

21 Jan 2009 : Column 231WH

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 January 2009

[Mr. Mike Hancock in the Chair]

Mountain Rescue Teams

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(Mark Tami.)

9.30 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to begin this debate under your leadership, Mr. Hancock. I expect that those who expressed surprise when I steered the Marine Safety Bill through in the 2002-03 Session will be equally surprised by the title of this debate. However, those who are not familiar with Bolton probably do not know that we have the west Pennine moors on our doorstep. It is an area of exceptional beauty and a recreation area for many of my constituents. Quite a bit of the area is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), who is unable to be with us today because he is serving on a Select Committee. I have checked the records and cannot find a previous Adjournment debate on this subject, so this might be a first.

When I submitted this debate for consideration, the Government were not sure—at least according to the Vote Office—who would make a response. I am very pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Jim Fitzpatrick) in his seat this morning, and he is very welcome. Some issues related to this subject cross a number of Departments. For example, the Home Office is responsible for some emergency services, especially the police whom I shall mention quite a bit.

The Bolton mountain rescue team—I will call it the MRT from now on—is one of the finest in the country. I pay tribute today to the hard work of its volunteers and of all mountain rescue volunteers throughout the four parts of the United Kingdom. Bolton MRT has been ably led since March 1989 by Garry Rhodes, who was awarded an MBE last year for his mountain rescue work by Her Majesty the Queen at Buckingham palace.

Bolton MRT was founded in 1968, so it is now in its 40th-anniversary year, and mountain rescue celebrated its 75th anniversary last year. Some 56 mountain rescue teams operate under a central council in England and Wales, of which 11 are located in the Lake district. Although Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own teams and regional bodies, there is dialogue across the United Kingdom. Mountain rescue teams get called out to help with large-scale rescues and searches, especially in mountainous areas. For example, teams from as far away as the Peak district went to assist recovery at the Lockerbie disaster.

Since the emergence of the Search and Rescue Dog Association, the Bolton team is not called out as it used to be to large searches in north Wales and the Lake district. Its bread and butter work involves evacuating casualties from difficult-to-access or remote situations, and searching for missing people in urban, rural and moorland locations, which often have tragic endings.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 232WH

Occasionally, it is involved in body recovery work, too. It regularly works with the Blackpool-based north-west air ambulance helicopter, particularly when its operation is restricted or proscribed in situations such as low visibility, snow or darkness, or when it is unavailable.

Although most of the casualties that Bolton MRT deals with, especially in rural settings, suffer from relatively minor injuries, such as sprains or broken limbs, it often has to deal with more serious incidents involving mountain bikers, hang gliders, parapenters, off-road motor cyclists and other off-road vehicles, horse riders, aircraft, helicopters, hot air balloons and falls from heights.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): May I add cave exploration to the hon. Gentleman's list? In my constituency, which straddles the Pennine dales of Yorkshire, the Cave Rescue Organisation, which is based in Clapham, does what its name suggests as well as the Upper Wharfedale Fell Rescue Association, which is a more classical organisation. Both are very important, and I endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Dr. Iddon: I am aware that cave rescue is part of some mountain rescue teams' work.

Bolton MRT also assists during bad weather. For example, it rescues motorists from snow drifts, and it provides standby rescue cover at fell races, sponsored walks, mountain bike races, orienteering events and moorland fires. It has a comprehensive training schedule and is included in predetermining attendance at rescue incidents involving the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service along with the Oldham team. It is the only service in Greater Manchester capable of bringing down from tower cranes workmen who have collapsed or injured themselves, or rescuing people from other high structures such as pylons, high-rise buildings and even bridges.

Bolton MRT regularly searches alongside and within still and swift water areas, and all its members are adequately trained for such work and equipped with lifejackets. Within its membership are a cadre of well-qualified kayakers, canoeists and divers who are used in such searches and body recoveries. Since its formation in 1968, the organisation has become busier and busier as its reputation has spread. It has attended well over 100 incidents a year since 2003. In fact, 2003 was its busiest year, with a record 206 incidents attended.

Bolton MRT works very closely with the North West ambulance service. Ambulances have soft suspensions and cannot access victims on rough ground or go along farm tracks or moorland mountain roads. The MRT is equipped with stretchers that can be used to carry victims long distances over rough ground, unlike the ambulance service, which is not so well equipped. Despite the excellent relationship that Bolton MRT has with the statutory emergency services of Greater Manchester and the county of Lancashire, there are some problems regarding its operations, which I hope that the Minister will take away for consideration and action.

While MRTs are effectively category 1 responders, they are not classified as such under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to debriefings following major emergencies or planning for future emergencies. They use blue lights in attending emergencies, but the legislation is not clear on the legality of that use.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 233WH

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is an example, which goes back a long way before the 2004 Act, of volunteers consistently getting a lower priority and a lower place at the table than paid professionals?

Dr. Iddon: Yes, I agree with that statement.

The Mines Rescue Service, coastguards, bomb disposal and RAF mountain rescue teams are all named services for the use of blue lights and sirens. However, I understand that a statutory instrument will be brought before the House in April this year to correct the anomaly, and I hope that the Minister will confirm that today.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Since the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the RAF mountain rescue service, may I tell him that I worked with such a team way back in the 1960s? I have worked on mountain and cave rescue both in and out of the RAF. The whole point is that people should go down caves and use our mountains more, but they should do so responsibly. They should always go properly equipped and dressed, and they should always leave decent instructions as to what their intentions are, which makes things safer for everyone.

Dr. Iddon: Indeed. I agree with that. Bolton MRT does an enormous amount of work trying to educate young and old people alike on that very point.

When I last met leaders of Bolton MRT, it had 45 volunteer members, of whom 15 are classed as response drivers, who have been trained in high-speed, blue-light and siren driving by the Greater Manchester police and assessed during at least two emergencies on blue light and siren response by a Bolton MRT member who worked for many years as a police traffic inspector. Unfortunately, GMP has now withdrawn this training as it considers that it may be legally liable for the actions of Bolton MRT members who have attended its courses.

High-speed training courses are available commercially, but at a cost of £800 per driver. They require the volunteer to take four or five days off work with a consequent loss of earnings. It is not clear whether such courses meet all the requirements of the current legislation. To increase its profile, promote safety in the hills and raise money, members of the Bolton MRT give many lectures to a variety of organisations, which are attended by people of all ages, and they organise a lot of fundraising events. In addition, they attend a weekly evening training session and frequent weekend training events. A considerable commitment is required from MRT members, which makes recruitment and retention difficult. In the past, volunteers have been recruited from the uniformed youth services, such as the Sea Cadets, and the scouts and guides movements, but there are falling numbers in those services, which is an added problem.

