

TASK GROUP ON PROPOSALS FOR THE COASTGUARD NETWORK

Report by the Scrutiny Officer

1.0 Recommendations

1.1 The expected level of savings

- (a) The costs of the present service are characterised as unsustainable for the Department of Transport. Around 90% of the nation's trade tonnage moves by sea, yet expenditure on protecting it is minuscule compared with the sums spent (often abortively) on maintaining and upgrading the infrastructure of road, rail and air transport, suggesting that there is a far greater scope for savings in other areas of the Department's programme.
- (b) The scale of the savings actually envisaged (£125m over 25 years) does not point to a major problem with the present costs of the service.

Exploration of alternatives

- (c) The Task Group recognises the desirability of full interoperability between coastguard stations. Have the cost and technical feasibility been evaluated of achieving this with the existing network of stations?
- (d) If centralisation in large centres is now seen as wrong for other emergency services, why is it nevertheless seen as the best solution for the Coastguard?

Demand

- (e) The Coastguard Service is getting busier and busier yet the consultation document deals in numbers of incidents rather than in a risk assessment weighing the likelihood of given scenarios against the expected severity of their impact. Therefore the information given is not an adequate basis on which to redesign a service which exist to manage risk.
- (f) It is notable from the statistics in the consultation documents that at the busiest times of the year, incidents "move westward", reflecting the increase in water-based recreation in the summer months. The Brixham station serves probably the most popular recreational coastline in the country yet is it proposed to close it entirely. Is the MCA confident that the proposals will provide adequate holiday season capacity along the coasts of the South West?

Capacity

- (g) The consultation material does not explain how the sheer volume of calls reaching the two proposed Maritime Operations Centres (MOCs) will be answered and prioritised effectively. These points however would appear critical to the proposals' feasibility.

- (h) Before proceeding, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) must be in a position to give unequivocal assurances that the technology is available and proven that will handle and integrate messages from the variety of sources and systems (land, sea and air, fixed and mobile) likely to alert the Coastguard.
- (i) The current system relies on locally-paired stations whereas the proposal appears in effect to a pairing of the two planned MOCs — is this arrangement sufficiently resilient in the event of (say) a catastrophic software failure?
- (j) If one MOC were out of action, what capacity would there be quickly to raise one or more sub-centres to 24-hour operation?
- (k) Is the proposed system designed to cope with the threat of terrorism at sea? If not, what other provision does the MCA rely on?
- (l) What account do the proposals take of the loss of the surveillance and co-ordination capability formerly provided by the RAF's Nimrod fleet?

Major commercial shipping hazards

- (m) The Task Group is concerned at the proposed closure of the station at Milford Haven in view the importance of the Bristol Channel for oil tankers and merchant shipping generally and the proposed development of the Atlantic Array.
- (n) With no station proposed between Falmouth and the Solent, the Task Group is also concerned that there will be inadequate monitoring of the safety and security of tankers anchoring in Lyme Bay (often in large numbers).

Cliff and shoreline safety

- (o) It is often a Missing Persons Report that triggers a cliff or beach search and rescue operation: how will the Police be linked into the new system?
- (p) The proposal to increase support for the volunteer element of the service is welcome.
- (q) Can the MCA be confident that new, remote Centres can effectively replace local knowledge (of both people and places — especially when so many place names around are coasts are duplicated)?

Local coastal safety

- (r) To ensure the safe enjoyment of coastal waters, the importance of an effective working relationship between the coastguard, lifeboat crews, fishing vessels and other boat owners cannot be over emphasised.
- (s) The MCA should explain whether the new system will be able to work with the comparatively short-range VHF sets typically fitted to private boats, or will owners need to invest in new equipment?

Select Committee on Transport

- (t) That the Council's response to the Coastguard consultation be copied to the Select Committee on Transport and that consideration be given to making written representations to that committee's inquiry into the future of the Emergency Towing Vessels and the Maritime Incident Response Group.

2.0 Proposals

- 2.1 The Maritime & Coastguard Agency's consultation document, *Protecting our Seas and Shores in the 21st Century*, was published on 16 December with a closing date of 24 March 2011. It puts forward proposals for what is described as a "modernised, fully-networked national Coastguard that can more flexibly manage the greatly varying demands of its workload." The proposals include changes to management arrangements and the use of volunteer Coastguard Rescue Officers.
- 2.2 The proposals were considered by the Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee's meeting on 10 January 2010 and a Task Group was established to consider them in detail and make recommendations for input into the Council's response to the consultation. The group consisted of Councillors Greenslade (Chairman), Clarence and Robinson.

