



SAVE MILFORD HAVEN COASTGUARD



“ ... this same blessed Milford: and by the way tell me how Wales was made so happy as to inherit such a haven... ”

William Shakespeare

Cymbeline Act 3, Scene 2, (1611)

“Milford Haven - the finest port of Christendom”

Admiral Horatio Nelson (1802)

1. 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. One of the Key Drivers for Modernisation was stated to be 'Resilience'.

Within Wales, the MCA proposal was to shut down the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC) at Milford Haven and Holyhead, and to downgrade Swansea to operate during 'daylight hours' only.

The initial proposals meant that Search & Rescue Coordination Services were to be centralised to 2 x Maritime Operations Centres at Southampton/Portsmouth and also Aberdeen.

This would've meant that during night-time, Search & Rescue Coordination would have been carried out at either of these Maritime Operations Centres.

Serious concerns arose throughout the UK that the closure of MRCC's and the centralising services would result in a loss of valuable and vital local knowledge, and the subsequent impact this would have had on emergency response times.

Considerable concern also arose concerning the lack of Risk Assessments presented with the Consultation.

2. Many local campaigns throughout the UK were formed along with many petitions.

In Milford Haven, a petition was started which eventually acquired in excess of 20,000 signatures opposing the MCA Modernisation Proposals in its current form. 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).

A 'compendium' of Risk Assessments was eventually published by the MCA, but these appeared to be weighted in support of the MCA proposals, and also some elements were written subsequent to the Transport Select Committee requesting publication of the documents.

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

“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.”

3. During the initial Consultation Period, the MCA also conducted a series of public meetings throughout the UK. Many of these met with fierce public opposition with the majority ending with unanimous votes of no confidence in the proposals.

The MCA Consultation ended on May 6th 2011. The MCA then tasked an ‘Independent Review Team’ to analyse an approximate 1700 responses to the proposals.

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

On July 4th 2011, a National Assembly of Wales E-petition was started to urge the Wales Government to conduct its own independent Risk Assessment on Coastal Tourism associated with the closure of MRCC Milford Haven, MRCC Holyhead & the downgrading of MRCC Swansea to ‘daylight hours’ only.

4. On July 14th 2011, the then Secretary of State for Transport Mr Philip Hammond MP announced a revision to the MCA Modernisation Proposals.

The ‘revised proposals’ had clearly addressed some of the concerns demonstrated during the initial consultation and MRCC Milford Haven and MRCC Holyhead were reprieved from closure, and would operate as 24/7 Rescue Co-ordination Centres. An announcement was made at this time that MRCC Swansea would close.

The concept of ‘day-time hours only’ MRCC’s is no longer considered a suitable for maritime search & rescue in the UK. However, the MCA now propose that 1 x 24hr Maritime Operations Centre based in Southampton will distribute Search & Rescue Coordination services throughout the UK.

This will in effect mean that when either Milford Haven or Holyhead Coastguard are busy, any incidents within the area of responsibility will be distributed to a quieter Coastguard Station. Essentially this would mean that a Search & Rescue incident on the coastline of Wales, and off the coast of Wales could well be coordinated from as far away as Shetland or Stornoway.

Local Knowledge is vitally important at a Search & Rescue Coordination level!

The Original Consultation Document stated that *“Managing an incident at sea is a considerable responsibility and requires substantial experience and knowledge, including an understanding of tides and weather, radio communications protocols, the theory and practice of search planning, an ability to assess risks, and decision-making skill. Over time Coastguards in Coordination Centres study for and acquire specialist, professional qualifications covering Search Planning, Radio Communications and how to act in the role of Search Mission Coordinator”*

That statement failed to include a number of points;

I. Managing an incident on the Coast is also a considerable responsibility which requires substantial experience and knowledge - Local Knowledge in particular!

Over time Coastguards in Coordination Centres acquire a significant amount of local knowledge and local expertise and it is recognised that this knowledge is a fundamental tool in the armouries of an SMC.

II. The statement also failed to mention that Coastguards are required under MCA Regulations to undertake an examination on Local Knowledge once every 2 years.

Coastguard Coordination Staff throughout the United Kingdom develop their intimate and vital local knowledge & relationships over many years. Staff in Milford Haven and Swansea are required to undertake a Local Knowledge examination once a year. This Local Knowledge should never be undervalued, it SAVES LIVES.

In practice it can be divided into 3 elements; Location Awareness, Situational Awareness, and Operational Relationships.

