Critical Insights

BRIEFING PAPER
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Emergency Services Network: the July 2026 Summary Business Case

What the Home Office has published, what it commits to — and whether Option 2 has actually been decided.

PREPARED BY	DATE	SOURCE DOCUMENT	BASIS
Critical Insights Ltd	11 August 2026	HO ESN Summary Business Case, 27 July 2026 (published 4 August 2026)	Open source only

Key judgements

- **Option 2 is the Home Office's preferred option and is "recommended for approval"** — the published document stops short of confirming that approval has been granted by Ministers or HM Treasury.
- **No separate public announcement of an Option 2 decision has been found**, and no new ESN contract has been awarded or announced since publication. The commercial architecture Option 2 relies on was already contracted in late 2024 and early 2025.
- **Publication itself is the strongest available signal.** Departments normally publish a summary business case once it has cleared investment approval, and a December 2025 Ministerial answer stated the revised Programme Business Case was expected to complete approvals in early 2026. Publication in July and August 2026 is consistent with approval having been secured — but it is inference, not confirmation.
- **The economics rest on a narrow base.** Over 80% of Option 2's quantified benefits come from improved 999 call handling in existing no-signal areas — a coverage benefit, not a mission-critical communications benefit. If that assumption softens, the £3.00bn NPSV advantage softens with it.
- **Airwave still has no published shutdown date.** The document commits only to shutdown when it is safe to do so, against a previously stated target of full transition by the end of 2029 and material uncertainty beyond the CMA charge control ending in 2029.

1 What has been published

On 4 August 2026 the Home Office published a Summary Business Case for the Emergency Services Network, dated 27 July 2026. It is a five-case Green Book summary setting out the case for continued funding of the programme's preferred option. It is a summary — the full business case, its assumptions and its underlying cost model are not in the public domain.

2 Strategic case

ESN replaces the Airwave TETRA network with mission-critical voice, video and data over a commercial 4G/5G bearer, giving responders "immediate access to life-saving data". The document frames the programme against public safety, NHS effectiveness, national security and rural connectivity objectives, and against the international move to 3GPP-standard public safety communications. Airwave's TETRA infrastructure is presented as obsolescent and lacking modern digital capability.

3 Options appraised

Option	Description	Assessment
Option 1 Baseline	Extend Airwave contracts to 2043/44; emergency services procure data services locally and separately.	Rejected — TETRA obsolescence risk; no modern digital capability; fragmented data procurement.

Option	Description	Assessment
Option 2 Preferred	Continue ESN delivery through the extended Mobile Services (BT/EE) and User Services (IBM) contracts to 2031, with Airwave shut down when operationally safe.	Preferred — best value for money, positive NPSV, strategic alignment.

Only two options are presented in the published summary. There is no published "do minimum" ESN variant, alternative bearer option, or accelerated shutdown case against which Option 2's margin can be tested.

4 Economic case

Social cost-benefit analysis to HM Treasury Green Book (2022) methodology, modelled over **2025/26–2043/44 (19 years)**, with optimism bias and quantified risk applied.

Metric (present value)	Option 1	Option 2	Difference
Total costs	£9.47bn	£9.35bn	−£0.12bn
Total benefits	£1.73bn	£4.62bn	+£2.89bn
Net Present Social Value (relative to baseline)	—	**£3.00bn**	—

Option 2 is therefore presented as both *cheaper* and *substantially more beneficial* than continuing with Airwave. Sensitivity testing is reported to show NPSV remaining positive under all scenarios tested. Risk contingency is around 12% of Option 2 costs. No benefit-cost ratio is published for either option.

Where the benefits come from

- **Over 80%** of quantified benefits: ESN-enabled 999 call improvements in areas currently without signal, monetised through reduced fatalities.
- Faster ambulance and fire service communications; improved multi-agency coordination (JESIP).
- Wider rural coverage benefits to residents and businesses.
- Non-monetised: security hardening and cyber resilience.

ANALYTICAL CAUTION

A benefits case concentrated in public 999 coverage is only loosely coupled to ESN's operational purpose — mission-critical push-to-talk for responders. Much of that coverage benefit is delivered by the mast infrastructure rather than by ESN service capability itself, and would in principle accrue under other delivery routes. Scrutiny of the £3.00bn NPSV should start here.