Bolton MRT has the benefit of insurance provided by GMP and the Lancashire constabulary, but there are inconsistencies in the provisions and administrative burdens for all concerned. It would make sense for the Government to consider blanket insurance cover for MRTs in England and Wales, if not the United Kingdom, but the situation is better in Scotland.

On financing, Mountain Rescue England and Wales, which estimates that MRTs save the Government £6 million a year by providing a free emergency service, receives only £33,000 annually. That money comes from the

21 Jan 2009 : Column 234WH

NHS, but little of it can be handed down to individual MRTs. Bolton MRT is fortunate that it is provided, free of charge, with an excellent headquarters and garage by the North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust and with further garage facilities by the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service.

Bolton MRT has four Land Rovers, which are manned when it is snowing heavily in case local ambulances cannot reach some of the addresses to which they are called out, and three trailers, which provide a control room, a catering resource, and equipment transport. Each Land Rover needs replacing approximately every 10 years. GMP helps Bolton MRT to replace its vehicles through their fleet purchasing scheme, which results in quite a saving, but the bulk of the vehicles' costs must be raised from big funding schemes, such as the lottery.

In lieu of its fuel expenses, Bolton MRT receives £1,000 from GMP. I understand that in Scotland, St. John Ambulance supplies one vehicle to each MRT. If the Government decide to go ahead with their new Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency banding scheme, and unless exemption is given to all rescue services, including MRTs, there will be additional costs to the service.

GMP has taken responsibility for the provision of most of Bolton and Oldham MRTs' radio equipment, which needs replacing at approximately 10-year intervals at a cost today of about £25,000. Yesterday, I was pleased to receive an e-mail from Ofcom that informed me that it has no plans to impose charges on MRTs for the use of their radio channels, nor do the Government plan to change the funding structures that support the sector.

Bolton MRT has calculated that it saves the police between £2,000 and £3,000 for each search call-out, which are mostly for children or vulnerable adults in urban areas. That is estimated to save GMP £1.2 million in a decade. The running costs of Bolton MRT are, roughly, £20,000 to £25,000 per annum, which is partly covered by small and large donations, often from people who have been rescued, and sometimes from bequests. The cost of weather-proof clothing alone is £15,000. Members of Bolton MRT actually pay a £100 membership fee, which I found astonishing, and they often contribute to the cost of their own uniform clothing. They receive no reimbursement for the fuel that they use in their own vehicles when on MRT duties.

When MRTs purchase equipment, they pay VAT. Will the Minister please consider the possibility of waiving VAT for rescue services? There have been discussions on that between Mountain Rescue England and Wales and the Treasury—the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has been involved in those negotiations, and I am sure he will tell us about them.

In Wales, each MRT is provided with basic equipment. In Scotland, the importance of MRTs in attracting tourists to the country has been recognised, and each MRT receives a grant of £22,000, which is distributed through local police forces. There are therefore regional variations in how MRTs work and how they are funded. Mountain Rescue England and Wales holds the view that it should be granted central funding for distribution to individual MRTs, but that view is not held in all quarters of the movement. MRTs would welcome relief

from the burden of fundraising, but the approach needs

21 Jan 2009 : Column 235WH

to be adapted to local circumstances, because, as has been mentioned, some undertake cave rescues, for example. MRTs value their autonomy, because their training and equipment requirements need to be adapted to local needs. Other well known rescue organisations, such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institute, operate nationally from a centrally organised headquarters.

There is also discussion within the MRT movement about its role and that of the national bodies. Obviously, in a mountainous area, an MRT's primary role is to rescue people who get into difficulty in the mountains. However, even in mountainous areas, MRTs are routinely deployed to other incidents. For example, MRTs, mainly from the Lake district, played a major role at the scene of the Grayrigg derailment in command and control, in marshalling, landing and loading helicopters, in stretcher handling and even in searching for the casualties over quite a wide area, sometimes in the dark. Because of the failure of the normal telecommunications system, Lake district MRTs provided a 999 radio network for days after the Carlisle floods, and MRTs have been involved in dealing with flooding in Sheffield, Gloucester and Boscastle.

There is also discussion among the general public about who should pay for rescues. Should those who engage in dangerous sports or activities be forbidden from taking part without adequate insurance that would cover them not only in case of injury or, worse, death, but in the event that they need rescuing? However, most MRT call-outs involve people whose activities are not regarded as dangerous—they are ordinary people who go out on the fells or moors for a walk.

I hope that the debate has highlighted the excellent and necessary work that MRT volunteers carry out—it is of great benefit to many communities throughout Great Britain. We thank them for their courage and dedication, and for the time that they devote to mountain rescue.

I am sure that the debate will demonstrate that the Minister has many questions to answer. If we are to continue to have MRTs, we need to consider proper funding. We need to protect MRT volunteers from prosecution and to ensure that they are properly insured and covered by the appropriate legislation. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other hon. Members.

9.47 am

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing this important debate? It is particularly timely in respect of events in my constituency, because we have had a number of incidents. About 12 days ago, not only were people rescued off a mountain, but a number of the team were injured in the process—I will return to that in a moment.

My constituency covers large parts of Snowdonia, or Eryri as I call it, including a large part of Snowdon, or Yr Wyddfa, including the summit itself, a distinction that I share with the hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams). It also includes a long sea coast from the Menai strait and around the Llyn peninsula. As such, the area provides unrivalled opportunities for outdoor activities of all kinds within a small geographical area. However, that means that we have frequent accidents and emergencies. Thankfully, we also have frequent

21 Jan 2009 : Column 236WH

rescues, because Llanberis MRT is located in my constituency. Many of the team are constituents of mine, and some of my constituents are members of the Ogwen team in the hon. Lady's constituency.

As has been said, MRTs perform a vital life-saving role. I say that with gratitude, because I am a walker—unfortunately, alas, not as frequent a walker as I was before I was elected. The mountain rescue team in my constituency, as elsewhere, works closely with helicopters, based in RAF Valley—I am glad that the headquarters was moved to Valley recently, by the way—and has a great deal of expertise, gained over many years of rescue work in the mountains. There is also a great deal of expertise in Ysbyty Gwynedd in Bangor, where injured people are regularly treated.

Although mountain rescue teams are voluntary, they deserve support from the public and, to an extent, public support, as the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East pointed out earlier. I say “to an extent” because one of the most striking things about mountain rescue teams is their voluntary nature. They comprise people with a fundamental and passionate love of the mountains and a commitment to helping their fellow walkers and climbers. The voluntary nature of mountain rescue teams means that they are not only of the community but in it, which can only help in their work recruiting new members. I am certain that that should not be compromised by too much public intervention in their funding, but they need and deserve public support, perhaps supplementary public support, so that their energies are not unduly diverted to the secondary task of fundraising to pay for over-burdensome duties and taxes.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right that fundraising is an important way for teams to connect with their communities, but are his mountain rescue teams finding, as those in the Peak district are, that in the current economic climate, both corporate and personal donations are harder to get hold of in the same quantity? The fall in interest rates means that income on savings is falling as well, putting an extra stretch on team resources.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. It is a dilemma facing so much volunteer activity. Clearly something needs to be done. My first question to the Minister is the one already posed: what consideration is being given to making financial concessions to mountain rescue teams? It seems wrong to me—and, I am sure, to other hon. Members—that the state should cream off a substantial amount of their hard-won funds in taxes and duties. Surely a way could be found to reduce VAT rates. I know that European regulations allow for a reduction to 5 per cent. Some goods, such as children's clothes, are rated at zero, but 5 per cent. VAT would be a good reduced rate on vital equipment. Fuel duty, which has been mentioned, could also be reduced.

