

14 December

For consideration by the Minister**Lead official:**

Simon Budden

Response to small boats pressure on search and rescue resources

Issue

1. HM Coastguard (HMCG) participated in a multi-agency tabletop exercise on 02 December to develop response options to increasing numbers of small boats crossings. The rising levels of activity are placing a strain on Border Force and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) rescue boats. Should small boat activity continue to increase and include crossings on consecutive days, similar to the high levels experienced to date, the availability of maritime surface search and rescue (SAR) assets could be reduced, significantly increasing the risk of loss of life. This submission presents recommendations and next steps resulting from the tabletop exercise.

Recommendation

2. You are asked to:
 - Agree that HMCG should explore increasing additional maritime surface SAR assets in order to continue to meet the rising levels of activity and deliver our obligations to preserve the safety of life at sea. Further advice on this will follow.
 - Agree that HMCG should explore developing enhanced situational awareness capabilities:
 - The business case for increased aerial assets (see previous submission at **ANNEX A**) will continue to be developed.
 - HMCG will investigate the use of enhanced mobile phone location systems and camera technology to enhance the ability to locate distress calls.
 - Note that full immigration and enforcement processing of migrants being landed at the Dover Tug Haven is significantly delaying the re-tasking of maritime surface assets. HMCG have written to the Home Office to provide feedback on the concerns raised at the tabletop, which includes Home Office considering changes to the management of migrants at Dover from full processing to humanitarian interventions only, and the introduction of a small boats reception point at Ramsgate.
 - Note the importance of welfare issues including the mental health of all staff and volunteers involved in the small boats response.
 - Note that HMCG are considering the development of an alternative SAR operating model to prioritise operations when insufficient maritime assets are available.

Background

3. A submission on 24 November (**ANNEX B**) noted the impact that the current high number of small boats crossings is having on HMCG operational staff, Border Force and RNLI maritime surface assets; and noted the work that is taking place to address this

challenge, including a tabletop exercise that took place on 02 December. The submission detailed the legal and operational background to rescuing small boats.

4. In 2021 HMCG has co-ordinated the rescue of 24,929 migrants, compared to 8,334 in 2020.
5. A tabletop exercise took place on 02 December with HMCG, Border Force, RNLI, Kent Police, Port of Dover Police, Bristow (supplier of rotary aircraft to HMCG) and 2Excel (supplier of fixed wing aircraft to HMCG). Two scenarios were exercised to identify the impact that responding to small boat crossings is having on each organisation, to share lessons learned and to consider potential improvements to planning, cooperation, interoperability and assess sustainability of operations. A third scenario considered an alternative operating model to prioritise resources in the situation where consecutive days of high activity results in insufficient availability of maritime SAR assets.

Considerations

6. The recent increase in small boats crossings is stretching maritime assets to the limit; the continuation of this trend is considered unsustainable. A period of consecutive days with high numbers of crossings would reduce the availability of maritime surface SAR assets and significantly increase the risk of loss of life. This is due to the need to rest crews and volunteers and to conduct maintenance on assets. To date, demand has been met, but if this continues then HMCG may not be able to provide an appropriate level of maritime surface asset response. A working group has been set up to identify the user requirements and specifications for additional maritime assets, with the aim of providing further advice to ministers in January.
7. HMCG will benefit from developing enhanced situational awareness capabilities to task vessels more accurately in the Dover Strait. Currently the number of duplicate calls and difficulty in locating vessels prolongs the SAR response, often diverting assets to incidents that do not exist. HMCG will investigate enhanced mobile phone location systems and camera technology that will better allow for the identification of the position of phone calls from small boats. HMCG is also investigating the resourcing of additional aerial assets, which was the subject of a submission to ministers titled 'Increased capacity in Coastguard aviation' on 18 November (**ANNEX A**).
8. Border Force may need to make changes to its processing of migrants in order to expedite the re-tasking of maritime surface assets and avoid dockside queuing for long periods of time. HMCG have raised those concerns with Home Office.
9. The mental health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers from all organisations and our duty of care to these individuals remains a priority. Pressures on staff are being exacerbated by negative social media and local protest activity. Mechanisms for traumatic risk management are already in place and further work will take place to share information between organisations and to identify proactive interventions, such as training to help staff manage the culminative impact of trauma.
10. An alternative operating model will be developed to optimise the deployment of assets when limited maritime assets are available. This is likely to necessitate prioritising rescue support to only those boats in the most grave and imminent danger, whilst actively monitoring other identified small boats. Clear operating objectives and protocols will be established as part of this new model.

