

Safety fears as Airwave radio firm plans to switch off masts

Exclusive Royston Martis

SCORES of Airwave radio masts across England, Wales and Scotland are facing the axe from the company that provides the network and could be switched off.

The plans have led the countries' two national police federations to question whether the future level of coverage will be safe for officers.

Police Review learned this week that up to 140 of the masts providing officers with radio coverage across Great Britain are likely to be switched off - although O2 Airwave insists there will be no detriment to 'contracted' radio coverage.

An O2 Airwave spokesman said she could not say whether forces would have to pay to switch back on any masts that are switched off and added: 'If they need further coverage then that would be another discussion.'

The company last week announced it had signed a contract worth around £350 million with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that will see the fire service covered by the Airwave network. All ambulance trusts in England will be using Airwave by the end of 2008.

As part of its £2.9 billion police service contract with the Government, the company 'offers guaranteed levels of coverage [for users] across England, Wales and Scotland'.

Paul Lewis, secretary of the health and safety committee of the Police Federation of England and Wales, said: 'Any judgement call over the future of masts has to be carried out taking into account the safety of police officers at all times and this can only be done if forces carry out a proper risk assessment. It would not be acceptable to put officers' lives at risk for the sake of a few pounds.'

Joe Grant, general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation, also criticised the move.

However, the O2 Airwave spokesman defended the decision, saying that 'less than 140' masts are likely to be removed. She said discussions are still ongoing with forces over their individual contracts and that 'coverage' tests will take place before any masts are removed.

The spokesman added: 'We have to run an efficient network and have found we can do that by taking out certain sites. Only when the customer is completely reassured will site removal go on.'