On Monday, I had the pleasure of meeting the Welsh Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, who told me that the Welsh Assembly Government make a small grant to mountain rescue teams in Wales. We should be thankful for that, but we also know that the Scottish Government make a somewhat more substantial grant to mountain rescue teams in Scotland, recognising not only their humanitarian contribution but their vital contribution to safety in the mountains and to the eventual economic good of mountainous regions.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 237WH

There has been a good deal of publicity in the past few weeks about rescues carried out by the Llanberis team on Yr Wyddfa, or Snowdon, on the Pen y Gwryd track. As a result of those efforts about 12 days ago, not only did the team rescue a large number of people, but eight team members were injured after being blown over by the incredibly high winds up there. I am sure that we are all glad to pay tribute to their grit and bravery. All mountain users owe them a debt of gratitude. Those feats of bravery were accomplished in the teeth of the most severe weather conditions. Indeed, they were necessitated partly by the extremes of weather in Snowdonia, or Eryri. It is no accident that the 1953 Everest expedition trained in Eryri, where the rain and wind, as well as the snow and ice, provide the most testing of conditions.

That, I suspect, is one of the reasons why rescues are such a regular feature of life in my constituency, and that is why fatalities unfortunately occur, although they are, thankfully, much less frequent now. Seemingly benign conditions in the valley floors can suddenly turn into driving rain and penetrating wind higher up, and can even prove fatal. That can easily catch out casual walkers, even in summer and even those with proper equipment. Equipment these days is so much better than when I first took to walking, but even with the best equipment, people can be caught out.

I suspect that people caught out are often those who have travelled quite far to reach the mountains and who may be tempted to think, “Well, since I’ve come this far, I might as well take a bit of a chance and go up.” I understand that a substantial portion of mountain rescue call-outs involves people who are lost or stressed, perhaps after a long day out in unfamiliar circumstances. Often they are not in organised groups and, as the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) said, have not given proper information about their intentions. They are often returning home in the late afternoon, perhaps bedraggled and over-tired, often with lower leg injuries. As we all know, coming down is as testing as going up, and possibly more.

What is being done to educate and inform walkers about what precautions they should take? I confess that I do not watch a great deal of television, but I cannot remember the last time I saw public information advertisements or a public information film telling people what care they should take before walking, scrambling or climbing. What public information steps could the Government take?

On the involvement of local people in outdoor activities, the training of others and the eventual provision of new recruits to mountain rescue teams, in the past—at least in our area—many people who participated in mountain activities were not of the area. When I was a student many years ago, I took a day off to walk up Yr Wyddfa—Snowdon—on the interesting Grib Goch route, which some here might know. As I was coming down, the weather was not good and I was very tired, so eventually I turned in to the pub at Nant Peris for a quick pint. [Hon. Members: “Surely not.”] Anyway, in I went, and there was a friend of mine, a fellow student, in the bar. He said to me in Welsh, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I’ve just been up Grib Goch, to the summit of Yr Wyddfa.” He looked at me quizzically and said, “What

21 Jan 2009 : Column 238WH

do you want to do that for?” He could not understand why anyone would want to climb the mountain as a leisure activity.

That is not surprising. In the past, the mountain has all too often been associated with hard, back-breaking work in the quarry or on the farms, so it is not surprising that local people would not be involved with mountain activities. I do not often come here to the workplace on

a Saturday, and in the past, neither would they. However, times have changed, and the mountains offer a great deal of business and employment opportunities as well as leisure activities.

I am glad to say that my local authority, Gwynedd county council, has a strategy to involve, inspire and support local people in getting involved in outdoor activities, receiving training and entering the field professionally. Training opportunities should be improved and better tailored to the needs of people who want to become involved, who are, after all, the potential recruits for mountain rescue teams. I hope that I am not straying too far off the subject, Mr. Hancock.

I have a case in point, the Dringo'r Waliau or Climbing the Walls project, whose report I have here. It provides tailored training for unemployed women over a long period so that they can take mountain qualifications, become employed and eventually become potential recruits for mountain rescue teams. The project is supported by the Rank Foundation with substantial amounts of money, and it is accepted by everyone as a worthwhile project. However, it does not fit into Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus rules for training, as it is tailored to the women's individual needs and is a slow project spanning four or five years. I appeal to the Minister to reconsider the opportunities for people through projects such as Dringo'r Waliau, because one of the women involved, unfortunately, must now make herself available for work and therefore will probably not be available for training.

I will close with another little story. Some years ago, I had the unforgettable experience of visiting Yosemite valley in California. As we all know, the valley is a wilderness and the park authorities there work very hard to keep it as a wilderness, because of its unique heritage. I walked with the head ranger and he told me that there are very severe restrictions on the use of modern conveniences, such as four-wheel drive vehicles and helicopters. In fact, he said that there are some supporters of Yosemite who hold the view that, if somebody is injured in the valley, they should be brought out on muleback, as they were in the 19th century. Thankfully, we do not go that far in Snowdonia or any of the other national parks throughout Wales and the rest of the UK.

We have highly committed and well equipped mountain rescue teams, but they come at a cost. I am sure that we would all agree, and I hope that the Government also agree, that more support should be given to this very worthwhile service.

10 am

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab): It is a privilege to conduct this debate under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing the debate and on the manner in which he and others have outlined both

21 Jan 2009 : Column 239WH

the service provided by the many mountain rescue teams in the UK and the difficulties under which that volunteer service operates.

North Wales has some of the most attractive and challenging landscapes in the UK. As a result, it was used to train those involved in the successful 1953 assault on Everest led by John Hunt, who later became Lord Hunt of Llanfair Waterdine. My constituency of Conwy

has one of several mountain rescue teams active in that area, the Ogwen Valley Mountain Rescue Organisation, or OVMRO, which is not the easiest of abbreviations to pronounce; it is certainly not as easy as the abbreviation that my hon. Friend mentioned in his speech. I challenge hon. Members to try pronouncing OVMRO.

