

Witness Name: Air Ambulance  
Charity Kent Surrey Sussex  
Statement No.: 1  
Exhibits: LC/01 – LC/02  
Dated: 25 October 2024

## THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF AIR AMBULANCE CHARITY KENT SURREY SUSSEX

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I, Leigh Curtis MBE, Executive Director of Service Delivery at Air Ambulance Charity Kent Surrey Sussex ("AAKSS"), Air Ambulance Building Rochester City Airport, Maidstone Road, Chatham, England, ME5 9SD will say as follows:-

#### **Introduction**

1. I make this statement on behalf of AAKSS in response to a witness evidence request dated 30 July 2024. I am authorised to make this statement on behalf of AAKSS.

#### **Overview of AAKSS**

2. AAKSS is a registered charity (charity number: 1021367) providing air ambulance services in Southeast England.
3. AAKSS was originally founded in 1989 for the purpose of providing a dedicated Air Ambulance for Kent, which was in 2007 extended to Surrey and Sussex. AAKSS has been a registered charity since 1993 and has approximately 150 volunteers.
4. AAKSS works closely with local NHS Ambulance Services but is independent of the NHS, with 88% of its income coming from donations and fundraising.

### **Services provided by AAKSS**

5. AAKSS provides two Helicopter Emergency Medical Services ("HEMS") crews every day, one covering the full 24 hour period and one covering an 18 hour period starting at 06:00 hours every morning. AAKSS primarily provides HEMS in support of the NHS Ambulance services in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and North Hampshire using its helicopters. When the aircraft are not available or appropriate this HEMS support provided by AAKSS is delivered through the use of AAKSS's Rapid Response Vehicles ("RRVs").
6. AAKSS supports the NHS Ambulance Service by offering the ability to transport critically ill or severely injured patients directly to the hospital that will best meet their immediate needs. In many cases this is a Major Trauma Centre ("MTC") but it can also include specialist cardiac centres, hyperacute stroke units or local trauma units designated hospitals.
7. AAKSS HEMS crews also provide the Medical Emergency Response Incident Team ("MERIT") function for the South East of England on behalf of the NHS. The purpose of MERIT is to provide advanced medical care on scene at a range of emergency incidents, including major and mass casualty incidents.

### **AAKSS's operating area**

8. AAKSS's operating area is defined by the operational area of its partner NHS Ambulance Service, South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust ("SECAmb"). This means the normal operating area for AAKSS is the region containing the counties of Kent, Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex and an area of North Hampshire.
9. However, there are agreements in place with neighbouring air ambulance charities for mutual aid provision across the ambulance service boundaries. As a result, AAKSS frequently attends to patients on the Isle of Wight, Hampshire, London and Essex.

### **Dispatch of AAKSS support**

10. AAKSS primarily receives requests for the dispatch of HEMS and/or MERIT through incoming 999 calls to the local NHS ambulance service, or ambulance crews requesting further support on scene.
11. AAKSS's dispatch team is based in the SECAMB Emergency Operations Centre ("SECAMB EOC"). This provides access to all ambulance 999 calls made within the operating region. SECAMB EOC also acts as a central contact point for partner agencies providing HEMS or other emergency or essential services to request support from AAKSS.
12. AAKSS dispatchers are non-medical staff who use the HEMS/MERIT Dispatch Guidelines, Version 3 which were published in 2023 ("the Dispatch Guidelines") to ascertain the nature of any AAKSS support required (Exhibit LC/01; INQ008932).
13. AAKSS will determine whether HEMS and/or MERIT support is required by reference to the dispatch triggers referred to paragraph 14 below. Typically, the support provided by AAKSS will be by aircraft but where the aircraft is unable to fly due to the weather limits set by the UK Civil Aviation Authority ("CAA") or unavailability of the aircraft, the service continues to respond using RRVs.
14. AAKSS's dispatch triggers are based on three key factors. These are:
  1. the mechanism – i.e. the nature of the incident and what has happened to the patient(s);
  2. the reported condition of any patient(s) as described on the 999 call; and
  3. the location of the patient(s) – consideration will be given to whether the patient is a long way from the most appropriate hospital or if there may be delays in providing the care they require.



