Who does what in the MCA?
PI0156

**Resource Description**
What are the roles of the personnel working within the MCA? This resource explains the ‘on shore’ and ‘at sea’ jobs and the desirable characteristics for these occupations.

**National Curriculum**
Key Stage 2/Citizenship
Key Stage 2/PSHE
Who does what in the MCA?

Most of the men and women who crew the lifeboats are volunteers. They are helped by support staff and volunteers. However, some lifeboat stations have a full-time mechanic who maintains all-weather lifeboats.

Inshore lifeboats are generally operated entirely by volunteer crews. They have a qualified helmsman who takes charge of the boat when it goes out on a rescue.

The number of crew members on a lifeboat varies according to the type and size of the lifeboat. Here are some of them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coxswain (on an ILB this is the helmsman)</th>
<th>Responsible for all decisions once the lifeboat is at sea, and for the safety of the boat and its crew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second coxswain</td>
<td>Acts as the deputy for the coxswain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>Makes sure that the lifeboat is in good working order at all times. Runs the engines regularly, makes sure the lifeboats are ready for launching during an emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio operator</td>
<td>Crew members are trained to operate the lifeboat’s radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew members</td>
<td>They work with the coxswain or helmsman to operate the lifeboat and carry out rescues</td>
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</tbody>
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What’s it like?

Fergal, Ballycotton lifeboat: ‘When you join the lifeboat service, you join because you want to. Once you are a lifeboat crew member, you are a lifeboat crew member 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. That’s part of the service and this is what we do. When it’s called for, we do it.’

Allen, Coxswain/Mechanic, Wells lifeboat: ‘As a mechanic, I maintain the boats and all the equipment so it’s always ready for action. As a coxswain, I command the lifeboat on exercises or service calls and am responsible for training the crew.

‘My family has been involved with the lifeboats here since the late 1800s. Before taking on the full-time job of coxswain/mechanic, I was a skipper of my own fishing boat. I knew that if I found myself needing help there would always be someone to call on. I wanted to use my knowledge and skills to help other people. The most satisfying aspect of the work is knowing that all your training has paid off and you may have saved someone’s life.’
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‘To be part of the lifeboat crew, you need to be able to work as a team member, enjoy meeting and talking to all kinds of people and most importantly have a real commitment to the job. You also have to be prepared for a lot of training and unsociable hours – so your family needs to be very understanding!’

James, Padstow lifeboat: ‘I was keen to join the crew ever since I went on the Padstow lifeboat when I was three! My family have been involved for over 100 years and I’m the fifth generation to be involved with the service. I helped in the beginning by becoming a Storm Force member, raising money for the RNLI and cleaning the lifeboat.’

Helping on shore
Voluntary shore helpers assist with the launch and recovery of the lifeboats. Some of them have special jobs such as tractor drivers and the head launcher. Each lifeboat station has a full-time mechanic. Here are some of the people who are part of the onshore team:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifeboat Operations Manager</td>
<td>Responsible for administering the station and deciding when the lifeboat should be launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station Honorary Press Officer</td>
<td>Acts as a link between the lifeboat service and local press, radio and TV. They raise public awareness of the RNLI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorary Medical Adviser</td>
<td>Some stations have volunteer doctors who may go to sea if medical help is needed. They also give first aid training to crew members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorary Treasurer</td>
<td>Looks after the lifeboat station’s finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractor Drivers</td>
<td>Drives and maintains the tractor that launches the lifeboat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Launcher</td>
<td>In charge of launching the lifeboat from the shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchman</td>
<td>Takes charge of the winch that is used to launch a lifeboat from a slipway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shore Attendant</td>
<td>Is on duty at the water’s edge all the time the lifeboat is afloat</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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Helping behind the scenes
In Poole, Dorset, the staff at the RNLI headquarters design and develop new lifeboats. They also provide support for the lifeboat service, store supplies that might be needed for the boats and lifeboat stations and make sure that replacement boats are ready to be sent anywhere around the country if they are needed. Another important part of their job is to educate people about water safety to stop them getting into difficulties in or near the sea.

There are ten RNLI regional offices in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Each one has a manager who looks after the education and fundraising activities in their region.

Working for Her Majesty's Coastguard
Her Majesty's Coastguard (HMCG) co-ordinates search and rescue (SAR) through a network of 19 co-ordination centres around the coast which are manned 24 hours a day and are fitted with a range of voice, digital and satellite radio communications, 999 telephones and computerised command and control.

