Witness Name: Simon Ling
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: 2
Dated: 14 November 2024

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIMON LING

I, Simon Ling, Head of Lifeboats at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, West Quay Road, Poole BH15 1HZ will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. I make this statement on behalf of Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). I am authorised to make this statement on behalf of Royal National Lifeboat Institution. This statement provides a wider overview of the role of the RNLI. It covers information provided to me by others at the RNLI as well as information considered relevant to the Inquiry.

2. I have been employed by the RNLI for 9 years and my current position is Head of Lifeboats. I have held my current role for 2 years 9 months and I report to the Lifesaving Operations Director. Prior to working for the RNLI, I served in the Royal Air Force for 29 years. I am qualified RYA Yacht Master Power and Sail and I am Search and Rescue Capable on All-Weather Lifeboats. I am also a Volunteer Operational Launch Authority for my local lifeboat station, Poole, which uses both the B and D Class inshore lifeboats.

3. As the Head of Lifeboats, I am responsible for lifeboat future strategy, lifeboat fleet management, lifeboat safety, lifeboat maritime standards and lifeboat operational assurance. I have also been used to lead on RNLI crisis response planning be that the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and migration related search and rescue (both UK and overseas).

4. The RNLI is a charity that works to end preventable drowning through rescue, lifeguarding operations as well as water safety educational programmes. The RNLI believe that whilst anyone can drown, nobody should. The organisation relies on highly trained volunteers with approximately 95% of all RNLI personnel in volunteer roles. Every year, volunteer lifeboat crews and lifeguards help and rescue thousands of people and the charity has saved over 143,000 lives since it was founded in 1824. In 2023, 364 lives were saved and 30,720 peopled aided by RNLI crews and lifeguards.

5. The RNLI is separate from the Coastguard, independent from the Government and therefore not governed by the Government. It is governed by a Royal Charter and Bye-laws, copies of which are attached as appendices. As a Charity the RNLI has Trustees who are legally responsible for the RNLI. Trustees are appointed from within and by the RNLI Council at the Annual Meeting of the Council each July.

6. The RNLI has an Executive Team, led by the Chief Executive, which are the RNLI's senior managers. The Chief Executive is responsible to the Trustees for the day-to-day running of the RNLI and the execution of the strategy and policies decided by the Trustee Committee.

7. By way of overview, the RNLI saves lives at sea throughout the UK, Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands through the provision of:

   i. 24/7 search and rescue lifeboat service through a strategically located fleet of over 400 lifeboats located at 238 lifeboat stations across the UK, Jersey, Guernsey and IOM. The RNLI aims to reach at least 90% of casualties within 10 nautical miles of the coast, within 30 minutes of a lifeboat launch and can deliver SAR cover out to 100nm. In 2023, the RNLI had over 5,700 crew members and made approximately 9,207 lifeboat launches, aiding 10,741 people saving 278 lives with 57,947 crew hours logged at sea.

   ii. A Lifeguard service which in 2023 the RNLI had over 1,565 lifeguards working from 238 lifeguard units to keep people safe. With a normal operating area of up to 300m from shore when within the red and yellow flags on RNLI-patrolled beaches. The RNLI aims to reach anyone in difficulty in a

patrolled area within 3.5 minutes. In addition, a key part of lifeguarding is to prevent people getting into difficulty through proactive advice, guidance and direction. In 2023, more than 2.9m preventative actions were taken by RNLI lifeguards who were keeping watch over more than 15m beach visitors. In 2023, 14,213 incidents were attended, 19,979 people assisted and 86 lives saved. RNLI Lifeguards made 8,716 medical interventions including full resuscitations taking place.

iii. A safety, education and accident prevention service including public campaigns (for example, the "Float to Live" campaign which reached more then 45m people), the provision of free curriculum-linked learning resources relating to safety in or near the water, educational visits to RNLI sites and "swim safe" practical sessions for young people. Educational programmes and partnerships also extend outside of the UK and the RNLI works with global leaders, public health organisations and at-risk communities seeking to make drowning prevention a priority worldwide and reduce this loss of life.

8. The RNLI lifesaving delivery is supported by staff and volunteers with regional bases and a Support Centre in Poole. In 2021 the RNLI had Area Lifesaving Managers whose were responsible for the safe, efficient and effective delivery of the RNLI's lifesaving services within a defined geographic area in accordance with RNLI policies, standards and external legislation. As set out below the role has now changed and Area Operations Managers are now responsible for Lifeboats service delivery with lifeguard services managed by. Regional Lifeguard Leads

9. There are specialist support teams who provide support for our water safety, lifeguard and lifeboat operations across the six regions. The Lifeboats Services Team provide central and strategic support for our lifeboat service across the UK and Ireland, including:

    i. Fleet Operations: The RNLI has a Relief Fleet on standby in strategic points around the UK and Ireland. The fleet is kept in a constant state of operational readiness to provide cover at all stations when lifeboats are being maintained or upgraded. Fleet Operations also has a team of highly specialist and experienced mariners who provide a range of specialist

support including cover at Lifeboat Stations, trials and evaluation and implementation of the Shannon Class Lifeboat. Most of the Fleet Staff team have provided support and cover to SE Channel stations.

ii. Maritime Standards and Performance Team: Responsible for the auditing, improvement and reporting of operational maritime standards to support our lifeboat rescue activity.

iii. Lifesaving Standards Team: Provide expertise and oversight of operational resources, information and communications that support the safe and effective delivery of our lifesaving service.

10. There is also a Policy Development Team who manage and deliver the research and writing of operational policy and standards within which the RNLI can operate safely, effectively and legally and a Lifesaving Support Team: Provide direct frontline support services and guidance to lifesaving operations, safety and lifesaving senior leadership teams through the 24/7 Operations Room.

11. In January 2021 a Medical Director was appointed with responsibility for shaping best medical practice within the RNLI; working within clinical governance structures and by supporting the Medical Advisory Committee and a team of volunteer lifeboat medical advisors.

12. Funding. The cost of running the RNLI in 2023 was £191.2m with the Lifeboat service and Lifeboats, property and equipment amounting to £159.2m. The majority of funding (c94%) from donations and the remaining 6% coming from income sources including trading, charitable trading and investments.

Lifeboat service

13. The RNLI operates two main classes of lifeboat – all-weather lifeboats (ALBs) and inshore lifeboats (ILBs). Within these categories, there are a number of different vessels and specific capabilities. Broadly speaking, ALBs are capable of 25kts and are designed to operate in all weather conditions, day or night. They are self-righting after a capsize and fitted with an array of navigation, and search and rescue equipment. The RNLI all-weather fleet currently consists of the Shannon, Severn, Trent, Tamar and Mersey class lifeboats. ILBs are very capable lifeboats

but are subject to weather limitations. However, they have their own advantages in that they can reach people in circumstances where the all-weather lifeboats could not. They usually operate closer to shore, in shallower water, near cliffs, and rocks. They are designed to be quick and manoeuvrable, allowing RNLI crews to get as close as possible to those in need of assistance. The inshore lifeboat fleet consists of the B and D class lifeboats, as well as the E class lifeboats on the River Thames. In addition, the RNLI also uses rescue hovercraft for areas that are inaccessible to conventional RNLI lifeboats such as mud flats and river estuaries. Hovercraft are on station at Hoylake, Hunstanton, Morecambe, and Southend lifeboat stations.

