Coastguard Service

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Parliament Live

I want to talk about Brixham maritime rescue co-ordination centre and its importance. Last year it co-ordinated more than 1,300 search and rescue incidents, assisting more than 1,900 people and saving more than 350 lives; 78% of those incidents were inshore or shoreline. Those are the incidents that need local knowledge, as I think all hon. Members would agree.

Mr Adrian Sanders (Torbay, LD)

Local knowledge is an extremely important point from a west country perspective. I wonder where someone in Solent would direct services if a call came in that someone was in difficulties off Blackpool beach. We have a Blackpool beach, just as Lancashire does.

Sarah Wollaston

I thank the hon. Gentleman. Of course, we have the equivalent of 22 full-time and highly skilled watch-keepers. I know that the Minister pointed out that local knowledge will not be lost because the individuals can be relocated to Falmouth, in the case of my area. However, unfortunately Falmouth is also drastically cutting staff under the proposals, so I suspect that the highly skilled staff at Brixham will find that very difficult. I suggest that their important local knowledge would be in danger of being lost. The point about local knowledge is that Devon, for example, had 25.2 million visitors last year—bringing in Â£2 billion to the local economy—and those individuals have no local knowledge. I have been told by a coastguard that very often a distress call will come in from people who do not know where they are. They might know that they are in Devon but they will not know they are on Blackpool beach, for example. They have no local knowledge and are often very distressed. The highly skilled individuals dealing with them on the phone must cope with that, to find out where they are.

The other issue is IT. My experience of IT in the NHS, for example, is that we had a Â£12.7 billion project, which was very disappointing, over-budget and highly overrated. We have also seen what the fire service experienced, which I shall not talk about much as it is the Minister's area of great expertise. My understanding is that it cost Â£423 million and the Taunton regional fire centre has not opened. The air traffic control system went Â£150 million over budget and was much delayed. I would say, to coin a phrase, "Over-budget, overrated, over time and over here."

Andrew George (St Ives, LD)

One of the primary drivers—in fact the primary one, to go by page 16 of the consultation document—is so-called limited resilience. As the document recognises, coastguard stations are paired. There is no suggestion that the resilience has failed. Yet we are not told anywhere in the document how resilience is improved under the proposals.

Sarah Wollaston:
I thank the hon. Gentleman. I agree. Currently, we have paired coastguard stations, which are directly linked by cable as part of an existing BT cable network. In addition, the stations are linked by point-to-point communications on a so-called BT kilostream unique to the coastguard—a kind of private radio network used by VHF radios. However, I find it hard to understand why it is so difficult to piggyback on existing cable networks to network all stations. I am dubious of the argument that it would be immensely expensive. I suggest that it is possible to network all existing stations at less cost than has been stated. It has also been stated that coastguard radio equipment is 12 years old and needs upgrading, and that it cannot be installed in existing coastguard stations, but the vast majority of calls are made by phone.

Brixham has been disadvantaged by the costings. In the year the costings were made, Brixham received a brand-new roof and an upgrade to its generator, which means that the building will now be fully fit for purpose for the next century. Given that its ongoing running costs will be considerably lower, it seems a shame that those renovations have been taken into consideration.

Like the coastguard stations in many colleagues’ constituencies, Brixham also performs other functions. For example, the marine surveyors, which are vital to the Brixham trawler, are based there. Brixham also houses cliff rescue equipment, a rescue vehicle and a radio station. I hope the Minister will take that into consideration.

As many Members have said, we do not want one station to be pitted against another. We call on the Minister and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to review the proposals thoroughly and hold a debate on the Floor of the House.

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Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Parliament Live

I take issue with the Minister because I know that Brixham coastguard takes over from Falmouth in international incidents, when Falmouth is unable to respond.

Mike Penning (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Roads and Motoring), Transport)

The case that we heard earlier, which was brilliantly made on behalf of Falmouth, referred to the fact that it is the centre of excellence. That is the place with all the knowledge, all the information, all the expertise and skill. It is not duplicated identically across stations.

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