



Shipping: HM Coastguard

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This note looks at the changes to the Coastguard service over the past few years and the recent privatisation of helicopter Search and Rescue.

Over the past twenty years, since it was established as an executive agency of the Department for Transport in 1994, the Coastguard has undergone a series of structural changes and reorganisations, most recently in 2010-11.

These changes provoked intense debate within the industry and were subject to a number of reports from both the Transport Select Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee. The Government insists that the changes, announced in November 2011, reflect a “clear blueprint for the operation of the nationally networked coastguard co-ordination service”.

Government-funded emergency towing vessels in England have also been scrapped; to be replaced by a commercial service. There is still one Government-funded ETV in Scotland.

The second issue summarised in this note is the recent announcement on the privatisation of Search and Rescue helicopters. SAR-H was previously separated between military and civilian operations, but brought together in 2005 as a joint entity. The Government abandoned a first attempt to secure a private sector bidder for the contract in February 2011.

The competition was re-run and in March 2013 the Government announced that Bristow Helicopters Ltd had been awarded the £1.6 billion contract to provide SAR-H in the UK.

Further information on shipping, ports and maritime matters can be found on the [Shipping Topical Page](#) of the Parliament website.

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1 History of the Coastguard

HM Coastguard¹ owes its origins to the efforts made to combat smuggling throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. HM Customs and Excise were responsible for the prevention of the evasion of duty by smuggling and by the end of the 17th century they had a small fleet of boats and a few men on the Coast. The service was expanded throughout the 18th century with the use of naval vessels, revenue cruisers, dragoons and a shore based mounted force called Riding Officers. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars the preventive forces were strengthened and a Preventive Water Guard was established in 1809. Although the primary objective of the Water Guard was to prevent smuggling, it was also made responsible for giving assistance when a ship was wrecked. The Preventive Water Guard can therefore be regarded as the immediate ancestor of HM Coastguard.

A Committee of Enquiry in 1821 recommended that responsibility for the Preventive Water Guard be transferred to the Board of Customs. In 1822 the Treasury directed that the preventive services be placed under the authority of the Board of Customs and in future be termed the Coastguard. The service was further reviewed in 1831 and it was decided that the Coastguard should become a reserve force for the Royal Navy and this was provided for in the Coastguard Service Act which was passed in July 1856. The Coastguard was placed under Admiralty control in October 1856. Under the Act the protection of revenue remained the responsibility of the Coastguard but as a result of the transfer to the Admiralty, counter smuggling duties became only a minor part of the Coastguard duties.² The 1856 made no mention of life saving but duties laid down included assistance to vessels in danger, taking charge of wrecks and an active participation in the lifeboats which had been stationed around the coasts by the Board of Trade.

¹ further information on the history of the Coastguard can be found in: William Webb, *Coastguard!: An Official History of HM Coastguard* (1976)

² in 1799 income tax was introduced and duties on a wide range of goods declined from that point as taxation focused on income and away from goods (which could be smuggled)

Under the *Merchant Shipping Act 1854*, the Government first took formal steps to assume responsibility for life saving at sea. Thereafter the Board of Trade provided life saving apparatus to the Coastguard and issued regulations to inspecting officers making them responsible for the efficiency of the apparatus.

The position of the Coastguard was reviewed in 1922 and it was agreed that it should come under the control of the Board of Trade as a coast watching force to perform duties in connection with the saving of life, the administration of foreshores and certain other miscellaneous duties. The new role of the Coastguard was formally established in the [Coastguard Act 1925](#).

2 Recent reforms and current structure of the Coastguard

2.1 First consultation, December 2010–July 2011

In December 2010 the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) published a consultation document on reform of the Coastguard service. The proposals in the consultation were designed to “enable fewer Coastguard centres to monitor and communicate with ships anywhere around the UK coastline, as well as delivering complete integration between stations”. The MCA believed that this would “allow greater flexibility and improved resilience” when responding to calls, particularly at peak times. The proposals would also mean ‘enhanced roles and responsibilities’ for a smaller number of officers, matched by ‘improvements in remuneration’.³

The main proposals were as follows:

- two nationally networked Maritime Operations Centres, located in Aberdeen and Portsmouth/Southampton;
- six sub-centres located at Dover, Falmouth, Humber and Swansea and at either Belfast or Liverpool and either Stornoway or Shetland. The 24/7 small centre at London would remain unchanged. Dover would be open 24 hours, others only during daylight hours;
- high quality and demanding jobs for Coastguards, with the job weight and pay reflecting the increased demands placed upon them in line with Civil Service pay guidelines; and
- strengthening the leadership and support provided to volunteer Coastguards.⁴

In terms of staffing, the proposals would result in a fall in the number of Coastguards stationed in the centres from 491 to 248. The number of volunteers in the Coastguard Rescue Service would increase from 80 to 105. Headquarters staff would fall from 25 to 17. Overall staffing numbers would fall from 596 to 370 over a four-year period with “higher quality and better paid jobs for those remaining”.⁵

The consultation proposed that the transition to the new service would begin in 2011/12 and take place over a four-year period. There were a number of FOI requests about the contents of the paper – picking up on things such as the supporting evidence for particular assertions.

