

**MEETING: 22 NOVEMBER 2010**

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**SUBJECT: DISSOLUTION OF THE NORTH EAST FIRE AND RESCUE REGIONAL MANAGEMENT BOARD**

**JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER**

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**1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Members, for their consideration, of the Regional Management Board's decision, in principle, to dissolve the Board and to replace it with a more informal meeting structure of Chairmen and Chief Fire Officers.

**2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Collaborative working between the four fire and rescue services in the North East of England has been undertaken for some time. Collaborative work was originally conducted under the auspices of the North East Fire and Rescue Service Partnership Board, which was established in the mid 1990's.
- 2.2 This body was superseded following the publication of the White Paper, 'Our Fire and Rescue Service', which required all Fire and Rescue Authorities to establish Regional Management Boards (RMB) based on existing government regions by 1st April 2004. This was subsequently underpinned by similar requirements within the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework Documents.
- 2.3 The intention of this, as expressed in the White Paper, was to increase effectiveness and achieve efficiency savings for all Fire and Rescue Authorities by collaborating and reducing the need for duplication of effort.
- 2.4 The North East fire and rescue authorities duly established a Regional Management Board in line with the first National Fire and Rescue Framework in 2004. This first Framework was followed by two subsequent Frameworks covering 2006/08 and 2008/11 that have either revised or removed responsibilities that the Regional Management Boards originally had.
- 2.5 The future of the Regional Management Boards came under further scrutiny with the arrival of the coalition government and, on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2010, the Fire Minister, Bob Neill MP, announced that he was giving fire and rescue authorities the freedom to work on a collaborative basis without the need to have in place Regional Management Boards in a way that best suits local circumstances.

## 3 FUTURE OPTIONS

- 3.1 Consequent to this announcement, informal discussions between the Chief Officers of the four North East fire and rescue services considered possible future arrangements for regional collaboration. The following issues were discussed:
- the background of successful regional collaboration prior to the establishment of the formal Regional Management Board,
  - the Regional Management Board's current constitutional, governance and budgetary arrangements.
  - the statement of the Fire Minister Bob Neill from the 29 July 2010.
- 3.2 These discussions led to the formulation of three potential options which are set out below:
- to continue with the existing Regional Management Board in it's current format,
  - to arrange for the dissolution of the Regional Management Board with no replacement arrangement being put in place, or
  - to arrange for the dissolution of the Regional Management Board and to replace it with an informal forum.
- 3.3 Currently, the Regional Management Board meets four times per year and requires funding in the region of £20k per annum contributed by each constituent Authority. This funding covers the cost of Treasurer, Clerk, committee support and audit of annual accounts. Additional overheads exist inherently in each authority as a result of the processing of often duplicated correspondence and papers at authority level given that the RMB has no formal decision-making powers but must refer all items of business back to the constituent fire and rescue authorities.
- 3.4 Dissolving the RMB with no alternative mechanism for sharing issues and discussing future and current collaborative ventures could pose a risk to the four Fire and Rescue Authorities given the financially difficult period the public sector is about to enter.
- 3.5 However, an informal forum, consisting of the Chair/Portfolio Holder and Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive of the four Fire and Rescue Authorities, would have no direct costs associated with it yet it would provide the necessary vehicle to allow discussion on collaboration to take place. It would also provide for regional political oversight of the existing regional collaborative projects such as the RCC, without the overheads associated with operating a formal joint committee such as the Regional Management Board.

**4 IMPACT ON THE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITIES**

- 4.1 At the Regional Management Board meeting, held on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2010, a paper containing these three options was debated by those RMB Members present.
- 4.2 The outcome of this debate was that it was agreed that there were financial savings to be achieved through the dissolution of the RMB, which were to be welcomed. Furthermore, provided that an informal mechanism for debate and discussion were implemented, then there was agreement that there would be no significant detrimental impact from the dissolution of the RMB.
- 4.3 Consequently, it was unanimously agreed by those present that the RMB should be dissolved, subject to the appropriate fire and rescue authority endorsement, were necessary, and that the existing budget held by the Board should be returned to the four fire and rescue authorities.
- 4.4 It was further agreed that an informal meeting framework consisting of the Chair/Portfolio Holder and Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive of each of the four Fire Authorities should be introduced in place of the Regional Management Board.

**5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The dissolution of the Regional Management Board will remove the requirement to financially support the Board and will also result in the return of approximately £20,000 to Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority in this financial year.

**6 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 6.1 Members are asked to:
  - (a) Consider the content of this report and, if deemed appropriate, endorse the decision to dissolve the RMB;
  - (b) Approve the proposal to establish an informal forum consisting of the Chair/Portfolio Holder and Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive of each of the four Fire Authorities.

