



AGENDA ITEM: 13

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

17th October 2011

Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG) Update

Report by Paul Claydon, Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report updates the Authority on the latest developments with regard to the Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG) and seeks acknowledgement of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's (MCA) withdrawal from the provision.

Background

- 2 The MIRG was set up to assist the MCA with incidents involving fire, chemical hazards and industrial accidents at sea. Fifteen out of the thirty nine coastal FRSs committed approximately 650 firefighters to support the MIRG. This includes both North and Mid & West Wales FRS in Wales.
- 3 MIRG provides the MCA with a guaranteed service controlled through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between FRSs and the MCA. Costs to the MCA are related to supplementing the training and equipment holdings of the FRS and providing a liaison manager. The cost to the MCA is a little in excess of £550k per annum.
- 4 Members will recall the report of the 21st March this year seeking continued support from the Authority to maintain a MIRG provision in North Wales for the short term. Members resolved at that meeting to continue to support MIRG from the 1st April 2011 utilising money from the 2010/11 financial year, capped at £11,000, until a clearer picture of the future commitment emerged.

Information

- 5 The Chief Fire Officer provided written evidence to the Transport Select Committee which met in April this year. In relation to the MIRG, the committee concluded:-

"Though the Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG) has been involved in only seven incidents, its intervention has been significant. Our evidence suggests that while ships' crews have some training their skills do not match the expertise of the MIRG. It is equally clear that without MCA funding, the MIRG will cease to operate. The operations of the MIRG are a matter of national resilience and responsibility to fund them should not be left to the local taxpayer. We are concerned that, as with the Emergency Towing Vessels, the Government has again taken a decision driven by the impetus to reduce expenditure that runs against an independent risk assessment. We recommend that the Government adopt a rationalised MIRG model which is better calibrated to the risk and more cost-effective than the present arrangement."

- 6 On the 16th September 2011 the Chief Fire Officer received a letter from the Director of Maritime Services of the MCA stating that the Shipping Minister had informed Parliament that the MCA would no longer be able to financially support the MoU that provides the MIRG capability and that the MCA would be withdrawing from the agreement on 14th December 2011.
- 7 The letter also asked if the FRS would wish to discuss the transfer of equipment provided by the MCA should the Service wish to continue to provide a firefighting capability at sea.
- 8 North Wales as with the other MIRG FRSs has been working together through CFOA (Chief Fire Officers Association) in relation to this issue and a meeting of all MIRG FRS was held in Kent on 4th October.
- 9 It was confirmed at the meeting that the Minister will not reconsider the MCA position. It was also confirmed that there are no detailed plans for a provision post 14th December. Discussions instigated by CFOA continue, but no plans for the continuation of arrangements or funding have been made. The meeting concluded

that FRS need to declare their intention to self-fund both in the interim and potentially the longer term. Of 13 FRS (2 have recently withdrawn) currently declared as MIRG, 4 have confirmed their intention to self-fund subject to FRA approval. Costs to maintain the current arrangements, excluding the required equipment refresh due in 2013, are estimated at £45,000 per FRS per annum. This cost will increase as the number of FRS's participating in such arrangements reduces.

- 10 In the interim none of the designated £11,000 the Authority made available to maintain the provision has been utilised and this will be returned to the Authority.

Recommendation

- 11 It is recommended that Members:
 - (i) note the contents of the report.
 - (ii) acknowledge the MCA's withdrawal from the MoU; and as a consequence
 - (iii) withdraw from the MIRG provision.