³ MCA, *Protecting our Seas and Shores in the 21st Century: Consultation on proposals for modernising the Coastguard 2010*, 16 December 2010, p7

⁴ *ibid.*, p8

⁵ *ibid.*, p8

The answers were published on the MCA website.⁶ A risk analysis and impact assessment of the proposals was also published.⁷ The consultation closed on 5 May 2011.⁸

There were a number of debates in the House and in Westminster Hall about the proposed changes;⁹ the Transport Select Committee questioned the Chief Executive of the MCA about the proposals on 8 February 2011¹⁰ and subsequently announced the setting up of a separate inquiry into the planned changes at the Coastguard on 21 March.¹¹ The Committee's report was published in June 2011. The Committee stated that it had received evidence which "raises serious concerns that safety will be jeopardised if the proposals proceed in their current form" and therefore welcomed "the Minister's assurances that the final proposals will be substantially different to those that were consulted on". The Committee's main concern was the loss of local knowledge amongst coastguard officers that "will inevitably occur under these proposals":

Rationalising the number of MRCCs so drastically, in our view, will reduce the quality and rate of exchange of information, particularly at key points when information needs to be passed swiftly in order to save lives. We are not satisfied that this issue has been adequately addressed in the MCA's proposals.

In particular, we are not convinced that the concept of daylight-hour stations should be proceeded with. Whilst there is general acceptance that there is scope to rationalise the number of MRCCs, there is a strong case for any future re-organisation of the Coastguard to be based on 24-hour centres in order to provide swift and expert assistance to people on local coastlines and in local waters, whatever the time of day.¹²

The Government's response to the Transport Committee's report was published in September 2011, after the publication of its revised proposals (see below), and reflected those changes.¹³

2.2 Second consultation, July–November 2011

On 14 July the then Secretary of State for Transport, Philip Hammond, announced the Government's revised proposals on the future of the Coastguard to the House. He stated that 'three key themes' emerged from the more than 1,800 consultation responses:

...first, widespread acceptance, as illustrated by all the alternative solutions put forward, that change is necessary; secondly, concerns about the potential loss of local knowledge and local contacts with volunteer coastguards and other search and rescue partners; and, thirdly, concerns over how the detailed concept of operations for the

⁶ MCA, *Freedom of Information Requests – Issue 1* (as at 19 July 2011)

⁷ MCA, *Risk*, 26 April 2011

⁸ the Minister extended the initial consultation period for a further six weeks until May in a statement to the House, see: [HC Deb 14 March 2011, c3WS](#)

⁹ see, e.g. [HC Deb 24 March 2011, cc335-84WH](#)

¹⁰ Transport Committee, *Uncorrected oral evidence: Maritime and Coastguard Agency*, HC 752-i, 8 February 2011

¹¹ Transport Committee press notice, "Coastguard, emergency towing vessels and the Maritime Incident Response Group inquiry", 21 March 2011

¹² Transport Committee, *The Coastguard, Emergency Towing Vessels and the Maritime Incident Response Group* (sixth report of session 2010-12), HC 948, 23 June 2011, paras 44-47

¹³ *Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2010–12* (seventh special report of session 2010-12), HC 1483, 16 September 2011

MOCs and sub-centres would work in practice, particularly how a handover between a daytime centre and a 24/7 MOC would work in practice.¹⁴

The revised proposals and the associated benefits outlined by Mr Hammond were as follows:

- one maritime operations centre in the Southampton-Portsmouth area (replacing the station at Solent) with a disaster recovery back-up facility at the Dover station, which would retain its responsibilities for the Channel Navigation Information Service and serve as a sub-centre;
- a further eight sub-centres, all operated on a 24-hour basis, located at Falmouth, Milford Haven, Holyhead, Belfast, Stornoway, Shetland, Aberdeen and Humber;
- stations at Clyde, Forth, Portland, Liverpool, Yarmouth, Brixham, Thames and Swansea to close progressively over the period between 2012 and 2014-15; and
- the small London station would be unaffected.

Mr Hammond stated that the revised proposals would deliver the modernisation required, and were “capable of delivering the same level of savings in the longer term as our previous proposals”. He stated that the additional costs generated by retaining a total of 10 centres overall, plus London, all operating on a 24-hour basis, and the higher coastguard numbers that would be needed to do so, would be offset by operating only one maritime operations centre, in the Southampton-Portsmouth area, with a back-up centre, equipped but not staffed, at Dover. He also indicated that by moving to more efficient watch patterns, “we will still be able to offer higher pay across the service to reflect higher levels of responsibility, while ensuring that costs overall remain within our planned funding for the coastguard as a whole”.¹⁵

The consultation on the new proposals ran from 14 July until 6 October 2011.¹⁶

On 22 November the then Minister for Shipping, Mike Penning, announced the outcome of the second consultation. This focused on four areas: the retention of both the centres at Stornoway and Shetland and their operation on a 24/7 basis; the change to a single maritime operations centre with an unmanned back-up in Dover; the retention of Holyhead rather than its paired centre at Liverpool; and the retention of Milford Haven rather than its paired centre at Swansea. He concluded as follows:

The support for keeping open both the centres at Stornoway and on Shetland was overwhelming, so I can confirm that we will keep them both open on a 24/7 basis.

On the move to a single maritime centre, concerns were expressed about having both an unmanned centre and its back-up in the south, when they should be geographically separated, and about the possible reduction in capabilities at Aberdeen to co-ordinate oil or gas incidents if there was not to be a second main centre in Aberdeen. However, we continue to believe that with more centres remaining open on a 24/7 basis, there is

¹⁴ [HC Deb 14 July 2011, c506](#)

¹⁵ [ibid.](#), cc507-08

¹⁶ MCA, *Protecting our Seas and Shores in the 21st Century: Consultation on revised proposals for modernising the Coastguard 2011*, July 2011; published at the same time: supporting documentation and associated Q&A and a review of all the responses to the first consultation, produced under the leadership of a non-executive director of the MCA, involving a number of serving coastguard officers and members of the Public and Commercial Services Union [all available on the [MCA website](#) – accessed 5 April 2013]

sufficient cover not to need a second nationally networked system. Consequently, there will be one network in the south.

