

# CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

**MEETING OF:** CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY  
**DATE:** 6<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2023  
**REPORT OF:** CHIEF FIRE OFFICER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
**AUTHOR:** ANDREW LEADBETTER

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**SUBJECT:** NORTH WEST FIRE CONTROL – CONTINUING  
THE COLLABORATION

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## Purpose of Report

1. To update Members about the future of North West Fire Control (NWFC) to enable them to:
  - confirm the Fire Authority's continuing commitment to NWFC;
  - determine the proportion that the Fire Authority should contribute to the collaboration;
  - agree the decision-making arrangements associated with a significant NWFC project; and
  - approve funding for the project and additional resourcing.

## Recommended: That Members

- [1] Confirm the Fire Authority's continued commitment to the NWFC collaboration.
- [2] Determine whether they are happy to increase the Fire Authority's contribution to the collaboration as explained in the report.
- [3] Authorise the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive to make all necessary decisions associated with the new mobilising system on behalf of the Fire Authority.
- [4] Approve the magnitude of funding that is described in the report (new mobilising system and additional resourcing) so that it can be included in the budget and reflected in the Medium Term Financial Plan.

## Background

2. North West Fire Control (NWFC) was created after the collapse of a national project to create nine regional control centres. The Government provided significant financial support to the North West fire control project (and continues to pay a substantial sum towards the rent of the building occupied by NWFC).
3. NWFC serves Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Staff at NWFC answer 999 calls, mobilise resources to incidents and assist operational staff with the management of incidents.

4. NW Fire Control Limited (the Company) is the legal entity that provides the services to the partner fire and rescue services. The Company is jointly owned by the fire and rescue authorities and liability is limited by guarantee. Each fire and rescue authority appoints two Directors to sit on the Board (from Cheshire it is the Chair and Deputy Chair). The Chief Fire Officers and some advisers also attend the Board, together with staff from NWFC.
5. NWFC started dealing with calls for Cheshire in May 2014. For those Members that have been appointed to the Fire Authority since NWFC came into being a copy of a report that was considered in September 2012 (less the appendices) is attached to this report as Appendix 1.

## Information

### General

6. Creating NWFC was a difficult and costly exercise. The parties to the collaboration were advised that it should be seen as a long-term and 'almost permanent' arrangement, due to the complexity and cost of ending it. Creating a separate fire control solely for one of the partners to NWFC would take at least two years (probably nearer to three) and involve: investment in a new mobilising system which would be likely to cost almost as much as the system utilised by NWFC; creation of a resilient control room; and recruitment of staff to be suitably trained in readiness for go-live.
7. Notwithstanding the significant challenge of creating a separate fire control, there have been recent questions about the future of the collaboration and some insight is provided in a report, with the same title as this, in Part 2 of today's Agenda. Thankfully, in the past few months the four Chief Fire Officers have been able to confirm the commitment of their respective organisations to NWFC until at least July 2033 (which is the date that the lease of the fire control building comes to an end). This is undoubtedly good news, with the partner fire and rescue services acknowledging the need to work diligently alongside the team at NWFC to ensure the continued success of the collaboration. This comes at a time when a new mobilising system is to be procured by NW Fire Control Limited and when a number of other pressures exist that have been impacting on NWFC need to be relieved.
8. *Members are asked to confirm the Fire Authority's continued commitment to the NWFC collaboration; it is a decision for Members as it is a long-term commitment.*

### Sharing the Costs of NWFC

9. When NWFC was created there was a significant investment by the Government (which continues in the form of circa £1M per annum towards the lease of the NWFC building at Lingley Mere in Warrington). Almost all up-front costs to create NWFC were paid for by the Government.

