

**Opening Remarks - Mr. Eugene Clonan, Director (acting) of the Irish Coast Guard
on the role of the Irish Coast Guard**

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications

18th November 2021

I thank the Chairman and the members of the committee for the invitation to attend. This is an excellent opportunity to engage with the Committee on what we do, the work programme ahead of us and the challenges we face as Ireland's Search and Rescue, ship casualty and pollution response service.

Before taking questions from members, I would like to take a few minutes to set out the international context for our work, our development, and an overview of our remit and challenges we currently face.

The international convention on Safety Of Life At Sea (SOLAS) Chapter V, Search and Rescue services provides that each contracting Government undertakes to ensure that necessary arrangements are made for distress communication and coordination in their area of responsibility and for the rescue of persons in distress at sea around its coasts. The Coast Guards role is to discharge Irelands Search and Rescue (SAR) obligations by implementing the National SAR Plan and the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan for all incidents occurring in the maritime domain, or as otherwise requested by SAR authorities in other domains (aviation or land).

Under the framework for Emergency Management, the IRCG is nominated as one of the States Principal Emergency Services along with An Garda Siochana, the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. The Framework assigns the IRCG responsibility for coordinating the response to marine incident outside port limits, except in the case of search and rescue, when all marine areas including ports are under its remit.

In relation to marine pollution, there is a suite of legislation, the Sea Pollution Acts 1991-2006 under which the Minister has appointed officers of the IRCG as Authorised Officers to enable them to carry out duties in cases of maritime casualties to prevent or minimise damage from pollution where these casualties pose a threat of major harm to the coastline and related interests.

The Sea Pollution Act also implements the framework for the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation (OPRC) which establishes measures for dealing with marine pollution incidents nationally and in co-operation with other countries. The Sea Pollution Act requires a National Oil Spill Contingency Plan along with County Council and Port Authority Contingency Plans in accordance with the regime set out in the OPRC Convention.

Additionally, European Communities (Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information System) Regulations 2010, give IRCG powers to act in relation to maritime casualties and ships requesting a place of refuge. The Coast Guard also provides a Maritime Assistance Service to vessels at sea in need of assistance.

The organisation stands at approximately 82 full time staff at 5 locations around the country and approximately 900 Coast Guard volunteers at 44 locations, and all working together to save lives at sea, protect the marine environment from maritime casualties. Earlier this year Coast Guard intervened in a number of maritime casualties most notable the MV Lilly B off Hook head. In 2020 Coast Guard responded to 2636 incidents. The Coast Guard attaches particular attention to what it categorises as **Lives Saved** i.e. assistance provided that, prevented, loss of life, severe risk to life, or protracted hospitalisation. In 2020, the Coast Guard recorded that **391 individuals** were categorised as Lives Saved. In Q 3 of this year, Coast Guard responded to 1089 incidents and saved 121 lives.

Actions included coordinating incidents in the Rescue Coordination Centres at Dublin, Valentia and Malin, deploying onscene, rescuing persons in distress, training and exercising with other Principal Emergency Services, managing and supporting the Coast Guard volunteer Units, maintaining the marine radio infrastructure, procurement and managing stores and services, providing assistance to mariners and the public, supporting the Departments work to keep essential goods moving and supporting the HSE during the pandemic.

In performing our responsibilities, we provide a variety of services, as follows:

- a **marine radio distress listening** service and a broadcasting service for marine safety information;
- Co-ordinate Search and Rescue in the maritime domain;
- Monitor maritime traffic within our Traffic Separation Schemes (Tuskar/Fastnet);
- Provide a **Marine Assistance Service** to ships requesting assistance;
- Monitor the Irish EEZ and intervene as necessary for marine casualties to **prevent or minimise damage to the marine environment** by oil and Hazardous and Noxious Substances' (HNS) **from ships and offshore installations** and coordinate the at sea response to maritime pollution from ships and offshore installations.
- Provide the national marine radio network and National Automatic Identification System
- Provide support on request to statutory bodies or agencies particularly in emergency response.

