

Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

30 April 2020

Dear Grant,

I know you will be aware of the significant work underway to tackle the issue of migrants crossing the Channel illegally using small, unseaworthy boats. In addition to the risks to life these attempts present, these crossings are being facilitated by serious organised criminals who are exploiting the vulnerable for their own gain. Having assessed the current policy and operational response to this ever-evolving issue, I am concerned about the ease with which migrant vessels can reach the UK and the implications for our homeland security.

More needs to be done to tackle this threat at source, and within the Channel itself. This month has seen a heightened number of clandestine small boats arrivals. Our current policy and operational response are **neither sustainable or sufficient**. This undermines our ambition to tackle illegal migration and deport Foreign National Offenders. I am now drawing up proposals to finally curb repeated vexatious immigration and asylum claims, which too often land at the taxpayers' expense. I am working with our joint HO/MoJ Ministers to advance these legal changes.

The Home Office has led the policy and operational approach to deal with small boats and with some success over the last year. This has involved working with our French partners through a bi-lateral agreement based upon joint intelligence and coordinating the deployment of assets to prevent boats from leaving France, and enhancing the capacity of the French authorities to detect and arrest criminal gangs. The Joint Maritime Security Centre (JMSC) has been commissioned to coordinate our operational response with a range of partners across Government. The, Serious and Organised Crime Group (SOCG) has also been designated to 'own' the coordination of the HO maritime security strategy. However, significant work is required to end our exposure to this criminality at sea. A threat of this scale requires a combined and interoperable approach, drawing on all UK maritime capabilities, which ensures a robust response and flexibility to deal with future maritime threats.

The National Strategy for Maritime Security dates from 2014, some time before migrants started to illegally cross the Channel using small boats in significant numbers. I understand that officials from our departments have had discussions around a revised security strategy for territorial waters over the last 18 months, in the context of fisheries enforcement as well as migration. However, considering the current challenges we need to urgently develop a robust approach with the objective of developing a plan that covers the associated criminality that we are now exposed to via the Channel.

Overall there has been a concerted effort to tackle illegal migration. The NSC Illegal Migration Strategy was agreed in 2016 in response to the significant increase in migrant crossings into Europe; and the Home Office enhanced the UK-focused strategy in 2019, following the tragic deaths of 39 people found in a refrigerated lorry in Essex.

Despite this, there is scope for a greater strategic focus across Government on small boats in the Channel, and on wider maritime issues, for example, the future shape and size of the UK's domestic maritime capability having left the EU. I would firstly welcome the opportunity to brief you directly on this issue and the threats to our homeland security and agree an approach for our officials to work together on this issue. Existing structures, such as the NMSC(O), are fine for wider ranging discussions, but I am working at pace across other Government departments to develop policy changes that will require legislation. I would therefore facilitate like to propose setting up a joint taskforce with an SRO and lead minister from both departments in order to review work to date, adapt our approach and deliver progress over a short timeframe. I suggest that we speak at the earliest opportunity so that I can provide a fuller picture of the policy and operational issues we face as a country and discuss the wider long term measures the Home Office is developing to address the corrosive and exploitative nature of illegal migration.

Yours ever,

W.K. all good wishes


Rt Hon Priti Patel MP