We also believe that the back-up at Dover is sufficiently distant from the maritime operations centre in the Portsmouth-Southampton area ... to provide the necessary resilience while minimising costs. However, we will retain additional specialist staff in Aberdeen to maintain the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's close links with the oil and gas sector. Those jobs will remain.

On the choice of Holyhead rather than Liverpool [...] familiarity with Welsh place names, rather than speaking Welsh, must be an important consideration supporting the retention of Holyhead. As a result, I have concluded that Holyhead should form part of the nationally networked system and that the co-ordination function at Liverpool will close. We plan to maintain a marine office, coastguard rescue team, coastal operational hub and a radio mast at the Liverpool site.

Representations were also received about the proximity, particularly of maritime activities, at Milford Haven and Swansea [...] I have concluded that it remains right that the choice of Milford Haven as the site for a continuing coastguard co-ordination centre should reflect the Department for Transport's continuing substantial levels of employment in Swansea. This means that we will no longer have a coastguard co-ordination function at Swansea, but we plan that the building will remain in use as a coastal operations hub for the volunteer rescue teams. It will be at that site.¹⁷

He also announced that the new national maritime operations centre will be housed in the vacant fire control centre building in Fareham, Hampshire.

In December 2012 the Transport Committee published a follow-up report on the Coastguard reforms. Its main concern was "not that the new system, based on a national coordinating centre and inter-linked regional centres, is flawed but that the Government has not yet explained properly how it will work", resulting in disillusionment and confusion amongst coastguards. The Committee also called on the Government to rule out further MRCC closures in the foreseeable future and to confirm that the new arrangements for the Coastguard Service "are intended to last for a generation".¹⁸ In its response to the Committee, published in March 2013, the Government said that over coming years the Coastguard "is likely to evolve and change progressively just like any other part of public service" and that therefore "no Government committed to excellent public services could guarantee that there will be no further change "for a generation"". ¹⁹

The Scottish Affairs Committee also published a report on the Coastguard changes in November 2012; its report and the Government's response (published February 2013) can be found on the [Committee's website](#).

2.3 Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs)

Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs) were introduced in stages and for trial periods from 1994, following the report by Lord Donaldson that was published as a result of the inquiry into the prevention of pollution from merchant shipping, set up after the wreck of the MV

¹⁷ [HC Deb 22 November 2011, cc162-63](#); the more than 800 responses received to the consultation are available on the MCA website, see: MCA, [Responses Received for the Revised HM Coastguard Proposals for Modernisation Consultation 2011](#), November 2011

¹⁸ Transport Committee, [The Coastguard, Emergency Towing Vessels and the Maritime Incident Response Group: follow up](#) (sixth report of session 2012-13), HC 647, 11 December 2012, paras 47-48

¹⁹ [Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of 2012-13](#) (tenth report of session 2012-13), HC 1018, 13 March 2013, para 67

Braer off the Shetland Islands in 1993. This is an enormous report of some 500 pages which looked at all aspects of merchant shipping safety and made 103 recommendations. Recommendation 85 stated inter alia that "The UK Government should set up a system to ensure that tugs with adequate salvage capacity are available at key points around UK shores".²⁰

By the end of the Conservative Government in 1997 there were three tugs, stationed in Dover, Stornoway and the south western approaches (Falmouth).²¹ A report by the Coastguard in March 1996 raised questions about the value of the tugs compared to their cost to the taxpayer.²²

A report on the three year trial of ETVs (1994 to 1997) was published in August 1997, along with a cost benefit analysis. While warning that the trial experience could not "be directly used to quantify particular benefits due to the nature of the risk of an oil tanker grounding", the trial experience could "check the plausibility of the central case assumptions". It also attempted to incorporate some of the environmental benefits of ETV provision, though it acknowledged that many of these were difficult to estimate. It concluded that if one excluded 'recreational benefits', the provision of an ETV would be justifiable during the winter months in Thames and Kent, North West Scotland and the West Country. The incorporation of recreational benefits suggested that the provision of an ETV in Thames and Kent and the West Country should be on a year-round basis, with the North West Scotland ETV remaining justifiable for the winter months only. It found that provision of an ETV in Shetland or South West Scotland was "not justifiable from the results found in this analysis", but that in the case of South West Scotland a re-examination "may be desirable if further experience of ETV provision in the other areas suggests favourable alterations in the central case assumption".²³

The first update on implementation of the Donaldson Report published under the Labour Government was in October 1997. On Recommendation 85, this stated that the Government would assess the usage of ETVs and the results of a 'more thorough' cost-benefit analysis as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.²⁴ In March 1998 the then Shipping Minister, Glenda Jackson, announced that the Government was considering ways of funding all-year-round cover emergency towing provision.²⁵

Following the 2010 Spending Review, the Department for Transport announced that, from September 2011, the MCA would no longer provide ETVs "at taxpayers' expense" on the grounds that "state provision of ETVs does not represent a correct use of taxpayers money and that ship salvage should be a commercial matter between a ship's operator and the salvor. Removing ETVs will save £32.5m over the Spending Review period".²⁶ Instead, the Government would be looking to the shipping industry to provide any ETVs that it thought necessary.