14. The Dover strait is served by the following stations and lifeboats:

	Shannon	Tamar	Severn	Trent	B Class (Atlantic 85	D class
Ramsgate		√			√	
Walmer					√	√
Dover			√			
Littlestone					√	
Dungeness	√					
Hastings	√					√
Eastbourne				√		√
Newhaven			√			√

15. The capabilities of the Lifeboats are as follows;

Type	Crew	Survivor Capacity Self-righting	Survivor Capacity Non self-righting	Maximum speed in knots	Range / endurance nautical miles
Shannon	6	18	43	25	250
Tamar	7	44	90	25	250
Severn	7	28	96	25	250
B Class (Atlantic 85)	3-4	20	n/a	35	3 hours
D class	3-4	5	n/a	25	3 hours

Training.

16. Performing rescues is an unavoidably high-risk activity. Crew members are typically volunteers and come from a range of backgrounds so extensive training is provided by RNLI specialists prior to any crew member being allowed to operate onboard a RNLI lifeboat. All lifeboat crew, regardless of which vessel they operate on and their other nautical experience, then must undergo ongoing RNLI training. As well as training, all necessary personal protective equipment is provided by the RNLI. There are three key stages to RNLI crew member training:

Trainee Crew

17. All trainee crew follow a structured crew training pathway which, in progressive stages, makes trainees safe to go afloat, safe to go on a service and then builds on basic skills to more advanced crew skills. Topics include hazards, personal safety, basic first aid, firefighting, how to use and maintain personal protective equipment, a thorough understanding of their lifeboat, and how to work safely with ropes. Early in their training all crew must attend a two-day Crew Emergency Procedures course at either the RNLI College in Poole, Dorset, or our satellite facility at the National Maritime College Ireland. Both these facilities provide crew members practical experience in sea safety and survival, where crew will experience simulated conditions, including rough seas, darkness, thunder,

lightning and rain. This externally accredited course meets, and exceeds, the International Maritime Organisation's specified criteria for sea survival training and must be repeated every five years.

RNLI College

18. In addition to the mandatory Crew Emergency Procedure Course, crew have the opportunity to attend a wide variety of courses at the RNLI College which is equipped with a range of boats, workshops, simulators and classrooms. Courses available span all aspects of seamanship, boat handling, navigation, search and rescue techniques, command skills, first aid and casualty care, as well as courses for mechanics and technicians covering the safe operation and maintenance of plant, machinery and equipment. The RNLI College is a first-class, specialist training facility which, in addition to training RNLI personnel, frequently trains UK emergency services and hosts visiting foreign coastguard, navy and rescue services. However, volunteer crew who are unable to attend the college can receive all necessary training at their own station or at regional centres delivered by the RNLI's mobile coastal trainers, all of whom are externally accredited and verified.

Fully Trained Crew

19. A typical volunteer should complete their full training pathway within two years, although those with a maritime background may complete more quickly. To complete their training all crew must pass two formal assessments conducted by qualified lifeboat assessors to confirm their competence. Thereafter, ongoing training is continuous; all lifeboat crew, from the most junior to the most experienced commanders, must maintain their currency by cycling through a series of structured exercises covering all aspects of operational activity, thus ensuring that lifeboat crews regularly train together and practise everything they may be called upon to do in a live rescue. Training and exercising occurs most weeks at sea and ashore; typically one evening each week and one day at the weekend. Each station has a Lifeboat Operations Manager, supported by a Training Coordinator who will plan and record training for the station as a whole and for individual volunteers. While the training pathways take volunteers from

being a new-joiner up to fully competent crew, much of the weekly training focuses on building cohesive teams able to work instinctively together. Crews will practise a variety of rescue scenarios, sometimes involving other emergency services such as the Coastguard and fire and rescue services.

Specialist and command roles

20. Beyond being lifeboat crew, those with the aptitude may go on to complete additional training and qualify as navigators, mechanics, helms, coxswains and other roles. These have similar structured training to that described for crew and also require a formal assessment to confirm their competence.

Record keeping

21. Record keeping is a crucial and well-regulated discipline within the RNLI. Full electronic records of all training and assessment activity are kept, giving visibility to crew members and to management of all training completed and, importantly, all training yet to be completed. Thus, the RNLI has a clear understanding of the training and competence status of each individual in all of our 238 lifeboat stations. In addition, records are made of every lifeboat launch, covering details such as the crew onboard, the circumstances of the launch and a narrative of the event.

Call out procedures

22. The RNLI works closely with, but is not part of, His Majesty's Coastguard (the "**Coastguard**"). When there is an emergency at sea, members of the public should call 999 and ask to speak to the Coastguard. The Government has a statutory duty to provide search and rescue, and this is provided through the Coastguard. RNLI lifeboats are "declared assets" to the Coastguard and will respond to tasking requests made by the Coastguard. A declared asset is a facility that has given a declaration to the Coastguard of a certain level of availability and/or training such that they form part of the Coastguard's incident response process. The Coastguard is responsible for coordinating rescues at sea including determining the deployment of appropriate assets. As well as the RNLI lifeboats this may also include assets owned and operated by other organisations. In general, RNLI is not

involved in decision making about which assets to use to deal with a particular incident, although it remains responsible for the safety of crews and would inform the coastguard if a particular asset was unsuitable or unsafe in the prevailing sea and weather conditions. The RNLI can but does not typically self-deploy its assets.

23. When a lifeboat is required by HM Coastguard (HMCG) it is normal procedure for the Coastguard to request a lifeboat by first paging the relevant station Duty Launch Authority (DLA). This is a specially trained operational volunteer role and a position of leadership within the station. The DLA will carry a different pager to the crew as the initial tasking request should go the DLA before any alert direct to the crew. The role of the DLA is to consider a tasking request and based on his/her knowledge of the crew, assets, conditions and local knowledge, determine if the request is compliant, appropriate and achievable.

24. The DLA will receive information from the Coastguard (or other coordinating authority) detailing the circumstances, the nature of distress and the request to launch. The launch authority will assess the request and, if in agreement, will pass this authority to launch to the SAR unit commander (coxswain, helm, hovercraft commander, or rescue watercraft operator)

25. The DLA will also consider if back up is required from flank stations or from air support. The DLA will then authorise (or decline) the tasking and instruct the Coastguard to page the crew. Once crew are paged the DLA will brief the helm, coxswain or commander before they launch and then support the operation from the Lifeboat station. Although very rare, the SAR commander can then decline a tasking authorised by a DLA if he/she feels it is not safe or appropriate in which case the DLA would contact the Coastguard.

26. If an RNLI lifeboat is deployed, the Coastguard will remain in communication with the vessel (and any others involved) to manage the incident. The ongoing communications include whether any additional assets are needed and search patterns. The crew can and do make suggestions in relation to both of these matters although it is the tasking Authority that owns the search pattern they provide.

27. Off Service. RNLI Lifeboats are sometimes declared off service. Off service is determined as the lifeboat being unable to safely launch and carry out an operational service due to damage, defects, or lack of crew availability or crew fatigue or the lifeboat or launching equipment is undergoing maintenance or repair which cannot be made ready to safely launch for an operational service within 1 hour.

28. A Lifeboat may also be placed on restricted service. Restricted service is determined as the lifeboat may be launched to carry out some operational services but with limited operational effectiveness (for example with one serviceable engine) or the lifeboat is undergoing maintenance or repair but can be made ready to safely launch for an operational service within 1 hour.

29. It is for the Duty Launch Authority to ensure any change in any lifesaving assets service status is reported in real time to the following: the coordinating authority (coastguard), Flank lifeboat stations and the RNLI Central Operations & Information Room (Operations Room).

30. The purpose of the Operations Room is to provide a 24/7 communication, escalation, support, assistance, when called upon any staff or volunteers across the RNLI. It is the 'one stop shop' for support in and out of hours. It is a function that is staffed during the day and at night responds via an out of hours telephone call duty system. It does not task or co-ordinate searches. It is supported by a duty structure, including an Executive on call, a Strategic on Call and a tactical on call.

