



## **AGENDA ITEM: 7**

### **NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**20 March 2017**

#### **THE WHITE PAPER REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT: RESILIENT AND RENEWED**

**Report by Simon Smith, Chief Fire Officer and  
Colin Everett, Clerk to the Authority**

#### **Purpose of Report**

- 1 To present the Welsh Government White Paper *Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed* and to invite members to make a response.

#### **Background**

- 2 Welsh Government has published a White Paper called *Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed*. The White Paper is a statement of intent for the future of local government in Wales. The White Paper replaces the earlier Local Government (Wales) Bill of the previous Welsh Government, a piece of draft legislation which had proposed a structural reorganisation of local government. In a change of policy direction the new White Paper advocates extensive regional collaborative working, supported by the unitary local authorities which are in existence, as an alternative to a structural reorganisation.
- 3 The White Paper both reinforces the role and importance of the local government in Wales. Whilst offering the facility for the voluntary merger of councils there is no intent to enforce mergers or to pursue the option of a wholesale local government reorganisation.

- 4 The paper sets out the rationale for regionalism and lists a series of tests against which the potential for enhanced regional working should be evaluated. The paper then lists a series of strategic and functional working areas where a form of regional working would be required, and a series of strategic and functional areas where the potential of regional working should be explored.
- 5 The paper explores which geographies or 'foot-prints' should be set for regional working, and the options for the extent of mandatory regional working that Government should direct. The paper gives a preference for a model where a regional 'footprint' would be prescribed for some functions such as economic development, and where a framework would be set out for others with a choice of regional boundaries and combinations of public bodies for others such as public protection.
- 6 The paper then goes on to explore the funding, workforce and governance challenges of regional working and collaboration. It poses the option of a 'joint governance committee' for regional collaboratives as a variation of the long-standing joint committee model.
- 7 In the middle and later sections of the White Paper there are proposals for:-
  - the repealing of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 which sets of the current arrangements for performance and improvement planning and their regulation
  - the reform of the governance and funding arrangements for fire and rescue authorities
  - the governance models for councils, the roles of councillors and local democracy
  - the role and value of community councils
  - electoral reform including the minimum age of voting, digital access to electoral registration and voting, flexible arrangements for voting, and the local adoption of the single transferable voting system for local elections.

8 In section 4.3.2 - 4.3.5 the White Paper states the following for fire and rescue authorities.

*“4.3.2 The fire and rescue services in Wales have a track record of delivery. They have reduced fires and fire casualties by over 50% since responsibility was devolved in 2004. They also have a long history of regional working, having operated on that basis since 1996. In that sense, they already represent an example of the broad approach which this White Paper proposes for other Local Authority services”.*

*4.3.3 However, Fire and Rescue Authority governance and funding arrangements do not generate sufficient accountability, for instance, Council leaders and cabinet members are generally not members. There is also no separation between executive and scrutiny functions, and budgets are set without any formal external challenge or control.*

*4.3.4 To correct this, and to ensure that fire and rescue services are properly integrated with other regionalised services, it is proposed that Fire and Rescue Authorities will change their governance arrangements so that their membership will resemble that of Joint Governance Committees, and budgets would be set on a pooled basis by agreement. This would not change the role, number or boundaries of Fire and Rescue Authorities, or their existence as separate organisations empowered to employ staff, spend money and exercise functions on their own account.*

*4.3.5 As part of the new Bill it is proposed that the 2009 Local Government Measure will no longer apply to Fire and Rescue Authorities from the same date as Local Authorities. They will not be subject to the new improvement and performance regime set out for Local Authorities. A full consultation will be undertaken in due course as to the new governance, funding and performance management arrangements for Fire and Rescue Authorities.”*

9 The section relating to fire and rescue authorities does not contain a specific consultation question, unlike other sections of the White Paper. Members will note that there is an absence of meaningful detail which presumably will be forthcoming in the full consultation referred to in 4.3.5 of the White Paper (paragraph 8 above). It is suggested that notwithstanding the absence of a specific consultation question, reference is made to this lack of detail in the Authority’s response to the consultation.

- 10 The White Paper carries forward from the earlier Bill the proposal to introduce the power of general competence as an enabling legal power for local authorities.
- 11 The consultation ends on 11 April. A series of consultation questions are posed in an annex to the White Paper. Many are not directly relevant to fire and rescue authorities.
- 12 The Authority is invited to debate the White Paper and to guide a response to be completed by the Chief Fire Officer and Clerk in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chair.

### **Recommendation**

- 13 That Members delegate the approval of the response to the consultation to the Chair and Deputy Chair.