GB COASTGUARD REFORMS

Shortly after noon on 14th July the Secretary of State for Transport, Philip Hammond, gave HMG’s updated Coastguard reforms. Broadly speaking it is Westminster’s belief that Coastguard stations will be better co-ordinated and more resilient to the challenges of the coming decades under the updated modernisation proposals.

In his statement the Minister said the Coastguard has been helping to manage our seas and protect those who use them for over two centuries. However, the service has undergone few changes over the past 40 years and is now in need of modernisation as the current structure is not sufficiently resilient and fluctuating workloads cannot be properly distributed. The Government launched its consultation in December 2010 on modernisation proposals designed to address these issues and provide enhanced career opportunities for Coastguard officers.

There were a total of over 1,800 responses to the consultation and while these reflected a general acceptance that change and modernisation is necessary, they also expressed concerns over a potential loss of local knowledge and a perceived weakening of operational relationships. The Government’s updated proposals reflect these responses and propose creating a nationally networked system of Coastguard stations comprising: (a) one Maritime Operations Centre in the Southampton/Portsmouth area with a back-up facility at the existing Dover site which will be retained as a 24 hour centre; and (b) eight sub-centres, all operated on a 24 hour basis, located at Falmouth, Milford Haven, Holyhead, Belfast, Stornoway, Shetland, Aberdeen and Humber. The small station in London is to be retained.

Previously the Government had proposed establishing two Maritime Operations Centres (in the Southampton/Portsmouth area and Aberdeen) and five sub-centres, operating in daylight hours only, as well as retaining the 24 hour centre at Dover which oversees English Channel activity.

Transport Secretary Hammond said, “We have been clear that modernisation is required to deliver a resilient Coastguard service, fit for the 21st century. But we have always been open to debate about how that should be achieved. This has been a genuine consultation that has seen a high level of engagement and many well-thought out responses – including specific alternative proposals. It is clear from the responses that there is huge public and political admiration for the work of our Coastguard, a clear consensus that change and modernisation is
necessary, but also some specific concerns about the original proposals. Our updated proposals will ensure the safety of seafarers and coastal communities, delivering the modernised and more cost-effective service we need for the 21st century, while also responding to the concerns raised during the consultation process.”

Under existing arrangements, neighbouring stations are paired, allowing them to provide back-up to one another when needed. This announcement means that one station in each pair is retained.

Under these proposals the Coastguard stations at Clyde, Forth, Portland, Liverpool, Yarmouth, Brixham, Thames and Swansea would close progressively over the period 2012 to 2014/2015. The station at Solent will be replaced by a new Maritime Operations Centre in the Portsmouth/Southampton area.

There will now be the opportunity for people to comment on those elements of this announcement which differ from the original proposals. These will be the subject of a further period of consultation, which will run for twelve weeks ending on 6th October 2011.