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Douglas RNLI Volunteers Call for Honest Reflection on a Decade of Decline

Douglas, Isle of Man – A number of current and former volunteers associated with Douglas Lifeboat Station have come together to provide what they describe as the background to the station's current situation. Following years of speculation and recent public discussion in the news and social media that the station has had operations suspended and now closed until another feasibility study takes place; with all operational volunteers now no longer part of the organisation.

They stress that this statement is a voice of crew, who they say have remained committed to saving lives at sea throughout a prolonged period of operational and organisational challenges.

According to the volunteers, the roots of today's issues stretch back to 2016, when Douglas was allocated a Shannon-class all-weather lifeboat to replace its ageing Tyne-class vessel. That allocation was withdrawn in 2017, and the vessel assigned to another station with the RNLI stating that suitable berthing facilities were not available.

Following the withdrawal of the Tyne-class lifeboat in 2018, Douglas was provided with an aging Mersey-class lifeboat. Volunteers say they adapted quickly despite limited crossover training and continued to operate an effective search and rescue service. Contrary to some recent reports, they state that the station's slipway remained

operational past 2018 when the Mersey entered service with Douglas Station.

Like every RNLI station, Douglas was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but once restrictions ended, training resumed and operational standards recovered. Crew members say they continued to answer emergency callouts with professionalism despite increasingly aging equipment and deteriorating infrastructure.

In 2022, the then Chief Executive of the RNLI visited Douglas Lifeboat Station. He expected to receive a hostile reception with poor condition of the station's facilities, including aging shipping containers, an increasingly worn and corroded slipway and a 30-year-old lifeboat. They say he later described being "blown away" by the warm reception he received from the volunteers and subsequently used Douglas as an example of dedication despite difficult circumstances.

Although a £30,000 donation was reportedly made following that visit to improve crew welfare, volunteers say they saw little direct benefit, receiving only surplus shipping containers.

The volunteers believe that a pattern of delayed infrastructure investment, aging lifeboats and reactive decision-making has continued ever since.

Between 2022 and 2025, Douglas operated a long succession of aging Mersey-class lifeboats, each suffering significant mechanical failures. Engine breakdowns, radar fires and extended repair periods resulted in repeated interruptions to operational availability. At times, the station

was left without a fully operational lifeboat during some of the busiest periods of the year. As an example, three out of the last four years the station has been off service during the TT race period!

At the same time, the station's slipway, boathouse and launching equipment required extensive structural repairs. Volunteers say corrosion had reached such a stage that sections of the slipway became unsafe, while the launch and recovery winch eventually reached the end of its economic life. The historic slipway and boathouse has since been removed from the RNLI's asset register and returned to the Isle of Man Government at the expiry of its lease. The Isle of Man Harbours has done everything within its powers to support the station.

The volunteers also state that repeated warnings from local management regarding infrastructure and operational risks were not acted upon until failures occurred.

Financial decisions have also raised questions among some volunteers. They note that funding originally donated towards a Shannon-class lifeboat had to be returned when the project failed to proceed. They also highlight the removal of approximately £500,000 from Branch funds for historic planned maintenance costs to infrastructure, a transaction they say was identified only because it was questioned by the station Treasurer.

Following a strategic review at the end of 2024, the RNLI ultimately allocated a 20 year old Trent-class all-weather lifeboat to Douglas. Although expected to enter service

April 2025, it did not arrive until August 2025 and subsequently experienced technical issues of its own.

Volunteers say the vessel was expected to enter operational service in November 2025 but this was postponed because the crew were judged not yet operationally ready. They say no detailed explanation or structured feedback was provided to explain the decision or identify the improvements required. At that point the Mersey was withdrawn from service leaving the station without a SAR asset.

Since then, volunteers say training opportunities have reduced significantly in 2026, operational experience has become increasingly limited and crew members have been affected by a series of management decisions that have impacted morale.

Despite recent public speculation, the volunteers reject some suggestions that internal disputes are responsible for the station's current position.

The crew remain united. People have different personalities and opinions, but support one another and remain committed to saving lives at sea. The problems we've experienced have largely been beyond the control of the volunteer crew.

It has been described the past few years as "the death of a thousand cuts."

Throughout every setback, the volunteers say one constant has remained unchanged: their commitment to the community they serve. They have always kept the moral

high ground and not got involved in social media threads of speculation.

“Our volunteers have continued to train, qualify as Coxswains, Mechanics, Navigators and crew members despite limited sea time and repeated operational interruptions. We have never stopped wanting to serve the people of the Isle of Man.”

The volunteers say this statement is not about assigning blame but about ensuring the public understands the wider context behind the challenges Douglas Lifeboat Station has faced over the past decade.

They conclude by expressing the hope that lessons will be learned and that Douglas will once again have the facilities, equipment and support necessary to provide the level of lifesaving service Douglas and the Isle of Man deserves.