

Witness name: Thomas Gregory Willows

Statement number: 1

Exhibits: 1

Date: 03 December 2024

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF THOMAS GREGORY WILLOWS

I, THOMAS GREGORY WILLOWS C/O The Government Legal Department, 102 Petty France, Westminster, London SW1H 9GL, **WILL SAY** as follows:

1. I am employed as an immigration officer at the Border Force Maritime Command Centre (“BFMCC”) in Portsmouth. I first joined the civil service in 1986 as a customs officer. I have worked in various teams during my career, including spending 15 years as a Maritime Enforcement Officer aboard Border Force Maritime Command’s (“BFMC”) cutters. I have worked at the BFMCC for the past 10 years or so.
2. During my time working on the cutters, I was never directly involved in migrant rescue operations, because the incidence of migrants making small boat crossings to the United Kingdom first occurred in 2018, when I was already based in the BFMCC. I do however have maritime experience and familiarity with the cutters.
3. I am providing this statement to assist the inquiry because I was working on the night of 23 November 2021 into the morning of 24 November 2021. I cannot remember whether I was working remotely or working in the BFMCC but I know that my colleague Karen Whitehouse, a BF higher officer, was working in the BFMCC that night. Wherever I was based, I had access to my work issued mobile

phone.

4. Every officer has a daybook, in which they can record information. It is an individual officer's decision as to what information they record in their daybook. I have checked my daybook and I have not made any notes during my shift on 23/24 November 2021. This is not unusual for me; I tend to record information directly onto Home Office systems, if relevant. Using my daybook is rare, given the ever-increasing move to electronic records. Where I did use my daybook, it was typically to record specific incidents which were relevant for law enforcement purposes, rather than 'business as usual' matters such as migrant crossings. The last note in my daybook prior to November 2021 was made on 01 August 2021 and the next note was dated 28 April 2022. Neither of those notes related to migrant crossings, nor the incident I know the inquiry is examining, but the distance between the notes demonstrates that I rarely use my daybook.
5. I cannot recall the night of 23 November into 24 November 2021 because it was a 'business as usual' night. Whilst I now know of the tragic events which unfolded whilst I was on shift, I did not know at the time. I cannot recall exactly what work I did that evening and I have not located any notes or emails from that shift. I am aware that Karen Whitehouse was providing the hourly BFMCC updates and the case register. I have had the benefit of hearing a recording and reviewing the transcript of a telephone call I made to His Majesty's Coastguard ("HMCG") during the early hours of 24 November 2021 **INQ007602** and I make this statement regarding that call.
6. From the content of the call, it appears that I contacted HMCG to seek clarification regarding HMCG's incident tracker, to which BFMCC had access. HMCG would receive information from various sources regarding migrant

vessels (and other vessels) in the Channel and they would keep a record on their tracker. Each individual incident would be allocated a letter of the alphabet. It appears that I sought an update in respect of incidents 'Bravo' and 'India'. I cannot recall to whom I spoke, but HMCG had a number of staff who would answer our calls, in the same way that we had a number of staff who would answer calls from them in the BFMCC when they required assets (with staff working shifts).

7. The person I spoke to confirmed that 'Bravo' was believed to be a repeat of 'Charlie' and was therefore marked as resolved on their tracker. They also indicated that 'India' was believed to be a repeat of 'Charlie' and explained that they had had a lot of calls from the same boat, which initially meant lots of incidents being generated but as HMCG analysed the information, it was able to identify duplicates. Given that BFMCC did not receive information directly and we relied on HMCG's tracker, we could not assist with identifying duplicates.
8. HMCG confirmed that HMC Valiant (BFMC's cutter on duty that night) was proceeding to 'Charlie'. I asked whether it was still a mayday situation. I assume that I had spotted the reference to a mayday on HMCG's tracker, or BFMCC's tracker. HMCG stated they had been told 'Charlie' was full of water and the mayday was broadcast to seek assistance from nearby vessels (without success).
9. As HMC Valiant was still making way to the Sandettie light vessel, HMCG and BFMCC needed to wait and see what her commander reported, in terms of the number of migrants and migrant boats.
10. I said that we did not want to call any other assets out just yet and we'd wait and see what developed, in response to which HMCG said "*that's the dream, isn't it,*

don't get more than one out." I agreed with their statement because the bottom line was that BFMCC had a certain number of surface assets reserved for migrant rescues and it was BFMCC's responsibility to ensure that those resources were preserved, insofar as was possible, to maximise the coverage available. BFMCC was also responsible for looking after our crew and I was always conscious of how demanding and tiring being at sea was (not least from my own experience). If we sent assets out hours earlier than required, or when they potentially were not actually required, this meant that the crew were up and working, expending their safe working hours and energy. It also meant we could find ourselves without sufficient resources if a situation later arose.

11. HMCG did not ask me to task an asset during the call; if they had done so then I could have considered the request together with Karen as the higher officer. My reading of the call is that, at that stage, HMCG were content for HMC Valiant to attend to any current migrant incidents. As it was, Karen was leading on managing the surface assets during that shift, I simply rang HMCG to query the latest updates on the tracker. The telephone call was a conversation between colleagues, discussing the current incidents of which HMCG was aware and assessing.
12. HMCG went on to confirm that they were sending a helicopter to assist in the search for migrant vessels. We then discussed the potential numbers of migrants who might need rescuing. That number is always a changing figure because of the issue of duplication noted above, but also simply because it is a dynamic estimate derived from multiple different sources, of varying levels of accuracy. For instance, some of HMCG's information comes from passing vessels who estimate the number of migrants, with a limited degree of accuracy, especially at

night when it is dark.

13. HMCG commented that the number of migrants might be 110 "*which is probably pushing our luck for Valiant*". I think he meant in terms of HMC Valiant's capacity. The recommended capacity of each vessel would change from time to time depending upon the guidance issued by BFMC and would sometimes be specific to individual vessels. Given the passage of time, I cannot now recall HMC Valiant's recommended capacity as at that time, but when working in the BFMCC in November 2021 I would have known. Since the creation of the Small Boats Operation Command ("SBOC") in December 2022, responsibility for assisting HMCG with migrant rescue operations has transferred from BFMCC and my work therefore is no longer related to migrant rescues, where the capacity of the BFMC vessels was a relevant factor of which both I, and HMCG colleagues, were aware.
14. The HMCG colleague went on to confirm that the helicopter would be about 15 minutes reaching the Sandettie area and that it had a life raft on board. This may have been a reason for HMCG not requesting a second asset during our phone call.
15. I am not aware of having had any other contact with HMCG that night, nor involvement with the migrant rescue work. I hope this statement assists in understanding the context of the conversation between myself and HMCG.

Statement of truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: *Thomas Willows*

Dated: 03 December 2024