

Witness Name: Stuart Downs
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: SD/01-SD/09
Dated: 01st December 2024

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF STUART DOWNS

I, Stuart Downs, former Maritime Operations Officer (“MOO”) based at H.M. Coastguard, Dover Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, Langdon Battery, St. Margaret's at Cliffe, Dover CT15 5NA will say as follows:

Introduction and background

1. I make this statement in my capacity as a former employee of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (the “MCA”) employed at the time of the events of 23rd/24th November 2021, and in response to a witness evidence request dated 30th July 2024. I am authorised to make this statement on behalf of the MCA.
2. I joined H.M. Coastguard at Dover Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (“MRCC Dover”) on 15th March 2021 in the junior role of Trainee MOO. My first shift at MRCC Dover was on 24th March 2021.
3. I completed the standard MOO training package in October 2021, and I remained as a MOO until leaving H.M. Coastguard on 13th June 2022, moving to another post within the Civil Service.

Training

4. I was trained at MRCC Dover by instructors from H.M. Coastguard's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Fareham, Hampshire ("JRCC Fareham") and by other personnel from Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Stornoway as well as from MRCC Dover.
5. Training for the role comprised completing and passing formal courses and practical experience, which was work shadowing MOOs who had completed their training, Senior Maritime Operations Officers ("SMOOs"), shift Team Leaders and Search Mission Coordinators ("SMCs") during shifts, and watching the workings of the Search and Rescue Operations Room ("SAR Operations Room") at MRCC Dover.
6. The formal courses to be completed and passed by a Trainee MOO were:
 - Communications (taking 999 calls and monitoring VHF maritime radio Channel 16 for Mayday messages)
 - Land Navigation and Search (missing/vulnerable persons)
 - Chartwork (Elementary)
 - Introduction to Incident Management
 - Vessel Traffic Monitoring (Monitoring commercial shipping)
 - Nautical Knowledge (Online self-taught package)
7. Trainee MOOs were required to pass tests at the end of each course.

8. The first course that I completed and passed was Communications, in April 2021. This meant that I was qualified to answer 999 calls.
9. There was no formal training course regarding dealing with migrant small boat incidents. I was told by one of the shift Team Leaders, Neal Gibson, when I first joined MRCC Dover and prior to joining his team, that this was because migrants attempting to cross the English Channel in small boats was, in maritime terms, a fairly recent phenomenon that had only been going on for about 4 years.
10. I have been shown some copies of Standard Operating Procedures ("SOPs") in respect of small boats that were in place as at 23rd/24th November 2021, but I do not remember these documents. One example is the SOP called "*Incidents Involving Migrants*" at **SD/01 [INQ000428]**.
11. If these SOPs were available on the Coastguard Information Portal or "CIP", I would have read them. I looked at CIP on a regular basis. If there was no formal training course on a topic, CIP was the fall back for locating guidance.
12. Not having a formal training course on a particular topic was not unusual, and nor was self-briefing on a topic using guidance on CIP. For example, when I was providing cover remotely for the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Aberdeen and I did not know anything about oil rigs, I found relevant guidance on CIP.
13. Neal Gibson also gave an overview of the situation with small boats as part of my work shadowing during shifts in the first week. The approach to these incidents was based on what people had picked up on the job and the practice had evolved from there.

14. Save for updating the UK Migrant Tracker or utilising the H.M. Coastguard mobile telephone, small boat incidents were, from a MOO perspective, handled as with any other incident, in that MOOs would act on the direction of the on-shift SMC.

15. The H.M. Coastguard mobile telephone was located in the SAR Operations Room at MRCC Dover and it was used to obtain location information via WhatsApp. I will explain this in more detail in the paragraphs below.

Role and Structure - General

16. As a MOO, the role consisted of answering routine and 999 calls; monitoring VHF maritime radio Channel 16 for Mayday calls; creating and updating incident logs on ViSION; coaching and training the trainee MOO assigned to each shift; providing support to the Team Leader in charge of the shift and following the direction of the Team Leader, the on-duty Search Mission Coordinator ("SMC") and other senior personnel.

17. A copy of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency Role Profile for a MOO is at **SD/02 [INQ003256]**.

18. I served on the Search and Rescue ("SAR") team in the SAR Operations Room at MRCC Dover. There was also a Vessel Traffic Services ("VTS") team at MRCC Dover and this team shared the SAR Operations Room with the SAR team. I did not serve on the VTS team because I was not trained in VTS.

