

Witness name: Neil Honeyman

Statement number: 1

Exhibits: Four

Date: 15 January 2025

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF NEIL HONEYMAN

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

1. I am employed as the Chief Technology Officer (“CTO”) within the Small Boats Operational Command (“SBOC”) within the Home Office and have held this post since September 2020. I have been in the civil service for over 20 years in various roles. I am duly authorised by the Home Office to make this statement.
2. I hold a master’s degree in the matter of criminology and I am a Doctor of Philosophy in the subject of criminal justice. My academic background and employment enable me to lead SBOC’s technology capability to support the work the team does.
3. I am writing this statement to assist the inquiry with understanding the technology available to the Home Office in response to the small boats situation, which first arose in 2018 and continues to this day. By ‘small boats situation’, I am referring to the irregular migration facilitated by journeys made in small boats between France and England in the Channel. Whilst it may not be immediately obvious to all, the use of technology is extremely important to the Home Office’s response to small boats because it maximises the ability of

the Home Office to detect and ultimately prevent small boat journeys from being made. Tracing the journeys all the way to the organised crime groups which facilitate the journeys has been a priority for a number of years, taking second place to saving lives. It goes without saying that the ideal scenario would be for the journeys not to take place at all; various teams within the Home Office work together utilising technology and intelligence with the aim of deterring or stopping the journeys. My role and that of my team is to ensure the Home Office has available the best technology to be able to do this.

4. The inquiry will be aware of the creation of the Clandestine Channel Threat Command (“CCTC”) in August 2020, comprising of four teams, one of which was the Chief Technology Officer team led by me. Following on from Operation Isotope, which was the operation whereby the Ministry of Defence led on the response to small boats, SBOC was created to take over that responsibility and my team moved into that command.
5. For the reasons outlined below, there is a limit to the amount of information I am able to share in this statement. However, I recognise the scale of the tragedy this inquiry is examining and the desire for all involved to understand as much as possible about the incident which took place on 23 and 24 November 2021, including what technology was available for search and rescue (“SAR”) purposes as at that time. The content of this statement focuses on the technology available in November 2021.
6. With the onset of the migrant boats situation, the Home Office’s maritime assets initially patrolled the Channel in order to intercept small boats, but for various reasons the likelihood of a surface asset encountering a migrant boat in a timely manner was, and is, low. The physical nature of the small boats

making the journey, including their small size, the materials used in their construction and their shallow draught, also makes them difficult to detect using the technology routinely available onboard surface assets.

7. The sooner the Home Office is aware of a migrant boat crossing the Channel, the better, not only for the safety of the migrants on board, by maximising the time for Home Office surface assets to respond at sea, but also for evidence gathering for the purposes of any potential prosecution.
8. In late 2019, the Home Office began exploring the use of aerial technology as a cost-effective and effective method of surveillance, including to photograph and track migrant boats in the Channel. That aerial technology included drones. Drones, also known as unmanned aerial vehicles (“UAVs”), are aerial assets which are operated by a ground crew. The first flight of a drone on behalf of the Home Office took place in November 2019. The Home Office still uses drones today.
9. Drones provide an invaluable capability as ‘assets in the sky’, but also have limitations in terms of their visual capabilities, insofar that their field of view is limited to a relatively small area, and an inability to fly in certain weather conditions. As part of the CCTC campaign plan (set out in the Gold Commander’s strategy [INQ008370]) to detect and stop the crossings, the Home Office began to explore alternative, more advanced technology to support that aim because whilst drones can detect individual migrant boats, their field of view is generally too limited.
10. Contemporaneously, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (“MCA”), of which His Majesty’s Coastguard (“HMCG”) is part, had an existing contract with a company called RVL Aviation (“RVL”) for the provision of an aerial dispersant spray

service, which included a Beech B200 King Air for use as a spotter aircraft. RVL is part of the RVL Group, which states on its website that it is a “*multi-capability airline operating in challenging markets; air freight, passenger charter, aerial survey and specialist operations*”. Through its relationship with MCA, in late 2021 the Home Office was able to secure the use of the Beech B200 King Air asset from RVL to test an enhanced surveillance capability. I will refer to that asset as the ‘RVL asset’. The Home Office and MCA entered into a memorandum of understanding (“MoU”) setting out commercially sensitive information such as repayment to MCA for the service and details of the equipment. Alongside the MoU, MCA signed a contract change notice with RVL which provided confirmation that the Home Office could task the RVL asset and that MCA would cover the cost of the additional use. Both documents confirmed that MCA retained the ability to override any Home Office tasking and that MCA could use the enhanced surveillance capability.

11. The RVL asset would be tasked by CCTC within the Home Office by sending a request form to HMCG’s Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (“ARCC”). I understand that the RVL asset was also used by HMCG for other work. HMCG would know when the Home Office had requested to task the RVL asset because the Home Office’s tasking requests went through HMCG.

23/24 November 2021

12. The inquiry will be aware that, on 23-24 November 2021, the Home Office was operating a drone supplied by Tekever known as ‘AR3’. The Home Office’s other drone, ‘AR5’, was on a mandatory rest day, such that its support crew had already reached the maximum flying hours within a set period **INQ003880**.