The OVMRO team was founded in 1965, so we beat the team mentioned by my hon. Friend by three years, and it was the first in north Wales to be set up in an organised manner. I was a young councillor then, revelling in the early flush of the Harold Wilson Government, after “13 years of Tory misrule”. So, in 2005, as the Member of Parliament for Conwy, I felt greatly honoured to be invited to the team’s 40th anniversary, which I must acknowledge to be one of the most pleasurable of occasions in my period as MP for the Conwy constituency. I should add that I am also a patron of the support group for the team. Have no doubt: these volunteers are a special breed of citizen. To be with them is to experience something really different. The only comparison that I would offer would be to spend time with another special breed, the slate quarrymen, who were central to my upbringing.

What mountain rescue teams undertake in their rescue work is a mark of respect for those who believe in the value of communing with nature in the mountains. At times, however, that act of communing with nature may offer challenges that some people cannot meet. The members of the teams are not judgmental; they empathise with and recognise the fallibility of the human form. They also respond and do what they can. Mostly, they succeed and help people or rescue them. Of course, sometimes, as we have heard, they fail. However, when that is the case I believe that they bring to the families of the bereaved the recognition that everything possible was done to save their loved ones.

The mountain rescue teams undertake their activities without financial reward; they are simply volunteers. In England and Wales, they receive very little Government support. Is that right? I think not.

Nevertheless, OVMRO has extended its rescue activities to include water incidents. Those incidents are twofold. First, many of the rivers in the area that the team covers include the most challenging sections of water for canoeists. As we all know, the last decade has seen the team called to an increasing number of incidents involving canoeists. Secondly, in recent years the team has attended a number of flood incidents in the Conwy valley, following heavy rainfall. As a result, it has developed a water response capability, including special clothing, equipment and training, and it is the only team in Wales to do so.

OVMRO responds to the developing interest of the public in challenging outdoor pursuits. I am sure that the Minister will recognise that a Government who seek to develop the good health of the nation across the generations must also recognise that outdoor pursuits can entail risks and that the bodies that enable those

21 Jan 2009 : Column 240WH

Government policies to be developed themselves need to be supported. OVMRO is such a body, as are all the mountain rescue teams in the UK.

I extend an invitation to the Minister to visit my constituency, in particular the Ogwen valley. If he comes, he will see mountains such as Tryfan, the Glyderau and the Carneddau. I believe that such landscapes are far removed from the landscapes of his own constituency. However, I am also aware that the Minister spent his early years in Glasgow, within easy reach of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, which is another area of outstanding beauty and, of course,

challenge. Therefore, I am confident that he will recognise my argument that those who support people who venture into the mountains themselves deserve support from our Government.

This is not the first time we have raised the issue—far from it. As has been mentioned already, in Wales, the mountain rescue teams benefit from a small grant for equipment that is made by the Welsh Assembly Government and I know that the teams are appreciative of that grant. However, I am told that in Scotland an annual grant of up to £500,000 is made by the Scottish Parliament to the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland and that that money is used to pay some of the costs of running team bases, vehicles and equipment. I understand that in England there is no money forthcoming from central Government for mountain rescue, apart from a very small amount, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East.

The Minister will no doubt be aware of the all-party group on mountain rescue and search teams, of which I am the vice-chair. Officers of that group, including myself, met the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on 14 March 2007 to pursue the matter of funding, which we are discussing this morning. At Prime Minister's questions, I asked him:

“My right hon. Friend will recall meeting representatives of Mountain Rescue England and Wales...Will he find time during his final days in office to review its request for public funding similar to that available in Scotland? If he is unable to resolve the issue, will he ensure that the request is in the in-tray of our right hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr. Brown)?”

He answered:

“I can assure my hon. Friend that, as I explained to those representatives when I met them, I will take a close interest in this issue right up to the time of my departure. It is a very live issue that we are considering.”—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 1373.]

As far as I am aware, there have been no further developments since then. I hope that the Minister will be able to offer reassurance that, in the words of the then Prime Minister, this remains a “live issue”. Perhaps he will also be able to offer information about progress.

There is a further issue on which I hope the Minister will be able to provide assurance. He may be aware that Mountain Rescue England and Wales has had concerns about possible charges for the use of radio frequencies. These concerns have been partially allayed—I choose my words carefully, saying they have been “partially allayed”—by Ofcom, which has indicated that there should be no charges. However, I understand that concerns remain that, as Ofcom charges the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the MCA may pass on those charges to mountain rescue teams. Clarification on that matter would be most welcome. There is the potential for an additional burden on that volunteer organisation.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 241WH

In deference to the Minister, who may feel that these are sufficient issues to be raised by one Member, and because I am looking at the clock, I will stop now. Thank you, Mr. Hancock.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): That is very good of you, Mrs. Williams. I would be grateful if all Members remembered that we would like to start the wind-ups at around 10.30 am, to give the Minister and the two party spokesmen an opportunity to speak, and that they could keep their comments to about the length of the speech by Mrs. Williams.

10.9 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock. I pay tribute to and thank the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) for securing the debate. In doing so, he does an enormous service to the House and, indeed, to mountain rescue teams and all those who rely on their services throughout the country.

My constituency contains a large chunk of the Lake district, the western part of the Yorkshire dales and many other mountainous areas in between that are not so designated but are still incredibly attractive. Those areas contain challenging terrain, not to mention several inland waterways, including Lake Windermere and Lake Coniston, where there is often a need for rescue services. In my constituency, and in those of many hon. Members who are present, mountain rescue is part of the fabric of society. People who are involved in it are also involved in work and other activities, and word is passed on as a consequence. They are very visible. As one drives into Ambleside, for example, one sees on one's right the headquarters of the Langdale-Ambleside mountain rescue team. It is something that we are all aware of in our part of the world.

Mountain rescue teams across England and Wales have saved a good 20 lives and have aided a further 2,000 people in recent times. Many of those people—possibly the majority—will not have been from the areas that we represent, although we warmly welcome them, but will have been dwellers of more urban constituencies. Therefore, this matter is relevant not only to the minority of rugged parliamentary constituencies, but to the whole country. I reiterate the point that the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East has made: if those services had to be replicated by the statutory services, it would cost the Government about £6 million a year to provide them. On a hard, financial level, that is what we owe the mountain and cave rescue services. In reality, of course, we owe them much more.

As we have heard, mountain and cave rescue teams deal with an ever-widening range of emergencies. Rescue in the uplands is a major part of what they do, but they also assist the police in looking for missing, vulnerable people. In my part of the world, searching for evidence after a crime is also a major part of what they do, as are rescues on inland waterways. I joined the Langdale-Ambleside mountain rescue team at Waterhead, at the north end of Windermere, not long ago, as it unveiled its new piece of kit for rescuing people on the lake.

