

<b><u>REPORT TITLE:</u></b>	<b>The Future of the NWFRMB</b>
<b><u>REPORTING OFFICER:</u></b>	<b>Janet Henshaw – Clerk to the Board</b>
<b><u>REPORT NO.:</u></b>	<b>NW/24/10</b>

### **Recommendation**

1. That Members of the NWFRMB consider the future of the North West Regional Management Board so that Members can take the recommendations of NWFRMB to their own Authorities for a decision.

### **Information**

2. As Members are aware, recent announcements made by the Fire Minister, Bob Neill, indicate that the Coalition Government has made a number of decisions in respect of the National Framework.
3. In particular, it has been decided that individual fire authorities now have the freedom to work on a collaborative basis in a way that works best locally and is not determined by regional boundaries.
4. The NWFRMB was established in 2004, to deliver the core functions as set out in the National Framework. The 2008-11 Framework reduced the number of key themes from 6 to 4, which are :-
  - Integration of common and specialist services;
  - Introduction of regional HR functions;
  - Development of a regional approach to training.
  - Introduction of regional procurement within the context of the National Improvement Strategy for the Fire & Rescue Service.
5. The NWFRMB has been working to its Business Plan for 2008-11, which is attached as Appendix A, and details at Section 8 the achievements of this regional collaboration.
6. However, the Fire Authorities of Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester are now free to decide if this particular form of structure for collaboration will best meet the needs of local communities in these areas.

7. Potential options for the future might include:
  - (i) Abolish the NWFRMB without any replacement
  - (ii) Abolish the NWFRMB and replace this with an informal Chiefs and Chairs meeting
  - (iii) Abolish the NWFRMB as it stands and replace this with a more refined model of regional collaboration by creating a North West FRS Partnership Board with some spending capacity
  - (iv) Any other model agreed by Members
8. Whatever the option ultimately taken by Members of each of the 5 Authorities, other issues (assuming that there would be some sort of collaboration) will need to be considered such as:
  - (i) Name
  - (ii) Membership (along current or a different "split")
  - (iii) Terms of Reference or a Constitution
  - (iv) Frequency of meetings
  - (v) Servicing of meetings
9. There is value in retaining a North West relationship not least as Members have seen significant collaborative benefits for their investment. Whether something like the NW PPE procurement project would have been delivered without the Board is debatable but it cannot be argued that the RMB was able to give it political support and Members enjoyed the success of the scheme.

### **Financial Implications**

10. The Board has operated for a number of years with an operating budget which has facilitated the delivery of a number of regional projects where there have been genuine business benefits including cashable efficiency savings. There is a separate paper on the agenda which updates the Board on the current financial position.
11. The formal status of the Board has created additional work and in the last two years the approach of the external auditors (appointed by the Audit Commission) has created work which is disproportionate to the business of the board. It is currently unclear what the future audit arrangements might be since the abolition of the Audit Commission was announced.
12. In the emerging financial climate there will be greater pressure to deliver more cashable savings through collaboration in the public sector and the retention of some type of North West forum may well be beneficial to taking forward new collaborations/partnerships.

13. There is currently an agreed budget in place which funds specific activities and any future budgets would only be created in response to the scale of ambition on the new body if one were to exist, but if this were not the case there is nothing to stop each Fire and Rescue Authority holding their own budgets to fund regional initiatives as individual projects are identified. The current distribution of costs is pro rata to the elected member composition of the Board. Greater Manchester has acted as the lead authority for New Burdens funding on behalf of the region for the Fire Control project and will continue to do this if members are content with this proposal.

### **Conclusion**

14. Although of course we should not be creating Committees or Boards for their own sake, the RMB does create a forum for officer/Member dialogue that can be useful, can build confidence amongst Members and be difficult to recreate. The key to its continuing value will be to determine what can be agreed/collaborated upon and, just as importantly, what would be a waste of time and effort to pursue. This can include sub-regional initiatives such as PFI. It may be sensible to consider what would be 'key themes' rather than continue to rely on those defined in the National Framework.
15. One issue that could occupy a disproportionate amount of time is the name for such an arrangement. One proposal would be 'The North West Fire and Rescue Partnership Board' – hopefully that will stimulate debate. Members will also need to discuss the merits of a quasi constitution for any new arrangement.

### **Recommendation**

16. Members are asked to consider the options presented and take any recommendations from this Board meeting to each FRA.