13. The Home Office has provided disclosure of documents relating to the AR3 drone. I am writing to clarify certain further details regarding the RVL asset, which was also airborne on 23-24 November 2021.
14. As referenced above, there are many sensitivities regarding what can be revealed about the specific capabilities carried by the RVL asset at the time. Whilst there is a lot of publicity around the small boats situation, it is imperative that the Home Office does not reveal the full extent of our surveillance capabilities, as to do so would undermine the work the Home Office currently undertakes. As matters stand the Home Office has prevented any uncontrolled beach landings since December 2022, meaning that, since that time, no migrant boats have landed on the shores of the United Kingdom (“UK”) undetected.
15. Moreover, the same technologies carried onboard the RVL asset at the time are also used to prevent the smuggling of narcotics, to counter terrorism, customs smuggling and other Home Office priorities such that, were we to reveal the full extent of our capabilities and tactics, it would likely have a severe and detrimental impact on those important areas.
16. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (“MAIB”) report 7/2023¹ into the incident which this inquiry is examining, made reference to the only “*UK aircraft undertaking government activity in the Dover Strait [being] a Home Office flight at high altitude*” (page 37 §2.5.2). This was the RVL asset. I would not class the asset as operating at high-altitude, but when compared to the AR3 drone and HMCG helicopter which were also operating that night, it is fair to say that the RVL asset was operating at a higher altitude. The drones generally operated at 1,000 – 1,500 feet above sea level due to airspace restrictions, whereas the RVL

¹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/654b77e8e70413000dfc49f0/2023-07-MigrantBoatReport.pdf>

asset would typically operate above that level.

17. The RVL asset had been the subject of various trial runs and encountered several technical problems since the Home Office first engaged with RVL to operate it. I recall occasions when RVL would operate the RVL asset of their own accord to test its functionality following encountering various difficulties. However, on the night of 23 November 2021, the Home Office specifically tasked the RVL asset to fly for surveillance purposes. The Home Office's CCTC team sent a tasking request to HMCG's ARCC on 23 November 2021 at 09:07 with two tasking requests for the RVL asset to fly at 2200 – 05:00 on 23-24 November 2021 and 24-25 November 2021 [INQ003876]. HMCG would pass these requests onto RVL and therefore be aware of the nature and timing of the requests. The request for the 23-24 November 2021 tasked the RVL asset to operate in the Channel near the median line. Publicly available flight tracking data shows that the RVL asset operated above UK Territorial Waters. Having reviewed the public flight data and HMC Valiant's track for the 23-24 November 2021 [INQ008336] it appears that the RVL asset likely operated in the vicinity in which HMC Valiant was recovering migrants. The RVL asset was operating a 'track' or loop at an altitude of 19,000 feet, which meant that occasionally it would be near HMC Valiant.
18. The RVL asset may have had existing capabilities on board for use in its role as a spotter aircraft for MCA, such as a high-definition camera capable of taking still images of the ground or sea level. When tasked by the Home Office the RVL asset did not have any visibility of, nor take any photographs of, the area in the Channel where HMC Valiant was operating. Should the RVL asset seek to communicate with the Home Office during flight, it could use the onboard satellite

phone. At the outset of each tasking, the RVL asset would conduct a test communication. The RVL asset would complete its mission and then return to base, following which a report would be prepared. The RVL asset had a transponder onboard and was likely visible on generic flight tracking sites.

19. The standard tasking request provided HMCG's contact details in the event that the RVL asset identified suspected migrant activity in the Channel and detailed the information RVL should convey to HMCG in those circumstances. I am not aware of RVL identifying any such activity during a Home Office tasking, most likely due to the high altitude at which the RVL asset would operate and the fact that Home Office taskings did not involve using any on-board technology other than the advanced surveillance technology. I am not aware of any communication between RVL and HMCG regarding suspected migrant activity on the night in question. In the event that RVL identified suspected migrant activity and relayed that information to HMCG, the Home Office would not be party to these communications because search and rescue coordination and responsibility rested exclusively with HMCG.
20. I am not able to exhibit any data captured by the RVL asset but can confirm that there is no data relating to the area in the Channel where HMC Valiant was operating, assisting HMCG by rescuing migrants. The RVL asset was airborne from 22:05 on 23 November 2021 to 04:25 on 24 November 2021 with just over 1½ hours of refuelling time, and therefore not operating in the area when the bodies were tragically discovered some time after midday on 24 November 2021. As noted above, the RVL asset was flying 19,000 feet above the area in the Channel where HMC Valiant was operating with no visibility of that area.
21. The RVL asset was not commissioned by the Home Office as a SAR asset, and

was contractually available to the Home Office for the purpose of testing the surveillance technology.

22. I am aware of the MAIB recommendations made to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Border Force (part of the Home Office) to “*develop procedures to ensure effective surveillance is possible when aviation assets are unavailable*” (2023/111). Directly in response to that recommendation, which the Home Office treated as an urgent operational requirement, and following the trials conducted by the RVL asset, we sought to put in place permanent arrangements to deliver the required surveillance capability. That surveillance capability is now fully operational.
23. I hope this statement assists the inquiry in understanding the presence and purpose of the RVL asset on the 23/24 November 2021.

Statement of truth.

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed

Personal Data

Date: 15 January 2025