

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE HOME OFFICE

1. Mr Chairman, I appear for the Home Office, with Freya Foster. The counsel team is led by Prashant Popat, King's Counsel, who is not able to attend today due to a pre-booked engagement and wishes to emphasise that no discourtesy is intended to you, the Inquiry team or any of the participants by his absence. We are instructed by the Government Legal Department.
2. First and foremost, the Home Office wishes to take this opportunity to again express its profound and sincere sorrow at the events that unfolded in the Channel during the early hours of 24 November 2021. It is now known that at least 27 people tragically lost their lives in desperate circumstances whilst attempting to cross the Channel from France.
3. The Home Office has been involved at all levels of the organisation in the preparation for this Inquiry and everyone who has considered the moving written testimony of those so tragically affected can but offer their deepest condolences for the heartbreaking tragedy that unfolded over that night. These condolences are echoed by the Minister for Border Security and Asylum, who expresses her personal sadness and sympathies for those who lost their lives or loved ones in the Channel in such an horrific occurrence.
4. I make it clear that nothing said or done by the Home Office in the course of this Inquiry is intended, in any way, to belittle the tragedy or the devastating losses it has led to.
5. The Home Office is extremely grateful to the Inquiry team for taking on the task of examining the circumstances surrounding this tragic incident. It hopes that this Inquiry brings some degree of resolution to the survivors and the friends and families of those who died. It particularly hopes that the evidence the Inquiry will hear serves to address

the concerns expressed in some of the statements of the survivor and families of the victims, that there was no effort to come to their rescue.

6. The Home Office has been and continues to be committed to supporting the Inquiry in its investigation. It welcomes the exercise that the Inquiry will conduct in identifying any further lessons to be learned from the events of that night, and will consider carefully any relevant recommendations that emerge, as it did in connection with the Marine Accident Investigation Branch investigation into this tragedy.
7. The Home Office has the status of Full Participant in this Inquiry. Within the Home Office, the United Kingdom's (UK) Border Force has responsibility for securing the UK's borders by carrying out immigration and customs controls for people and goods entering the UK. Border Force Maritime Command operates within UK Border Force and is responsible for maritime borders. It maintains vessels to discharge that function. In addition, the Home Office supports other governmental departments in their performance of Search and Rescue (SAR) at sea. Since 2018, the Home Office's at sea functions have increasingly been deployed to address the challenges posed by migrants' use of small boats to cross the Channel, with the number of such crossings being made having increased exponentially since that time.
8. It is important to make clear at the opening of this Inquiry that the Home Office's overall response to the small boat arrivals has always been guided by the aim to preserve life, whether by deploying its law enforcement vessels to aid in search and rescue operations when requested to do so by His Majesty's Coastguard, or by working with colleagues in the UK and abroad to break the criminal organisations who profit from and prey upon those who want to come to the UK.
9. The dramatic increase in crossings in the lead up to this tragedy required the Home Office to deploy additional resources and hone its expertise in responding to the new and unique challenges posed by small boats. It has also required Home Office staff to take significant personal risks, including those presented by the disembarking of migrants from totally unsuitable and often overloaded small boats in challenging maritime conditions, often at night and at times in inclement weather. They do so professionally and with great courage.

It is of critical importance to the Home Office that this Inquiry understands that the terrible loss of life which occurred in the early hours of 24 November 2021 was a tragedy, and devastating to the Home Office, whose staff all take, justified, pride in the performance of their professional duties.

10. The Home Office would also like me to express its firm hope that, in addition to bringing some degree of solace to the survivors and families of the victims, this Inquiry's review of the events of the night of 23 and 24 November 2021 will also draw attention to the terrible jeopardy that people smugglers place migrants in. The Home Office has no doubt that that will be made clear by the evidence.

11. May I conclude by reiterating the Home Office's deepest sympathies to the survivors, the families of the victims and all those who have been affected by what happened on 24 November 2021. It is hoped that this Inquiry will assist the UK authorities in seeking to minimise the risk of such a tragedy ever happening again.

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