

## **Report to Partnership Meeting – 4 February 2011**

### **MARITIME SAFETY**

#### **Maritime Emergency Response Capability**

##### **Purpose of the Report**

The HITRANS Board at its Meeting on 3 December asked to be updated on the changes proposed to the MCA emergency response capacity at a future meeting. The UK Government as part of the 2011/15 Spending Review has decided to no longer provide the cover of four Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) tugs which provide an emergency response capability around the UK coastline. The Report provides background on the decision and comments on the potential impacts within the Highlands and Islands.

##### **Recommendation**

It is recommended the Board

1. Note the proposals to date, their potential impact, and the lead that the Conveners of the Highlands and Islands Councils are taking to make the case to Government for the continuation of an effective emergency towing provision around the coasts of the Highlands and Islands.
2. Agree to support the Conveners' lead as and when this would add value to the case for retention of an effective Maritime Safety Response Capability around the coast of the Highlands and Islands.

##### **Background**

The MCA will no longer provide Emergency Towing Vessels (ETVs) from September 2011. 4 MCA funded tugs which provide this service on a rotational basis, based in Falmouth, Lerwick and Stornoway, are to be taken out of service as part of the Westminster Government's Spending Review proposals.

A Department of Transport review issued in October last year stated "Emergency towing vessels are mainly deployed when vessels break down. The Government believes state provision of ETVs does not represent a correct use of taxpayers money and that ship salvage should be a

commercial matter between a ship's operator and the salvor. Removing ETVs will save £32.5 million over the Spending Review period.”

The MCA in September 2000 issued a report entitled ‘ETV Project – Information Relating to Pollution Risks in the UK’ which provides background to the decision to put in place the current arrangements. This report is included with the Board Papers as an appendix to this Report.

The purpose built tugs - Anglian Prince, Anglian Princess, Anglian Sovereign and Anglian Monarch - are chartered by the MCA for use in pollution control and towing vessels as an emergency first response to vessels in distress by attending incidents and taking the distressed vessel under tow, thereby saving lives and preventing a major environmental incident. The current contract for their supply terminates in September 2011.

The service was introduced in its current form as a result of the recommendations of the inquiry lead by Lord Donaldson into the Braer oil spill disaster which resulted in 86,000 tonnes of oil polluting the Shetland seas.

The UK Government has now decided it should be the responsibility of companies and their insurers for the salvage and clean up of stricken vessels.

## **Comment**

Commercial tugs are active within the major harbours and estuaries around the UK Coastline carrying out core functions of manoeuvring vessels in restricted area. Many of these tugboats are fitted with firefighting monitors or guns, allowing them to assist in firefighting duties, especially in harbours. These vessels can additionally provide emergency support for vessels in distress within a reasonable distance of their home port and as a result there seems little need for publicly supported emergency response tugs in the majority of UK waters.

The exceptions to this position is in areas where commercial tugs are not present, in the South West of England and on the West and North Coast of Scotland, beyond the immediate reactive range of commercial tugs based in the Clyde in the west and Aberdeen in the east. These areas are by happenchance amongst the most environmentally sensitive marine coastlines in the UK. With expanding oil extraction to the west of Shetland and potential offshore energy developments on the northern and western coasts there will in time be an increase in the amount of support shipping in these waters, but not in the short term. Currently it would not be a commercially viable operation to locate a vessel capable of providing the required emergency assistance in these areas. The risk of incidents where assistance would be needed continues to

be present and the need for an effective response capability is likely to increase during the short to medium term due to increased activity in the area in a period when no commercial emergency response capability is available.

There have been a number of incidents where the MCA tugs have successfully provided support in the past,

Anglian Prince was involved in the rescue of a Canadian submarine in 2004 after fire broke out onboard. Former Royal Navy submarine HMCS Chicoutimi caught fire on its voyage from Faslane on the Clyde.

Anglian Sovereign protected the wreck of Cumbria-based scallop dredger Aquila after it overturned with the loss of three of its four crew off Ardnamurchan Point in 2009.

The most recent incident, a couple of days after the Department of Transport Announcement, involved the MCA tug from Stornoway being called in to help free the nuclear submarine HMS Astute from the seabed near the Skye Bridge.

It is not clear that adequate protection for the Highland and Islands coastal communities and their economy can currently be relied upon from the private sector alone were the MCA to be withdrawn - especially when the speed of response is critical. It would be useful to establish what the UK Government sees as the mechanism by which this service to protect the sensitive marine environment along the Highland and Islands coastline will now be provided and how it would intend to ensure that an incident such as the Braer or worse does not again cause significant environmental damage through of lack of an emergency response capability. The Conveners of the Highlands and Islands Councils have, in the period since the meeting of the HITRANS Board in December considered the matter, and it is understood they have collectively agreed to lobby for retention of the existing provision in the absence of any commercial alternative.

The savings identified by the Government would pale into insignificance in the event of a major oil spill in Hebridean or Northern waters, and while the short term clean up costs would be met by the offending party and Government, the longer term negative marine and coastal environmental impact and legacy would inevitably be left for the communities of the area to cope with long after any incident had occurred.

**Report by:** Dave Duthie  
**Designation:** Partnership Director  
**Date:** 21 January 2011