15. Page 4 of the Dispatch Guidelines provide that certain mechanisms or conditions will trigger immediate dispatch of HEMS. The mechanisms or conditions in the guidelines for immediate dispatch include:

- I. 'Mechanism Z1' which provides that a trigger for the immediate dispatch of HEMS/MERIT is: *"Major incident or Mass Casualty as SECAMB MERIT response"*.
- II. 'Condition C16' which provides that a trigger for immediate dispatch of HEMS will be a request for AAKSS HEMS support from any partner agency including Police, Fire & Rescue or HM Coastguard.

**Civil maritime search and rescue ("SAR") missions**

16. HM Coastguard's Capability Document dated 25 July 2023 ("The HM Coastguard Guidance") provides that: *"HM Coastguard has the primacy for the initiation and coordination of civil maritime search and rescues within the United Kingdom (UK) Search and Rescue (SAR) Region. As directed by Parliament under the Coastguard Act 1925"* (Exhibit LC/02; INQ008933).

17. In accordance with the HM Coastguard Guidance, Civil maritime SAR missions will be conducted by HM Coastguard using specialised SAR aircraft. AAKSS's aircraft and HM Coastguard SAR Aircraft have very different operational capabilities which reflect the very different remits of AAKSS and HM Coastguard.

18. AAKSS's aviation operations are conducted under a Commercial Air Transport ("CAT") Air Operators Certificate ("AOC") issued by the CAA.

19. The provision of HEMS and SAR support is not permitted under standard AOCs issued by the CAA. Operators need specific approval from the CAA to use their aircraft for HEMS and SAR support.

20. There are increased risks associated with using commercial aircraft for the purpose of HEMS and conducting SAR missions. The process for obtaining approval from the CAA to provide HEMS and SAR support requires an operator to demonstrate

that they have appropriate equipment, training and policies, procedures and processes in place to provide HEMS or SAR support. An operator would not be able to obtain SAR approval at short notice to, for example, provide support in connection with an ongoing incident.

21. AAKSS is permitted under a Gama Aviation UK Ltd. AOC (GB1068) dated 26 January 2024 issued by the CAA to provide HEMS support. However, AAKSS does not have approval under this AOC to conduct SAR missions. AAKSS therefore is not permitted under the terms of its AOC to conduct SAR missions.
22. There are differences in the operational limitations imposed by the CAA on aircraft operators permitted to conduct SAR mission and aircraft operators that are permitted to provide HEMS only. For example, it is a requirement of AAKSS's AOC that the minimum cloud ceiling for its aircraft is 300ft. Whereas the minimum cloud ceiling for operators conducting SAR missions will not be specified and it will be at the sole discretion of those in command of the aircraft.
23. While AAKSS will not conduct civil maritime SAR missions, it will in certain circumstances (as explained below) provide support at the request of HM Coastguard which is related to civil maritime SAR missions.

#### **Inter-agency working: HM Coastguard**

24. As noted above, the capabilities and assets of HM Coastguard and AAKSS are very different and there is limited overlap in the services provided by AAKSS and the duties of HM Coastguard. However, there are occasions where a single incident requires both AAKSS and HM Coastguard's capabilities and assets. In this scenario, both AAKSS and HM Coastguard's frontline teams will work together.
25. AAKSS's involvement in incidents alongside HM Coastguard results from requests from HM Coastguard to AAKSS directly or via the ambulance service for HEMS attendance to provide medical intervention and/or transport.
26. In addition, AAKSS interact with the HM Coastguard Joint Rescue Coordination Centre – Aeronautical Rescue ("JRCC-AR") to provide aviation situational

awareness. Aviation situational awareness involves both organisations communicating when operating in the same area to assist in ensuring that the position of their respective aircraft is known.

27. In circumstances where the provision of HEMS is required in support of an HM Coastguard led incident, AAKSS aircraft will respond and rendezvous with HM Coastguard teams and SECamb ambulance resources at an agreed onshore location.