31. The information that boats are off service are also included in a document called "Watchkeeper." This is an internal morning briefing document produced by the Operations Room and sent out around 9.30am. The purpose of the Watchkeeper report is to provide an update to key people in the organisation on a variety of matters including; assets off service, relief fleet availability, media notes, safety activity reports, Coastguard reports from the previous day and the duty rota including the Executive on call.

RNLI and Migration Related Search and Rescue

RNLI and the Aegean Sea

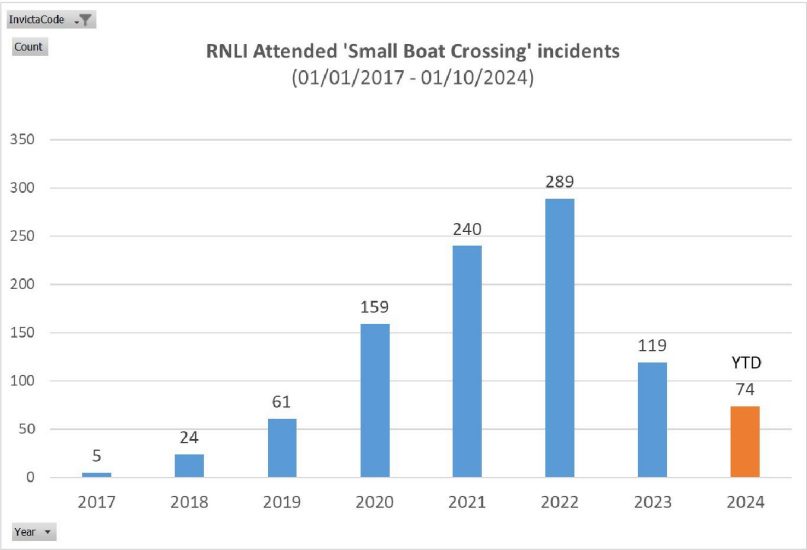
32. The RNLI first became involved in migration related search and rescue in 2015. This was in response to a request for help from a Greek volunteer rescue organisation, the Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT). The HRT made an urgent request for support to the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) of which the RNLI was a founding member. This request was due to the unprecedented drowning risk presented in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and the Aegean Islands.

33. The request triggered a multi-nation IMRF response with UK, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands and German SAR organisations all committing support. The response was centrally coordinated by the IMRF, but each country was allocated an island to support. The RNLI was asked to support the HRT on the island of Lesvos which at that time was considered a frontline of migration with thousands crossing monthly resulting in many deaths. Specifically, in 2015, over 770,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, with more than 45% landing on Lesvos. Tragically, in 2015 alone, over 800 migrants died attempting the Aegean crossing from Turkey to Greece.

34. The RNLI response was to deploy a small yet specialist team to Lesvos to design and implement an intervention that would seek to make the HRT volunteers competent, capable, credible and sustainable. The intervention involved the deployment of 2 RNLI end of service life but refurbished Atlantic 75 inshore lifeboats and also embed a RNLI trainer for 7 months to train the HRT crews in RNLI SAR competencies. This intervention continued for 4 years with bi-annual deployments of RNLI teams to support the initial deployment. The result of this work is that the HRT are now self-sufficient and considered the principal Search and Rescue provider to the Hellenic Coastguard. The intervention also provided invaluable learning in respect to the risks of migration related SAR and also wider IMRF and RNLI international SAR training procedures.

RNLI Activity in SE Channel

35. The first indications of migration related search rescue in the SE Channel first presented in 2017. At this time numbers of crossings were few and far between and in the main were small numbers crossing on small conventional dinghies purchased locally in France. However, as the months and years ensued it became very clear that organised crime group (OCG) activity was very much in evidence with the numbers crossing growing year on year. In this respect the drowning risk also increased exponentially as we saw more casualties crossing in poorly manufactured black market sourced, unseaworthy vessels similar to those encountered in the Aegean Sea. Unlike the Aegean, the risk presented by channel migration was compounded by lower sea temperatures, increased crossing distance, tidal water, weather and the risks presented by crossing one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.



The above graph indicates the unprecedented increase in taskings to SE Channel stations. These numbers are based on word / text interrogation of post service reporting as RNLI data capture did not identify small boat casualties as an independent rescue category until mid 2022. The graph does illustrate the scale of increase in demand on our crews but also clearly signposts the decline in recent years of RNLI service calls, most likely linked to the deployment of further UK Border Force Vessels in 2022/3.

Tasking of the RNLI

36. Whilst the RNLI can self-launch, it is a rare occurrence and in most cases the RNLI will be tasked by the Coastguard. When initially tasked / paged the RNLI crews will not know the nature of the tasking request. The nature of tasking will be determined once the crew have mustered at station initially via the DLA who would have spoken to the Coastguard. The tasking instruction will then be backed up once the lifeboat launches and establishes contact with the tasking authority on VHF radio. It is important to outline that the RNLI does not determine the level of distress, this is undertaken by the tasking authority. In the case of small boat crossings, the UK Government and by default the Coastguard has deemed that any small boat detected entering UK waters is a vessel in distress. What assets are tasked to interact with a vessel in distress is coordinated by the Coastguard.

Search and Rescue Challenges Presented by Small Boat Crossing

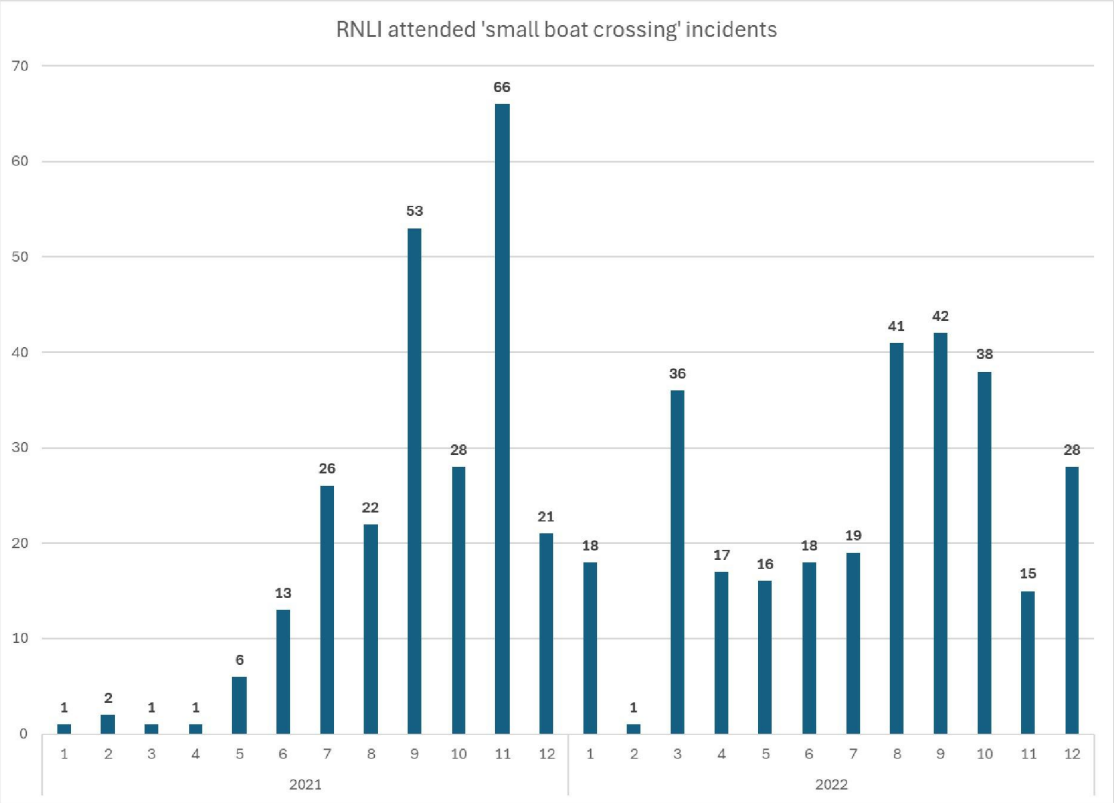
37. Small boat crossing SAR presented the RNLI (and other SAR partners) with a vast array of challenges which for the RNLI include but are not limited to the following:

Increase in Rescue Demand

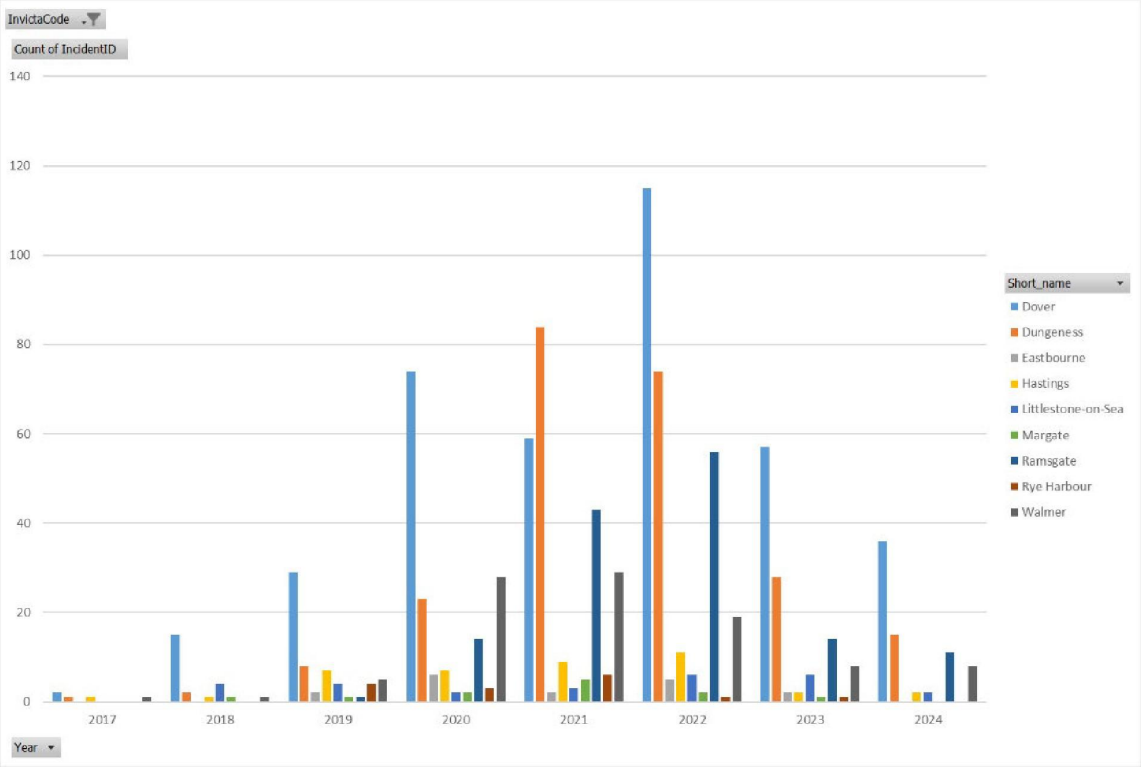
38. Small boat rescue demand increased significantly in 2020 and continued to rise at an unprecedented rate peaking in 2022. This tasking was on top of existing RNLI tasking to non-small boat crossing activity. This increase on rescue demand placed immense strain on our staff and volunteers at affected stations. The stations affected most by small boat crossing demand are Dover, Dungeness, Ramsgate and Walmer. At Dover Lifeboat station, the crew went from an average of 25 service calls a year to 158 in 2021. This placed huge strain on staff, volunteers, their families and their employers. Recruitment of more volunteers was then undertaken in 2022 and the station were supported with central staff to provide extra resilience. Further down the coast, the small community of volunteers at Dungeness, found themselves going from an average of 12 service calls a year to close to 100. Unlike a large Port town such as Dover, Dungeness is very remote with a small community demographic which made recruitment of new volunteers

very challenging. In relation to small boat crossing SAR, November 2021 was the busiest on record for the RNLI with 64 small boat crossing taskings in a month and 2262 casualties rescued. The RNLI is immensely proud of how our volunteers and staff reacted in the face of such huge demand. The dogged determination and desire of our crews to sustain lifesaving delivery and save lives at sea is and continues to be inspiring and humbling in equal measure.

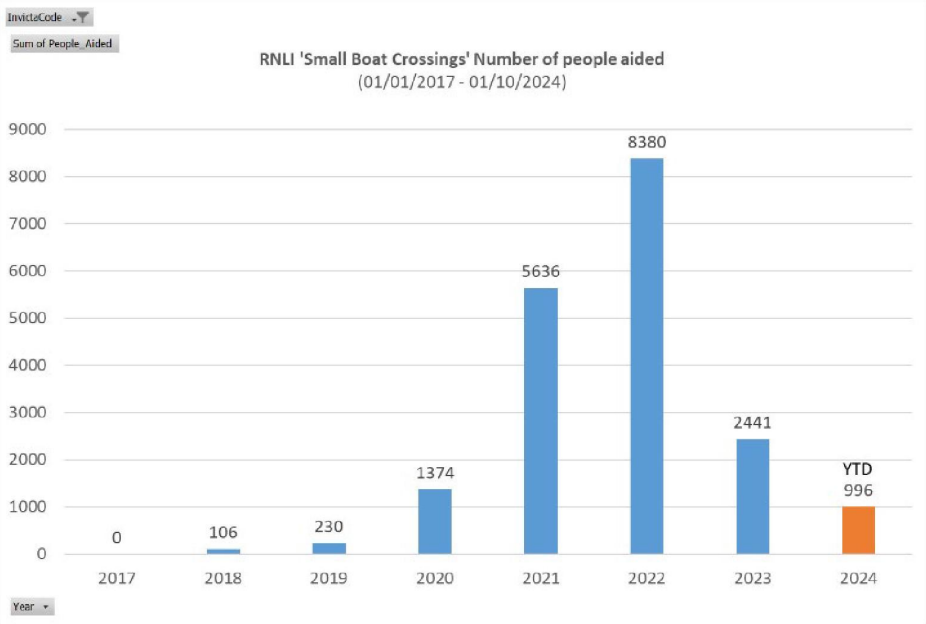
Graph showing small boat crossing SAR Taskings 2021 and 2022.