Reference S 44/2021: 18 November 2021

Lead Official: Name

**For consideration by the Minister/
Secretary of State**



Maritime &
Coastguard
Agency

INCREASED CAPACITY IN COASTGUARD AVIATION

Issue

1. We are taking steps to not only increase the number of crewed search and rescue aircraft, but also to introduce uncrewed search and rescue aircraft to meet increasing demands for Coastguard aviation services. Much of this demand arises from the need for a search and rescue response to small boats crossing the English Channel.

Recommendation

2. That you **note** this submission.

Background

3. Coastguard helicopters and planes undertake a range of missions in support of several public bodies. Their primary role is search and rescue. Coastguard helicopters and planes routinely undertake counter pollution, border protection, fisheries protection, and the detection of serious and organised crime. Such has been the success of these arrangements that Coastguard planes in particular have reached the limits of their operating capacity. These demands arise from higher than anticipated demand in support of Coastguard search and rescue operations and from other public bodies.

4. Overlaid on this demand issue is the anticipated growing number of small boats crossings. HM Coastguard cannot be sure as to the risk to life to anyone in a small boat crossing the Channel without real time situational awareness obtained from its planes. This means that on a high-risk day for crossings, a Coastguard plane can be operating for a full 24-hour period extending into consecutive days and sometimes weeks. The consequence is that other flying activity, including in support of HM Coastguard elsewhere, must be deferred or cancelled. We expect the demand for aviation assets to continue to increase.

5. We have therefore determined that a dedicated Channel search capability is required to work alongside and support the Kent-based search and rescue helicopter and to help reduce the ever-increasing burden currently placed on the existing Coastguard planes.

6. A modification will be made to the contract the MCA holds with Bristow Helicopters Limited to accommodate an increased level of flying to meet these demands.

Considerations

7. This is an **urgent** requirement in anticipation of a doubling of activity in the Channel and proposes a core 2000-hour annual flying provision which is adjusted depending upon seasonal peaks and troughs.

8. In response to this challenge, Bristow Helicopters Limited is proposing dedicated crewed and uncrewed aircraft to support the Kent-based search and rescue helicopter. The costs for these dedicated assets will be contained and managed as a pressure within the existing search and rescue helicopter budget.

9. Migrants crossing the channel in significant numbers was not an issue the HM Coastguard faced in 2013 when the UKSARH contract was awarded, nor was it anticipated that it would become an issue; the problem is largely unprecedented for the UK and has increased exponentially in a relatively short space of time.

Presentation and handling

10. Tackling illegal migration is a Home Office lead. MCA Press Office has a reactive line for if-asked use only agreed with the Home Office, which can be found at **ANNEX A1**.

Annex A1 – Media lines to take

A spokesperson for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency said:

HM Coastguard will continue to safeguard life around the seas and coastal areas of the UK, working with search and rescue resources in the area.

If a vessel needs search and rescue assistance, HM Coastguard will continue to respond and rescue those in danger.

Please contact the Home Office for any further information.

ANNEX B

26 November

For consideration by the Minister**Lead official:**

Simon Budden

Small boats pressure on search and rescue resources

Issue

1. HM Coastguard is responding to increasing numbers of small boats crossings.

Recommendation

2. This submission is for information. You are asked to:
 - Note that the current high number of small boats crossings in the Channel is predicted to continue and will place pressure on HM Coastguard operational staff and Border Force and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) maritime surface assets.
 - Note that work is taking place to examine means of addressing this challenge, which will identify the limits of HMG Search and Rescue (SAR) capacity and develop options to maintain the rescue of persons in distress.
 - Note that a tabletop exercise is taking place on 02 December with HM Coastguard, Border Force, RNLI, Clandestine Threat Command, Bristow and 2Excel to work through this issue, the output of which will be provided in a further submission.
 - Note that a new Cabinet Committee has been established, the Domestic & Europe (Illegal Migration) Committee.

