

Debate Pack

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Contribution of lifeboat services to search and rescue

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1 Background

There will be a debate on the contribution of lifeboat services to search and rescue in Westminster Hall on 10 January 2023 at 9:30. This debate will be led by Kevin Foster MP.

1.1 Search and Rescue

Search and rescue (SAR) provision in the UK is delivered through an amalgam of government departments, emergency services and various SAR charities and voluntary organisations. UK SAR is organised through the UK SAR Strategic Committee, an inter-departmental body which is currently chaired by the Department for Transport (DfT).¹

HM Coastguard provides a response and co-ordination service for air- and sea-based SAR in the UK. HM Coastguard is a section of the [Maritime and Coastguard Agency \(MCA\)](#), which is itself an agency of the DfT.² HM Coastguard has existed since 1822 and [celebrated its bicentenary in 2022](#).³

HM Coastguard co-ordinates air and sea-based SAR through its [nine operations centres around the UK](#). These are in Shetland, Aberdeen, Humber, Dover, Fareham, Falmouth, Milford Haven, Holyhead, Belfast and Stornoway. Additionally, London Coastguard is co-located with the Port of London Authority and looks after SAR on the River Thames. HM Coastguard has its National Maritime Operations Centre, at Fareham in Hampshire, at its hub.⁴

According to the MCA's [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#), HM Coastguard's role "includes the mobilisation, organisation and tasking of adequate resources to respond to persons in distress in the air, at sea, in tidal waters or at risk of injury or death on the sea cliffs and shoreline of the UK."⁵

Other authorities, primarily the police services, also have an SAR role. Police services utilise their command-and-control infrastructure to co-ordinate land-based SAR operations. As with HM Coastguard, police services enable specialist, mainly voluntary organisations to respond to incidents and emergencies. In all areas the police retain primary responsibility for investigating deaths. HM Coastguard has delegated responsibility from the

¹ MCA Guidance, [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#). 5 November 2021, p6

² MCA, [About us](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]

³ HM Coastguard Souvenir Magazine, [Saving Lives for 200 Years](#), 15 February 2022

⁴ NEC Insights, [The Coastguard Operations Centre : A Day in the Life](#), 19 August 2019

⁵ MCA Guidance, [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#) 5 November 2021, p6

police services for maritime SAR in some specific inland areas such as major lakes in Scotland and in England's Lake District.⁶

Fire services, ambulance services, and the Ministry of Defence may all also be involved in responding to SAR incidents, as can a range of voluntary organisations (such as Mountain Rescue, the British Cave Rescue Council, and Beach Lifeguards). The assistance of these voluntary organisations is requested and tasked, through one of the civilian coordinating authorities – that is, a police service or HM Coastguard, who retain primacy for an overall incident.⁷

HM Coastguard discharges the MCA's responsibilities as a '[Category 1 responder](#)' for maritime emergencies under the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#). Other category 1 responders include the Ambulance, Fire and Police services.⁸ In emergencies, [999 calls can be directed](#) to HM Coastguard, who can also be contacted by seafarers issuing a 'mayday' broadcast.⁹

Search and Rescue reforms

Under the Coalition Government, the UK's helicopter SAR provision was privatised, and since 2013 has been provided by Bristow Helicopters Ltd.¹⁰ In July 2022, Bristow Helicopters was [awarded a new ten-year contract](#).¹¹

Government funding for Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs), which are used to intercept ships that have become disabled before they ground or collide with other ship traffic, [was withdrawn in 2011](#).¹² With the exception of [one government-funded ETV in Scotland](#), ETV provision has since been left to the commercial market.¹³

Further consolidation of UK coastguard provision was [also announced in 2011](#), following a [consultation](#).¹⁴ More information on these Coalition reforms appears in the Commons Library briefing [Shipping: HM Coastguard](#).¹⁵

⁶ MCA Guidance, [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#), 5 November 2021, p6

⁷ MCA Guidance, [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#), 5 November 2021, p10

⁸ College of Policing, [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#), 29 September 2020

⁹ HM Coastguard, [Beach, coast or sea: think 999 Coastguard](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]; MCA Press release, [New national Coastguard operations centre opens](#), 9 September 2014

¹⁰ DfT Written statement to Parliament, [Search and rescue helicopters](#), 26 March 2013

¹¹ MCA Press release, [Government contract uses the latest technology for search and rescue](#), 21 July 2022

¹² DfT Press release, [Transport spending review 2010](#), 20 October 2010

¹³ PQ 179545 [[HM Coastguard: Boats and Helicopters](#)], answered 15 April 2021

¹⁴ DfT Press Release, [Coastguard modernisation proposals confirmed](#), 22 November 2011; MCA Consultation outcome, [HM Coastguard proposals for modernisation 2011](#), 14 July 2011

¹⁵ Commons Library Briefing SN-00186, [Shipping: HM Coastguard](#), 9 April 2013

1.2

Lifeboat services

HM Coastguard provides its own lifeboat services, which are often partially or fully staffed by volunteers in its [Coastguard Rescue Service](#). This operates in 18 regions along the UK coast.¹⁶ According to the MCA, [HM Coastguard responded to over 33,000 incidents](#) in 2020.¹⁷