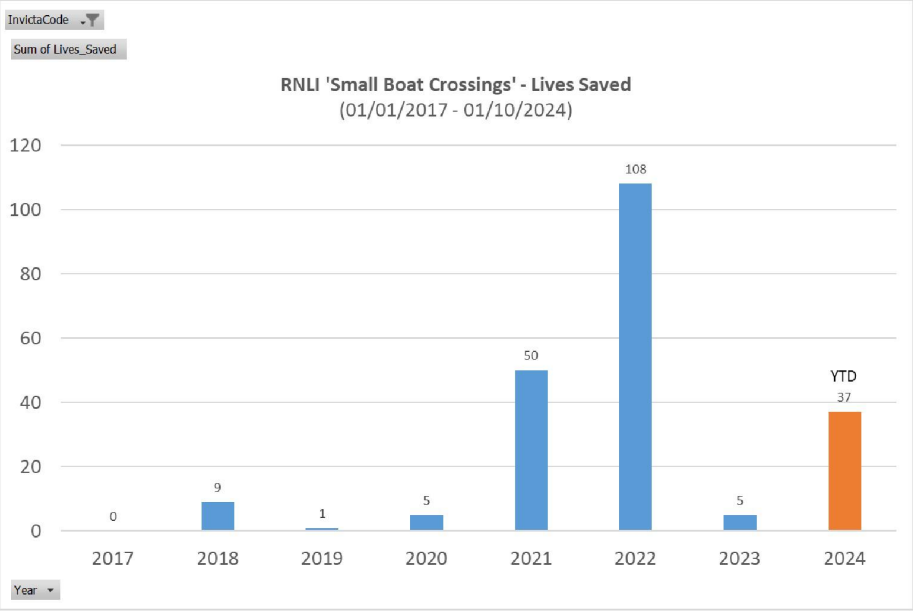
Graph showing small boat crossing annual tasking levels at 9 SE Channel Stations.



A further breakdown showing RNLI small boat crossing rescue people rescued by year can be seen in the following graph.



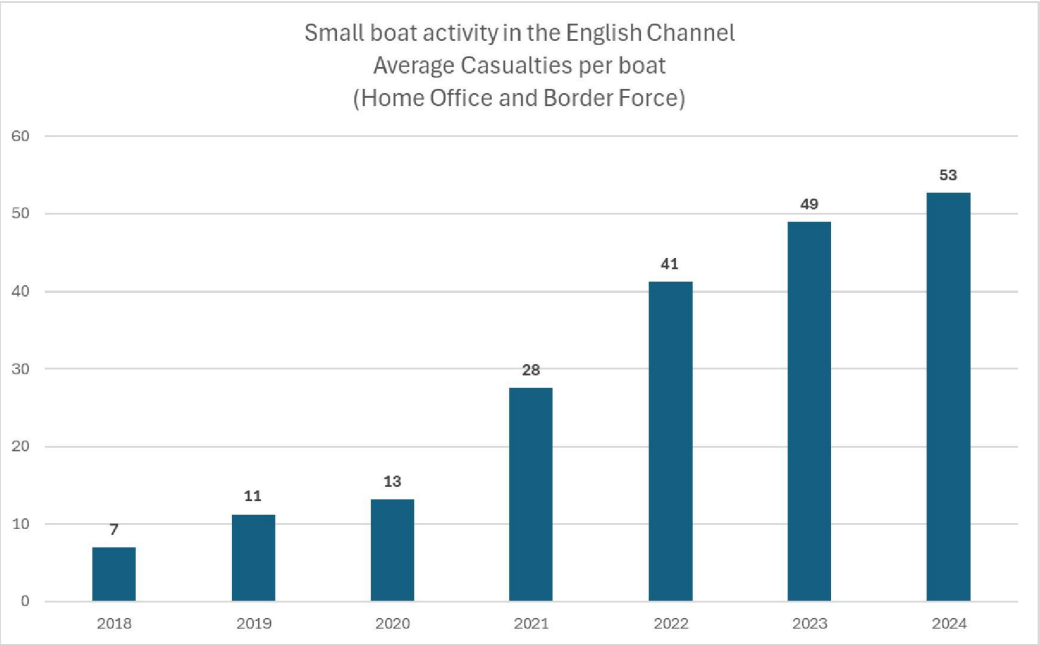
In terms of lives saved. The RNLI operates to a very strict assessment process ro determine if a rescues was a life saved. Every service return that suggests a life is saved is subject to detailed assessment to determine validity. The current data for lives saved relating to small boat crossing casualties against current assessment methods is as follows:



Casualty Numbers Per Boat

39. The number of casualties that require rescue by the RNLI has increased. Whilst in recent months the number of services requiring RNLI response is in decline, the numbers of casualties crossing per boat has increased from an average of 13 per boat in 2020 to 53 per boat in 2024. This year, the RNLI has now been tasked to small boats laden with over 80 casualties. This increase in small boat size presents significant drowning risk associated with overcrowded unseaworthy boats with little stability or freeboard becoming compromised resulting in a mass persons in the water situation. The issue presents considerable challenge to our rescue teams as they attempt to cross deck casualties from a fragile, overcrowded, unstable and unseaworthy vessel to the safety of a lifeboat. Conventional methods such as securing lines to the casualty vessel prior to cross decking or rescue is simply not possible and the small rubber boats do not have the fittings or strength for such operations.

Graph that shows average casualties numbers per small boat crossing



40. Another principal issue associated with an increase in casualties presented per vessel is that the numbers of casualties requiring rescue can exceed the practical carrying capacity for our Lifeboats. This is especially evident if some of the rescued casualties need significant casualty care that requires deck space or if we need space to allow for a SAR Helicopter winch person to embark from the air to support lifesaving casualty care.

41. The issue invites 3 responses. Firstly, and most importantly, the RNLI requires accurate information on casualty numbers as soon as possible from either the Tasking Authority (The Coastguard), or any assets first on scene be that other SAR partners (UK Border Force) or third party vessels. The second response is for active engagement between the RNLI and the Coastguard at point of tasking to consistently consider dual tasking of lifeboats (or other assets) to single small boats to mitigate the rescue demand on one single lifeboat or rescue asset. This is also important if the RNLI are tasked to rescue more than one small boat on a single tasking. Finally, the risk invites the RNLI to continue to develop contingent procedures to deal with a worst-case scenario of a single lifeboat being presented

with a rescue demand / persons in the water that equates to over twice the capacity of a single asset.

Picture - Dungeness Lifeboat tasked to a single small boat in distress with casualty numbers exceeding the max capacity of a lifeboat. Source RNLI 2024.

42. Risks associated with unseaworthy boats. The RNLI has observed a consistent deterioration in the quality of boats crossing. The boats are poorly constructed and have very little structural integrity. Often the boats offer very little stability by way of floor panels or solid build transoms. When overcrowded, the vessels present very little free board which presents a significant risk from flooding / capsize due to water ingress. The build of the vessels does not consider the need for strong points to support towing or attaching any lines to the vessel. In the context of a vessel broken down in the Shipping Lanes, this presents a sign challenge to our Coxswains who ordinarily would seek to tow a vessel from immediate danger of collision.

43. Organised Crime Tactics. Unlike any other form of Search and Rescue activity, small boat crossing rescue demand presents risk and complexity linked to the tactics of the organised crime groups (OCGs). Whilst a decision to launch a vessel from France may include some form of crude weather assessment by the OCGs, it does not take into account the relationship between wind and tidal conditions in the Channel. This result is that overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels are launched from France in what the OCGs believe to be benign weather without any consideration of wind over tide or other weather risks. In 2021 and 2022 small boat crossing weather windows were reasonably easy to predict: however, in late 2023 and 2024 the risk appetite of the OCGs has changed and small boats now cross in weather / sea conditions that present much increased risk. Allied to this those selected to helm the vessel have no maritime experience or awareness of the many risks associated with passaging in the channel (collision, weather, tide, vessel stability). Finally, the OCGs coach the casualties to call UK government numbers (the Coastguard) and relay a vast array of distress on board narratives that invite a priority rescue response. This issue alone presents a huge challenge to the UK Tasking authority in terms of the coordination of a rescue response and assignment of valuable rescue assets. In most if not all SAR situations, our lifeboat crews receive updated information on the nature of distress before they arrive on scene which allows them to develop a plan. However, in relation to small boat crossings, our crews often arrive with little to no accurate information to work on.

