

'SEA OF CHANGE' PROJECT 2003 - 2007 PROJECT CLOSURE NEWSLETTER

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A 'potted history'!

Since the introduction of the Fire Services Act 1947 many coastal Fire & Rescue Services (FRS) in the British Isles have provided a response to assist Her Majesty's Coastguard (HMCG) with ships on fire at sea. At its peak in the 1990's there were in excess of 24 Local Authority FRSs who were declared to the HMCG.

In 1994, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was agreed between the MCA and the Fire Service on the arrangements for firefighting, chemical hazards, and rescue on vessels at sea.

By 2001 the number of FRSs providing support to HMCG had reduced to less than 12 due predominantly to this role being non-statutory business and subsequently, FRSs were therefore unable to support the training and equipping of firefighters to respond to incidents at sea.

In September 2002 the Chief Coastguard agreed to support a research project to review the situation with the aim of producing a strategy report for the Department for Transport (DfT) in relation to the way UK Fire Services could, if they were willing to do so, support the Maritime & Coastguard Agency.

The project commenced in January 2003 with 2 senior fire officers being employed by the MCA as the Project Team. The incentive of financial support from the MCA/DfT was seen by coastal FRSs as a positive move. Subsequently, the research project gradually expanded into development and implementation.

In 2004 a further 2 fire officers joined the Project Team in an effort to maintain and improve the training standards for those FRS personnel who were 'volunteering' to respond to incidents at sea.

In October 2005, a major milestone was achieved by the signing of a tripartite MoU between the MCA, Ministry of Defence and Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) in relation to the provision of dedicated Search & Rescue helicopter training for FRS teams.

This was recognised as a significant factor at a very early stage of the project in 2003 as the non-availability of this facility would have been a major threat to the overall strategy being developed.



Another significant milestone achieved in 2005 was finalising the identification of strategically located coastal FRSs within the British Isles who could integrate into a new national strategy that would support UK maritime resilience. Fifteen Fire Authorities then agreed to participate in the proposed strategy and in February 2006 a formal agreement between those FRSs, CFOA and the MCA was signed thus underpinning many of the outcomes from the 'Sea of Change' project.

In April 2006, 3 years after the commencement of the project, the Secretary of State for Transport formally launched the implementation of the new MCA/FRS partnership to be known as the MCA Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG).



The uniqueness of this project and ultimate strategy, believed to be the first of its kind in the world, is the result of major cross-governmental co-operation and work involving a number of the principal organisations that provide the UK's civil resilience.

Funding of almost £3m from both the MCA and DfT together with additional funding from the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG), and each of the 15 FRSs involved, has enabled the MCA/DfT to enhance its role in line with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

As agents for the MCA, the MIRG teams now provide an additional resource to UK maritime resilience, which is a vital and much valued element of UK Search & Rescue .



The project closes on 31st March 2007, but the strategy will continue.

This report and its recommendations should assist in the resolution of any future issues which will impact on all organisations and government offices involved in the support, development and further modernisation of the MIRG national strategy.

MIRG Management

The FRS MIRG strategy is now being managed by a senior FRS officer detached to the MCA from Strathclyde FRS. The Fire Liaison Manager (FLM) will continue to act as the interface between MIRG teams and the MCA.

The Future

As the project closes a number of key issues remain unresolved and hopefully suitable funding can be found that will assist in addressing these issues – on behalf of all MIRG responders.

The primary goal of the project has always been to improve UK civil/maritime resilience by involving and ensuring a comprehensive FRS response - working in co-operation with other UKSAR partner organisations.

It was also to engage with and develop other 'land based responders' whom could enhance the range of

emergency assistance to incidents at sea under a more dedicated and formalised response.

The Ambulance Service has been working with FRS colleagues to adopt the same strategy as the Fire Service for an 'at sea' response by integrating into the MIRG with joint response processes. This is still in development.

In February 2007 members of the Project Team were invited to attend Germany as observers of a workshop arranged as part of the 'EU Interreg - Eurobaltic Civil Protection Project'. This project, part funded by the EU, has been looking at the potential for dealing with incidents at sea involving 'rapid intervention teams' from Fire Brigades of the Baltic Sea States.

It was clear from the discussions that many are now giving a higher priority to this issue. This is due to increased shipping movements and the potential to reduce pollution from shipping incidents by the provision of these 'rapid intervention' or MIRG teams.

The MCA MIRG strategy was presented to the meeting and extremely well received. A key outcome from this workshop was the potential to further develop the principals of the Baltic project to all European waters – subject to funding and intergovernmental support.

Ultimately this would further enhance the opportunities to produce minimum standards in relation to fire, rescue & medical operations at sea and lead to a more integrated and cost effective 'interstate' response.



Closure

In closing, the Project Team would like to extend it's thanks to all those people who have over the past 4 years and 3 months participated in making the MIRG strategy such a success.

Thank you.