10. NWFC is now paid for by the partners in proportions that were agreed before the original project was fully committed to. The proportions were intended to reflect the relative demand placed upon NWFC by the respective partners, i.e. call volumes were seen as a meaningful driver for establishing the respective shares of the costs. The proportions are recorded in various governance documents, with the Co-Operation Agreement between the fire and rescue authorities stating that the '*... proportions will be reviewed from time to time. Such reviews will take into account the relative benefits to the respective Authorities derived from the Services provided by the Company.*'
11. The percentage call volumes per partner have generally been extremely close to the proportions and therefore the partners have not sought to review them. More recently, however, the call volumes have changed to such an extent that at least for the time being they no longer align with the proportions.
12. The proportions have not changed since the original project was commenced and continue to apply at present. They are

Fire Authority	Proportion (%)
Cheshire Fire Authority	18
Cumbria Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner	8
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	48.5
Lancashire Combined Fire Authority	25.5

13. The discussions about the potential to leave the collaboration, the need to fund the new mobilising system and requirement for additional funding for NWFC, as well as the fact that the call volumes no longer align with the original proportions have led to a debate about the proportions that should be paid by the partners going forward. The Chief Fire Officers have reached a position which they feel able to justify to their respective fire authorities. For Cheshire this would see the proportion change from 18% to 19.8%, the impact of which is explained in the Financial Implications section of this report. This would be expected to take effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024. It could be reviewed at a later date.
14. *Members are asked to determine whether they are happy to increase the Fire Authority's contribution to the collaboration.*

### New Mobilising System

15. NWFC uses a computerised mobilising system which assists the control room operators when answering and handling emergency calls. The current system is now nearing 'end of life' and needs to be replaced. A project to achieve this has been active for some time, but has only recently commenced in earnest (now that the Chiefs have confirmed their commitment to the collaboration).
16. This project requires a significant investment by the partners (both time input and money) as well as from the team at NWFC. An important first step will be the agreement of an extension to the contract for the current mobilising system,

which will need to be available to NWFC until the new mobilising system is in place. The partner fire and rescue services are fully engaged in the project. Currently, the tender documentation is being prepared with involvement of a range of staff from the partner fire and rescue services, some staff from NWFC and external legal and procurement advisers.

17. During the project there will be a number of important decisions, which will need to be taken by the partner fire authorities and NW Fire Control Limited. For example, all parties will need to be: satisfied with the procurement arrangements/tender documentation before the tender process can commence; and in agreement over the appointment of a supplier once the tender process has run its course. In addition, the Chief Fire Officer for each partner fire and rescue service will make the decision about 'going-live' onto the new mobilising system, once they are satisfied with the implementation work and readiness of the new mobilising system.
18. *Members are asked to authorise the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive to make all necessary decisions on behalf of the Fire Authority.*

#### Funding the New Mobilising System

19. There are two aspects to this. Unfortunately, at this point it is not possible to share firm figures with Members; these will only become clear as the project is delivered. There are, however, some estimates and assumptions that can be shared with Members.
20. The procurement and implementation of a new mobilising system is a large undertaking, encompassing work that will span three financial years (at least). For the purposes of illustration, the figures in the Financial Implications section assume that this stage will require a one-off investment of around £6m. This cost is shared by the partner fire authorities. Currently, Cheshire's share of the cost is 18%.
21. Once the system is live there will be recurring annual costs for licensing, maintenance, development etc. Currently, the cost is circa £800k. It is hoped that the recurring cost will not increase substantially, but given the recent impact of inflation on wage increases, there will undoubtedly be some uplift. It is probably prudent to budget for up to £1m per annum. Again this cost will be shared by the partner fire authorities.

#### Additional Resourcing

22. Since NWFC started handling emergency calls back in 2014 a number of things have changed. Firstly, the expectations of the partner fire and rescue services have risen. Secondly, the requirements placed upon the fire control have grown, e.g. as a result of recommendations from the Manchester Arena Inquiry. Thirdly, quite recently, a new Fire Standard aimed at fire control rooms has been published, which NWFC will need to comply with and prove that it does (if it cannot do so already).