44. Condition of Casualties Rescued. In respect of casualty care, the RNLI mission is to remove casualties from the threat of drowning and then care for a casualty before handover to the Coastguard Rescue Teams and or emergency services at the nearest safe haven as soon as practicable. In this respect all of the crews in the Channel have undertaken a basic first aid course with the majority also qualified in a higher standard of training to become RNLI casualty carers.

45. The condition of multiple small boat casualties rescued presents significant challenge to RNLI casualty care. Tragically, we have on occasion rescued casualties from the water that have been unresponsive and despite the valiant efforts of our crews with continuous Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) on

passage to Dover, some have been pronounced deceased on arrival by the emergency services. Indeed, some lifeboat crews have entered the water to rescue face down casualties to recover them to the lifeboat. Many casualties rescued from the water will very quickly deteriorate in condition with some suffering from 'survivors shock' which can quickly lead to unconsciousness demanding that crew constantly attend to them and manage the delivery of oxygen therapy. Other conditions routinely presented include: shock, exhaustion, sea-sickness, malnutrition, dehydration, exposure, hypothermia, infectious disease, cuts, bruising and fuel burns as a result of poorly made engines leaking fuel that mixes with sea water in the bottom of the rubber vessels. Some casualties display symptoms of physical and mental distress / trauma experienced from all manner issues associated with months of migration.

46. A final challenge of effective casualty care relates to the issue of space on board a lifeboat and how to administer care on a lifeboat that is carrying the maximum number of casualties permitted. To that end we now try to deploy crew to designated spots on the lifeboat to ensure we can to our best effort manage casualties until we reach the safe- haven and can transfer to the care of the emergency services or Border Force. Once casualties are rescued, we then seek to protect them from the elements with the ponchos issued for those on deck. The priority of the Coxswain or helm is to then get rescued casualties to the nearest safe-haven, a decision made in consultation with the Coastguard. The vast array of medical conditions presented by small boat casualties dictates a need for the RNLI to constantly review its casualty care procedures.

47. Handover of Rescue Casualties. The Coastguard preferred location for casualty drop off would always be at Port of Dover as this was the UK Border Force preferred location for reception and handling. However, in the period 2017-2022, the facilities at Dover were lacking and under resourced to meet the demand. The result of this 'bottle-neck' was on busy days, Lifeboats laden with rescued casualties would be required to queue up for some considerable time waiting for UK Border Force handling capacity to be made available. The result of this was that RNLI lifesaving assets would be fixed at a location and not able to redeploy

should another lifesaving event present. This delay and protracted length of service also placed strain on our volunteers crews who have left employment to respond to a rescue.

48. In 2021 to 2022 Dungeness would often declare the nearest safe haven as the Lifeboat station beach at Dungeness itself (the Shannon class ALB is designed to beach launch and recover). This decision would always be made on the day subject to a risk assessment undertaken by the Coxswain that includes (condition of casualties, number of casualties embarked, weather and seas state). A decision to beach land at Dungeness did present challenges in regard to the onward management and humanitarian care of rescued casualties which in the period of 2017 - 2022 was sub-optimal. In essence, the responsibility for reception and onward movement of rescued casualties is the responsibility of the Coastguard. However, over this period there was no real concept of operation or resourced plan to receive and manage casualties at satellite locations such as Dungeness. This meant lifeboat crews and other NGOs such as Care for Calais were met with humanitarian care challenges awaiting the provision of coaches from UK Border Force.

    It should be stressed that the UK Border Force Handling infrastructure at Dover has been subject to significant investment and is now very much the recovery point of choice.

49. Rescue Area. The rescue area for small boat crossing activity is extensive and includes rescues in both UK and French territorial waters. In the early years 2017-2021 most rescues were in UK territorial waters. However, in 2022 the RNLI would be tasked by the Coastguard to transit out to the median line to intercept a small boat as it entered UK waters (therefore categorised by the Coastguard as a vessel in distress). On some occasions this tasking protocol did cause some concern for our Coxswains who on occasions would observe small boats in very real danger in French waters. In this instance, the Lifeboat crews were advised to act of its own accord and cross the median line in order to effect rescue under the international maritime rules of Saving of Life at Sea (SOLAS). It should be noted this activity was often in the presence of French vessels that appeared to be shadowing small

boats but would not communicate with the Lifeboat or offer assistance to the rescue effort.

50. More recently, the RNLI has been tasked by HM Coastguard to support rescue effort in French territorial waters especially in relation to small boats sinking and persons in the water. Indeed, the RNLI has rescued many casualties and saved many lives in French territorial waters. This is done under coordination by HM Coastguard with casualties recovered to the UK.

51. Policy and Procedure. Unlike the land environment, there is no known maritime law or policy to cater for a mass rescue / mass person in the water rescue / response. The RNLI believes a UK or IMO policy covering this area is now essential as it will set a legally permissive environment for SAR and sets the conditions for procedure around triage, rescue and immediate casualty care. The RNLI working alongside the Coastguard has developed an interim framework that has been shared with the IMRF. It is hoped this initial work will be sponsored to the IMO for consideration.

52. Mental Health of RNLI Crews. A principal risk associated with the small boat crossing SAR, is the mental health and wellbeing of our crews who are routinely being exposed to a level of trauma that most crews would never encounter. Whether it be casualties drowning in front of our crews, the recovery of drowned victims or simply the harrowing and shocking nature of mass person in the water rescue has affected many of our crews and left some suffering from Post Traumatic Stress. Whilst the RNLI currently employs a very effective tool developed by the military called Trauma Response Incident Management (TRiM), this was very much reactive in nature, and this invited the RNLI to develop a mental health pathway for our crews. This is currently on trial at some known RNLI trauma hotspots.

53. Interoperability. Interoperability has and remains challenging for the RNLI and in this respect is an area that invites attention. When discussing interoperability, we refer to both UK SAR partners working together and also UK SAR Partners working alongside French agencies. At the time of the incident in question, effective liaison

between UK SAR partners was perhaps lacking, with all SAR partners operating in what could be described as crisis response mode. Whilst operational mission collaboration was evident, proactive collaboration forums between HMCG, UKBF and others were not in place. In December of 2021, HMCG did host a forum in Dover to discuss some of the challenges associated with the unprecedented increase in rescue demand associated with small boat crossings. In the summer of 2022 an inaugural meeting at the Strategic level between RNLI, HMCG and UK Border Force occurred, and similar such meetings now occur every 6-8 months. In addition to this, an operators group has been established which is chaired by the Coastguard. To date there have also been 1 multi-agency desk top exercise (led by the Coastguard and Royal Navy) that included other supporting agencies such as emergency services in December 2022.

54. However, whilst it is very clear that the Coastguard task and exercise command and control RNLI assets undertaking SAR operations, what is perhaps unclear is which government department has primacy in relation to small boat crossings and therefore which department should be leading on the challenge of developing interoperability.

55. As referenced above, whilst liaison between UK SAR partners has improved, we are yet to undertake a multi-agency exercise that involves UK Border Force, UK Coastguard Air Assets, The Coastguard Ops Room and other responders such as Coastguard Rescue Teams, Police and Ambulance. Accordingly, the RNLI believe that gaps in interoperability do still exist especially in relation to multi agency response. Examples of this would be in the transfer of casualties from RNLI lifeboats to UK Border Force assets and also issues around on scene command and control/coordination (OSC). The RNLI believe that OSC should not be delegated to the RNLI whose limited resource should be focused towards specialist rescue and lifesaving. This remains somewhat of an interoperability gap.