Background

3. So far in 2021 more than 24,835 people have crossed the Channel to the UK in small boats, a 198% increase from 8,334 in 2020. All small boats crossing the Channel are initially considered by HM Coastguard as in distress and requiring rescue. Any loss of life at sea, is unacceptable and the tragic events off the French coast on 24 November are a stark reminder of the potential consequences facing migrants making the perilous crossing.
4. Rescues of persons in small boats in the Channel are co-ordinated by either UK or French coastguard authorities. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) fulfils the UK Coastal State responsibilities, set out in several conventions, to render assistance to persons or vessels in distress at sea. The MCA's operational arm, HM Coastguard, has primacy for, and coordinates, civil maritime SAR in the UK SAR Region (**Annex B1**). When requested it also provides mutual aid and support to other Coastal States including France. In response to migrant small boat incidents in the Channel, HM Coastguard principally task Border Force assets and the volunteer-crewed RNLI vessels (4 all-weather lifeboats in the South East).

Considerations

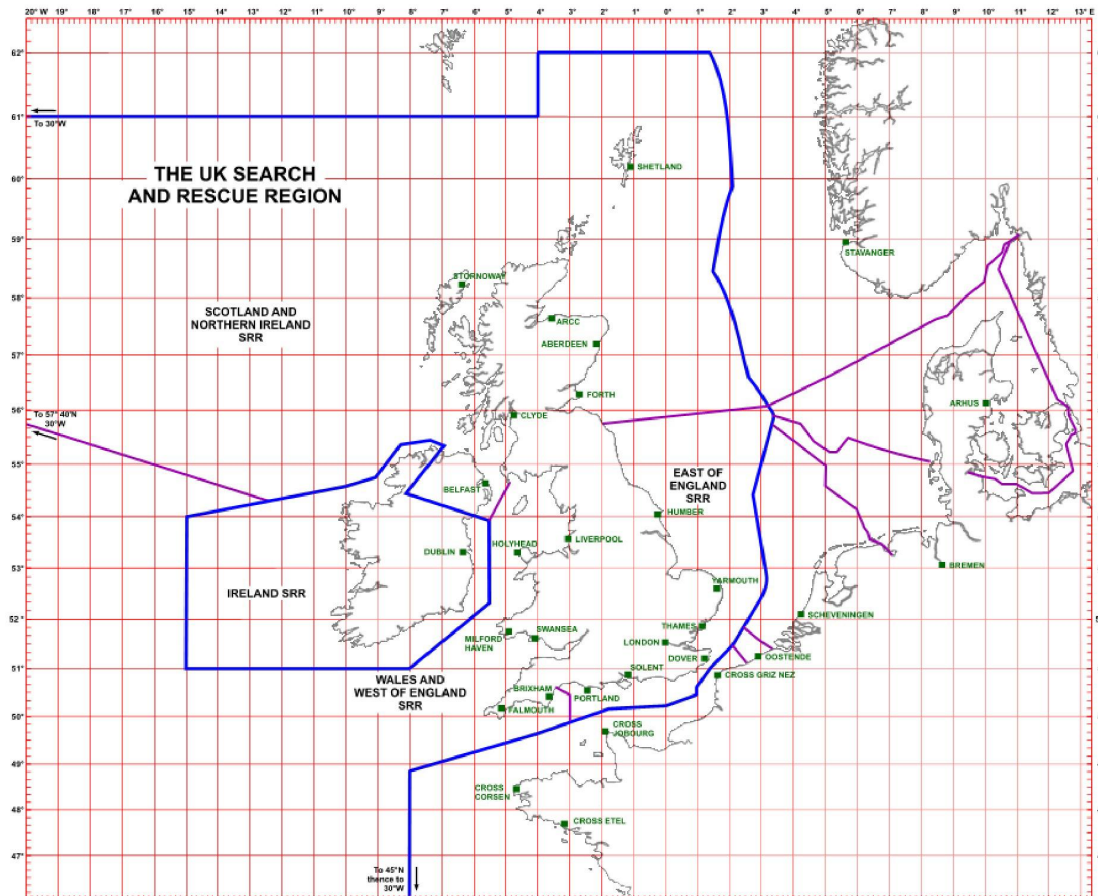
5. The UK's actions in respect of small boats crossings in the Channel are derived from UNCLOS, SOLAS and the SAR Convention, which provide the international legal framework and contain obligations:
 - on masters of vessels to provide assistance to those in distress;
 - on coastal States to promote the establishment, maintenance and operation of effective search and rescue services; and
 - on the Flag State with respect to the safety and safe navigation of vessels (small boats are unflagged).
6. Whereas migrant crossings have principally occurred on 'red' days—when weather and sea conditions are favourable—facilitators are now increasingly putting migrants to sea on 'amber' days—when sea and weather conditions are unsuitable to crossings. For example, 4,935 migrants have been rescued so far during November 2021, as opposed to 700 in November 2020. The National Crime Agency has predicted that this trend will continue and the "the steep seasonal winter decline in small boat arrivals, seen in previous years, will likely not occur this year."¹ To date, HM Coastguard operations have met the demand of tasking the RNLI and Border Force to fulfil the UK's statutory duties. If we continue to see the same increased volumes of crossings on 'red' and 'amber' days, this may have an adverse impact on the availability of resources to respond.
7. On days with high numbers of rescues, the reception site at the Port of Dover has become hugely congested with queuing at the quayside where migrants wait to be processed by Border Force personnel. HM Coastguard regularly task their volunteers to support Border Force disembarking migrants.
8. A disconcerting trend is that RNLI and Border Force crews have been targeted by right-wing groups who are protesting migrants' arrival in the UK, causing distress to crews and volunteers (members of the local community) who are acting to save lives at sea.
9. To prepare and plan for the rising numbers of small boat crossings, HM Coastguard is leading a tabletop exercise on 02 December with response partners (air, land and sea) to explore the limits and capacity for small boats operations. This will form the basis of a further submission. The exercise includes:
 - understanding the impact of increased small boat activity on individual agencies;
 - identifying alternative operating models and strategies to respond to the increase in small boat crossings, such as prioritising the rescue of vessels most in need, as well as defining means of predicted availability of maritime surface assets;
 - considering alternative means of rescue to a temporary place of safety, such as life rafts being deployed from air and surface assets;
 - considering the impact of increased beach landings on shoreside agencies; and
 - considering operational lessons from the tragic incidents that happened in the French SAR Region, had those occurred with the UK SAR Region.
10. A new Cabinet Committee has been set up (**Annex B2**). The Domestic & Europe (Illegal Migration) Committee will be chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and