I. Location Awareness enables a Search & Rescue Mission Coordinator (SMC) to immediately identify an incident location & task the appropriate SAR resource, when somebody finds themselves in Grave & Imminent Danger. It allows them to assess and plan a SAR Mission quickly and effectively. Additionally, it allows them to be aware of and assess any associated dangers that may exist during the incident.

All 3 MRCC's in Wales have responsibility for areas where both Welsh and English place names are commonly used. There are places with combined Welsh & English names, and uncharted or un-mapped local nick-names for bays or rocks.

Immediate Local Knowledge is vitally important to giving the swiftest possible response to any incident. Tourists are often unable to pronounce properly their location, especially if they are panicking. They are however, always able to describe their surroundings.

II. Situational Awareness enables an SMC to maintain a 'Surface Picture' or 'Maritime Domain Awareness' of their particular Search & Rescue Region (SRR). In the event of being alerted to a distress and emergency situation, an SMC is often able to identify a 'Non – Declared Resource' and task them to assist when necessary. A 'Non-Declared Resource' is something other than RNLI or Coastguard. Pleasure craft, Pilot Vessels, Water Ranger, MOD Ranges Safety Vessels & Fishing Vessels could all be considered 'Non-Declared Resources'.

III. Operational Relationships are established over time between SAR providers and their controlling Coordination Centre. It is widely considered that an element of 'local knowledge' is the strong and valued relationships plus mutual respect that Coastguard Operations Room Staff develop with Local SAR Stakeholders, be they Coastguard Rescue Volunteers or RNLI Crew etc. This is something that Volunteers consider to be important, particularly so during SAR (Search & Rescue) Operations.

5. The 'revised proposals' were subject to a further consultation period which ended on October 6th 2011.

The 2nd Consultation has now pitted MRCC Milford Haven against MRCC Swansea, and MRCC Holyhead against MRCC Liverpool. It is not a case that any MRCC in Wales is safe yet.

During this 2nd Consultation period, Swansea Coastguard developed a campaign to reprieve its Coastguard Station from closure, and delivered a 100,000 + signature petition to Westminster, opposing the closure of MRCC Swansea.

6. In addition to the apparent lack of credible Risk Assessments, no Security Impact Assessments were carried out.

With the increased status of Milford Haven as the 'Energy Capital of the UK' comes an increased security risk. This risk was identified by the Welsh Affairs Select Committee in their Fifteenth Report, which identified the importance of Milford Haven to the whole of the UK. Subsequently additional funding was provided to Dyfed Powys Police to provide a dedicated Armed Response Team for the Port.

The Report recognised that the threat to maritime infrastructure has been raised and addressed by the UK Government's updated National Security Strategy.

It also states that to ensure Welsh ports are secure *“depends on number of different aspects. These include: dedicated police and border agency staff; intelligence-sharing on the threat facing ports; co-operation from stakeholders such as the Coastguard, and the local community”*.

The Report goes on to mention *“the important role that the ports communities and stakeholders play in assisting with the gathering of information and intelligence needed to assess security risks. The role of Maritime and Coastguard Agency was in particular deemed to be significant in alerting the authorities to unusual activities along the coast.”*

7. Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres are also partners in ‘Coastwatch Wales’. This is an initiative designed to enhance the security of the Welsh coast line by identifying both vessels and individuals engaged in suspicious maritime and coastal based activity. Such activity could be linked to smuggling, organised crime or terrorist activity.

Coastwatch Wales is an amalgamation of specialist officers and agencies including Customs, Immigration, Police, Coastguard and the Royal Navy. Its intention is to disrupt those engaged in criminal activity through effective communication with the maritime and coastal community and continue to make the coastline and waterways of Wales a safe environment for all to enjoy.

8. Given the level of criticism and suspicion, *“of the MCA's own making”*, it is not unreasonable to mis-trust the Risk Assessments offered by the MCA.

The MCA ‘Revised Proposals’ were published in a little less than 6 weeks after the closure of the 1st Consultation process. It is therefore not unreasonable to consider that vital elements may have been overlooked by the MCA given the ‘hurried’ nature of the ‘alternatives’.

The National Assembly E-Petition was started based on the proposed closure of MRCC Milford Haven, MRCC Holyhead, and the downgrading of MRCC Swansea to ‘daylight hours only’.

In light of the MCA ‘revised’ Proposals, we remain committed to calling upon the National Assembly of Wales to urge the Wales Government to conduct independent risk & impact assessments on tourism, if any of the 3 Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres in Wales were to close.