²⁰ *Safer Ships, Cleaner Seas: Report of Lord Donaldson's Inquiry into the Prevention of Pollution from Merchant Shipping*, Cm 2560, 1994

²¹ [HC Deb 17 June 1996, c333W](#)

²² Coastguard Agency, *Emergency Towing Vessels Trial Report*, March 1996, pp13-15 [HC DEP/3 4501]

²³ Coastguard Agency, *Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs): Cost benefit Analysis; an evaluation of emergency towing provision after the three year trial period*, August 1997, summary [HC DEP 6015/3]

²⁴ DETR, *Implementation of the Recommendations of Lord Donaldson's Inquiry into the Prevention of Pollution from Merchant Shipping: Progress as at 31 October 1997*, p44

²⁵ DETR press notice, "[Further tug cover for UK coasts – Glenda seeks way forward](#)", 31 March 1998; the *Merchant Shipping and Maritime Security Act 1997* gave the Secretary of State powers to raise a levy on shipping

²⁶ DfT press notice, "[Transport spending review 2010](#)", 20 October 2010

In its June 2011 report on the Coastguard reforms, the Transport Committee made three recommendations regarding ETVs. It was primarily concerned that there was no suitable commercial alternative to state-funded ETVs and that the savings the Government would achieve from cancelling the ETV contract represented a false economy.²⁷ In its response to the Committee, the Government reaffirmed its commitment to end the ETV contract on 30 September 2011 and to assist the industry to develop a commercial response to take its place. However, it did state that special provisions would apply in northern Scotland/the Western Isles which might result in the ETV at Stornoway being retained for an extra six weeks while a suitable alternative could be found.²⁸

On 10 October the Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Moore, announced that the Government would provide funding to support the Stornoway ETV for an extra three months until a replacement could be secured.²⁹ On 20 December he stated that discussions had taken place with a wide range of interested parties, including senior representatives of the oil and shipping industries as well as public sector organisations, resulting in the north sea oil industry, led by Oil & Gas UK and its member companies, indicating a willingness to offer support by establishing a call-off arrangement for their chartered vessels to be deployed in support of HM coastguard in the event of an emergency.³⁰

On 12 June 2012 Mr Moore updated the House on the situation. He announced that the Government would continue funding an ETV for the duration of the spending review period (i.e. to 2015), for which the procurement process would begin immediately, and that further funding would be provided towards a temporary contract for a vessel until the longer-term arrangement was put in place. He also stated that the Government would continue its efforts to secure an additional vessel under a commercial call-out arrangement.³¹

Most recently on 13 February 2013 Mr Moore announced that agreement had been reached with BP and North Star Shipping to release a vessel to respond to an incident in waters around Scotland. He stated that he hoped that the scheme would be broadened out to include other suitable vessels identified by offshore industry around Scotland.³²

2.4 New arrangements

The MCA website gives a brief overview of current operations:

17 Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCCs) form a network of command and control centres for responding to reports of maritime and coastal distress. Watch keeping staff in these centres provide a 24 hour service to mariners and coastal users by receiving incoming distress calls and sending resources to their rescue. These calls could come in via the monitoring of emergency radio frequencies, or by 999 calls, as the Coastguard are a recognised 999 emergency service.

The UK Search and Rescue region covers some 1.25 million square nautical miles of sea and over 10.5 thousand nautical miles of coastline.

²⁷ op cit., [The Coastguard, Emergency Towing Vessels and the Maritime Incident Response Group](#), paras 58, 62 & 65

²⁸ op cit., [Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2010–12](#), pp10-11

²⁹ [HC Deb 10 October 2011, c12WS](#)

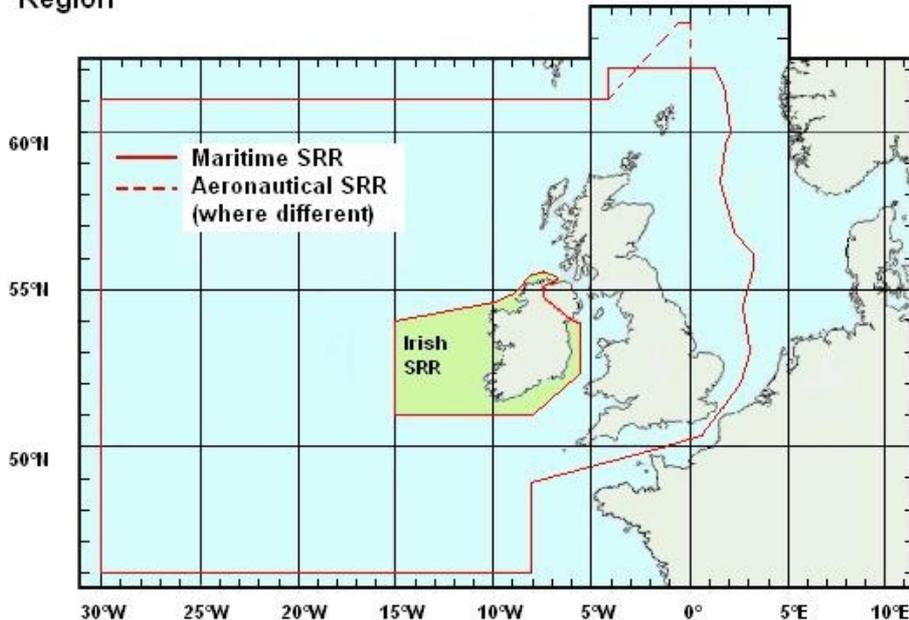
³⁰ [HC Deb 20 December 2011, cc163-4WS](#)

