



AGENDA ITEM: 13

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

21st March 2011

MARITIME INCIDENT RESPONSE GROUP (MIRG)

Report by Paul Claydon, Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report is seeking continued support from the Authority to maintain the Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG) provision for the next financial year. The report also provides an update on the national picture with regard to continued support by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA).

Background

- 2 The MIRG was formally launched by Alistair Darling (the then Secretary of State for Transport) in April 2006. This was an outcome of the "Sea of Change" project which was initiated after a fire on the Ferry Norseia in September 2002. The MIRG was set up to assist with incidents involving fire, chemical hazards and industrial accidents at sea.
- 3 It should be noted that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has a duty to mobilise, organise and task resources to respond to people in distress at sea. MIRG provides the MCA with a guaranteed service to fulfil those responsibilities. This is controlled through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) and the MCA. Costs to the MCA are related to enhancement of the training and equipment holdings of the FRS and providing a liaison manager.
- 4 Currently fifteen out of the thirty nine coastal FRSs have committed approximately 650 firefighters to support the MIRG. This includes both North and Mid & West Wales FRSs here in

Wales. The benefit to the FRSs is in the provision of enhanced training and equipment. This assists in the response to fires on ships that are alongside in ports for which FRSs do have a statutory duty. The total cost to the MCA of this function is understood to be something in the region of £550k per annum.

Information

- 5 Following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review the MCA is required to implement a budget reduction of 22% by March 2015.
- 6 The MCA undertook a review of its requirements to assist with incidents involving fire, chemical hazards and industrial accidents at sea which reported in October 2010. Significantly the report identifies that:-
 - there is no statutory duty on the MCA or FRSs to make provision for response to 'at sea' events;
 - notwithstanding the above, the risk associated with UK territorial waters is such that the provision of a response capability is justified;
 - a commercial replacement of the MIRG would be expensive and deployment would be problematic due to a shortage of commercially available helicopters;
 - the most appropriate option identified for future provision of an 'at sea' response is a continuation of the MIRG but with a realignment to match the resources to the identified risk.
- 7 North Wales, as with the other MIRG FRSs, has been working with CFOA (Chief Fire Officers Association) to review the MIRG strategy and look to improve the provision while scaling back the overall resource commitment. The revised strategy would see the number of FRSs committed to MIRG reduced from fifteen to ten. This would reduce costs to the MCA by nearly 36%.

- 8 At a CFOA meeting of the MIRG FRSs in November 2010 many of the participating Services stated they would find it difficult in the current financial climate to recommend continuation of the MIRG provision if funding from the MCA was withdrawn. This was a position adopted by both North and Mid & West Wales FRS.
- 9 As recently as 16th March 2011, confirmation was received from the MCA that it would continue to fund the MIRG provision in its current format for a period of six months only from April 1st 2011.
- 10 While CFOA has been in discussion with the MCA the cross party parliamentary Transport Select Committee (TSC) met on the 8th February 2011 to review proposals for modernising the MCA in line with the budget reduction requirement. Following evidence provided orally and in writing the TSC has decided that it wants to hold a further full inquiry into the proposals, including the MIRG provision.
- 11 The TSC has asked for the submission of further evidence by 26th April 2011. CFOA is currently working on additional evidence for submission to the TSC and has suggested that FRSs may wish to consider providing evidence from their own local perspective. It is the Chief Fire Officer's intention to provide that evidence as suggested.
- 12 While the previously mentioned processes continue, CFOA is making a concerted effort to secure the necessary funding for the future MIRG strategy beyond October this year.
- 13 CFOA estimates the cost of maintaining the provision by an individual service at £40k per annum. After examining the competences of North Wales Fire and Rescue Service's own personnel, and the associated equipment requirements, costs for maintaining the provision in North Wales for the year would be approximately £11,000 exclusive of any contribution made by the MCA. Continuing to fund the capability until the end of the next financial year would allow some time to re-evaluate the position given the changing national picture. Naturally, this would include time to implement an exit strategy from MIRG if it became no longer viable for the Authority to maintain its membership of the Group.

- 14 Given the difficult financial conditions facing the Authority in 2011/12, set against the comparatively small cost of maintaining the MIRG service for the next financial year at least, Members may feel it appropriate to utilise a small proportion of this current year's projected underspend as a provision to mitigate the withdrawal of MCA financial support.

Recommendation

- 15 It is recommended that Members:
- (i) note the contents of the report;
 - (ii) continue to support MIRG from the 1st April utilising money from this financial year, capped at £11,000 until a clearer picture of the future commitment is ascertained;
 - (iii) agree that any unspent money from the £11,000 provision be returned to the Authority's reserves; and
 - (iv) note that a further report will be brought to the Authority in due course when the national picture has become clearer.