

# Coastguard closures will risk lives, MPs are told

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SHUTTING coastguard stations, including Brixham, threatens safety and risks lives, MPs have heard.

It came as a select committee report was presented to Parliament which branded the plans for the rescue service, which would see ten of the 18 centres close and a further five only open during the day, as seriously flawed.

The cross-party Transport Select Committee called for the proposals to be ditched.

Speaking in the Commons, committee chairman Louise Ellman said the plans jeopardised safety.

Presenting her committee's latest report in the Commons, Mrs Ellman said: "The overwhelming views of members of all parties, regardless of whether their constituency happens to include a coastguard centre, has been one of deep concern."

She admitted modernisation of the 'essential emergency service' was 'desirable', but said it was unclear if technology could com-

pensate for the loss of local knowledge.

"Reducing the number of full-time, maritime rescue co-ordination centres drastically would reduce the quality and rate of exchange of information, particularly at critical points when information must be passed swiftly to save lives," she said.

Mrs Ellman added: "The proposals assume technology can replace local knowledge. We weren't convinced by that and believe this puts lives at risk."

She also levelled 'extreme criticism' at ministers for preventing many serving coastguards from giving evidence to her committee.

Mrs Ellman said she believed it was 'deeply regrettable' the Government announced its plans without consultation, her committee could not support the proposals

and called for 'substantial' changes to the coalition's plans, followed by a short consultation.

Tory MP for Totnes Dr Sarah Wollaston, whose constituency includes Brixham, welcomed the select committee's report, and called on the Government to listen to its conclusions.

"Brixham coastguard saves lives and we want it to continue its outstanding work from its rightful place at the heart of Brixham," she said.

Labour's shadow transport secretary Maria Eagle said: "The Tory-led Government should finally listen to coastguards up and down the country and abandon their dangerous and reckless plan to close more than half of Britain's coastguard stations."

"The cross-party committee is clear that these plans will jeopardise safety along Britain's coastline and ministers must now think again."

Transport Secretary Philip Hammond said: "I welcome the committee's recognition that the

coastguard service is in urgent need of modernisation.

"The original proposals do not compromise safety and include increased resources for frontline rescue services. Reform will improve resilience in the system through improvements to IT and create better career opportunities for staff, as well as better pay and conditions."