19. The MRCC Dover SAR team was made up of 4 teams. I originally joined Team 2 but, because of high staff turnover, I was moved to Team 3. I was in Team 3 on the night of 23rd/24th November 2021.
20. Each team worked a shift pattern of two 12-hour day shifts (07.30 to 19.30), followed immediately by two 12-hour night shifts (19.30 to 07.30), followed by four consecutive days off.
21. Each shift was split into 1.5-hour slots. Different tasks were undertaken for 1.5 hours at a time. For example, I would answer routine calls for 1.5 hours. I would then monitor VHF maritime radio Channel 16 for Mayday calls for 1.5 hours, and so on.
22. We were permitted to take one break of 1.5 hours in total during each shift. Breaks could not be taken in the first 1.5 hours or last 1.5 hours of each shift. We could not all take a break at the same time.
23. The structure of each team should have been as follows:
- a. Shift Team Leader, who could also be the on-duty SMC
 - b. SMOO
 - c. MOO
 - d. Trainee MOO
24. The on-duty SMC could be physically at MRCC Dover or stationed remotely at any one of the other Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres around the UK, or at JRCC Fareham. This was known as "zone-flexing". Remote on-duty SMCs could provide

temporary cover for physically on-shift, on-duty SMCs during their 1.5-hour break or when the on-site, on-duty SMC was providing cover for another team.

25. Handovers between shifts took place between the outgoing and incoming shift Team Leaders only. The incoming shift's Team Leader would then update their shift team and allocate tasks for the first 1.5 hours of the shift. I understand that before the Covid-19 pandemic, the whole incoming shift team would be briefed by the outgoing shift's Team Leader, but this was not permitted when I joined to avoid groups of people congregating.

26. There were no formal handovers between outgoing and incoming MOOs.

27. The incoming shift would need to login, get settled and begin working before the outgoing shift could leave, to ensure that there was no period between shifts during which routine and 999 calls were left unanswered or when VHF maritime Channel 16 was not being monitored for Mayday calls. In November 2021, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the incoming shift would login at a spare desk in the SAR Operations Room. I would describe it as a "one in, one out" process.

Role and Structure – Night shift on 23rd/24th November 2021

28. For the events of the night of 23rd/24th November 2021, my shift team structure was as follows:

- a. Shift Team Leader and on-duty SMC: Neal Gibson
- b. MOO: Myself
- c. Trainee MOO: TRAINEE MOO

29. Neal Gibson as shift Team Leader and on-duty SMC "had the room", (i.e. he was in charge of our duties that night).

30. I have been shown the National Network Management Log for the period 00.00 to 23.59 on 23rd November 2021 and it confirms this shift team composition in the entry made by Neal Gibson at 19:44.13 for MRCC Dover. This starts at page 22 of 28 of **SD/03 [INQ000231]**.

31. My role and the role of **TRAINEE MOO** was to assist Neal Gibson for the 12-hour duty from 19:30 on 23rd November 2021 to 07:30 on 24th November 2021. The three of us sat together, with **TRAINEE MOO** sat between Neal Gibson and I.

32. I was supervised by Neal Gibson. I was not responsible for the supervision of **TRAINEE MOO**. She was also supervised by Neal Gibson.

33. I do not recall whether there was any additional support on-site at MRCC Dover during the night of 23rd/24th November 2021 and before Richard Cockerill, who was a Team Leader, joined the shift. There was some remote support from JRCC Fareham ("zone-flexing") when we were overwhelmed with calls.

34. I cannot recall if Richard Cockerill joined the night shift in person at MRCC Dover at 05:00 on 24th November 2021 or if he joined remotely from his base at JRCC Fareham. I do not recall any handover that he received from Neal Gibson or anyone else.

35. I do not recall whether or not I had a break during the 12-hour duty. This would have been recorded by Neal Gibson.

36. I do not recall, other than for essential toilet breaks, that Neal Gibson in his role as on-duty SMC was physically absent from the SAR Operations Room at any point as we were overwhelmed by call volume. However, at page 23 of 28 of **SD/03 [INQ000231]** I note that Neal Gibson made a request for SMC support for MRCC Dover for 4.5 hours. This would have been to cover his 1.5-hour break and 3-hour shift providing cover for the VTS team's breaks. He would have remained physically in the SAR Operations Room during the 3-hour period with the VTS team, because the SAR team and the VTS team shared the SAR Operations Room, but he would not have been the on-duty SMC for the SAR team during his 4.5 hours of cover for the VTS team and his break. The on-duty SMC role was covered by Tom Barnett remotely from JRCC Fareham.

37. The shift was too busy for us to stop and catch-up verbally, so I made sure that ViSION was kept up-to-date, and Neal Gibson would be constantly reviewing ViSION. As a shift team we did have conversations about the calls that we were getting, but these were in the margins and not the primary means of exchanging information about incidents during the shift.

38. As mentioned above, at the commencement of a shift, the outgoing shift's Team Leader would hand over to the incoming replacement to maintain a consistent operational picture, who in turn would pass on information they felt relevant to their shift team once settled in.

39. I do not recall the handover from the day shift on 23rd November 2021 to my night shift on 23rd November 2021, nor do I remember Neal Gibson's handover to the day shift on the morning of 24th November 2021.

40. I did not provide a handover to any member of the incoming shift team on the morning of 24th November 2021.

41. I also do not recall receiving a handover when I started my night shift on 23rd November 2021. However, an incoming shift Team Leader's handover briefing to his or her incoming shift team normally consisted of assigning who would be doing what, when breaks were to be taken and confirming if any coverage was to be provided by the SAR team to the VTS team who shared the SAR Operations Room at MRCC Dover.