To carry out these functions the Coast Guard organisation is made up of 4 sections

Coast Guard Operations

The Coast Guard has 3 Rescue Coordination Centres based at Dublin, Valentia and Malin Head. These centres are responsible for search and rescue coordination, provision of maritime safety broadcasts such as weather and navigation warnings, ship casualty operations and investigating pollution reports.

There current staffing compliment of operations is 57 staff, which includes 51 to maintain 24/7 watch coverage at all three centres.

To respond to marine incidents on the Coast the RCCs have a number of resources to call upon:

Search and Rescue Helicopters

Coast Guard helicopter services are provided under contract by CHCI operating a fleet of Sikorsky S92 helicopters out of four bases in Dublin, Shannon, Waterford and Sligo. Helicopter services are on 15 minutes notice by day and 45 minutes by night.

In Q3 the Coast Guard aviation service flew 315 missions, 137 maritime SAR missions, 55 medical evacuations from offshore islands, assisted AGS with SAR inland on 78 occasions and assisted the National Ambulance Service on 19 occasions.

RNLI

The RNLI is categorised as a declared resource to the Coast Guard which means that each individual station can be directly requested to respond to individual incidents. The RNLI maintain 38 lifeboats on the island of Ireland manned by volunteers. In Q3 the RNLI were requested to launch on 379 occasions.

Coast Guard Units

Coast Guard Unit and Support Section

In addition to the Operations section, Coast Guard Unit and Support Section is responsible for the management, resourcing and training of the volunteer Coast Guard Units. The volunteer Units provide local maritime emergency response. There are 44 Coast Guard Units around the coast made up solely from the local communities. There are approximately 900 volunteers in all. Coast Guard Units provide a coastal search capability on the shore. In addition to coastal search some units are trained to provide cliff rescue, boat rescue and also a UAV search capability. Coast Guard Units are also available to enhance community resilience during emergencies such as storm EMMA/OPHELIA in supporting the Principal Response and Principal Emergency Services.

Coast Guard units were tasked from the RCCs on 484 missions in Q3.

The volunteer Units are managed by Coast Guard Unit and Support Section which includes six staff on the coast managing the volunteer units directly and four staff in

Dublin supported by a further 7 staff from Maritime Strategy and Governance Division in the Department. Each Coast Guard volunteer unit is composed of a Volunteer OiC, Deputy OiC, Training Officer, Equipment Officer, Administration Officer and Education Officer, Units volunteer complement range from 25 volunteers to 12 depending on their range of functions.

Engineering and Logistics Section

The Engineering and Logistics section manages the radio communications network in the Rescue Co-ordination Centres and the radio aerial infrastructure around the coast to maintain marine VHF and HF coverage in the Search and Rescue region. i.e. VHF Channel 16 and HF frequencies for distress listening and calling and working channels. Engineering also manage the Coast Guard stores in Blanchardstown. There are nine staff employed in this area with another two staff in the pipe line.

Finally Safety, Quality and Compliance Section

The Coast Guard Safety, Quality and Compliance Section responsibility is to integrate all CG processes into a single management system, here after referred to as the Quality Management System (QMS). And once established, to ensure the CG operates in compliance with each QMS component. Doing so aids in ensuring operational consistency and provides CG stakeholders and those at the receiving end of SAR services, assurance the organisation is being managed in accordance with best practice both safety and service delivery.

The Coast Guards success depends largely on the good will of volunteers from the RNLI and its own Coast Guard volunteers to give of their time and become professional responders in maritime lifesaving situations. In return the Coast Guard provides its volunteers excellent training and equipment to carry out that task.

Recent tragic accidents have been difficult for the organisation. We mourn the loss of close and valued colleagues and friends. I would like to take this opportunity to extend again our sympathy to the families of R116 and Bernard Lucas and Family. We are also

compelled to honour their memories by delivering a world class search and rescue, maritime casualty, and pollution response service.

I hope this provides a quick overview of who we are and what we are about. I am more than happy to take questions from the Committee.