HMCG co-ordinates about 12,500 rescues or searches each year and is responsible for deciding which Search and Rescue units to send and for their mobilisation, and co-ordination at the scene of the incident. The main Search and Rescue units available to HM Coastguard are Coastguard Rescue Teams, RNLI Lifeboats and Coastguard and military search and rescue helicopters.

Coastguard Operators
Coastguard Operators work in co-ordination centres so if they are called by radio or 999 telephone and told that a ship or person is in distress or missing at sea or on the coast then the Coastguard operators will decide what action should be taken and which Search and Rescue units should be sent out.

Most Coastguard Operators who co-ordinate search and rescue have experience at sea and need to be physically fit, have good hearing and eyesight. They should also have qualifications (such as GCSEs) in English and Maths to show that they can use words and numbers accurately.
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Coastguard Operators need to be good at:

Dealing with the public:
Coastguard Operators receive emergency calls from the public either on the coast (999) or at sea (radio) where the situation may be stressful or dangerous. Whilst it is important to get the important information concerning the incident from the caller, i.e. who, what, where, so they know which SAR units to send and to where, it is also important to re-assure the caller that help is on the way and to provide any other information which might assist their survival or help to placate their fear or worries.

However, Coastguard work is not all about rescuing people in trouble. Coastguard Operators are also very much involved in providing safety information to the public either on request via radio or telephone or by their four hourly Maritime Safety Information broadcasts on short and medium range voice and digital radio and long range via satellite.

HM Coastguard also provides the Radio Medical Advice Service for ships at sea whereby a Master or Skipper of a vessel can call a co-ordination centre and ask for medical advice for an ill or injured crew member or passenger. The Coastguard operators will then link the Master or Skipper through to a hospital where a medical expert will provide the appropriate advice. The Coastguard Operator will also be involved in the three-way discussion in case a medical evacuation is required by helicopter or lifeboat.

Using different kinds of communications equipment:
In the course of their duties, Coastguard Operators will need to use voice and digital radios, satellite communications, telephones including the 999 system and to understand the complexities of distress alerting from ships at sea via satellite.

Local knowledge:
Coastguard Operators need some detailed knowledge of the area for which their co-ordination centre has responsibility to ensure they understand local tidal conditions, navigational dangers, high risk areas and know the capabilities of the Search and Rescue units available to them.

Chart and map work:
Coastguard Operators use both maritime charts and Ordnance Survey maps to plot positions of incidents at sea or around the coast and to carry out any navigational or search-related tasks.
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Search area determination:
Search and Rescue incidents at sea can sometimes involve either the drift of persons in the water, liferafts, broken down yachts or fishing vessels because it may take some time for the Search and Rescue units to arrive on scene, depending on the distances involved. Therefore to help Coastguard operators, they have a computerised Search and Rescue Information System (SARIS) which, by use of tidal and wind information, predicts the movement of drifting objects at sea and enables the Coastguard Operators to send the Search and Rescue units to the correct position. If the initial information from the person or vessel is uncertain, SARIS will also provide a search area for the SAR units to search and a search plan.

Coastguard Operators also need:
To understand the weather systems that prevail in and around the UK so that they understand weather forecasts from the Met Office and can also supply the Met Office with weather data either routinely or on request.

A cool head! Coastguard operators have to gather information, often from a distraught caller, make decisions on how dangerous a situation is and decide what action to take. To do that, they need to stay calm.

Mike, Coastguard Watch Manager
I’ve worked for the MCA for 17 years. I have a nautical background, having worked as a trawlerman, in the offshore oil industry and on coastal dredgers. I joined the MCA as a watch officer and have since been promoted to watch manager where I am responsible for the management and supervision of my Watch within the co-ordination centre.

When I started, all Coastguards were recruited as watch officers and sea experience was, and still is, a requirement for recruitment at this grade. However, we now also recruit at the lower grade of Coastguard watch assistant level where sea experience is not a requirement, though it helps, and these recruits can come from all sorts of different backgrounds. Recruits at either grade can be any age from 16-60.

Once someone has been recruited, they join one of our co-ordination centers as either a watch officer or Coastguard watch assistant. They will receive the appropriate training at the Maritime & Coastguard Agency Training Centre, near Christchurch, for the duties they will be expected to undertake in the coordination centre. On completion of training, there are examinations to take.
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My routine at work is very varied. As a watch manager, it is my responsibility to ensure that we are ready to respond to emergencies. I also train staff, organise the watch keeping rotas and attend meetings with different authorities and organisations.

We do a lot more radio work than the other emergency services, since a lot of our contact is with vessels at sea. We also receive a lot of 999 calls, which we are expected to answer within 15 seconds.

