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RNLI is more than an emergency service, it is a national treasure

ONE of the podcasts I often listen to during my commute between Chelmsford and Westminster is The News Agents, with Emily Maitlis, Jon Sopel and Lewis Goodall.

A little while ago, Emily was saying that journalists can be really good dinner table conversationalists because they know a bit about a very wide range of subjects. The problem, she admitted, is that if you scratch too far beneath the service, you often discover that knowledge can be very shallow. Much as some with a vested interest would have us believe otherwise, the same is often true of politicians.

I really do wish there were some secret special pill that could be given to politicians (actually, why not all people?) on the day they're elected, which makes them know and understand every topic under the sun, but that simply isn't the case.

The result is that while our experience, together with our personal and professional interests, mean there may be a field or two in which we are experts, or at least fairly knowledgeable, it's impossible to know a lot about everything.

And one of the things I'd like to know a lot more about is our front-line emergency services.

That's why I was pleased to discover that Parliament runs schemes for MPs to learn more about various different topics, including our front-line services. So I signed up, and our first module, starting last week, was to learn about the amazing bravery, selflessness and professionalism of the world-leading organisation that we are all used to seeing around our coastline: the RNLI.

As part of the Frontline Services Scheme – a Parliamentary Knowledge initiative running from October 2025 to July 2026 – I had the privilege of spending just over 24 hours at the RNLI Training College in Poole.

The scheme is designed to immerse MPs in the operational realities of our emergency responders, from police and fire crews to mountain rescue and the RNLI. But it's not just about policy – it's about people.

These are the people who keep our coastal communities safe... and who do it without fanfare.

Marie Goldman MP

New lifeboats being built and older ones being refitted at the RNLI All-weather Lifeboat Centre in Poole
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP



The RNLI Memorial Sculpture in Poole



Poole Lifeboat Station's Atlantic Class Inshore Lifeboat



And the people at the RNLI? They're extraordinary.

The RNLI was founded in 1824 by Sir William Hillary, who saw firsthand how dangerous the sea could be while living on the Isle of Man. Originally called the

National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, it became the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in 1854. Since then, the RNLI has grown into a world-class lifesaving charity, with more than 200 lifeboat stations, plus lifeguards on hundreds of beaches. Despite its scale, it's still powered by volunteers and funded by public donations – staying true to its mission: to save lives at sea, whoever needs help, whenever they need it.

It's easy to forget that when you see the scale of their operations: cutting-edge lifeboats, rigorous training

and a culture of professionalism that rivals any statutory service. At the Poole college, I learnt how future crew members from across the country learn to navigate stormy seas in simulators, practise rescue techniques in wave tanks and absorb the ethos of service that defines the RNLI.

But these aren't adrenaline-chasing thrill-seekers. They're calm, methodical, and deeply committed to saving lives, often in the worst conditions imaginable. Whether it's a fishing boat in trouble off the Cornish coast in February or a paddleboarder swept out near Blackpool in August, RNLI crews respond with speed and skill, 24/7, 365 days a year.

The training college itself is a testament to the RNLI's investment in excellence. It's not just about teaching technical skills, it's about building resilience, teamwork and trust. Trainees learn to make split-second decisions, communicate under pressure and put others' safety

above their own. And they do it knowing they're volunteers, often leaving jobs and families behind when the pager goes off.

Growing up in the South West of England, I was hugely privileged to spend many a summer's day at the beach, having fun on the sand and in the sea while my dad, a fully qualified diver, would be exploring the world beneath the waves with his fellow diving club members. It was idyllic.

Yet very occasionally, I remember the panic and worry from the adults around me when a diver didn't resurface when and where they were supposed to, or when the weather took an unexpected turn.

But we knew that a lifeboat was never far away – the bright orange was a beacon of hope and reassurance in more ways than one, crewed then as they are now, by people who dedicate much of their free time to helping others – and genuinely saving lives in the process.

The Frontline Services Scheme

gave me another window into this world – and it's a world that deserves more recognition. These are the people who keep our coastal communities safe, who respond when the tide turns dangerous and who do it without fanfare.

As policymakers, we owe it to them to understand their challenges, support their mission and ensure that resources and legislation reflect the realities they face.

In Poole, I didn't just see a training facility. I saw a lifeline – for the thousands of people rescued each year, and for the volunteers who make those rescues possible. The RNLI is more than a service. It's a national treasure.

I'm grateful to them for everything they do and for sharing a little bit of that with me.

Learn more about the Parliamentary Knowledge Frontline Services Scheme at www.parliamentknowledge.uk/schemes/frontline-services.

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