Staffing levels at MRCC Dover and the impact on the response to small boat activity

42. 2021 was my first year in the role of MOO and I was new to MRCC Dover. I could not really make any comparisons between the numbers of small boat crossings in 2021 and the numbers prior to this. To me, the numbers were normal because I did not know any different.

43. However, I was aware from conversations at work and from media coverage that the situation was worsening and quickly. It was for this reason that it was quite concerning that the systems at MRCC Dover had not really adapted to deal with it.

44. I was advised that the number of small boat crossings were increasing, in relation to numbers of craft and therefore overall numbers rather than larger numbers of people in less boats. It was the large number of boats and multiple calls from the same boat which generated a confused picture as to the number of actual incidents. There could be three or four calls from what transpired to be the same boat, but which gave differing descriptions, number of persons on the boat, type of boat etc., so it would appear that there were many more boats than there actually were. This did have an impact on my role.

45. In terms of staffing levels, there was a high turnover of personnel at MRCC Dover and staff retention was a problem. People were having to come in from other Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres in the network and from JRCC Fareham to provide cover for MRCC Dover and to learn about small boats. They were there to provide support and to gain experience.

46. I recall that there was an advertisement for a secondment to MRCC Dover, but I am not sure if this was before or after the events of 23rd/ 24th November 2021.

47. The staffing levels and what organisationally H.M. Coastguard was comfortable with surprised me. We routinely "zone-flexed" with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Humber to address this. This meant that on numerous occasions we were being provided with remote cover by members of the SAR team based at the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Humber.

48. There were shortages of MOOs and SMOOs across all the SAR shift teams at MRCC Dover. I was moved from my original shift team to Team 3 because of the numbers of personnel leaving and the speed of the turnover of those staff.
49. Others did comment about the shortages of personnel to deal with the tempo of crossings, but how that was raised with, and managed by, the leadership, I am not aware. Any concerns raised were covered off with the fact that other Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres in the network and JRCC Fareham would support via "zone-flexing" and that though busy, operating with shortages of personnel was routine for MRCC Dover.
50. The staffing level on the night of 23rd/24th November 2021 did seem low, but only one below what I had come to expect. We did not have a SMOO on our team. I had been on duty before with lower staffing levels. I did raise some concerns regarding these working practices, but I do not think that my observations were well received.
51. For example, I have worked a full 12-hour shift on my own in the SAR Operations Room at MRCC Dover. I linked into the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre at Humber and I supported their work. The shift team in Humber took over the SAR team's work in MRCC Dover due to the shortage of staff.
52. When I was a Trainee MOO, I dealt with an incident involving a fatality with help only from another Trainee MOO who was on duty with me at MRCC Dover. I received welfare support following this incident, but I did not find it very helpful because the overriding message was that we cannot save everyone.

53. I think that staff shortages impacted how we responded to small boat activity. It meant that we could not necessarily follow all the relevant processes. For example, mission statements (which are plans of action to respond to an incident) were being recorded on ViSION after a rescue had been effected because calls would take precedence. Also, the on-duty SMC would be answering calls and listening to VHF maritime radio Channel 16 instead of focussing completely on the role of SMC. It almost paralysed the H.M. Coastguard operating structure because call volume was so great that the structure could not cope with all of the incoming information, let alone process that information. We became accustomed to this, but it did mean that we could not action things as perhaps would have been optimal because the resources were not there to do that.

Gaps in communication coverage in the Dover Strait

54. The issues with Airwave coverage and mobile telephone coverage set out below are well known amongst staff at MRCC Dover and at JRCC Fareham. UK Border Force is also aware of them.

Airwave coverage

55. There are gaps in radio communication coverage for the secure Airwave system utilised by UK Border Force and H.M. Coastguard, however I do not recall whether I knew this on the night of 23rd/24th November 2021 or subsequently. The gaps have existed since the inception of Airwave coverage.

56. The Airwave system was installed for use by land-based fire, police and ambulance services in the UK, and it is transmitted from the UK. It is not designed to be used

in the maritime environment or to provide coverage in the English Channel. However, fortuitously due to the narrowness of the English Channel, coverage can be obtained out to sea.

57. There is a gap in Airwave coverage in the Dover Strait in the Bullock Bank area.

This is to the south of the Dover Strait, off the Dungeness area of the English coast.

There is also a smaller area to the north of the Dover Strait, off the Essex coast, called the Sandettie Bank, where Airwave does not work.

58. The Bullock Bank Airwave blackspot is about 4 times the size of the northern blackspot off the Essex coast. There tends to be fewer migrant crossings in the area of the smaller black spot to the north.

59. Airwave coverage is very consistent in the UK Search and Rescue Region within the Dover Strait, save for these two blackspots.

60. Part of the boundary between the UK and French Search and Rescue Regions is located in the Bullock Bank area. The UK Search and Rescue Region extends some way into French territorial waters in this location.