56. UK Boarder Force Capability. It must be recognised that UK Boarder Force Maritime have done an outstanding job in recent years and on average their assets interact with the vast majority of small boats crossing. However, it would be reasonable to say that UK Border Force did not have enough capability to meet

the unprecedented demand of 2021 and most of 2022 and this in turn placed a huge burden on volunteer RNLI Crews. The RNLI believe that UK Border Force capability was not bespoke enough to meet the specialist demands of small boat rescue and this also presents both risk and challenge to the RNLI. The vessels used by UK Border Force (CTVs) are UK Wind Farm support vessels that have been leased and slightly modified to support small boat crossing rescue. The principal modification is a metal boarding platform fitted to the stern quarter of the CTV which allows cross decking of casualties from the small boat to the CTV. Whilst this platform is effective in benign weather and sea conditions, it has proven to be sub-optimal in any sea state above 1 metre. Indeed, in such conditions and during cross decking operations, the platform has on occasion caused impact damage to the frail and poorly constructed dinghy which results in the vessel becoming compromised and persons entering the water. As a result of this risk, the RNLI are routinely tasked to provide safety cover to UK Border Force. An increasing trend is that UK Border Force may arrive on scene first but will not undertake rescue due to on scene conditions. This situation dictates a need for RNLI assets to undertake rescues when sea conditions are in excess of 1-1.5 metres. As previously referenced, this requirement and the risk it presents is on the increase as the OCGs risk appetite changes resulting in launches in higher sea states.

57. Allied to equipment shortfalls, the CTV assets are manned by UK Border Force and commercial boat crews who are not specially trained in Search and Rescue techniques.

58. Therefore, whilst UK Border Force have and continue to undertake the vast majority of rescues of small boats, they do so with leased commercial wind farm vessels that are not configured correctly for small boat SAR with crews that are not Search and Rescue qualified or specially trained.

RNLI Response

Strategic Engagement

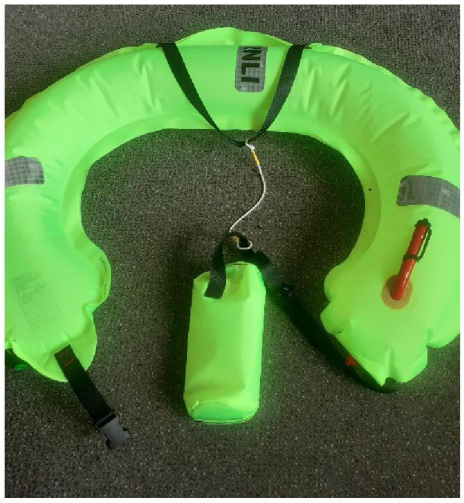
59. In 2022, the RNLI undertook some organisational change and restructuring. The output of this work saw the creation of 6 new head of region roles supported by 4 central head of department functions including the Role of Head of Lifeboats. This significant increase in management capability was to improve support to the delivery of RNLI lifesaving across all of the UK and Ireland. The Head of Lifeboats position was filled in February 2022 and a principal responsibility for the department was to understand the rescue challenges of small boat crossing in the SE channel and lead on the deployment on a range on measures aimed at reducing the drowning risk presented by the unprecedented increase in small boats crossing.

After a period of engagement with all stations involved in the rescue activity it was clear that the RNLI was presented with many areas that invited urgent attention. The following areas were identified from the initial engagement period.

How to stop casualties in the water drowning once on scene

60. When arriving to a situation with multiple persons in the water, the RNLI needed to develop equipment and procedure that would stop casualties drowning after a lifeboat had arrived on scene and in so doing, buy time to effect rescue from the water. To interact with this risk the RNLI began a period of innovation and partnering with industry. After mass person in the water trials in the RNLI Sea Survival Centre at Poole, an industry partner (Ocean Safety) developed 2 products for consideration. These products were existing commercial products modified and adapted to specifically fit the context of SE Channel Drowning risk. The first item was an automatic inflate horse-shoe floatation device which is thrown from the lifeboat in the vicinity of casualties in the water. Once the device makes impact with the water it auto inflates and provides a lifesaving flotation device for a casualty. The device can be deployed, recovered, repacked and re-armed by RNLI crews at the station. This device was developed, manufactured and deployed to the coast in a matter of 4 months. Our ALBs now carry 50

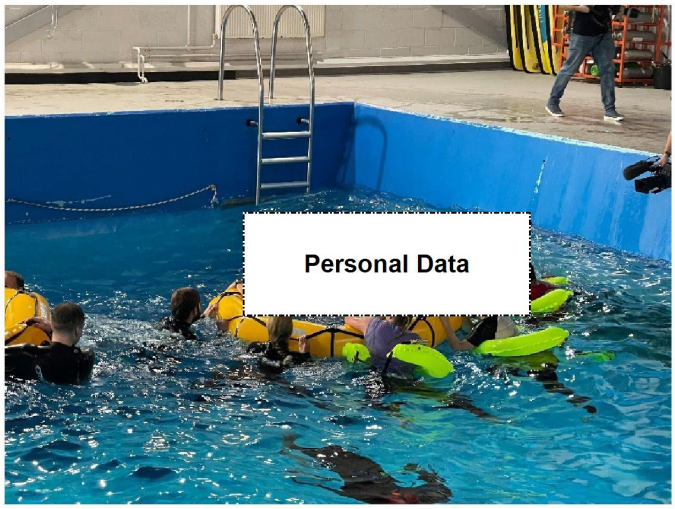
horseshoes at any one time whilst our ILBs carry 12.



RNLI Rescue Throw Horseshoe. Source RNLI

61. The first known lifesaving use of this equipment in an actual rescue was the mass person in the water event in UK waters on 14 December 2022. On the same day Walmer ILB was tasked to provide safety cover to a UK Border Force CTV rescue which resulted in casualties entering the water. This tasking represented the first operational use of the horseshoes from an ILB. The rescue horseshoes are now in regular use in the Channel and are a proven saver of life.

62. At the same time as the Horseshow, the rescue doughnut was developed. This giant inflating ring was created by modifying and existing small aircraft 4 man life raft. The result was a piece of equipment that our pool testing showed provides flotation to in excess of 20 casualties. The rescue doughnuts are activated from a firing mechanism activated by the crew and are currently operating from ALBs who carry 2. As with the rescue horseshoe, this device has been deployed operationally in the Channel, most notably on a mass person in the water rescue on in August 2023.



Picture – RNLI Rescue Doughnut. Source RNLI

63. In the summer of 2022 and given our confidence in the new equipment, the RNLI made contact with UK SAR partners operating in small boat rescue (UK Border Force and Royal Navy) and as a result, both have adopted the equipment.

64. Another fundamental requirement to avoiding drowning on scene was the development of training and procedure around Triage. Experience (from both the Aegean Sea and Channel) told us that immediate committal of the lifeboat to rescue would render the Lifeboat unable to both manoeuvre and deploy lifesaving equipment to points of need. Therefore, a procedure was developed that would guide a coxswain on what to do on arrival. This process was so very important as unlike the land environment there is not policy or procedure to guide decision making with the context of mass casualties at sea. Therefore, it was imperative that we provide guidance to our commanders that allows then to save most lives whilst at the same time protect them from any liability linked to a lack of International or UK policy. The RNLI Mass Persons in the Water Triage Procedure (Exhibit SL/01: INQ009669 and Exhibit SL/01: INQ009670) has been developed in consultation with the Coastguard who have shared the concept with the IMRF. The RNLI very much hope that such procedure can be sponsored to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) such that the search and rescue (maritime) environment can work within an IMO policy, procedure and/or framework.

Improve and expediate extraction of casualties from the water

65. Having now developed and deployed equipment to prevent drowning whilst on scene, attention was directed on how to better extract multiple casualties from the water. Whilst RNLI lifeboats are equipped to extract casualties from the water, current equipment and procedure is focused towards a small number of people and not the numbers presented with small boat crossing rescue demand. Once again partnering with industry was key in this respect. The RNLI partnered with a company called FUNAIR based in North America. Having provided some initial designs to industry we were able to test a prototype rescue platform in April 2023 and deploy a new capability called Sea Stairs to all SE Channel ALB stations in September 2023.