3.0 Deliberations

- 3.1 The group met on 8 February 2011 and considered:
- the consultation paper;
 - the MCA's list of *Consultation Questions & Answers*;
 - a briefing from the Council's Coastal Officer;
 - extracts from a statement by the Under-secretary of State for Transport;
 - press reports of a recent visit to Torbay by the Head of the MRA and the suspension of the Search And Rescue Helicopter privatisation.
- 3.3 The Search and Rescue (SAR) role covered a very broad spectrum, from minor recreational mishaps through to full-scale maritime emergencies but even so 25% of the Coastguard's time was devoted to SAR. Its counter-pollution role directly affected the County Council's responsibilities for "Tier 3" incidents since its Shoreline Response Control would often be established at a Coastguard facility.
- 3.4 In a related development, not part of the consultation, it was noted that the government was saving £11m by not renewing its contract for Emergency Towing Vessels (ETV) when it expired in September. The government had argued that ETV were not its statutory responsibility but a matter for ship owners. The French Government was maintaining its service however and the availability of ETV had been an important factor in the *MV Napoli* incident.
- 3.5 Although not a formal consultee, Devon Sea Fisheries Committee would be responding to the consultation.
- 3.6 In support of its recommendations, the Task Group asked the officers to obtain for the Cabinet:
- statistics on trends in boat ownership (since any increases are likely to lead to greater demands on the Coastguard);
 - any views expressed on the consultation by the RNLI;
 - any views expressed by the governments of France and Ireland; and
 - figures for call-outs by Search and Rescue helicopters at Chivenor.

4.0 Parliamentary scrutiny

- 4.1 On the day that the Task Group met, the House of Commons Transport Committee was questioning three MCA representatives and the transcript has since been published and can be read here:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmtran/uc752-i/uc75201.htm> .

MPs' concerns were very similar to those of the Task Group.

- 4.2 Vice-Admiral Massey, Chief Executive since July 2010, advised that the programme had been in gestation for at least two years or slightly more. His Agency was required to find a 22% budget reduction by 31 March 2015 and the coastguard modernisation programme was among the measures being proposed to meet those cuts.
- 4.4 MPs asked why no risk assessment had been published with the consultation. They were told that "at every stage ... we have done a risk analysis" and that the Agency would shortly be publishing "a compendium of all the risk assessments that have been done in relation to the future modernisation programme." MPs were critical of this way of doing things.
- 4.5 The MCA representatives opined that "the type of local knowledge that we see as being of most benefit to our activities is of a very detailed nature which is highly specific to the type of incident that we are trying to deal with ... a coastguard officer on watch ... being in possession of knowledge that helps them then to initiate the tasking of assets and ... setting the scene for a particular rescue." This was contrasted with the knowledge Coastguard volunteers had of (say) how to get access through a particular field to the shore.
- 4.6 The Chair cited Coastguard regulations that "all grades of coastal officer should acquire a thorough local knowledge" including as navigational hazards, coastal features, shipping activity and potential problems. Staff at the 18 existing centres sat a local knowledge test every two years with a pass mark of 80%. The MCA's Maritime Director responded to the effect that this was somewhat anachronistic and that "it is unlikely that [future testing] will extend to the level of detail that you have explained, and it certainly won't be as currently set out."
- 4.7 John Leech MP (who worked in an RAC call centre) asked what was the danger that "as with all other 21st century call operations, some calls don't get answered?" The Chief Executive's replied "I don't know ... I have personally not been aware of the failed call issue being a factor at all ... so I will go away and get some data."
- 4.8 On the withdrawal of Emergency Towing Vessels: "the risk analysis that we have done ... shows that there is still a risk and there needs to be some sort of capability. The issue is how we now consult with those interested parties to come to arrangements that will provide for exactly this sort of capability." It emerged from the discussion that there had been no robust procedure to recover ETV costs from ship owners or insurers: in one year £10m had been spent yet only £80,000 recovered. The MCA's Director of Finance & Governance stated: "I think Government has accepted it is not a very good contract, which is why they are not renewing it" while the Chief Executive advised that "The French have sought further clarification of what we are seeking to achieve."
- 4.9 Julie Hilling MP questioned how reducing staffing by half could improve either customer satisfaction or the service's resilience.
- 4.10 MPS were also advised that the government had directed the MCA to review the arrangements for the Maritime Incident Response Group to see how it could be provided at no cost to government. There had been no risk assessment of this.

- 4.11 In common with the Task Group, MPs asked about the loss of Nimrod and the problem (in the absence of local knowledge) of distinguishing between similarly named places far apart.
- 4.12 It has since been announced that the Transport Committee will conduct an inquiry into the proposals for the Coastguard as well as the Government's decisions not to renew the contract for emergency towing vessels and to review arrangements for the Maritime Incident Response Group (which responds to incidents at sea which may require fire-fighting, chemical hazard and/or rescue teams).
- 4.13 The Committee expects to hear further oral evidence after Easter. Written evidence is invited from individuals and organisations, including copies of their responses to the present consultation. Written submissions are requested by 26 April 2011.

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Electoral Divisions: All
Cabinet Member: All

Local Government Act 1972 List of Background Papers		
Officer contact:	Nick Beale	
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Tel No:	01392 382296	
Background Paper	Date	File Reference
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