23. The Chief Fire Officers have given a considerable amount of attention to NWFC in recent years. Various pieces of work have been commissioned and some investment has taken place. As a result, a form of business plan (with annual delivery plans) has been created which the Chiefs believe needs to be supported. For now, they have considered the support that is necessary for the next twelve months (2024-25) as well as building in some additional resource the cost of which they believe should be built into NWFC's base budget. Inevitably, there will be further resourcing requirements, because the delivery plan contains some challenging elements that NWFC cannot deliver from its existing establishment.
24. In 2024-25 the following matters are due to be progressed: a new training regime and system for capturing that training; an appraisal of and action plan which needs to be delivered associated with the fire control Fire Standard; a capacity review and work on a future operating model. These will require a project management team. Some elements will lead to permanent growth to be built into the base budget, e.g. additional operations managers and project management resource.
25. *Members are asked to approve the magnitude of funding that is described in relation to the new mobilising system and additional resourcing so that this can be included in the budget and reflected in the Medium Term Financial Plan.*

## Financial Implications

26. Whilst NWFC has been a great success, saving the Fire Authority in excess of £3m, to-date, this report describes a number of necessary investments that need to be made by the partners to the collaboration. This will help to ensure the continued success of the collaboration until 2033 as well as helping the partners understand what happens from that date.
27. The costs are summarised in the following paragraphs

### Current Budget

28. Current Cheshire Fire Authority budget for NWFC - £1.119M (18% of the overall cost).

### The impact of increasing the Fire Authority's share of the cost of NWFC

29. If the Fire Authority's share increases by 10% of the current proportion, i.e. rises from 18% to 19.8% and for the purpose of illustration we use the current, 2023-24 budget for the Authority's share of NWFC (£1.119M) the cost to the Fire Authority would increase by £112k to £1.231M.

30. The table below provides details of the position reached by the Chief Fire Officers:

	Cheshire	Cumbria	Greater Manchester	Lancashire
Current Proportion (%)	18	8	48.5	25.5
Proposed Proportion (%)	19.8 (+1.8%)	8.8 (+0.8%)	43.35 (-5.15%)	28.05 (+2.55%)
Change – expressed as percentage of Current Proportion	+10%	+10%	-10.62% (rounded)	+10%

31. Members will see that each of Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire have offered to increase their proportion by ten percent of their current proportion; for Cheshire this is an actual increase of 1.8%. Greater Manchester will see a reduction in its contribution of just over five per cent.
32. It should be noted that the cost to Cheshire, even at 19.8% is a very significant saving on the sum that would be required for its own control function. It would be responsible for the considerable expenses described earlier in the report if it wished to set up its own control. This simply would not make financial sense.

#### New Mobilising System

33. The procurement and implementation costs, estimated to be in the region of £6M, will be payable over three years (2024-25, 2025-26 and 2026-27).
34. The share payable by Cheshire at 18% would be £1.080M, or at 19.8% would be £1.188M (an additional £108k). It is proposed that will be met from the Fire Authority's reserves.
35. Ongoing costs for the existing mobilising system are circa £800k. It would be wise to budget for these to increase from 2026-27 when the new mobilising system is expecting to go live and a figure of £1M has been suggested. This means that the cost payable by NWFC could increase by £200k per annum. This would be a long term commitment, i.e. until the end of the contract which is intended to run until July 2033. It may be index-linked; this will depend upon the tender process and contractual position.
36. The share of this increased ongoing cost (£200k) that would be payable by Cheshire at 18% would be £36k, or at 19.8% would be £39.6k (an additional £3.6k).
37. The Fire Authority already budgets to pay its share of the £800k ongoing costs for the current system within the sum that it pays towards NWFC at present.

## Additional Resourcing

38. During 2024-25 the sum of £639k is needed to deliver those aspects of NWFC's business plan that will be contained in its annual delivery plan (with £466k of this being one-off costs and £173k becoming part of NWFC's base budget as it will be required in subsequent years).
39. The Fire Authority's share of the addition to the base budget of £173k at 18% is 31k, or at 19.8% is £34k (an additional £3k) and its share of the one-off cost of £466k at 18% is £84k, or at 19.8% is £92k (an additional £8k).

## **Legal Implications**

40. The collaboration is captured in various legal documents which, thankfully, have stood the test of time. In reality they have not been needed as the partners have always worked towards the resolution of issues that have caused concern/tension.
41. NW Fire Control Limited will enter into the contract for the new mobilising system. Partner fire authorities can be assured that fire and rescue service staff are working with colleagues at NWFC to ensure that the arrangements are robust so that future provision of fire control services will be suitably supported by the new system.

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

42. There are no equality and diversity implications.

## **Environmental Implications**

43. There are no environmental implications.

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**BACKGROUND PAPERS:**