

## **TRANSFER OF NIFRS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

### **Introduction**

The Secretary of State announced on 21 March that:

‘The Fire Authority for Northern Ireland will transfer to local government’.

It is our understanding that this would be on the basis of an English model.

### **Background**

Under the Fire and Rescue Services (NI) Order 2006, the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland will be replaced, from 1 July, by the Fire and Rescue Service Board. This will be a body corporate and will which include 4 District Councillors nominated by NILGA, selected under Public Appointments procedures and appointed by the Minister. The Board will own all the assets of the Fire and Rescue Service.

### **Key Issues**

To fulfil the intentions of the Secretary of State’s announcement, two key issues need to be considered:

1. The funding arrangements for the Fire and Rescue Service; and,
2. The governance arrangements for the Service.

### **Guiding Principles**

It is important that any proposals underpin three key principles:

1. The Fire and Rescue Service should continue to be a single unitary body serving the whole of Northern Ireland as a regional service.
2. That there are clear lines of accountability and governance at both local and regional levels.
3. That there should be no disruption to the capacity of the Service to deliver what is universally accepted as an excellent service.

## **Exiting Models**

In England, Fire Authorities operate under four different models.

1. As a single service provided to a single Local Authority.
2. As a shared service provided to a group of Local Authorities.
3. As a service to a County Council.
4. As a service to a Metropolitan area, including Greater London Authority.

In each case the Fire Authority owns the assets of its respective Fire and Rescue Service.

## **Options**

Policy responsibility would rest with a sponsoring Department and would be based on the presumption that a devolved Minister would wish to exercise control over a regional emergency service. That Department would be responsible for ensuring national initiatives and necessary subordinate legislation are introduced as appropriate.

There appear to be at least two options that would achieve the Secretary of State's intention:

A minimum option – this would keep the Fire and Rescue Service Board as is with four Elected Councillors representing the seven Councils. The Board would continue to own the assets of the Service. By having four, rather than seven Councillors, would reinforce their regional role rather than being primarily interested in the fire and rescue needs of their own area. They should also take a wider perspective in the strategic development of the Service. Greater local accountability would be achieved by closer formal liaison with District Commanders. A precept on the rates could be determined in order to move some of the costs of the Fire and Rescue Service to local taxation. This option raises the issue of whether it would be seen as going far enough to achieve the Secretary of State's intention.

A full option – this would require the establishment of a new body corporate representative of the seven new Councils. This new body would own the assets of the Service. The body would be fully accountable to the seven Councils. This option raises a number of issues. The transfer of functions legislation will need to ensure that the Fire and Rescue Service is funded on an equitable basis by each of the seven Councils. Again, this could be a precept on the rates after taking account of the regional contribution. Also, an individual Council should be prevented from increasing funding for the Service in its area as this would have the potential to pull the organisation in seven separate directions rather than in a strategic direction determined solely by risk. This would require careful consideration of the governance arrangements to avoid such tensions as these would be detrimental to the strategic development of the Service on a regional basis and have the potential to undermine its current excellent level of service provision.

**Public Safety Unit**

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