Mobile telephone coverage

61. Mobile phone coverage in the Dover Strait is very variable. Coverage depends on the weather conditions, the location of the vessel and how low the vessel is to the water. It also depends on the mobile telephone and the network used. Small boats tend to be very low to the water, and the White Cliffs of Dover can interrupt the UK mobile phone signal.

VHF maritime radio Channels 0 and 16

62. Coverage on these maritime radio channels works everywhere in the Dover Strait.

However, migrants on small boats do not have access to these maritime radio channels because they do not carry marine radios.

63. The fact that small boats do not carry maritime radios precludes the use of VHF direction finding equipment by MRCC Dover.

MRCC Dover's working relationship with Gris-Nez as at 23rd/24th November 2021

64. The working relationship between MRCC Dover and the French equivalent of a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre at Gris-Nez was amiable but not particularly interactive or collaborative.

65. The majority of communication would be via Gris-Nez emailing copies of its French Migrant Tracker to MRCC Dover. I do not believe it was a live document as at 23rd/24th November 2021 and it could only be obtained when they emailed it across to us. The arrival of the French Migrant Tracker would be one of the first indications from the French Coastguard of small boat crossings, with both the French and the UK focussing on their respective Search and Rescue Regions.

66. I would describe the relationship as reactive rather than proactive. For example, if we saw a French Government boat moving in French territorial waters, we would ring Gris-Nez and ask them if something was going on. This might then lead to Gris-Nez sending its French Migrant Tracker to MRCC Dover.

67. Language was also a difficulty. The international maritime language is English, but local Gris-Nez radio communications, which we could hear, were in French. Sometimes we took an educated guess about whether or not something was going on and then we would call Gris-Nez to get some more information. This might then lead to Gris-Nez sending us the French Migrant Tracker.

68. The difference in approach to small boats by the French and UK authorities in their respective Search and Rescue Regions also meant that the working relationship was not very joined up. The French authorities will follow a small boat to the edge of the French Search and Rescue Region. Also, migrants in small boats do not want to be rescued by French vessels.

69. A small boat in the UK Search and Rescue Region will automatically get a distress phase categorisation given to it by H.M. Coastguard regardless of whether or not the small boat is sinking. "Distress" means that a vessel is in grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance.

Incident "Charlie" on the night of 23rd/24th November 2021

Call collection - general

70. Call collection means answering a call in whatever form it is received. It can be a routine telephone call, a 999 call, a message received via Airwave radio, or a Mayday call on VHF maritime radio Channel 16.

71. 999 calls, routine calls, Airwave messages and Mayday calls on VHF maritime radio Channel 16 will be recorded by H.M. Coastguard, so long as they come through the Integrated Command and Control System ("ICCS").

72. On the night of the 23rd/24th November 2021, I believe that monitoring of VHF maritime radio Channel 16 for Mayday calls would have been passed to JRCC Fareham because of the volume of telephone calls that we were receiving.

73. All 3 of us on shift were needed to answer telephone calls and operate WhatsApp on H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone. I believe that **TRAINEE MOO** was not able to answer 999 calls or monitor VHF maritime radio Channel 16 for Mayday calls because I do not think that she had completed her MOO formal communications training. This would mean that answering the 999 calls at MRCC Dover would have fallen to Neal Gibson and I. **TRAINEE MOO** was answering routine calls only and she also operated H.M. Coastguard's WhatsApp account.

74. As stated above, I do not recall receiving any formal training in relation to call collection from small boats. I would have been aware of any relevant material uploaded to CIP because I checked CIP regularly.

Call collection - 999 calls

75. 999 calls had a distinctive ring tone, and a box on our computer screens flashed red when a 999 call was in-coming. This distinguishes them from routine calls. Another distinguishing factor is how a H.M Coastguard operator answers a 999 call when compared to a routine call. The H.M. Coastguard operator answers a 999 call with "*Coastguard Rescue*", whereas the H.M. Coastguard operator answers a

routine call with "*UK Coastguard*". 999 calls can also allow MRCC Dover to establish the position of the caller using a mapping system.

76. We were not permitted to hang up a 999 call. We learnt this as part of the formal MOO communications training course.

77. If more than one 999 call is received, it should be picked up by MRCC Dover. If it is not, it should be picked up by another Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in the network or by JRCC Fareham. If there are a limited number of people available to answer 999 calls, it makes it difficult to answer all 999 calls, particularly because we are not permitted to hang up a 999 call even when sufficient call collection has taken place (i.e. the call has been answered and there is nothing more that can be obtained from the call).

Call collection - Routine calls

78. Routine calls are all non-999 calls and include calls from the general public enquiring about the state of the tides and calls to and from Gris-Nez. TRAINEE MOO was able to answer routine calls and would, therefore, have been able to speak to Gris-Nez during the night of 23rd/24th November 2021. As outlined above, the way a H.M. Coastguard operator answers a routine call is different to how they answer a 999 call.

79. On the night of 23rd/24th November 2021, there was a short period during which migrants in small boats were calling Dover Port Control. This was unusual and

may have been as a result of the briefings being given that night by the organised crime groups facilitating the crossings. This was an issue for my shift team because calls to MRCC Dover from Dover Port Control were categorised as routine calls and not prioritised as 999 calls.