5 Financial and commercial case

- **Whole-life budget: £19.1bn to 2043/44. £6.1bn spent to date.**
- **Mobile Services — BT/EE**, effective December 2024, extended to 2031. Announced at £1.29bn, with an award value up to approximately £1.85bn over seven years and three months plus a one-year extension option.
- **User Services — IBM**, approximately £1.6bn, seven years, awarded December 2024 and announced January 2025.
- Further contracts cover air-to-ground services, end-user device frameworks, control room integration and test services.
- Milestone-based payments used to incentivise delivery across the supply chain.

Note the scale mismatch between the £19.1bn nominal whole-life budget to 2043/44 and the £9.35bn present-value cost of Option 2 over 2025/26–2043/44. The figures are on different bases — nominal whole-life including sunk spend, against a discounted forward-looking appraisal — and should not be compared directly.

6 Delivery approach and timeline

Stage	Content
Release 1	ESN initial data capability.
Release 2	ESN voice capability, with certification.
Release 3	Full data, voice and air capability, ahead of user acceptance testing.
Then	Full Operating Model delivered for user acceptance testing, then scaled for migration through to Airwave shutdown.

The document describes a "progressive readiness model, with controlled capability releases and staged transition activities". **It does not publish a national Airwave shutdown date.** The most recent Ministerial position on record, from December 2025, was early adoption of a service-ready solution in early 2028 and full transition from Airwave targeted for completion by the end of 2029.

7 Risk and assurance

- Optimism bias and quantified risk assessment applied; contingency approximately 12% of Option 2 cost.
- Principal financial exposure identified as **continuing Airwave costs and significant uncertainty after 2029**, when the CMA charge control on Airwave ends.
- Assurance through the Home Office Investment Committee and project delivery function, the Major Projects Review Group, and NAO and PAC scrutiny, with NCSC and NPSA security engagement.

8 Has Option 2 been decided? Has a contract been agreed?

FINDING — DECISION STATUS

Not publicly confirmed. The published document states only that Option 2 is the preferred option and is recommended for approval. It contains no statement that approval has been granted, no reference to Ministerial or HM Treasury sign-off, and no dated decision point. Searches of GOV.UK, Parliamentary questions and the trade press found no announcement of an Option 2 approval decision, and no Written Ministerial Statement accompanying the 4 August 2026 publication.

The balance of evidence nonetheless points towards approval having been obtained: departments publish summary business cases after investment approval under transparency arrangements, and the Home Office told Parliament in December 2025 that the revised Programme Business Case had been endorsed by emergency service and devolved administration leaders and was expected to complete approvals in early 2026. Publication in July and August 2026 fits that sequence. This remains inference and should be treated as such.

FINDING — CONTRACT STATUS

No new contract has been agreed or issued in connection with this business case. Option 2 is explicitly built on contracts already in force:

- **Mobile Services** — awarded November and December 2024, effective December 2024, running to 2031.
- **User Services** — awarded December 2024, announced January 2025, seven years, approximately £1.6bn.

Recent procurement activity is at component level — end-user device frameworks, control room system upgrades — rather than a new prime contract. No contract award notice tied to the July 2026 business case has been identified.

9 Implications and what to watch

- **Confirm approval before relying on it.** A Freedom of Information request or Parliamentary question on the date and level of business case approval would settle the point that publication only implies.
- **Watch for the Airwave shutdown date.** Its continued absence from published material is the clearest indicator of residual delivery confidence.
- **Watch the post-2029 Airwave cost exposure.** The CMA charge control ends in 2029; if transition slips past it, the £0.12bn cost gap between the two options is easily consumed.
- **Watch voice capability certification.** This is the point at which the programme's mission-critical claims become testable by users rather than by suppliers.
- **Expect NAO and PAC re-engagement.** A refreshed business case with a £19.1bn whole-life figure and £6.1bn already spent is a natural trigger for renewed scrutiny.

10 Sources

- Home Office, *27 July 2026: Emergency Services Network — summary business case*, GOV.UK, published 4 August 2026.
- UK Parliament, Written Question 95578, answered 3 December 2025 — ESN operational timeline and business case approvals.
- Home Office and BT Group announcements on the ESN Mobile Services contract, August and December 2024.
- Home Office and IBM announcements on the ESN User Services contract, December 2024 and January 2025.
- National Audit Office, *Progress with delivering the Emergency Services Network*, March 2023, and Committee of Public Accounts reporting thereon.
- Find a Tender and Contracts Finder notices for ESN end-user devices and control room systems.