Coastguard Service

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)  

I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the problem is not always pronunciation. Sometimes there are problems with the sheer number of locations with the same name and spelling. We have 12 Cod rocks in my area, and someone local wrote to me recently about a serious incident when he was stranded off Cod rock.

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Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I will cut my speech short, as other hon. Members wish to contribute. We are not disputing the need for modernisation. We accept that the technology of Her Majesty's coastguard is outdated, but the staff are not. I dispute whether we can reduce the number of staff from 491 to 248 without a significant loss of local knowledge.

Detailed local knowledge is important, as is recognised in the fact that coastguard officers take rigorous local knowledge tests on their area of responsibility every two years and must receive an 80% pass mark to continue carrying out their highly professional role. I dispute whether two maritime operation centres could carry out such a role. To illustrate, if a child on a lilo is in difficulty off Blackpool sands, is the maritime operation centre likely to send the rescue effort to the west coast or to my constituency, which has a small cove by that name?

As time is short, I ask the Minister to consider the alternative proposals from Brixham coastguard. When he met Brixham coastguard, he invited its members to propose an alternative. They have discussed it with at least 14 other coastguards, who have endorsed their proposals. Time is short, but I hope that he will agree to consider them in detail.

To summarise the proposals, Brixham coastguard recognises the possibility of reducing the number of stations, but it proposes reducing that number to 14 rather than adopting the current proposals. It disputes the rationale for having two central maritime operation centres, but it understands that it might be necessary to review how duty rosters are managed and to use more of an evidence base to consider the details of call-outs, for example. That would be much more rational.

Brixham coastguard feels that it is possible to improve rostering, reduce staff and rationalise the management of the coastguard. For example, it disputes the need for regional management and suggests that we need only one national management centre for the coastguards. Again, that would generate considerable savings.

A review of technology is essential, but Brixham coastguard suggests that we consider electronic charts. It currently buys its own. Electronic charts are used by the RNLI and shipping, but not by Her Majesty's coastguard. The current system is outdated.
Brixham coastguard asks the Government to reconsider the replacement of radio equipment. There is a strong feeling in the coastguard that the system has not been adequately piloted. I have heard, for example, that it has been difficult to page rescue teams. I ask the Minister to reconsider and definitely to pilot any new system before it is rolled out.

The Minister knows what issues have arisen with fire and rescue centres, so I will not reiterate them—many Members have already made the point—but I will mention the fiasco of the NHS’s over-reliance on IT. More than £12 billion has been spent on a system that has not been fit for purpose. It is a question not of just throwing money at the problem, but of piloting systems and ensuring that they do the job required of them.

The Brixham proposals ask the Minister to consider an alternative method of linking stations. We all recognise that resilience is an issue within the coastguard, but will he consider extending stations’ areas of responsibility, so that they cover the stations to either side and are linked in triplets? That would increase resilience, rather than having centralised maritime operation centres, about which all Members who have spoken have expressed concern. That way, we can retain local knowledge and improve resilience. We feel that that, as well as considering staff rostering, would be a much better way forward.

I reiterate the strength of feeling nationally. Within my constituency, my local paper, the Herald Express, published an article on the issue and had 6,625 signatures and letters. That shows the strength of local feeling. I am sure that every Member will have seen similar responses in their constituencies. It is a national matter that we hope the Minister will take back to the drawing board and start again with a blank sheet of paper. The coastguards who do the job on the ground feel that they were not consulted and that experts or coastguard officials who had been away from operational responsibilities for some years were involved. I ask him to consider proposals from grass-roots coastguards with multi-centre support.

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