80. As outlined above, **TRAINEE MOO** was answering routine calls because there was no one else to take them.

Call collection – H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone and WhatsApp

81. MRCC Dover also had a mobile telephone that was used only to send and receive WhatsApp messages to and from small boats and as a means of trying to establish the position of small boats. The H.M. Coastguard mobile telephone was located at MRCC Dover in the SAR Operations Room.

82. I do not think that WhatsApp was being used when I first started working at MRCC Dover. I think that the use of WhatsApp evolved over a period time as a means of dealing with the growing numbers of small boats.

83. The use of WhatsApp was a local practice that had developed in MRCC Dover and WhatsApp was only used in MRCC Dover. I do not recall there being any formal training in its use during the MOO Communications training module, or a specific written procedure or policy for its use. I knew how it was used by word of mouth. However, I have been shown a copy of a SOP called “CGOC *Dover*

WhatsApp Usage” SD/04 [INQ006747], but I do not recall seeing this document before.

84. On the 23rd/24th November 2021, **TRAINEE MOO** operated H.M. Coastguard's WhatsApp account because she was not able to answer 999 calls, and she was very proficient in the use of WhatsApp. It was a logical division of labour for the shift team.

85. We had been briefed not to answer any telephone calls to H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone. As far as I am aware, if the mobile telephone rang, it was ignored. This is because none of the calls would be recorded via ICCS. Its sole purpose was to be used to send and receive WhatsApp messages.

86. I believe that the brief not to answer H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone was given verbally. I do not know if anything was written down.

87. I do not know why the call to H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone at 02:17 on 24th November 2021 was answered or who answered it. I do not recall the call being received or answered. We had been told not to answer calls to H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone for the reasons set out above. I do not know why there is no ViSION entry for this call.

88. I do not recall the calls to H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone at 02:57 and 03:12 on 24th November 2021 at all. I do not know why they went unanswered other than to comment again that we had been told not to answer calls to H.M. Coastguard's mobile telephone.

89. I do not know why the WhatsApp position received at 02:21 on 24th November 2021 was not actioned until 03:28 on 24th November 2021.

Call collection – 999 calls from small boats

90. 999 call collection from small boats was the same as for any 999 call and was managed in the same way by inputting information from the caller into ViSION. However, we would also update the UK Migrant Tracker. On receipt of a 999 call, we would try to establish the position of the vessel, number of persons on board, which beach they had left from, a description of the vessel and whether any lifesaving equipment was available/being worn. This information was sought in order to try to work out which incident was which and to know how many persons were on board in case of an issue. An example of the questions to be asked of the caller can be found in the "Information Gathering" section of the SOP called "*Incidents Involving Migrants*" at **SD/01 [INQ000428]**.

91. I believe that some of the most important information to be obtained from a call from a small boat, whether or not it is a 999 call, is:

- a. Where did it set off from and when? With this information it is possible to work out roughly where the vessel is, based on tides, likely speed and drift etc.
- b. How many people are on board? This helps search and rescue assets to know how many people to look for.

- c. Does the vessel have any distinguishing features, such as colour? Again, this helps search and rescue assets to identify vessels.
- d. Does the vessel have lifejackets and are they being worn? If not, we can prioritise the provision of search and rescue assets to vessels without lifesaving equipment on board.
- e. Are there any medical concerns or signs of distress? This helps with prioritising the deployment of search and rescue assets.
- f. Can the caller see any other vessels and if so, do they have any markings? For example, if a caller can see a ferry and tell us what ferry line it is, we can use this information to triangulate it with what we can see on the maritime traffic system to come up with a location.

92. An example of me asking these types of questions can be seen in the Incident Header on page 1 of incident log 041393-24112021 at **SD/05 [INQ000245]**.

Call collection – updating colleagues

93. The ViSION system and the UK Migrant Tracker were updated when new incidents, or incidents which could not be attributed to an existing incident were created. Due to the nature of the calls being received from small boats, there were routinely more incidents on ViSION or in the UK Migrant Tracker than there were in reality.

94. Generally, shift team members were updated about the content of the calls being received from small boats verbally or by an entry being made into the ViSION system. The information inputted into the ViSION system could also be seen by colleagues across the wider Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre network and at JRCC Fareham.

95. On the night of 23rd/24th November 2021, there would have been some verbal communication amongst my shift team, but updates were largely made through ViSION in order that all information was recorded and could be seen by others, particularly by Neal Gibson who was going through all of the incidents on ViSION throughout the night, and Tom Barnett when he provided on-duty SMC cover for Neal Gibson. All of us in the shift team were so busy that there was limited or no opportunity to update each other verbally.

Call at or around 02.31 on 24th November 2021 with "Mubin"

96. Once the shift became busy with calls, I was aware of Neal Gibson talking loudly with someone who it sounded like he was calling "Moomin". I do not know if this was a 999 call or a routine call. The conversation appeared to be animated. If Neal Gibson had not repeated Mubin's name several times, while I would have heard the call because of the raised voice, I would not have been aware of specifically who was on the call.