Lifeboat services are also delivered by a range of voluntary and charitable organisations, which can receive requests for SAR assistance from HM Coastguard. The biggest of these is the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

The RNLI is a charity, incorporated by Royal Charter for the purpose of saving lives, promoting safety and providing relief from disaster, primarily at sea and on specific inland waters.¹⁸ It has a fleet of lifeboats in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and Republic of Ireland, which are declared for SAR purposes to the relevant national authorities.¹⁹

The RNLI is a member of the UK SAR Strategic Committee and the UK SAR Operators Group which are both co-ordinated by the Government, but not publicly funded. [According to its website](#), 92% of the RNLI's total income comes from donations, with the remaining 8% from sources including trading and investments.²⁰ According to their [annual operational statistics report](#) [PDF], RNLI lifeboat crews aided 12,903 people and saved 296 lives in 2021.²¹

In addition to the RNLI, other smaller voluntary organisations provide lifeboats in various coastal areas of the UK. These organisations are expected to abide by the [MCA's Rescue Boat Code](#).²² Many of these are represented by the [National Independent Lifeboat Association](#) (NILA), which was set up in 2022 and whose membership includes:

- Humber Rescue (Yorkshire/Lincolnshire)
- Jersey Lifeboat Association (Jersey)
- Lagan Search & Rescue (Belfast)
- Loch Lomond Rescue Boat (Stirlingshire/Dunbartonshire)
- Hope Cove Lifeboat (Devon)

¹⁶ MCA Guidance, [Volunteering for MCA](#). 9 December 2022

¹⁷ MCA, [About us](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]

¹⁸ RNLI, [Royal Charter and Bye-Laws](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022];

¹⁹ MCA Guidance, [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#), 5 November 2021, p10

²⁰ RNLI, [Running costs](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]

²¹ RNLI, [Operational statistics report 2021](#) [PDF] [Accessed 30 December 2022]

²² MCA Guidance, [The rescue boat code](#), 16 July 2014

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 Parliamentary questions

Marine Accident Investigation Branch

28 July 2022 | UIN HL1848

Asked by: The Lord Bishop of Exeter

To ask Her Majesty's Government, what assessment they have made of the 2021 Marine Accident Investigation Branch Annual Report, published on 9 June; in particular, the finding that 10 commercial fishermen lost their lives in 2021, the highest figure in a decade; and what steps they are taking in response to improve maritime safety and reduce fatalities.

Answering Member: Baroness Vere of Norbiton | Department for Transport

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) Annual Report reflects that fishing remains the most dangerous industry in the UK. Owners and Skippers are ultimately responsible for the safety of their vessels and crew.

Following the MAIB recommendations to improve maritime safety and reduce fatalities, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) introduced the Small Fishing Vessel Code of Practice in September 2021, which sets minimum standards for vessel construction, machinery, water freeing, freeboard, and stability. Vessels are now inspected both in and out of the water and the MCA have introduced inspections to take place at random, outside of the routine inspection cycle.

In addition, Seafish and the MCA have developed the Home and Dry website and have run three safety campaigns covering: risk assessment; man overboard and vessel stability. Since 2008, the MCA has provided £3 million to enable Seafish to obtain match funding to provide free safety training. The MCA have also supported the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Seafish in the delivery of Man Overboard Awareness events. The MCA are also developing new training and certification requirements which will extend certification for skippers of vessels from 16.5m to 7m.

2.2 Parliamentary debates

National Lost Trawlermen's Memorial Day

13 December 2021 | House of Commons | 705 cc878-890

Adjournment debate

[RNLI and Independent Lifeboats: Covid-19](#)

13 October 2020 | Westminster Hall | 682 cc80-103WH

Motion, That this House has considered the future of the RNLI and independent lifeboats after the covid-19 outbreak.

2.3

Select committee – oral questions

Backbench Business Committee, [Proposals for backbench debates](#), 6 December 2022, Q8

3

Press material

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[Independent lifeboats to get backing from new charity](#)

Emergency Services Times

20 October 2022

[Lifeboat crews accuse RNLI managers of complacency over Channel crossings](#)

The Guardian

2 October 2022

[RNLI reports rise in lives saved last year to more than one a day](#)

The Guardian

21 April 2022

[Lifeboats risk stormy seas and save lives for almost 200 years](#)

The Guardian

26 June 2021

[RNLI says lifesaving callouts increased by 30% in summer 2020](#)

The Guardian

27 April 2021

4

Further reading

- HM Coastguard [Blog](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]
- HM Coastguard [Memorandum of Understanding between the RNLI and HM Coastguard](#) 1 October 2020
- Maritime and Coastguard Agency [Strategic Overview of SAR in the UK](#) 5 November 2021
- RNLI [How the RNLI is run](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]
- National Independent Lifeboat Association [About – NILA](#) [Accessed 29 December 2022]

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