³¹ [HC Deb 12 June 2012, cc27-27WS](#)

³² [HC Deb 28 February 2013, c38WS](#)

The image below illustrates the Search and Rescue region.³³

UK Search and Rescue Region



As explained above, the new arrangements for the reorganised Coastguard were published in November 2011. This outlines the ‘new, nationally networked system’ as follows:

A single Maritime Operations Centre (MOC) manned by 96 regular coastguard staff divided into shifts to provide comprehensive 24 hours a day throughout the year. The MOC will act as a national strategic centre to manage Coastguard operations across a network of interlinked coastguard centres, as well as co-ordinating rescue activities for many incidents occurring anywhere around the coast of the UK on a day to day basis depending on demand and work levels in other centres. The MOC will generate and analyse a national maritime picture using information from a variety of sources. It will be based in a ready built operations centre at Fareham originally constructed as a Fire Control Centre.

A stand-by MOC at the existing coastguard rescue coordination centre at Dover fully equipped to take on the MOC role but not normally manned for this purpose. The centre at Dover will have 28 staff divided into shifts, slightly higher than other centres given its responsibilities for the Channel Navigation Information Service (CNIS). This will enable it to handle a transition to MOC operations until additional staff can be brought in should the back-up need to be activated.

Eight further centres, all of which will be connected into the national network allowing the effective interchange of information and tasking between the MOC and these centres or between themselves. All these centres will be open 24 hours a day with a total staffing of 23 regular coastguards for each, divided into shifts. These networked centres will be based at the existing Coastguard coordination centres at:

- Aberdeen
- Shetland

³³ MCA, *The Role of HM Coastguard* [accessed 8 April 2013]

- Stornoway
- Belfast
- Holyhead
- Milford Haven
- Falmouth
- Humber

The small centre at London, collocated with the Port of London Authority operations centre, and overseeing activity on the Thames will continue with 6 staff rostered to provide 24/7 cover.

Aberdeen will have some additional staff to handle liaison with the oil and gas industry.³⁴

And on communications:

All regular Coastguards working in the new centres, wherever they are located, will use the same systems, have access to all the same data and be able to use all available communication aerials and other links to communicate with those needing assistance. The future design will connect the existing radio aerial sites to centralised equipment located in two geographically separate locations; the MOC and all Coastguard Centres will connect to these systems. This will mean that operators anywhere within the network will be able to access any of the radio aerials, communication and management systems they need to carry out their operational duties as shown below.³⁵

The provisional schedule for the closure of MRCCs is as follows (by end of financial year):

- 2012/13 – Clyde, Forth
- 2013/14 – Brixham, Portland, Solent, Yarmouth
- 2014/15 – Liverpool, Swansea, Thames

The paper states that both the dates and sequence of closure “will be driven by operational requirements during the implementation of the programme and, as such, are subject to ongoing review”.³⁶

3 Previous reforms of the Coastguard

3.1 Establishment as an Executive Agency, 1994

The Coastguard Agency was established as an executive agency of the Department of Transport in April 1994.³⁷ The Agency comprised HM Coastguard and the Marine Pollution Control Unit (MPCU), which was responsible for counter-pollution operations in UK waters.

³⁴ MCA, *Blueprint For Future Coastguard Organisation In The UK*, November 2011, pp2-3; [supporting documentation](#) and [Q&A](#) also available

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp4-5

³⁶ *ibid.*, p9

³⁷ ‘executive agencies’ are public institutions that deliver Government services; they do not set policy (this is the responsibility of the relevant Government department); and they are headed by chief executives who are personally responsible for day-to-day operations

At the same time as its conversion to agency status the Coastguard service underwent a reorganisation of its sector and auxiliary structure, announced in December 1991. Among the measures announced were:

- establishing 68 additional auxiliary companies at new locations around the coast and streamlining the size of companies so as to permit a reduction in the number of auxiliary coastguards and sector officers;
- improving the remuneration, equipment and training of the auxiliary coastguard service (e.g. increasing the number of pagers, portable radios and uniform items);
- ceasing fixed watchkeeping at Lizard, to be replaced by a mobile lookout undertaken by a coastguard response vehicle on a casualty watch basis, but continuing the fixed lookout at St. Ives for eight to 10 hours watchkeeping per day during the Easter to September period; and
- agreeing to an extensive building programme, including new sector stations at Thurso, Buckie, Hartlepool, Port Pendennis and Burnham on Sea, and leasing suitable buildings or rebuilding existing buildings at 18 other locations, and providing new auxiliary stations in Orkney, Burnham on Crouch, Whitstable, St. Just, Penhale, Bridport and at Sutton Bridge.³⁸

The implementation of the review was to be spread over four years.

