

Multi-Agency Table Top Exercise/Workshop Summary

2 December 2021 – Dover

Purpose

The purpose of the workshop was to bring the various organisations together who are currently responding to small boat incidents in the English Channel. Two scenario's were designed to identify the impact that responding to small boat crossings is have on each organisation, share lessons learned and consider potential improvements to planning, cooperation, interoperability and assess sustainability. A third scenario considered an alternative operating model that attempts to provide a response during periods of limited maritime search and rescue assets, following consecutive days of high activity levels.

The main outcomes were:

- To understand the impact of small boat crossing on responders - sustainability
- To improve pre-planning for small boat crossings
- To improve co-operation between responders
- To evaluate the sustainability of current operating models
- Consider an alternative operating model for occasions where there is a shortage of maritime surface assets due to consecutive days of high activity
- Use today's read-out to make informed decisions

In attendance at the workshop were representatives from HM Coastguard (JRCC, MRCC Dover, Divisional and Area Commanders, On-call Strategic Commanders, Duty Operational Directors), UK Border Force (Maritime), UK Border Force (Immigration and Enforcement), Kent Police, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Dover Port Police, Bristows and 2Excel.

Outcome Summary

All organisations present had needed to change the their normal operating models and procedures in order to respond to the rising and unsustainable levels of small boat crossings. The only exception to this was UK Border Force Immigration and Enforcement (IE) and this was seriously hampering the response effort by unnecessarily tying up maritime search and rescue assets, sometimes up to 4 to 6 hours, at the Port of Dover Tug Haven. Currently IE are processing each migrant at the Port of Dover which delays the search and rescue assets returning to the Channel. All participants, including IE representatives, agreed that this process needed to change and it was proposed that reception at the Port of Dover should be limited to Humanitarian issues such as a medical assessment and dry clothing and all formal Immigration and Enforcement procedures i.e finger printing etc should be done at a different location.

I was felt that there were insufficient maritime surface search and rescue assets available and the rising numbers of small boats crossing were making the current levels of response unsustainable and increasing the risk to loss of life.

Maintaining situational awareness of the surface picture during periods of high levels of activity was also proving very difficult. It was very difficult to know for sure if all boats had been rescued

despite additional aerial assets being provided. It was agreed that other options needed to be considered to improve situational awareness particularly technology that locates mobile telephones – the main method used by migrants to contact UK authorities.

Key Outcomes

1. The importance of good preparation and planning was recognised, especially with the high (and rising) volumes undertaking the crossings and the subsequent impact on resources. However it was agreed that it is unsustainable to continue to meet the rising levels of activity without investment in additional maritime surface search and rescue assets. A period of consecutive days of high levels of activity would seriously reduce the availability of maritime surface search and rescue assets and significantly increase the risk of loss of life. Early engagement and planning across responders is essential.
2. Operation Deveran report which is the information provided to the responders, needs to include an assessment of the information on Windy App which is used by Organised Crime Groups as well as Met Office data. There needs to be a comparison between the two pieces of information in the planning process. The current report only provides daily information from 22:00 to 06:00. However, small boat crossings outside of this period are now increasing and it was suggested that Op Deveran reports should now cover a 24hr period.
3. The current risk assessment only considers the activity levels – more vessels then there is more likely to be high risk. However if the weather is favourable then there is less risk to those undertaking the crossings, less chance of sinking. Whereas on Amber days when there is less favourable weather, these days are presenting more risk – more chance of vessels being swamped/sinking in poor sea conditions. There is a need to consider this in our plans for the **actual risk** to those crossing, and this needs to be incorporated in the HM Coastguard risk assessment – which will be discussed at Monday afternoon meetings going forward
4. There was recognition that maritime assets were being stretched to the limit and with the recent increase in migrant activity volumes, if this were to continue current maritime assets will be unsustainable on the current trajectory to provide an adequate and appropriate level of response. Those at the workshop agreed to set up a working group to identify the user requirements and specifications for additional maritime assets – commencing next week (6 December 2021)
5. The groups identified the need to maintain situational awareness throughout the days, which is very difficult to achieve due to the number of calls which are received and the difficulty in obtaining position information from migrants using a mobile telephone. The number of duplicate calls is hampering the SAR response – often diverting assets to incidents that do not exist.
6. It was agreed that HMCG would consider/investigate additional air assets – already underway
7. HM Coastguard, Head of Infrastructure and Technology, would investigate mobile phone location systems and camera technology to improve situational awareness. This work is ongoing now, with evaluation and utilisation underway

8. The Dover Tug Haven issues are impacting the landing of persons rescued by the maritime surface assets. This was discussed in great detail and the significant impact that it was having on the ability to re-task maritime surface assets due to the processing of those being landed at the Tug Haven. It was suggested that humanitarian processes be applied at Tug Haven with follow up Immigration and Enforcement processes be applied elsewhere. HM Coastguard is to raise this issue with Dan O'Mahanney to enquire how this can be unblocked

The initial reception at a landing point – humanitarian response, should provide clothing and a basic health check, with the persons then to be transported to a Immigration and Enforcement processing facility elsewhere inland. There is also a requirement for a second landing facility to be established in Ramsgate, currently the only one in Dover means SAR assets being diverted to Dover which results in longer transit times and less assets on the water.

9. The mental health and wellbeing of staff is also a significant issue. -TRIM (traumatic risk management) is in place for individuals and discussions were had during the day to identify any proactive interventions also – such as training staff to prepare people for the level of stress and share information between the organisations.
10. The exercise looked at scenarios showing consecutive days of high levels of activity, impacting surface asset availability. Discussions considered new operating models – with the replacement of locate and rescue (current) with locate, assess and monitor progress with the limited rescue resources responding only to vessels in grave and imminent danger – this would be any occasion when insufficient maritime assets are available. It was agreed that we would develop clear operating objectives for the use of the new Operating model.

Actions

- HM Coastguard Monday meetings – consider windy app and tie in weather information in more detail and assess risk of amber days
- Air Assets advanced Business Case to be completed
- Mobile Phone and camera system options to be progressed
- Mental Health awareness and training of staff to prepare for the types of calls/days
- To arrange a meeting with UKBF Immigration and Enforcement to explain the impact of their operations at the Tug Haven and ask them to explore other options
- New operating model – develop and then table top the objectives – HM Coastguard operations to lead