97. It was at this time when Tom Barnett from JRCC Fareham called on the iPad asking to speak to Neal Gibson, and I said that he was engaged on the phone with

someone called "Moomin". In fact, I recall saying something like "he is having a row with someone called Moomin". I passed the message to call Tom Barnett back on to Neal Gibson when he was free from the call with Mubin.

98. During the call with Mubin, it was clear that Neal Gibson was having difficulty communicating with him. It is not for me to second guess what was in Neal Gibson's mind regarding telling Mubin not to keep calling H.M. Coastguard, but I would imagine it came from a position of frustration because there were multiple calls going unanswered and demand was outstripping our capacity to action them.

99. Moreover, it is routine for callers to state that they are in distress, that their situation is worsening, that the boat is sinking and that they are drowning in order to elicit a response, though simply saying that they are in a dinghy in the Channel would in itself generate a search and rescue response.

100. When search and rescue assets arrive on scene the situation is often not as described by the caller. This, therefore, clouds the issue making it fairly impossible on the call alone for the call-taker to work out whether the vessel is actually in imminent danger or not with all/most callers stating the worst with every call. It is therefore difficult for the on-duty SMC to identify which of the limited search and rescue assets to prioritise to which incident.

101. I do not know why Neal Gibson said that HMC Valiant from UK Border Force would arrive within half an hour, nor why an updated position was not obtained.

Call at or around 03:12 on 24th November 2021

102. I have been shown a copy of incident log 041397-24112021 at **SD/06 [INQ000249]**. This confirms that I took a call at 03:12:07 on 24th November 2021.

103. I have also been given the opportunity to listen to the audio recording of this call **SD/07** INQ007658 I do not remember the call.

104. The detail in the incident header on page 1 of 4 at **SD/06 [INQ000249]** was updated at 03:17. I believe that this was an update by the ViSION system at this time rather than me inputting the information into ViSION at 03:17. The spelling mistakes in the header suggest that I was typing at speed while speaking to the caller when I first answered the call. When the call cut out, I was still completing the initial call collection.

105. During the initial call collection, I would also have been listening to any background noise, which may have provided an indication as to the status of the vessel.

106. I have noted upon listening to the audio recording of this call that it did not sound particularly different to many other calls that I have dealt with.

107. At 03:17:09, on page 2 of 4 at **SD/06 [INQ000249]**, the message in the log is "*Call Collection Incident repositioned to 1.34327042102814, 51.132999420166.*" This long number is the location of MRCC Dover.

108. The whole ViSION system was designed to deal with, for example, an oil tanker in difficulty in the English Channel and from which we would get a position during call collection. If we cannot get an initial location, we position the vessel on top of

the building in which MRCC Dover is located and then reposition the vessel to where it actually is once that information becomes available. This was because, at the time, my understanding was that you had to provide a position to create an incident in the ViSION system, and without having created an incident you could not progress it.

109. However, some months following the incident, I found out, as did other colleagues at MRCC Dover, that you could force an incident to be created without a position. A MOO on attachment from Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Humber advised us that it was a practice that they routinely used as it would allow search and rescue assets to be tasked more quickly, with the positioning following later.

110. I have also subsequently learnt that the practice of positioning a vessel on top of the MRCC Dover building originated at MRCC Dover as a means of dealing with small boat incidents, because the exact position of the small boat was unlikely to be known at the point of call collection.

111. I did attempt to obtain an updated position from the caller, but the line cut off before I could do this successfully. It is extremely important to find the location of a vessel because the location of a vessel makes a difference to its classification for search and rescue purposes, but it is difficult to do this when you are speaking to someone whose first language is not English and who is not a mariner. I was trying to use plain, simple English in a calm and open manner to establish the caller's position.

112. I believe that the caller must have been told to call 999 by someone and that he had already done so, and the call had failed to connect. This is because the caller said that 999 did not work.

113. With regard to asking the caller to hang up and dial 999, this would be an attempt to obtain a more accurate position using the 999 call system. One of the systems that was extremely valuable in these incidents is the 999/112 call origin location function. For example, when test calls are made to 999/112, the location function zooms in, and one can even see which desk the person is at who is making the test call. I once used this function to locate a vulnerable elderly man who thought that he was on top of cliffs in the dark, but he turned out to be in a dark rugby field in Leicestershire; he was safely located by Leicestershire Constabulary based on the information we provided.

114. Any request to call 999 was not a part of the formal MOO communications training but it was standard practice to try and establish an accurate position. It would be unusual for a small boat to be able to provide (especially at night) an accurate position of where it is during a routine call as the migrants do not normally have navigational equipment with them, therefore the 999-mapping location system is the most accurate way of determining someone's position. However, the further away the caller is from the UK, and the shorter the length of the call, the less accurate the position will be.