The team is involved in a range of different activities and skills, including giving advice about outdoor events, some of which are challenging. I am grateful not to

21 Jan 2009 : Column 242WH

have had to rely on mountain rescue, so far, to be rescued. I am an enthusiastic, although 10th-rate, fell runner, as some hon. Members will know, and I have been grateful for the presence of mountain rescue teams at events to give advice and ensure safety. Last October I took part in the Coniston trail, the course of which was changed following advice from mountain rescue. Those people know better than anyone else which risks are worth taking

and which are not. They are not massively risk averse, and they understand that some people get involved in challenging activities, but they have the expertise to make the call on which risks are worth taking and which are not.

As we have heard, mountain rescue teams are increasingly involved in flood rescue operations and in assisting ambulance services where there is difficulty in accessing patients. I want to make a brief repetition regarding the Grayrigg incident which happened nearly two years ago in my constituency. Mountain rescue teams were the first on the scene at that tragedy, which was unbelievably bewildering and appalling, and happened without warning in a dark and rural area, to which the nearest village was the best part of half a mile away. People were utterly bewildered, got injured, and there were difficult circumstances. The only people who had the equipment to get there on time and to make a difference were the mountain rescue team. For their troubles, however, the Government take from mountain rescue teams, on average, £143,000 a year in taxes.

Those teams value their independence. To draw an analogy, although not a perfect one, they are comparable to the hospice movement. They want to remain independent, and that is quite right. This is not a call for them to become a statutory service, but it is quite another thing for the Government effectively to fail to provide any support for such an outstanding service.

We have heard that the Scottish Government pay, on average, £400,000 a year in grants to the 26 mountain rescue teams in Scotland, and that the Welsh Assembly Government make a small grant available to the 13 teams in Wales. Many of us have been calling, for some time, on the UK Government to make a serious contribution to our mountain and cave rescue teams, who have been providing essential rescue services across the country for more than 60 years.

Currently, the only way in which the Government assist mountain rescue teams is through the gift aid system, but I give to mountain rescue by chucking coins in the pot when the Kendal mountain rescue team is rattling its bucket outside the birdcage in Kendal, or in the marketplace in Ambleside. Much of its funding is from flag days, tin rattling and the like, and it cannot get gift aid back on that, so that is not much of a concession. It is helpful, but it does not fill the gap that is created. We have a ridiculous situation in which mountain rescue teams are effectively being charged for providing rescue services that they provide free of charge. That is unjustifiable nonsense due to an historical accident. I do not claim that there is malice on the Government's behalf, but surely it is time that that nonsense was corrected.

The charges incurred by mountain rescue include paying vehicle excise duty on essential 4x4s for reaching stricken climbers, and paying VAT on essential equipment such as ropes, climbing gear, clothing and boots. Given the varying terrain in which team members work, they need three or four pairs of boots and a variety of

21 Jan 2009 : Column 243WH

different clothing and waterproofs, bearing in mind the vast range of weather conditions in which people work between ground level and up to 3,000 ft. As we have heard, vital life-saving communication equipment is not always exempt from taxation. Teams also have to pay, out of voluntary donations, for national personal accident insurance policies for team members. Even lighting and flares, which are essential to rescue operations, can be subject to VAT.

The 56 teams in England and Wales paid at least £75,000 in tax last year alone for the items that I have listed, but when one adds one-off equipment such as vehicles and specialist clothing, the sum is more like £200,000 in a year. Is not it outrageous that we expect a charity that is run by immensely skilled and dedicated volunteers to pay for the privilege of saving lives? I think of the irony of the Kendal mountain rescue team being situated on Busher walk in Kendal, cheek by jowl with the ambulance and fire services and the police—those three statutory services do not have to pay such taxes, while the mountain rescue team does. Mountain rescue's maritime equivalent, the lifeboat services, are rightly exempt.

On VAT, Treasury Ministers have indicated their sympathy in the past, including the previous Treasury Minister, now the Minister for Local Government, the right hon. Member for Wentworth (John Healey), and the current Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle). The right hon. Member for Wentworth indicated, in a letter to me in 2006, that the Treasury was on the verge of committing to help out, at least with vehicle taxation, which is well within the Government's powers, but no action has been taken. I confess to being a little frustrated about that.

The Government have allowed themselves to get bogged down in EU rules, saying that there are restrictions to prevent them from waiving VAT rules and other taxes. However, where there is a will, there is a way. I have been working with mountain rescue in England and Wales, and we have approached the Commission to establish what leeway the Government have. I pay tribute to Stewart Hulse from mountain rescue in my constituency—another MBE—who has been leading the way in that matter. In response to our inquiries, Commissioner Kovács's office has shown that matters are not so clear-cut, because our mountain rescue operation is unique in Europe, which means that there is scope for the Government to make exemptions on VAT. The UK has the only mountain rescue service, in England, that is not statutory, and the only one that does not charge for its services in some way. The Commissioner's response, which I am happy to share with the Minister, reveals that there is about to be a review of VAT. I request that the Minister intervenes and calls on the Commissioner to allow an exemption.

I request that the Minister supports the bid, through the Commission, to seek an exemption to allow mountain rescue a fair deal—I know that I have to wind up, and I apologise—because that would be pushing an open door. The change would cost the Government only £200,000, which would be a drop in the ocean to them, but would be a massive vote of confidence in our mountain rescue services. That would make sure that we have a service that is committed to saving and rescuing people in the years to come.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 244WH

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): I do not think that you were pushing an open door there, Tim; you were pushing your luck.

10.20 am

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): I, too, will be brief. In July 2007, I was up in the Peak district hills between Mam Tor and Rushup Edge. I was near the top of a large slope and found myself incapacitated. I was trapped in a gully from where I could see the valley laid out before me, and during the hours that followed, 24 members of Buxton mountain rescue

team were mobilised. They set up communication headquarters and catering, and I could see them scouring the valley with their dogs. They were looking in an expert way for clues and using their knowledge to establish where I might be hidden. When they eventually found me, I was given a thorough medical check-up, counselled by people who knew what they were doing, and taken out on a stretcher. Fortunately for me, I was a volunteer victim. I had no injuries and I had offered my services for a training session for Buxton mountain rescue team. Fortunately for them, my efforts that morning raised £1,600 in sponsorship and I recommend that every hon. Member in the Chamber follows that example.

However, £1,600 is a drop in the ocean. The Buxton mountain rescue team alone costs £34,500 a year to operate, and along with the team based in Edale, which is next door, it is one of the busiest mountain rescue teams in the country. That is not surprising. The Peak district has 22 million visitors a year and if only a small proportion of them get into trouble on the hills, teams might still be called out several hundred times. The teams are made up of a group of incredibly dedicated and skilful volunteers, and my experience showed that many different types of skills have to be used and co-ordinated. When I was rescued, it was an unearthly hour on a Sunday morning, but sometimes rescues are at night and in poor weather conditions. Even in the Peak district, people sometimes have to deal with death as part of their voluntary activity or help those who are perhaps experiencing the death of a loved one up on the hills—whether from an accident, a heart attack or whatever.