The review also recommended that as many auxiliary coastguards as possible should be general purpose auxiliaries and divided into Initial Response Teams (IRTs) and Backup Response Teams (BRTs). It made some recommendations about the size of such teams, which would lead to a reduction in the number of auxiliaries. There were also recommendations about the system of remuneration and hours worked by auxiliaries.³⁹

The Coastguard and the Department of Transport also agreed that the Agency would make efficiency savings worth approximately £1.5 million over two years, beginning in 1994.⁴⁰

In December 1994 the Transport Select Committee published a report on the future of the Coastguard service following the announcement of the planned efficiency savings. The Committee raised concerns about the effect of the savings the Agency was being asked to make and expressed a hope that the conversion to agency status would end the continual reviews to which it had been subject.⁴¹

3.2 Focus for Change, the five year strategy and review, 1997-99

In his foreword to the Coastguard Agency's 1996-97 Business Plan, the then Chief Executive, Chris Harris, said that in the previous year the Agency had undergone a far-reaching review of its staffing and organisation.⁴² The conclusion of that review was an internal document entitled *Focus for Change*. This stated that there would be benefit in adopting a more flexible approach to the manning of the rescue centres. Mr Harris stated that

³⁸ [HC Deb 3 December 1991, cc105-06W](#); this followed a year-long review, see: DoT, *Review of HM Coastguard Sector Organisation and Auxiliary Coastguard Service*, January 1991 [HC DEP 6908]

³⁹ *ibid.*, *Review of HM Coastguard Sector Organisation and Auxiliary Coastguard Service*, paras 11-19

⁴⁰ [HL Deb 20 July 1994 c33W](#); and: DoT press notice, "Coastguard efficiency gains", 20 July 1994 [PN 94/273]

⁴¹ Transport Committee, *The Future of the Coastguard Service* (first report of session 1994-95), HC 89, 7 December 1994, paras 16-17

⁴² CA, *Coastguard Agency Business Plan 1996-97*, 1 January 1996 [HC DEP/3 3563]

the planned changes would result in a net increase of approximately eight full time posts.⁴³The Agency's Annual Report, published in July 1997, summarised the measures implemented during the year as a result of the recommendations contained in *Focus for Change*. These included:

- Descriptions for all Coastguard grades;
- New terms and conditions of employment for Coastguard Watch Assistants (CWAs); a new selection and recruitment procedure for the same; hiring of part time CWAs to enhance operational support at all 21 rescue centres to replace the part time volunteer operations room assistants; revised training and supervision arrangements;
- Permanent administrative support at all 21 rescue centres;
- New Watch Managers in 17 rescue centres and Sector Managers at all 21 Coastguard districts; with a new selection procedure and training package for both new grades;
- Reduced district management teams at 14 rescue centres; and
- A rationalised organisational structure ready for the introduction of Sector Managers.⁴⁴

In November 1997 the then Minister for Shipping, Glenda Jackson, announced that she had endorsed a strategy for the Coastguard "which would involve a substantial investment in new technology and would take the Service into the next century". The key to the strategy was:

... the introduction of digital communications technology at Coastguard rescue centres and remote radio sites to replace aging equipment. Once the new technology is in place HMCG will be able to concentrate their operational expertise within fewer rescue co-ordination sub-centres by closing the rescue sub-centres at Oban and Pentland (Orkney) by the end of 1999, and Tyne-Tees and Liverpool by the end of 2000. Portland and Solent rescue sub-centres at present in unsuitable buildings will be bought together under the same roof by March 2002.

By carefully planning the process we expect to be able to achieve the reduction of staff by a combination of natural wastage, early retirement and early severance. Staff and trade unions will be closely involved in the implementation.⁴⁵

The Government indicated that following the closure of the stations at Pentland, Oban, Tyne Tees and Liverpool, the complement of Coastguard officers would be reduced by around 78 staff over the following four to five years although there would be some additional posts at flank stations. This would be set against the increase in staff of around 200 in 1997 and the overall result after five years would be a net increase in staff over the previous year's levels.⁴⁶ An article in the *Financial Times* estimated that these station closures would involve a reduction in the number of coastguards from 552 to 474.⁴⁷

⁴³ [HC Deb 24 July 1996, c368W](#)

⁴⁴ CA, *Coastguard Agency Annual Report and Accounts, 1996/97*, HC 42, 10 July 1997

⁴⁵ [HC Deb 17 November 1997, c9-10W](#)

⁴⁶ [HC Deb 21 November 1997, c335-36W](#)

⁴⁷ "Closure of coastguard stations sparks anger", *Financial Times*, 18 November 1997

In January 1998 the Government published a consultation document outlining the five-year strategy, representing the result of the 'extensive knowledge' gained by the *Focus for Change* review together with the flexibility offered by the proposed Integrated Coastguard Communications System (ICCS). The strategy sought to provide a clear direction for the Coastguard; investment in new communications technology; 17 co-ordination centres controlling 136 remote VHF radio sites with enhanced levels of staffing to improve safety; and no loss of any rescue service on the ground or compulsory redundancies.⁴⁸

There was some criticism of the consultation process, mostly on the basis that decisions on closures and other matters had been made prior to the consultation itself and thus presented employees and others with a *fait accompli*.⁴⁹ However following the consultation process the Minister announced that the timing of the closure of the Coastguard co-ordination centres at Oban, Pentland, Liverpool, Tyne Tees, Solent and Portland had been revised from 1999 and 2000 to later dates between 2000 and 2003.⁵⁰

In February 1998 the National Audit Office (NAO) published a report on the Coastguard.⁵¹ This was followed by a report from the Public Accounts Committee in July 1998, which concluded that the service should ensure that the new communications system be in place in good time and that any closures, should they go ahead, must not lead to a loss of local knowledge. It also recommended the regular checking of radio communications equipment, good preparation by co-ordination centres and full training for auxiliaries.⁵²