115. Explaining to a caller why 999 calls are not connecting is something that I would often do. Often migrants call and say that they are near the UK when in fact they are still off the French coast. As the 999 system is a UK one, calls that do not connect would mean that the caller is still within the coverage of the French mobile

telephone network rather than the UK one, so making them more likely to be in French territorial waters. This also gives an indication of which Search and Rescue Region to begin to look for them in. Even being able to narrow down a small boat's position to the correct half of the English Channel (French territorial waters or UK territorial waters) is useful.

116. From listening to the call, it has been identified that I asked "*Have you just called?*" I cannot recall if I asked that because I recognised the person's voice.

117. "*Have you just called?*" is a question we asked regularly to ascertain if it was a repeat call, to try to avoid creating another incident in ViSION when one had already been raised. This would create duplication in ViSION, which could result in information not being added to existing incidents and potentially divert search and rescue resources away from other incidents.

118. I cannot recall if this practice started before or after the incident, but once an incident had been identified as "Echo" for example, the person who called would be told by the H.M. Coastguard operator to use that term if they called again, so that we would know when they called back it was incident "Echo". This meant we could start updating the existing incident log for "Echo", instead of starting a new incident. This was to try and stop unnecessary repeats and it, therefore, meant that not all calls resulted in a new incident log being created.

119. I do not remember why the call was closed by me at 03:21:45 as a repeat of incident reference 041382-24112021, but I would not have been able to close it without Neal Gibson's permission. MOOs are not authorised to close calls.

120. Finally, my understanding is that it was normal for migrants who had been rescued from small boats to get rid of their mobile telephones by throwing them in the water, to avoid any means of tracing the people facilitating the crossings. If a caller could not be contacted using a mobile telephone number that had previously worked, it could have meant that the caller had been rescued and the telephone had been thrown into the water, or the signal was poor. We could not call a person back and ask if they were on board a rescue boat, because if they were, they had probably got rid of their phone.

Location and position information provided to MRCC Dover

121. All location and position information was updated in ViSION along with any other source data that was obtained. TRAINEE MOO may have given me location and position information from WhatsApp, and I would have put that into ViSION. We did not treat location and position information gleaned from WhatsApp any differently to other sources of information. It should all be put into ViSION for the on-duty SMC to review.

122. As stated above, if there was no location and position information at the point of call collection, the call would be positioned with the coordinates to locate the vessel on top of the MRCC Dover building. It also indicated to other people using ViSION that we did not have a position for the incident and that one was needed.

The location would be changed if and when more accurate information was provided.

123. The on-duty SMC would use location and position information to triage incidents and to make decisions about deployment of search and rescue assets. Decisions on the accuracy of location and position information were also made by the on-duty SMC.

124. My role as MOO was to capture location and position information and update ViSION with all the information received from all sources to enable the on-duty SMC to review it and make decisions about the accuracy of the information and deployment of search and rescue assets.

125. There was not really a system for grading the accuracy and usefulness of location and position information. The most accurate information was provided by the 999-call system. The accuracy of position information obtained through WhatsApp depended on the location of the caller in the Dover Strait and the strength of the mobile telephone signal. There was no way to verify it.

126. A WhatsApp position followed by a 999 call from the same vessel would enable us to triangulate the position of the vessel via mobile telephone masts, but it was unusual to get both a WhatsApp message and a 999 call from the same vessel. Sometimes the only location and position information we had was from WhatsApp.

Impact of the content of calls from small boats as at November 2021

127. In my experience, the majority of callers from small boats make multiple calls overstating the level of distress that they are in, that there are women and children on board, often that the boat is sinking, that they are in the water and that they are going to drown. I have seen copies of the leaflets given to migrants, which use pictures to explain what to say and who to call.

128. I have also heard frequent references to the "white mountains", which are the cliffs at Dover, and to "the masts", which are the two radio masts situated behind MRCC Dover. Being able to see the White Cliffs of Dover does not mean that a vessel is close to Dover. It is possible to see the cliffs from France on a clear day. If the radio masts are not visible, it could mean that the vessel is too close to the bottom of the cliff and the view is obscured.

129. I have also experienced callers making adverse comments about my family and saying that I will have to live with it if they all die.

130. It makes it very difficult to know which search and rescue asset to send to which vessel when all of the callers are saying the same thing. When search and rescue assets arrive, the situation is often not as described. The on-duty SMC's job was made more difficult because of this and forming an accurate operational picture was almost impossible.

131. If we received information that migrants in one boat were wearing lifejackets and migrants in another boat were not, the boat without lifejackets would have

received assistance first. If there is nothing to differentiate between the circumstances of the small boats from which calls are being received, a search and rescue asset would be deployed to the closest small boat first. However, assets would be sent to all small boats.

132. There was no specific training about how to deal with the content of calls from small boats. I learnt how to deal with it from taking calls and work shadowing more experienced colleagues. About a week into starting shift work, I was advised of what callers would say.

133. There is no need to overstate the situation for H.M. Coastguard to deploy search and rescue assets.

Mayday Relay

134. On the night of 23rd/24th November 2021, I thought it was unusual that Neal Gibson as on-duty SMC did a Mayday relay on behalf of what I now know was incident "Charlie". A Mayday relay is an emergency radio call to all vessels in the area made on behalf of someone who you know to be in distress, but they have no means of making that distress call themselves, or an emergency radio call to alert other vessels to the distress situation. Something must have stood out to Neal Gibson from the information on ViSION, and from what was being said in the calls that night, for him to do this. He did not do this for any other incident that night.