Mountain rescue teams do not just need our respect; they should be shown that respect with a much more generous funding regime. As I hinted in my intervention, those services are being squeezed, and that is not just for taxation reasons, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said. In the words of Ian Hurst, the chairman of the Buxton mountain rescue team:

“Street collections in Buxton and Castleton this Xmas have not been as fruitful as previous years...due to there being less money around and the public being unwilling to give to charity, which as the recession bites, will only worsen. The dramatic reduction in the banks interest rates to savers is also hitting us. Companies we approach are not willing to support us when they are making their own employees redundant, which is understandable. We are managing our financial resources very well and Buxton MRT will continue to provide a first class service to our communities next year, but funding that will become very much more difficult.”

At such a time, we need to redouble our efforts to try to meet some of the demands that other colleagues have made this morning.

I do not want to go into much more detail, apart from to say to the Minister that over the years, I have tabled many parliamentary questions on the subject of

21 Jan 2009 : Column 245WH

mountain rescue. Some of those have gone to the Home Office; some have gone to the Department for Communities and Local Government; and some to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I do not remember tabling any questions for the Department for Transport, but it might well be that I did. Local authorities, police authorities and others are supportive. However, we cannot rely on local authorities because the Peak district, for example, falls under four different Government regions. There is no single region that can take responsibility for the mountain rescue at that level. With all due respect to my Front-Bench colleague, I would like a Minister to have mountain and cave rescue specifically

as part of the ministerial remit. I do not care in which Department the Minister is, but it would be nice to know that we had one champion on these issues in the Government.

My colleagues have made powerful points about funding specifically and generally. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) for securing the debate, and I thank him for doing so. I shall let my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) finish the round.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr. Levitt. I am disappointed; I thought you were worth a lot more than £1,600.

10.24 am

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): It is fair to say that with the current opinion polls, the hon. Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt) is probably worth considerably more than £1,600 to the Labour party.

I shall make a brief contribution because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) has said, there are few occasions when we get the opportunity to discuss mountain rescue teams in the House. Although some of the issues raised are very much to do with the situation in England and Wales, there are some generic issues that I would like to mention.

My constituency is Stirling and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) said, we have the Loch Lomond and Trossachs national park, the Ochil hills, and the Campsie fells, which border my constituency. Within my constituency we have what I would call the lower highland ranges, stretching from Callander to Tyndrum, before we move into the higher mountains of the highland regions. I am sure that the Minister is aware of some of those areas, given where he grew up.

It is fair to say that it is not just Stirling folk who climb the hills in the area; it attracts people from all over the country. Indeed, many mountaineers and hill walkers from Scotland travel to other parts of the United Kingdom to walk hills, which is why it is important that we have a UK perspective on the issue. Hill walking and mountaineering is seen as part of the mainstream of activity in Scotland, so much so that the BBC on a Saturday morning in Scotland issues a weather forecast specifically targeted at hill walkers and mountaineers. I do not know whether that is replicated in other parts of the country—*[Interruption.]* I see that colleagues from Wales are saying that it is.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 246WH

We should not lose sight of the fact that mountain rescue teams are made up of volunteers. They safeguard their independence and want to continue to provide the support that is necessary for what is a massive tourist attraction, in my constituency and in other parts of the country.

On safety, it is interesting to note that in Scotland, research has shown that two thirds of those involved in mountain incidents are experienced climbers and walkers. It is not people who are feckless on the mountains who need to be rescued; it is people who know what they are

doing. As the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) said—he represents the area that takes in Snowdonia—people need to know what they are doing, but if the weather breaks and comes in during difficult circumstances, even the most experienced people can get into difficulty.

I offer my support to colleagues in other parts of the country because we need to recognise that mountain rescue is part of our emergency services. Although those involved want to maintain their independence, there is a need for elements of core support, and they should not have to raise funds for the specialist equipment that they need. I hope to visit some of my mountain rescue teams from central Scotland in the near future, including the one based at Killin, which covers many of the most difficult and challenging climbs in my constituency.

In making this brief contribution, I hope that the Minister will consider funding in Scotland and whether it is an appropriate model for other parts of the United Kingdom. Although the administration of these funding mechanisms is devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government and to the Scottish Executive, there is general interest across the UK in making our mountains and hills as safe as possible. We can do that by continuing to support those volunteers who give their time and effort and are prepared to put their lives on the line for other people. We should not undervalue that commitment.

10.30 am

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) for securing it on a very important subject, as other hon. Members have said. Frankly, the spotlight is not shone on it often enough. Hon. Members who visited my constituency in the 2005 by-election, when I was first elected, will know that there are not many mountains in Cheadle. I am not giving away any secrets by saying that, but, of course, the significance of this debate reaches far beyond those of us who live in areas that do have mountains or active mountain rescue teams, because it is quite possible that any of my constituents might need to call on the assistance of a mountain rescue team when they visit other parts of the United Kingdom.

Tom Levitt: I believe that residents of the hon. Gentleman's constituency are active in mountain rescue teams in the Peak District.

Mark Hunter: Indeed they are, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that intervention.

I am not the first person to point out that the work of mountain rescue teams is not restricted to mountains and hills; they also provide assistance to anyone lost or injured on moorland, fells, or even open countryside.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 247WH

Their services are requested and given in a wide variety of emergencies that are not limited to mountain climbing but include searches for missing children, lost walkers, people who are suddenly taken ill and motorists lost in snowstorms—all kinds of scenarios. In fact, the mountain rescue teams, along with the lowland search and rescue teams, actively serve vast chunks of the United Kingdom, and we should recognise that fact.

During the west country flooding of summer 2007, its mountain rescue team helped to recover more than 800 people in north Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, with volunteers

working 14-hour shifts. I am told that that was the highest recorded number of persons assisted or lives saved at any one incident in the history of mountain rescue in England and Wales. That example alone shows how important the work of the mountain rescue teams is throughout the country, how closely they work together with the police and other emergency services, and how much danger those brave individuals are regularly exposed to. I, like others, pay tribute to the brave and dedicated men and women who invest so much time and energy—often risking personal injury and facing hardship and all kinds of hazards—in providing that very valuable service and in serving the communities as they do.

Mountain rescue teams, like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, all work as volunteers and have to balance their work with the teams with the need to earn money and support their families. Therefore, it is also appropriate to pay tribute to the families of people involved in mountain rescue teams, who have to put up with the constant strain of knowing that their loved ones are in danger, and who, as the teams run a 24-hour seven-day-a-week service, all too often lose out on quality time together as a family.