The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee examined the closure proposals in a February 1999 report. It expressed concerns about the increased workload for Watch Officers and the potential loss of 'local knowledge' and therefore concluded that, based on the relatively small cost savings involved (£500,000), the closure programme should be abandoned and "all 21 maritime rescue co-ordination centres and sub-centres be retained, and that the new communications technology, which is so necessary, is installed in all of them".⁵³ In its response to the Committee, the Government rejected the savings figure of £500,000 and stated that overall the proposals in the strategy would save £2.9 million. It put the cost of keeping all 21 co-ordination stations open, along with the proposed introduction of ICCS, at £12 million.⁵⁴

A review of the five year strategy by Lord Donaldson of Lymington was published in August 1999, focusing on the proposed closure programme. He supported the closure of the centres at Pentland, Oban and Tyne on the grounds that they had an "unduly low workload". However, he did not see a case for the co-location of the Solent and Portland centres or for closing the co-ordination centre in Liverpool. He also concluded that his support for the closure of the three centres mentioned above was conditional on staffing levels being maintained so that search and rescue staff could undertake the requisite training and build

⁴⁸ DETR, *HM Coastguard Five Year Strategy: A document for consultation*, 1 January 1998 [HC DEP/3 5864], pv

⁴⁹ e.g. [HC Deb 26 November 1997, c891W](#); and: ETRA Committee, [The Maritime and Coastguard Agency](#) (sixth report of session 1998-99), HC 31, 17 February 1999, Qq4-12

⁵⁰ [Letter from Glenda Jackson MP to Stephen Hesford MP](#), 31 July 1998

⁵¹ NAO, *HM Coastguard: Civil Maritime Search and Rescue* (session 1997-98), HC 544, 20 February 1998

⁵² PAC, [HM Coastguard: Civil Maritime Search and Rescue](#) (fifty-ninth report of session 1997-98), HC 741, 31 July 1998, para 2

⁵³ *op cit.*, [The Maritime and Coastguard Agency](#), paras 45-46 [emphasis in the original]

⁵⁴ *The Government's response to the sixth report of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Select Committee*, Cm 4433, August 1999, p6

up their local knowledge and contacts. He also stated that the Agency must carefully monitor the installation of the ICCS to “ensure that it delivers the expected benefits”.⁵⁵

3.3 Merger into the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, 1998

In August 1997 the then Minister of Shipping, Glenda Jackson, announced that the Coastguard Agency and the Marine Safety Agency would merge on 1 April 1998 to create a new Agency, to be known as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). The Government indicated that there would be no reduction in front line services by the Coastguard and Marine Survey Services on the coast but that there would be some ‘efficiency gains’ at headquarters in Southampton.⁵⁶ The combined MCA budget for 1998-99 would be more than the single budgets of the two existing agencies.⁵⁷

In its 1999 report, the ETRA Committee acknowledged that there were savings to be made from the merger of the MSA and the Coastguard but questioned the operational effectiveness of such a merger and on that basis recommended “that the two Agencies should be demerged, and that the Coastguard Agency and the MSA should be re-established”.⁵⁸ In its response to the Committee, the Government said that the “principal reason for the merger was the complementary nature of the work carried out by the former Agencies” and that it therefore made sense to “make use of coastguard resources on the ground to support the work of the surveyors in specific areas including vessel inspections”. The Government stated that both areas of work were in the interest of safety and cleaner seas (one as a regulator and the other as educator) and that “to continue to act independently would seem wasteful”. Further, “each discipline is able to learn from the others to improve safety and counter-pollution work and to target areas of concern which might otherwise be neglected”.⁵⁹

3.4 Consequences of centre closures, 2000-04

As indicated in the section on ‘Focus for Change’, above, in the end the Coastguard only closed the Oban, Pentland and Tyne Tees co-ordination centres. These closures took place in 2000-03. In July 2004 the Transport Committee published a further report on the MCA, criticising the lack of consultation or assessment as to the impacts of closing those three centres. The Committee recommended that the MCA carry out a full assessment of the impact of these closures, covering, as a minimum, any impact of the closures on:

- Time taken to decide on appropriate search and rescue responses and to initiate action;
- Time taken for Coastguard Response Units to arrive at the scene of an incident; and
- The prevalence of incidents, accidents and deaths.

⁵⁵ Lord Donaldson for the DETR, *Review of the Five-Year Strategy for HM Coastguard*, Cm. 4432, August 1999, letter of introduction, p3

⁵⁶ DoT press notice, “New marine agency introduced”, 19 August 1997 [PN 97/189/transport]

⁵⁷ [HC Deb 22 January 1998, c604W](#)

⁵⁸ op cit., *The Maritime and Coastguard Agency*, paras 49 & 56 [emphasis in the original]

⁵⁹ op cit., *The Government’s response to the sixth report of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Select Committee*, p8

The Committee took the view that until such an assessment had been undertaken, the MCA's claims that safety had not been jeopardised were 'impossible to verify'.⁶⁰

The Government did not accept that there had been insufficient assessment of the impact of the closures, or that safety had been jeopardised as a result. In its response to the Committee, it said:

Before any decision was made to close the co-ordination centres at Oban, Pentland and Tyne Tees, a full and independent review of the proposed 5 year closure strategy was carried out by Lord Donaldson of Lymington, on behalf of the then Secretary of State. Since the closure of the three co-ordination centres, regular exercises have been carried out to ensure the operational integrity of the areas taken over by other co-ordination centres. Levels of search and rescue activity in all regions are already regularly reviewed and dynamic risk appraisals are carried out. Where a need for improvement is identified, procedures are amended accordingly and good practice is disseminated across the SAR network. The work already in hand to improve analysis of statistics for incidents, accidents and deaths, will further assist this process.