¹ NAC(21)448 – Irregular Migration to the UK: Forward Look, November 2021

attended by the Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, the Attorney General and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We expect you (Transport Secretary) to be invited when the agenda is relevant to DfT. The Taskforce will consider all aspects of illegal migration, including the up-stream facilitation via Organised Immigration Criminal Gangs, through to returns, rather than solely crossings by sea.

ANNEX B1

UK Search and Rescue Region



Legend

- UK SAR region border
- Intra-UK and international SAR region borders

ANNEX B2

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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA
www.gov.uk/number10

From the Private Secretary for Home Affairs

17 November 2021

Dear **Name**

This Government was elected on a clear mandate to take back control of our borders and introduce an Australian-style points-based immigration system. Our immigration system welcomes the best and brightest, including those who will contribute to our economy and support our public services. The Government is also meeting our commitments to the people of Hong Kong and has introduced a generous offer to those fleeing persecution in Afghanistan. But the corollary of this generosity is that the public also expect the Government to take effective action to address illegal migration.

The continued arrival of illegal migrants in small boats is undermining public confidence in our immigration system and risks threatening our national security. These Channel crossings put lives at risk and are supported by significant organised criminal gangs. Ministers and officials in the Home Office have worked tirelessly to address these growing problems, but it is clear that the scale of the challenge demands a whole of Government response.

The Prime Minister has therefore asked the Cabinet Secretary to establish a new Illegal Migration Taskforce in the Cabinet Office, which will look at the full range of issues from preventing upstream flows to increasing returns. He will chair a strategy meeting next week to consider progress and further actions to tackle illegal migration. To support this work, he has established a new Cabinet Committee. Domestic & Economic (Illegal Migration) will be chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and attended by the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Attorney General, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Other Secretaries of State and officials, including HM Ambassador to France, will attend as appropriate.

The Illegal Migration Taskforce and the new Cabinet Committee will begin their work immediately, so as to prepare effectively for the first meeting with the Prime Minister next week. Ministers should prioritise attendance at Domestic & Economic (Illegal Migration) with delegations only accepted with the prior agreement of the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Departments should ensure that the Taskforce have appropriate papers in good time.

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I am copying this letter to

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 the Principal Private Secretaries
of all Cabinet Members,

Name	Name	Name	Name
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Name

 and HM Ambassador to France.

Yours ever

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 PPS to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

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