135. It is unusual to make a Mayday relay for a migrant crossing despite their automatic classification as being in the "distress" phase as soon as the small boat crosses into the UK SAR Region.

136. I do not recall that at any point in the shift I formed an opinion that there were persons in the water, but I was aware that Neal Gibson had taken the unusual step of issuing a Mayday Relay.

"Controller Message" recorded on incident log 041382-24112021

137. I have been shown a copy of incident log 041382-24112021 at **SD/08 [INQ000235]**, but I do not recall the Controller Message at page 3 of 21, or being aware of it at the time it was broadcast.

138. If there were no air search and rescue assets, such a message would be a statement of the situation and one which I would have expected to have been addressed at the Controller/Commander level. In the junior position of MOO, maintaining professionalism and focussing on the mission at hand was all that I could do; rostering/resourcing not being within my control. Even if I were aware of this message, I would not have changed my approach to the incident. I did the best I could with what was available to me.

Reconciliation and closure of incidents

139. With regard to reconciling, linking and closing incidents, this was something normally carried out, and sanctioned, by the on-duty SMC. I do not recall reconciling any duplicate incidents. If I did link or close any incidents, it would have

been done at the request of Neal Gibson and because the small boat in question had been recovered. I was not authorised to close incidents without direction.

140. Having been given an opportunity to review relevant incident logs, I now know that reconciliation of incidents was carried out by James Crane (the Team Leader and SMC for the day shift on 24th November 2021), George Papadopoulos (a Team Leader and SMC) and another person at JRCC Fareham.

141. I do not recall having any conversations with any of my colleagues during the night of 23rd/24th November 2021 in relation to incident "Charlie", including about any conclusion that I had arrived at about it being rescued or not. Neal Gibson as on-duty SMC was busy all night and I was using ViSION as the primary means of communicating with him, my other shift team members and JRCC Fareham, who were also looking at ViSION. Neal Gibson was constantly going through the logs on ViSION. If there were any discussions, they were in the margins. I understand that the Mayday relay made by Neal Gibson was noted in ViSION, but the first I was aware of it on the night in question was when I heard Neal Gibson making the Mayday relay on the radio.

142. When I finished the night shift on 23rd/24th November 2021, I understood that all vessels were accounted for.

143. It was not until returning for duty at MRCC Dover for the night shift on 24th/ 25th November that I was aware from talk in the SAR Operations Room of the incident involving a small boat having sunk. I was not aware until sometime later that it was incident "Charlie".

Other matters

144. I was spoken to individually by Julie-Anne Wood from H.M. Coastguard. A copy of the notes of this meeting are at **SD/09 [INQ004725]**

Post-incident support

145. At the start of the night shift on 24th/25th November 2021, I thought that the incident on 23rd/24th November 2021 had taken place during the day shift on 23rd/24th November 2021 and it was a new incident. I cannot remember when people started to join the dots and realise it was incident "Charlie" and not a new incident. It was about a week or so after the incident that I became aware of people beginning to ask questions about it. I remember that the Chief Coastguard came to MRCC Dover.
146. We were advised that we could speak with the Coastal Commander at MRCC Dover for welfare support, but I did not feel that it was appropriate, and I did not want to speak to him.
147. The Coastal Commander arrived at the start of a night shift about a week after incident "Charlie". It cannot have been earlier than this because after the night shift on 24th/25th November 2021 I had 4 consecutive days off and no one contacted me during this period.
148. The Coastal Commander sat in the MRCC Dover SAR Operations Room and announced that if anyone wished to speak to him, they could join him in his office;

it was obvious if someone went in to speak to him. I felt it was indiscrete and that there was a lack of confidentiality afforded to people who wanted to speak to him privately.

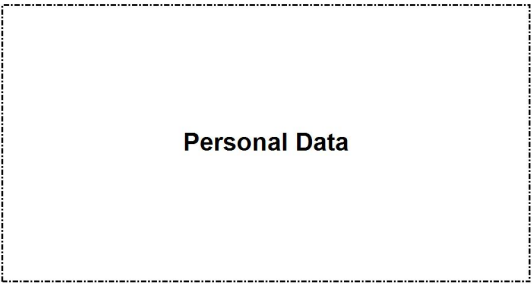
149. Support from elsewhere, such as external resources, would perhaps have been more appropriate.

150. I was aware of the H.M. Coastguard Trauma Risk Management policies to provide support in the aftermath of incidents involving fatalities before incident "Charlie", and I was also familiar with H.M. Coastguard's Employee Assistance Programme. I was not comfortable accessing these resources.

151. The shift pattern was also a potential issue for the provision of support. I was back on duty for the next night shift following incident "Charlie" with the same shift team members and going through what felt like a re-run of the previous night shift was challenging.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:  Personal Data

Dated: ____01st December 2024____