Although the co-ordination centres are an integral part of the SAR chain, it is important to distinguish between the role of Coastguard Rescue Co-ordination Centres on the one hand, and the role of those who undertake search and rescue missions on the other (the local auxiliary coastguard teams, helicopter and lifeboat crews). Rescue resources are not located at the centres but are dispatched from strategic locations on instructions issued remotely from co-ordination centres. There has been no reduction in the actual number of response teams carrying out search and rescue.

New technology enables co-ordination centres to monitor maritime activity and co-ordinate incident response over a wider area than was previously the case. For example, while the co-ordination centres at Oban, Pentland and Tyne-Tees have closed, the radio-communications infrastructure (the aerials), which pick up distress alerts, continue to operate. The aerials were switched in a flanking arrangement, so that the signals they detect are now monitored by other co-ordination centres. It is also now possible to link co-ordination centres, so that one centre can assist another during periods of increased activity.⁶¹

4 Search and Rescue (SAR-H)

*Full background on helicopter search and rescue, and the SAR-H programme is available in HC Library standard note [SN5861](#), *Privatisation of RAF/Royal Navy Search and Rescue*, 16 December 2011. [Defence Industry Daily](#) provides a summary and timeline of the procurement process on its website.*

The Joint SAR-H (Search and Rescue Harmonisation) project was established in 2005 to replace the search and rescue helicopter capabilities in the UK currently provided by the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. That project envisaged the creation of a single SAR entity that would comprise a mix of civilian and military personnel; while all of the airframes would form part of a commercially owned and registered fleet.

⁶⁰ Transport Committee, [The work of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency](#) (fourteenth report of session 2003-04), HC 500, 19 July 2004, paras 11-13

⁶¹ [The Government's Response to the Transport Committee's Report on the Work of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency](#), Cm 6343, October 2004, p2

The Soteria consortium was chosen as the preferred bidder for the project in February 2010.⁶² However, the project was suspended in June 2010 following a Treasury review of the Government's major spending projects. An announcement on proceeding with the project had been expected in December 2010. The Government subsequently confirmed that the project would be delayed while issues relating to the bidding process were clarified.

On 8 February 2011 the Government announced that the SAR-H contract had been cancelled after it emerged that irregularities had arisen in the bidding process relating to the consortium that had gone on to win the competition.⁶³

After a period of assessment, the Department for Transport announced on 28 November 2011 that a new civilian operated search and rescue capability would be established and that military involvement in search and rescue would cease once that capability becomes fully operational. The then Transport Secretary, Justine Greening, announced a competition to procure a search and rescue helicopter service for the whole of the UK, for a period of ten years. Ms Greening said she expected to award a contract in early 2013.⁶⁴

The Department for Transport announced in February 2012 that a contract was signed with Bristow Helicopters Ltd to operate search and rescue services from Stornoway and Shetland, and a separate contract with CHC Scotia Bristow Helicopters Ltd to operate search and rescue services from the MCA bases at Portland and Lee-on-the-Solent. Operations under both contracts would commence by the time the existing MCA service contract expired, and would continue until June 2017. The Department affirmed that procurement remained under way for the longer-term arrangements mentioned above. At this stage the Department expected operations under the longer-term arrangements to commence during 2015 and the future contractor for the UK to assume responsibility for the MCA capability during 2017.⁶⁵

The MOD confirmed in June 2012 that the MOD provision of Rotary Wing Search and Rescue at the eight remaining military bases would end in April 2016 with the withdrawal of the Sea King. This service would be performed by a contractor through the Department for Transport. The confirmation came as a result of the Defence Rotary Wing Capability Study.⁶⁶

Finally, in March 2013 the Department for Transport announced that it had signed a £1.6 billion contract with Bristow Helicopters Ltd to provide SAR helicopter services in the UK. This would mean that:

... helicopters would be able to reach a larger area of the UK search and rescue region within one hour of take off than is currently possible, and based on historic incident data it is estimated that there will be an overall improvement in flying times to incidents of around 20% (from 23 to 19 minutes). Presently, approximately 70% of high and very high risk areas within the UK search and rescue region are reachable by helicopter within 30 minutes. Under the new contract, approximately 85% of the same area would be reached within this timeframe.

[...]

Under the new contract, 22 state of the art helicopters will operate from 10 locations around the UK.

⁶² [HC Deb 9 February 2010, cc42-43WS](#)

⁶³ [HC Deb 10 February 2011, cc16-17WS](#)

⁶⁴ [HC Deb 28 November 2011, cc52-53WS](#)

⁶⁵ [HC Deb 8 February 2012, cc26-27WS](#)

⁶⁶ [HC Deb 12 June 2012, c18WS](#)

- Ten Sikorsky S92s will be based, 2 per site, at Stornoway and Sumburgh, and at new bases at Newquay, Caernarfon and Humberside airports
- Ten AgustaWestland AW189s will operate, 2 per site, from Lee on Solent and a new hangar at Prestwick airport, and new bases which will be established at St Athan, Inverness and Manston airports

All bases will be operational 24 hours a day.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ DfT press notice, [“Government contract to deliver faster, state of the art search and rescue fleet”](#), 26 March 2013; and: [HC Deb 26 March 2013, cc98-99WS](#)