In the current economic environment, many charities are finding it hard to cope financially, and many teams face dramatically reduced funding because of the downturn in voluntary donations. Mountain Rescue England and Wales says that contributions are down 60 per cent. year on year, which is a worrying trend. The teams themselves cost significant amounts of money to operate. Members need to be trained not only in the latest first aid and emergency medical treatments, but in search techniques, off-road driving, work with search and rescue dogs, and many other facets. The specialist equipment that they need is also expensive. For example, a collapsible stretcher can cost about £2,500, modified 4x4 vehicles do not come cheap, and boots and clothing—all such equipment—is costly. This means that mountain rescue teams, run as they are on voluntary contributions, have large and ongoing expenditure. As we have heard, a team can cost up to £50,000 a year to operate successfully.

The 26 mountain rescue teams in Scotland receive upwards of £400,000 a year towards their costs, and the Welsh Assembly contributes £13,000 to rescue teams in Wales. But, as has been said, the rescue teams in England receive little or no help towards their expenditure. All hon. Members have said that the Government ought to do more to support this vital search and rescue service. Mountain Rescue England and Wales estimates that it would cost the Government £6 million a year to run.

The teams do not ask for all their running costs to be covered, only for certain tax exemptions to be met so that the equipment that is vital to them if they are to fulfil their search and rescue role is made more affordable.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 248WH

Currently, only some of their vehicles—those that can officially be classed as ambulances—are exempt from vehicle excise duty. The rest of their vehicles, carrying men, women and equipment, are not exempt. Making all vehicles exempt, as is the case with the RNLI, would cost the Treasury only a small amount of money, and the teams could then use it to replace or update other equipment, or for other training needs. Perhaps the Minister will refer to that.

The teams also seek a VAT exemption for their equipment, clothing and other vital purchases. Other emergency and health services do not have to pay VAT on their purchases, but mountain rescue services do, and that is unfair and, frankly, unsustainable. Again, the amount of money is relatively small. In 2007, Mountain Rescue England and Wales carried out a VAT survey and discovered that £75,000 was paid in VAT that year. These charities

fulfil an important role as emergency and rescue services. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government have considered making mountain rescue equipment purchases exempt from VAT and whether, considering the small cost, they will commit to take action?

Mountain rescue teams throughout the UK provide a emergency service for their communities, whether it is for towns and villages facing snow storms or floods, or for individuals lost on mountains or in remote places. They work with, and support the work of, the police, ambulance and other emergency services, and often venture into places where it would be impossible for ambulances to go. These volunteer teams give much more than just their time, and they fully deserve our support. I very much hope that the Minister will assure the House that they have the Government's support, too.

10.37 am

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber under your chairmanship, Mr. Hancock. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on obtaining the debate. We have had some excellent contributions, starting with his own. It is a good opportunity not only to pay tribute to a group of volunteers who give of their time freely and, occasionally, risk their lives so that others can enjoy the natural wonders of some of the more interesting parts of this beautiful country in a variety of different weathers, but to put across some genuine concerns. The contribution of volunteers in the field of adventure, in particular, is all too often taken for granted.

As well as being the shadow Minister selected at relatively short notice to respond to the debate, I happened to be the sponsor of a private Member's Bill on the promotion of volunteering, which was aimed specifically at limiting the effects of the compensation culture on adventure and sport volunteers. As a result of the Bill, I am co-founder of the all-party adventure and recreation in society group, so I shall take the liberty of inviting to our next meeting everyone who has contributed to this debate.

My experience of training for the Territorial SAS on the Brecon Beacons left me with huge respect for anybody who operates in such terrain. We have heard a lot about other terrains and, indeed, about several other parts of

21 Jan 2009 : Column 249WH

the country, including the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and many organisations in the adventure and sport fields face similar dilemmas, many of which have evolved from risk aversion, the compensation culture, insurance problems and Government policy, the unintended but inadvertent consequences of which have been unhelpful.

My party is firmly committed to reintroducing structured risk-taking and adventure to the lives of young people. There are few activities more adventurous and challenging than those listed by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East as ones that his mountain rescue service supports, from canoeing to rock climbing. Cave rescue has also been mentioned.

In September, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) said that

“we'll take action to put adventure back into learning. If we are worried about raising a generation of obese children nothing will be as effective as getting them active.”

If we want people of all ages to do adventurous activities and to challenge their physical and mental boundaries, and if we want to tackle obesity and other problems in today's society that physical challenges can overcome, we need organisations such as mountain rescue teams that are willing to be there when things go wrong. As hon. Members have pointed out, we also need such teams if an ordinary walk in the mountains goes wrong.

Activities in all parts of the adventure and sport world—from cadet units and scout troops to canoeing—are possible only because of such volunteers. In mountaineering, they not only commit time and energy, but put their lives at risk. We must therefore ensure that those organisations and their volunteers are uppermost in our minds as policy and law makers. We must seek to stave off the law of unintended consequences.

I will give an example directly related to my transport brief. A visit to my local coastguard headquarters in Dover was kindly facilitated by the Minister. I saw a photograph of the local cliff rescue team, which is made up of volunteers, although unlike mountain rescue teams it is led by a paid member of staff. In the photograph, the volunteers were abseiling down a cliff to rescue a young woman who had fallen. Miraculously, her fall had been broken after 120 ft by an illegally dumped fridge. There was a good outcome in that case. However, the insurance for such dangerous work is inadequate. As a consequence, a volunteer coastguard who was seriously injured on a rescue mission on a cliff in Pembrokeshire lost his job and received minimal and only temporary compensation that was lower than half his salary for the period that it was paid. While I cannot comment on the strong cases that have been made on a variety of tax and funding issues, because they are beyond my pay grade, on the narrow area of cliff rescue teams, my Treasury team has agreed to review the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in the context of the other emergency services.

There are considerable parallel problems with insurance for mountain rescue teams. One team told my office:

“Many team members are under the impression that they operate under a system that they are adequately insured, sometimes on the pretext of a verbal assurance from Senior Police representatives, only to find that they have not been insured for certain mountain/cave rescue duties they have undertaken”.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 250WH

I am told that the gold standard of insurance for mountain rescue is the policy in Cumbria, which was achieved with partial funding from the police. That policy has been adopted in north Wales and the Mountain Rescue Association wants it to be adopted nationally. Unlike the pledge that I made on coastguards, I can pledge only to look at that matter.

Although mountain rescue teams feel they have an entitlement to insurance, one member told me:

“Scant regard is made to making sure that team members are adequately covered by insurance ... there is vast evidence of ‘slip shod’ and mis-administration of insurance cover”.

Insurance is a problem throughout the outdoor, sport and adventure activity fields, and it relates not only to money but to other issues. On a related point, I was particularly concerned by the example given by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East of the Greater Manchester police withdrawing responsive driving training from the Bolton mountain rescue team because of fears that the police would be legally liable for the subsequent actions of the team's members.

Two pledges by my party would help with that problem. First, we would abolish negligence claims in adventure training and sport, allowing only reckless disregard claims with a much higher standard of proof. That issue is on the edge of that pledge, but I will press for it to be considered. That change would return Britain to the legal position until the 1950s and bring us in line with the position in most American states, which have introduced the measure one by one.