66. This equipment is an inflatable platform that is deployed alongside the lifeboat. The platform can accommodate 2 crew at sea level and using a sunken well and steps provides a safe and ergonomically efficient means to haul casualties on board. Our testing has shown that whilst existing methods of casualty extraction would mean 1 casualty would take 60-90 seconds, Sea Stairs allows the RNLI in extract 20 casualties in the same period. The equipment has proven to be utterly effective and has been deployed on many occasions. Indeed, most recently on July 2024, Sea Stairs was used by Dover Lifeboat to rescue 47 men, women and children from the water.

Picture of the RNLI Sea Stairs in use during a training exercise in 2023. Source RNLI.

Care for the casualties once rescued

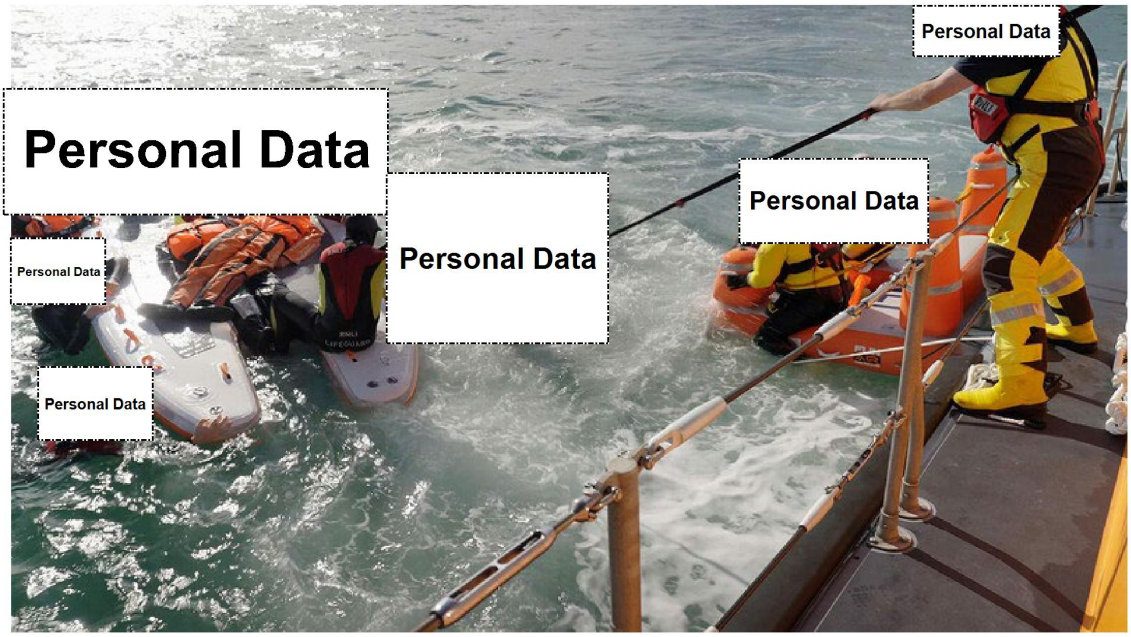
67. Having rescued the casualties, the RNLI's priority is to care for casualties and seek to get them to a safe-haven where upon they can be handed over to a care of the Coastguard Rescue Teams, emergency services or UK Border Force. Small boat crossing casualty management has invited the RNLI to review casualty care procedures and equipment carried. Once a lifeboat is loaded to capacity it is extremely difficult to deliver casualty care especially for those who are unresponsive or very ill. Most casualties will be managed on the deck and where appropriate / possible windproof ponchos will be given out. Those who require more attention may be treated on the after deck or inside the lifeboat. The majority of RNLI crews operating in the SE Channel are first aid trained with some trained to a higher RNLI standard which allows them to administer drugs, provide medical gases such as Oxygen and Entonox or operate Automatic Electric Defibrators which are carried on all SE Channel ALBs. In some cases, our crews have been required to deliver Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation from point of rescue in the Channel until such time as stood down by either SAR Helicopter Paramedic or Doctor / Paramedic ashore. As previously referenced, small boat crossings have

presented our crews with a myriad of conditions that include exposure, heat exhaustion, dehydration, hypothermia, survivor shock, fuel burns, lacerations and even women in labour.

Another risk presented to our crews from small boat crossings is that of diseases such as Hepatitis, Covid and TB. The RNLI will be alerted to exposure after medical assessment of casualties has been undertaken at UK Border Force facilities.

How to provide controlled environment training to our crews

68. During 2022, it became apparent that the RNLI would need to develop controlled environment training to our crews. Such training would seek provide an opportunity for our crews to train in mass person in the water techniques, equipment and procedure and provide an opportunity for the Charity to learn, develop and innovate. To date the RNLI has undertaken 3 such exercises in October 2022, April 2023 and October 2024. The exercises involved ALB and ILB crews from the SE Channel stations coming to RNLI Support Centre Poole for a day of exercise scenarios in Poole Bay using RNLI lifeguards acting as casualties. For each exercise the RNLI has extended invites to SAR partners to observe the scenarios including industry, UK Coastguard and UK Border Force. For the most recent exercise, the French Coastguard sent 2 observers. The exercises have been hugely successful not in only in terms of training for our crews but also to test and develop new procedures, techniques and rescue equipment and it is intended that the exercises will take place once a year. Next year (2025) it is hoped to include a UK Border Force asset and crew within the exercise scenarios.



Picture of RNLI crews and Lifeguards exercising in mass person in the water rescue in October 2024 – Source RNLI.

Recommendations

69. The Enquiry has invited the RNLI to suggest areas that may invite attention or improvement. In that respect the RNLI would invite consideration in the following areas:

Interoperability

70. The RNLI believe there is a clear requirement to develop interoperability between both UK SAR Partners and French SAR capability. This should be based on a train as you operate and operate as you train concept. On the UK front, SAR assets declared to the Coastguard should explore greater interoperability especially around multi-asset incident response, cross- decking of casualties and on scene command and / or control. To date no formal joint exercising between UK Coastguard, UK Border Force and the RNLI has occurred. Whilst on a UK and French interoperability, consideration should be given for a joint exercise involving SAR partners from both countries that would seek to test interoperability, share

learning and develop command, control and coordination within a multi agency response sceanrio(s).

71. RNLI assets now undertake rescue activity within French territorial waters. This is largely done under SOLAS albeit under the tasking control of the UK Coastguard. The likelihood is that the RNLI will continue to be tasked to undertake SAR within French territorial waters and this would therefore invite the development greater interoperability and communication protocols between UK and French agencies.

Bespoke Search and Rescue Capability

72. As outlined in this Statement. The UK Border Force interact / rescue the majority of small boast crossing. However, UK Border Force undertake this activity with chartered vessels designed for wind farm support with crews not trained in SAR. This prevents risk to both the UK Border Force and RNLI. The RNLI believe that greater consideration should be given to longer term investment in more bespoke assets optimised for small boat crossing rescue crewed by SAR trained crews. This capability can then be supported on tasking by the RNLI as required.

Maritime Law and / Policy on Mass Persons in the Water Rescue

73. Unlike the land environment, there is no real policy or legal framework to support triage and rescue for a mass person in the water event. Going forward, the absence of such policy may present a legal risk to SAR agencies responding to such incidents. The RNLI would welcome the development of a framework that provides a legally permissive environment for mass person in the water SAR.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Dated: 14 November 2024