28. Page 12 of the HM Coastguard's Guidance provides that: *"HM Coastguard's role is to evacuate the casualty to the nearest safe point to meet Ambulance personnel."* In accordance with this guidance, in the case of maritime incidents AAKSS will meet with HM Coastguard at a point along the coastline, at which point AAKSS can provide HEMS support onshore, including facilitating transport to a medical facility.

29. Where casualties require urgent medical intervention whilst at sea, AAKSS's medical team can be transported by another agency (e.g. RNLI or HM Coastguard SAR aircraft) to attend casualties while at sea if enhanced care is required at the place of injury or before arriving ashore.

30. To support collaborative working on scene, operational staff at both AAKSS and HM Coastguard have joint training days.

#### **Inter-agency working: Home Office**

31. AAKSS does not engage directly with the Home Office.

32. AAKSS does however work with Medevent Medical Services Limited ("MMS") which is a private healthcare provider that is contracted by the Home Office to provide medical assistance. This engagement is limited to the provision of HEMS and other medical assistance as required in relation to migrant arrivals. The provision of the support provided to MMS is ad-hoc and infrequent but has in the past involved the provision of HEMS in relation to migrant arrivals at Dover, Manston and other reception sites.



33. Communication lines and operating procedures have been shared with MMS to enable MMS to request support from AAKSS either directly or indirectly via SECAMB, where required.

**AAKSS's involvement in SAR missions and mass casualty events in the Dover Strait**

34. AAKSS does not conduct civil maritime SAR missions in the Dover Strait. All civil maritime SAR missions in the Dover Strait are conducted by HM Coastguard in conjunction with other bodies such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution ("RNLI") and where appropriate the French coastguard.
35. In accordance with the HM Coastguard's Guidance, AAKSS's involvement in SAR missions in the Dover Strait is primarily limited to providing HEMS and advanced medical assistance where casualties are brought ashore. This is because AAKSS aircraft are not permitted under the terms of its AOC to undertake civil maritime SAR missions. Furthermore, AAKSS's aircrafts do not currently have the capabilities required for civil maritime SAR missions – AAKSS's aircrafts can only land onshore and are not equipped with 'winching' capabilities (i.e. they cannot lower people from the aircraft to the water).

**Mass casualty events in the Dover Strait**

36. On 20 November 2021, AAKSS received a request to provide HEMS support in relation to a potentially mass casualty event in the Dover Strait involving migrant crossings. It was intended that AAKSS would provide onshore HEMS support at the rendezvous point at Lydd airport which is HM Coastguard's airbase in Kent. An AAKSS team flew to Lydd airport while the SAR mission was being conducted by HM Coastguard. The team waited at Lydd airport for two hours before it was eventually stood down and left without seeing any patients. AAKSS was not told why our services were not ultimately required and we would not expect to be told this.

37. On 14 December 2022, AAKSS received a request to attend Dungeness lifeboat station to provide onshore HEMS in relation to potential mass casualty event in the Dover Strait involving migrant crossings. The AAKSS team dispatched was subsequently redirected to Dover Western docks to rendezvous with the lifeboats conducting the SAR activity. The team attended to three casualties to provided medical assistance at the rendezvous point.

38. On 12 August 2023, AAKSS received a request to provide support in connection with a mass casualty event in the Dover Strait involving migrant crossings. Due to the weather conditions, AAKSS was unable to deploy an aircraft and instead had to provide support using its RRVs. However, the AAKSS team was stood down whilst on route to the rendezvous point and never attended to any patients or casualties.

AAKSS's involvement in the 23-24 November 2021 mass casualty event

39. I understand that the Inquiry has been established in order to examine the events of 23-24 November 2021 when at least 27 people lost their lives crossing the Dover Strait.

40. AAKSS did not provide any support in connection with this incident. As noted above, AAKSS's aircrafts would not have had the requisite capabilities to assist with the recovery of casualties from the sea.

41. AAKSS's records indicate that it did not receive any requests to provide onshore HEMS to any of the casualties. AAKSS's MERIT response was similarly not requested to provide medical assistance to any casualties in connection with this incident.

**Statement of Truth**

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

**Signed**

**Personal Data**



Dated: 25th October 2024

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