Secondly, we have pledged to ask courts to take into account the social value of risky activities and to have judges recognise it when making decisions in civil cases. Mountain rescue certainly is a risky activity. I am not too familiar with the responsive driving case, but I hope that Greater Manchester police would review its decision against such a legal background. Such measures would help a risk-averse society properly to assess and revalue risk, as the hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) has mentioned. That could produce better outcomes for those seeking insurance, which has been inflated by a series of court judgments. I hope that such measures would lower the price of insurance.

I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East mention a statutory instrument that will give volunteers a more prominent role under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which I spoke in favour of during its passage through Parliament. The Minister nodded, so I take it that it will soon come forward. There should be greater recognition for a string of voluntary organisations from mountain rescue teams to St. John Ambulance, which are currently undervalued in legislation. We must look again at the way in which the Health and Safety Executive pursues some cases.

I will end as I began, by congratulating the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. It has been an opportunity to praise the work of mountain rescue teams and to draw attention to their concerns.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): I am delighted to say that despite being dropped in at the deep end, you did not need the team to rescue you, Mr. Brazier.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 251WH

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): I was going to say what a pleasure it is to see you presiding until that little joke, Mr. Hancock. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing this debate on the invaluable work of mountain rescue teams in Bolton and throughout the UK. I also congratulate him on securing the unanimity of opinion that has been articulated by all parties this morning.

I, too, pay tribute to the hard work of mountain rescue teams and of all search and rescue volunteers who work in a range of organisations that this country relies on heavily to provide a crucial 24-hour service. As a former professional emergency service worker in the fire service, I feel an instinctive personal solidarity and respect for all such volunteers. Such respect has been articulated by all hon. Members this morning.

Perhaps I should begin by explaining why a Transport Minister is responding to this debate rather than a colleague from the Home Office, the Treasury or any other Department. The provision of search and rescue—SAR—in the UK brings together Departments, Government agencies, the military, emergency services, charities and voluntary organisations such as mountain rescue volunteers. All those organisations contain respected professionals in their fields. The framework within which those organisations operate is overseen by a strategic committee that looks across the piece to achieve an effective and efficient SAR capability for the UK. The committee is chaired by the Department for Transport, because of its responsibility for maritime and civil aeronautical SAR. That is why I am responding to the debate.

The UK search and rescue strategic committee is chaired by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and members are drawn from the key SAR organisations—the people who actually do the job. Mountain Rescue England and Wales and the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland are both actively represented on the group, which is a forum for sharing best practice and resolving practical issues that affect all aspects of UK SAR capability.

Several colleagues asked about advising and educating walkers and organisations, and getting information out to them. Individual organisations have their own information campaigns, but the strategic committee and the operators group have worked hard to find the best way to address the issue. They have set up a UK SAR website which contains advice for the public and enthusiasts, and the information can be obtained on the Department for Transport website.

My hon. Friend has been unable to find a previous Adjournment debate on this subject in the *Official Report*, and I am not aware of one either. However, many of the issues that he has raised were considered by the Transport Committee during its consideration in 2005 of UK SAR provision. In that regard, I am happy to report that some progress has been made on at least one of the issues that he raised—the one that I was nodding about during his opening speech.

The Select Committee's report contained a recommendation that official mountain rescue and lowland search vehicles, which are operated by trained drivers, should be able to use blue lights to reach incidents in the

21 Jan 2009 : Column 252WH

same way that RAF mountain rescue teams do. Currently, the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations 1989 restrict the use of blue warning beacons for mountain rescue vehicles to those operated by the RAF. However, I am aware that voluntary rescue organisations often provide a similar service to a broader cross-section of the community, and I agree that they, too, should be allowed to benefit from the use of blue warning beacons. I am pleased that the Government therefore propose to extend the permission enjoyed by the RAF to all mountain rescue services. A public consultation on a package of measures, including an amendment to the road vehicle lighting regulations, was held in summer 2008. Among other things, the

package included modifications to permit mountain rescue vehicles to use blue lights. We aim to bring that into force by the end of 2009.

Although the Select Committee recommended that the Government should make funding available to mountain rescue and lowland search teams, responsibility for co-ordinating local inland SAR operations in England and Wales lies with local police authorities. Therefore, it is right that any decision on support for local mountain rescue teams should be a matter for the police authority and chief constable concerned.

My hon. Friend asked about the application of vehicle excise duty to mountain rescue teams. That has already been carefully examined by my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who has responsibility for vehicle excise duty rate policy. She concluded that because tax policy in respect of charities is based on neutrality of treatment, a focused mountain rescue vehicle exemption might appear to favour a specific charitable cause, which would be contrary to the wider principles of Government tax policy. However, I understand that some rescue teams are equipped with ambulances, which are subject to vehicle excise duty exemption. My hon. Friend asked me to consider the waiver or reimbursement of VAT due on mountain rescue equipment, but that is properly a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I shall ensure that he receives the relevant extracts from this debate.

My hon. Friend also touched on the difficulties of recruiting volunteers for the mountain rescue service in his area and elsewhere. Volunteering in the UK is a traditional way for communities and individuals to respond to needs in our society and, generally, the retention of search and rescue volunteers is highly impressive—turnover is relatively low.

The strategic committee's volunteering sub-group is looking at generic issues that affect all SAR volunteers, and mountain and cave rescue teams are actively represented on the group. Recruitment and retention is a major topic of discussion. A publicity DVD that will encourage potential volunteers to come forward and to seek support from their employers is under development.

On payment for rescues, I need to make it clear that, in the UK, the general principle is that search and rescue is provided free of charge to anyone who needs it—other than my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, of course, who commendably raised £1,600. It crossed my mind that the price for a Minister might be slightly higher, and perhaps VAT exempt, but that is a matter for the Treasury. Without breaking protocol, Mr. Hancock, I know that Treasury officials are in close proximity and monitoring this debate and that they will take strong messages back to the Treasury in due course.

21 Jan 2009 : Column 253WH

Tom Levitt: If my hon. Friend is volunteering, I would be happy to put his kind offer to the test.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I used to get paid to take risks, but doing it for fun has never appealed to me. However, I shall speak to my hon. Friend after the debate.

We would not wish anyone in distress to be deterred from seeking assistance because of the cost, particularly as a delay in seeking assistance could further endanger the lives of the individual and the rescuers. Therefore, we have no intention of introducing a charge.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Government's appreciation of the work of all our SAR operators, including the volunteers, who give much to their local communities and to the wider public through their local knowledge and expertise. They are why the UK has a world-class SAR capability, which the Government remain committed to supporting.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): I thank the Minister and everyone who has taken part for their courtesy and good humour, and for allowing everyone to get involved.