All staff need to get experience of responding to 999 calls, though I can listen in and give advice if necessary. At least two people will listen in to a 999 call and details of the incident are immediately input on the computer.

We all receive major incident training and work with the other emergency services, namely the police, ambulance and fire services. These major incident exercises take a lot of planning but they reflect situations that could happen – like a tanker colliding with a passenger ferry.

What do I like about my job? Firstly, we are in the business of helping to save lives and it’s also a very varied job because incidents are different every day and I get a lot of satisfaction when things go right and people are grateful for the help we’ve provided, particularly where a life has been saved.

Amanda, Coastguard Watch Assistant
I joined HM Coastguard in June 2002. Before that I worked in the leisure industry. I was looking for employment locally and found the vacancy in the Jobcentre. I thought it sounded intriguing and applied. After filling in an application form, I went for an assessment, which involved tests in maths, keyboard skills, English, logic and an interview.

Once I’d got the job, I spent a few days meeting the different watches, shadowing staff and learning how things worked. I went to the Training Centre at Christchurch for a two-week course and then came back to the station.

We all have a workbook, which is a study guide that acts as a training manual. This helps to prepare us for exams that qualify us as competent watch officers. In all, it took me about six months to get up to speed.

The job is really interesting, there’s a lot of teamwork and a good culture. The shifts vary a lot – some are very busy and others can be fairly quiet. There’s a good career structure and you can choose to move into different areas such as administration,
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security or survey and inspection of vessels.

You need to be calm in a crisis, a good team player and be able to work on your own initiative. You also need good communication and keyboard skills.

Coastguard Search and Rescue Helicopter Crew

The Coastguard search and rescue helicopters can be called upon at any time of the day and night in all types of weather, and the crew have to be ready to winchman and a winch operator, and each has their own important role to play as part of the team.

Whilst the two pilots are responsible for flying the helicopter, equally important are the winchman who goes down on the wire to rescue people, and the winch operator who lowers and raises the winchman and casualties during a rescue.

All the crew work together to find and rescue the person in the water or on the shore, and there is special equipment on the rescue helicopters to help them. The pilots will speak with the Coastguard Coordination Centre for instructions or to get a search plan that ensures the correct area is searched and they go to the right location. There is also a video camera and an infrared camera mounted below the helicopter, and the winchman uses a video screen in the back of the helicopter to get a better view of anything they spot. The infrared camera works in darkness and can show up a warm body in the water or on the coast, which could not be seen otherwise. Once a person is found and winched up into the helicopter, both the winch operator and winchman can provide medical help while the pilots fly to the nearest hospital.

Looking after the seas

The UK has 16,800 kilometres of coastline. An important part of the MCA’s work is dealing with oil and chemical pollution at sea that could damage the marine and coastal environment and the marine life it supports. The MCA have specially trained officers who can respond, day or night, to any emergency at sea which could cause pollution. These officers also give advice to local authorities and ports and harbours on how to plan for a pollution incident and what to do if the shoreline is polluted. In the year 2000 there were nearly 1,600 pollution incidents in UK waters, and over 700 of these involved either oil or chemicals. To help monitor pollution from ships, the MCA regularly fly aircraft across our seas and coastline.
The MCA has enforcement officers who make sure that ships are obeying the laws of the sea. This includes checking that ships are not polluting the sea and they are safe places to work.

**Coastguard Rescue Teams**

As well as the permanent staff, HM Coastguard has 3,500 volunteer Coastguards who work in teams stretching the whole length of the UK coastline, from the Isles of Scilly to the Shetland Isles.

All the volunteers are experts in:

- Rescuing people who have fallen down cliffs
- Rescuing people trapped in mud
- Searching the coast and cliffs

Volunteer Coastguards have to be good at working in a team because one person alone cannot manage an effective rescue job – but they must also be able to think through problems and find answers. They need to be very flexible. Every volunteer always carries a pager, and could be called out at any time of the day or night and in any kind of weather. They have some equipment which they carry with them all the time including:

- A rescue suit and luminous jacket
- Walking boots
- Torch
- Radio and pager

There are a minimum of eleven members in each team. All of them are well trained in first aid and have special skills and training to match the geography of their local coastline.

As well as mud and cliff rescue, Coastguard rescue teams also get involved in some other jobs on the coast including:

- Investigating reports of unexploded bombs washed up on the shore
- Investigating and getting help for beached whales or dolphins
- Visiting public events and schools to promote beach safety.

Anyone over the age of 16 can apply and volunteer Coastguards will be trained, equipped and managed by HM Coastguard.