

On December 16th 2010, the UK Coalition Government launched the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) Consultation on Modernising Coastguard for the 21st Century. The consultation process was originally due to end on March 24th 2011, though this was later extended to May 5th 2011.

Within Wales, the MCA proposal is to shut down the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC) at Milford Haven & Holyhead, and to downgrade Swansea to operate during 'daylight hours' only. (I am assuming that Swansea would be required to cover the whole of the Wales coastline during the daytime, though this detail was not provided within the MCA Consultation).

During the night time, HM Coastguard Rescue Coordination services would be centralised to a Maritime Operations Centre (MOC) at Southampton or Portsmouth.

Serious concerns arose throughout the UK that the closure of MRCC's will also result in a loss of valuable & vital local knowledge, and the impact this would have on response to an emergency situation. Considerable concern also arose concerning the lack of Risk Assessments presented with the Consultation.

The 'compendium' of Risk Assessments were eventually published by the MCA, but these appear to be loaded in support of the MCA proposals, and also some elements were written subsequent to the Transport Select Committee requesting publication of the documents. (Risk Assessments available)

Many local campaigns throughout the UK were formed along with many petitions. In Milford Haven, a local paper & online petition was started which eventually acquired in excess of 20,000 signatures opposing the MCA Modernisation Proposals. This petition was delivered to Downing Street, along with a 15,000 Signature National Online Petition, on Tuesday 29th June 2011.

So great were the concerns of so many, the Transport Select Committee launched a full Inquiry into the MCA proposals for Modernising the Coastguard, Emergency Towing Vessels (ETV), and the Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG).

The Save Milford Haven Coastguard Campaign submitted a formal response to the Transport Select Committee and was subsequently invited to Westminster for one member of the Campaign to offer evidence at the final Oral Evidence Meeting on May 24th 2011. (Campaign Response available)

The subsequent Transport Select Committee Report on the Coastguard Modernisation was highly critical of the MCA Consultation Process. It states;

"By failing to involve serving coastguard officers, unions, volunteers, stakeholders or the devolved administrations in the drafting of the current proposals for the future of the Coastguard, and by failing to publish a risk assessment of the current plans or an impact assessment of the previous round of closures until prompted, the MCA management has badly miscalculated. It has mishandled the consultation and made it appear opaque rather than clear and open-minded. It has appeared arrogant, and reluctant to open itself to proper scrutiny in the process. The atmosphere of disquiet and suspicion generated by this consultation process is of the MCA's own making."

Many debates have taken place in Westminster on the Coastguard Modernisation proposals, as well as a Short Debate at The Senedd. All of these debates have met with cross-party support in opposition to the proposals.

The MCA also conducted a series of public meetings throughout the UK which met with fierce public opposition and many ending with unanimous votes of no confidence in the proposals. (Transcripts available)

On May 19th 2011 , the Secretary of State for Transport Mr Phillip Hammond MP announced that the Government were "*looking again*" at the MCA proposals, fuelling speculation that a reprieve for some Coastguard Rescue Centres may be possible.

The MCA have tasked an 'Independent Review Team' to analyse approx. 1700 responses to the proposals, and is shortly to issue its own report.

The Government have stated that it will make an announcement of 'Alternative Proposals' before the Houses of Parliament rises on July 19th. We await that announcement.

In the meantime, the National Assembly of Wales E-petition was started to urge the Wales Government to conduct its own independent Risk Assessments on Coastal Tourism associated with the closure of MRCC Milford Haven, MRCC Holyhead & the downgrading of MRCC Swansea to 'daylight hours' only.