

Chief Minister of Jersey

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[REDACTED]
Jersey Lifeboats
[REDACTED]

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Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for copying me into the correspondence between yourselves and His Excellency, the Lieutenant-Governor. As His Excellency makes clear in his response to you, the management of Jersey Territorial Waters is absolutely a matter for the Government of Jersey as a Coastal State¹. This includes the obligation through the International Maritime Convention² and regional agreement³ "to ensure that necessary arrangements are made for distress communication and co-ordinating in their area of responsibility and for the rescue of person in distress at sea and around its coast"⁴

The States of Jersey has delegated this responsibility to the Harbour Authority⁵, who practically manage day to day activity through the internationally recognised Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC)⁶ operated by Jersey Coastguard at Maritime House.

I do not intend to repeat the whole chronology of events here, but we are all aware that before November 2017 there had been a long period of instability at the RNLI St. Helier Lifeboat Station, a situation that impacted the wider Search and Rescue (SAR) community. Only some of those unfortunate events have been played out in the public domain.

In June 2017 (and in an attempt to resolve matters and make a fresh start) the RNLI apologised, the Coxswain was reinstated and all parties (Government, the RNLI management, the Ports of Jersey, and the crew) accepted that matters could have been handled better by ALL. It was agreed to move forward in the interests of saving lives at sea. Additionally, the crew all agreed to sign the RNLI Code of Conduct for Volunteers.

What is now clear is that looking forward constructively was not possible for the former crew, as almost immediately, a complaint was made relating to previous conduct. When this complaint was not upheld by the RNLI the crew informed the RNLI by letter that they no longer wished to carry on volunteering for the Institution, although they were willing to continue to man the lifeboat whilst seeking to form an independent station. The crew were very clear that their relationship with the Institution was "broken".

¹ Territorial Sea Act 1987 (Jersey) Order 1997

² The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, Chapter V Regulation 7

³ Manche Plan

⁴ Foot note 2

⁵ Harbours (Administration) (Jersey) Law 1961, Public Service Obligation in the Air and Sea Ports (Incorporation) (Jersey) Law 2015

⁶ IMO GISIS

On the 17th of November, and following the letter from the crew, the RNLI decided they could no longer operate the St. Helier Station on the terms proposed by the crew and stood the crew down, terminating their volunteer status with the RNLI. For a short period, as they no longer had a crew, the All Weather Lifeboat (ALB), the George Sullivan, was taken off service and was returned to Poole for servicing.

Whilst the reason was unprecedented, the loss of a Jersey based asset was not. All Jersey based assets, including the ALB, have at some point over the previous three years not been available for service and Jersey Coastguard has routine contingency plans in place to deal with these events. Due to the original crew walkout in spring, and the potential risk of further disruption throughout the autumn of last year, these routine contingency plans were subject to a number of reviews with other SAR partners throughout 2017.

The re-establishment of a full St. Helier based service became a priority for the States of Jersey, the Harbour Master and the Emergency Planning Officer. It was also the clear priority of the RNLI. All parties engaged and cooperated in developing a comprehensive plan which resulted in the St. Helier Inshore Lifeboat (ILB) being returned to service with a fully trained Jersey-based crew on the 4th December 2017 and the St. Helier ALB being available outside of the ILB operating parameters from the 13th December 2017.

Since that time the ALB has been on call and fully operational with RNLI UK Staff crew supported by fully trained local volunteers for 32 of the last 44 days (as at 26th January) and both the St. Helier and St. Catherine's crew have been called upon to assist in SAR incidents.

Moving forward, the RNLI have undertaken a recruitment process which has successfully identified a large pool of local volunteers, including those with extensive local maritime knowledge and experience, to support a fully functioning St. Helier Station. Training these volunteers will take a number of months and the RNLI and Jersey Coastguard will not declare the asset without staff crew support until the required standards have been met. The RNLI's Director of Lifesaving, Leesa Harwood's New Year message, filmed at St. Catherine's Lifeboat Station, is clear evidence of the Institution's continuing commitment to Jersey.

With these plans in place, to the satisfaction of Jersey Coastguard, there is neither the necessity to, nor anything to be gained by, attempting to broker an interim arrangement between the RNLI and the former crew. The previous efforts at mediation in June 2017 were unsuccessful and the relationship is broken.

At the meeting on 18th December 2017 (with myself and Deputy Luce) statements were made by a number of people. The former Coxswain alluded to a wider ambition to replace the RNLI in Jersey not only St. Helier, but St. Catherine's, the Beach Lifeguard Service, and constructing a training facility for Search and Rescue activity. However, you were also clear in stating that the aim of the Independent Lifeboat Committee was to establish an additional SAR asset that would, once the necessary standards have been achieved, form part of the Jersey SAR community under the coordination of Jersey Coastguard. Any additional asset would clearly also include the requirement to work collaboratively alongside existing on island facilities operated by the RNLI and the Fire and Rescue Service, giving consideration to how your service will compliment rather than compete with these services. Given some of the comments attributed to the former Coxswain in the Jersey Evening Post and on social media this will be a key determining factor.

On the understanding that you wish to provide an additional, not replacement or competitive, service, the States of Jersey have provided support by outlining the requirements under the regulatory framework as well as making the Jersey maritime surveyor available to you. Putting the past behind us, learning lessons, and moving ahead is imperative.

All parties acknowledged in June 2017 that they could have acted earlier to intervene in relationships that had deteriorated over some years and agreed to move forward together. The Proposition of Senator Ferguson acknowledges this. However, to ensure that there is no repeat we have commissioned an independent report on the recent events that led to the breakdown in relationships between the former Coxswain and other SAR partners including Jersey Coastguard. This will include interviewing major stakeholders. The purpose of this report is to better inform the future coordination and make up of SAR activity in Jersey and recommend any actions necessary to minimise a repeat of the events of recent months.

Notwithstanding the conclusions of the report (and since the events of the summer) Government has already acted in conjunction with Jersey Coastguard. We have established regular meetings of all SAR partners to ensure improved working relationships and communications are maintained to provide Jersey with the best possible SAR capability. A number of meetings have been held since last autumn and excellent progress is being made to ensure that the SAR community in Jersey remains the best it can be to protect the lives of islanders and visitors at sea.

In conclusion, we continue to support your efforts to create an additional SAR asset for the island that will form a constructive part of the existing SAR community. However, to be absolutely clear, we are not supportive of removing the RNLI from St. Helier, or any other part of the island as there is no justification for so doing. In point of fact, to suggest doing so risks severely weakening Jersey's SAR capacity and therefore our ability to meet our international commitments as a Coastal State. The RNLI have clearly demonstrated their commitment to Jersey throughout the recent crewing issues and that commitment is welcomed by us as part of our responsibility for keeping people safe at sea around our shores.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'I. Gorst', with a long horizontal line extending to the right across the page.

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