Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah speak

I apologise to Mrs Ellman for missing the start of the debate. Unfortunately, I had an unbreakable commitment, but I have read the excellent report and congratulate the Committee on its follow-up. I have three issues to raise. First, it remains a matter of profound regret in my constituency that the Brixham maritime rescue co-ordination centre will close. I pay tribute to the staff at the centre and to the dignified way in which they are assisting in the handover period. Listening to the accounts of staff, I hope that the Minister will pay particular attention to ensuring that we retain their valuable skills and support those who are able to continue within the service so that we do not lose their local knowledge. I take the point, however, that the efforts that are being made to transfer some of that local knowledge into detailed databases will be helpful.

Secondly, much local knowledge is vested in the volunteer coastguards. Will the Minister look at a particular area in my constituency around Hope Cove? We have a Hope Cove rescue boat and a cliff rescue team, which is staffed by volunteer coastguards. Unfortunately, there has been an attitude of extreme intransigence on the part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in the matter of dual manning. I represent a rural constituency and we are fortunate to have volunteers who are prepared to undertake dual manning. There has never been an issue over that. Unfortunately, volunteers are being pressured into a situation where they have to choose between one or other of the operations, and there simply is not the availability of staff in the area reliably to man both as completely separate teams.

Ian Pedrick, who heads up a team, is the third generation in this community that has manned the Hope Cove lifeboat. If pressed, the entire team would opt to stay with the Hope Cove rescue boat because there is such a long tradition within our community and it is such a highly valued resource. Will the Minister look at the matter and try to break the deadlock, so that we can continue an arrangement that has served our community well over generations.

The third issue is emergency towing vehicles. There are concerns in my constituency that we may find that there are no vessels capable of carrying out the duties of ETVs closer than Brest or Cherbourg. Evidence for that is supplied by the MCA head of pollution control. Both vessels are many hours away. They are under the control of the French Government and might be available if the French are not using them. It should be noted that the French are particularly unhappy about the UK's unilateral withdrawal of ETV cover as it has left their coastline also relatively unprotected. I do not need to spell out to the Minister the disastrous consequences if we had a spillage in the channel, which is a busy shipping area. The impact would be felt not only by our valued fishing industry but by our tourism industry. Will the Minister tell us exactly what facilities would be available on a commercial basis, and what assessment has been made of their reliability to provide the reassurance that my constituents seek should there be a shipping disaster in the future? Let me close now by paying tribute to our local coastguards for everything they do on our behalf.

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Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon, Conservative)

Understandably, that final confirmation will disappoint several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). Like her, I praise the coastguards at Brixham, but the new system will ensure safety round her shores. She raised a particular issue regarding Hope Cove and I understand that the MCA is working with the coastguards there to resolve that. I will ensure that my officials speak to the team at Hope Cove, and I will respond in writing to my hon. Friend to address her concern.

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Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

Will the Minister write to me to reassure my constituents about the availability of commercial ETVs? We do not have an offshore oil industry that could provide such support.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon, Conservative)

I will write to my hon. Friend to point out what arrangements are in place and why they have worked so well for the past two years. I am sure that if she wishes to raise other issues, she will, and I will be happy to respond.

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