



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Operation Isotrope, HC 612

Tuesday 12 July 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Dave Doogan; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 - 83

Witnesses

I: James Heappey, Minister for the Armed Forces; Paul Wyatt, Director-General Security Policy, Ministry of Defence.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Operation Isotrope: the use of the military to counter migrant crossings: Government response to the Committee's fourth report of Session 2021-22](#)



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: James Heapey and Paul Wyatt.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on Tuesday, 12 July 2022. I am delighted to welcome Minister James Heapey, Minister for the Armed Forces, back in front of us this afternoon, accompanied by Paul Wyatt, who is the director-general for security policy. Today we will be focusing on Operation Isotrope, which is the MoD's component to stopping the small boats from crossing the English Channel. Thank you very much indeed for your time this afternoon.

Before we focus on that, I know we have you for only an hour today. That does mean we cannot cover some of these other issues. There are big questions to do with the size of the Army after NATO's increase in its rapid reaction force that we would like to speak to you about. There are questions about equipment and ammunition stocks, given the scale of gifting to Ukraine. More widely, there are questions about increasing the defence budget, given the new era of security that we have now entered, and growing calls to revisit the entire integrated review, given the changing long-term threat picture. I do hope we can place something in your diary, depending on how things move in the future, in the first two weeks in September, and invite you back to talk about those things.

There is also a pressing question. You will be aware that "Panorama" put out a programme last night to do with operations in Afghanistan, the SAS and what they may or may not have been up to on the night raids targeting bombmakers. I am aware that the MoD put out a statement prior to the programme itself. We have seen that. When you get an opportunity to review the programme as well, please could you then say, if there is fresh evidence, what you will be doing to make sure that proper due diligence and scrutiny is seen to take place?

We are very proud of what our Armed Forces do, not least the Special Forces. Ultimately, the optics of this does not look good. It is important that the MoD does respond to be able to put things into perspective. Minister, I hope that is in order.

James Heapey: Yes, Tobias, absolutely. There is a part of Special Forces activity that one does not really talk about, which we neither confirm nor deny, but the existence of the SAS is a pretty open secret. We were aware of some of the allegations that I understand to be in this evening's "Panorama". They have been investigated, I believe, twice. On each occasion they have not met the evidential threshold.

Let us be clear. If new allegations or new evidence comes to light as a consequence of the "Panorama" investigation and that is then passed to the service police for further investigation, we will absolutely investigate it. Nobody in our organisation, no matter how special, gets a bye on the law. That is that.

Q2 **Chair:** Those words will be very well received. We have to remember why



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we go out to places like this: to uphold international standards. That includes every aspect of our Armed Forces. Thank you very much for that.

Once you have had a chance to see the programme itself, maybe there could be a written statement or something to clarify where you will be going with this and how you will be providing the necessary scrutiny, if new evidence is seen to materialise.

James Heapey: I know the Secretary of State is seized by the need to be entirely transparent. I am sure he will be wanting to communicate accordingly.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Let us move to Operation Isotrope. That is not the easiest of codenames to be given to an operation. Could I invite you, in your own words, to say what it is all about? What is the military trying to achieve in the English Channel?

James Heapey: The role of the military in the English Channel is quite tightly bound. It is there to gain control over the flow of migrants from France to Kent. Within that is a greater assuredness over the capacity of UK-based maritime assets to save life at sea, but it is also there to ensure, as much as we can—since we took primacy, only one boat has landed in an uncontrolled way—that those arriving in the UK are arriving under the control of Her Majesty's Government and enter into a process thereafter.

As you will remember well from the Urgent Question in January that brought this to your attention in the first place, in and of itself we do not move the dial. No one ever pretended that we do. We are part of a system. If there are greater levels of deterrence, interaction and interdiction on the continental side of the channel, and if there is a process once people arrive in the UK that leads to outcomes that serve as a deterrent for those who are attempting to cross without cause, we will be part of a system that has moved the dial.

That is my understanding of it, and that is the understanding of everybody else within defence. I believe we are broadly succeeding hitherto.

Q4 **Chair:** On those numbers, you say you are gaining control. Have you gained control of the channel?

James Heapey: One hates to tempt fate. Normally, crossings peak towards the back end of the summer, when there is benign weather, after a period of good weather over the summer, during which time people have moved across the continent to get themselves into a position to attempt the crossing.

Since defence took primacy, only one migrant boat has landed in the UK in an uncontrolled way. We define "uncontrolled" as us not physically escorting it or having intercepted it and cross-decked people at sea. Even



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the boat that arrived in what we would describe as an uncontrolled way landed in the vicinity of Dungeness power station, and the nuclear civil police were able to intercept them.

Q5 **Chair:** That really sounds impressive. It sounds like you have the channel under control.

James Heapey: Tobias, you are not going to tempt me to say such grand things. A run of still days would test us; of course it would.

Q6 **Chair:** What you are perhaps glossing over that we need to probe into is how many boats still successfully made it to the UK that you then escorted in under your control. How many vessels, boats or rigid raiders did you then escort in?

James Heapey: It would be quite a few. Give me two seconds.

Paul Wyatt: We count in personnel rather than in crossings.

James Heapey: We count in people rather than boats. The cumulative number of people to arrive this year thus far is 13,729. That is the number to date, thus far.

Q7 **John Spellar:** How does that compare with the previous year?

James Heapey: The total for 2021 was 28,526.

Q8 **Chair:** We are just looking at some data here. We have about 3,000 people who came across in June in 76 boats.

James Heapey: It was 3,139.

Q9 **Chair:** I was just rounding down. If you want to give the exact figure, which is higher, you are more than welcome to do so. The point we are trying to make is that you are not having an impact on reducing the numbers of people crossing the channel.

James Heapey: I do not know that we have ever claimed that we would have an impact ourselves.

Q10 **Chair:** So we have simply made it safer, but we are not affecting the numbers. Is that fair?

James Heapey: We have made it safer, and we have achieved control. What happens before us and behind us in the process that is owned by other Government Departments delivers a deterrent, which in fairness is exactly what I said. It is in Hansard from January.

Chair: It is not a deterrent.

Q11 **Derek Twigg:** You said you have achieved control. What do you mean by that?

James Heapey: Forgive me if the wording was ambiguous. I believe that "control" means that people are not arriving in the United Kingdom



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in an uncontrolled way. In other words, they are not arriving in the United Kingdom on their own terms. They are arriving here in small boats across the channel. That is how we define it.

Q12 Derek Twigg: It is not true that they are not arriving on their own terms. Some are arriving on their own terms.

James Heapey: One boat has, as I have said. Because of where they landed, they were intercepted by the nuclear civil police at Dungeness power station.

Q13 Dave Doogan: Minister, the language is really important here. When you say, "Defence has established control", I accept that. What I might take issue with is, "Control of what?" It seems to me that you have established control only of the receipt or the termination of those voyages. There is no control over the embarkation of these voyages from France. There is no control over the number of vessels or people. All that is controlled is the escort service to shore in the UK. Is that fair?

James Heapey: Yes.

Dave Doogan: Yes, okay.

James Heapey: By "Is that fair?" do you mean, "Does wider HMG recognise that?"

Dave Doogan: Is that a fair assessment?

James Heapey: I do not know. You would need to speak to Home Office Ministers about whether they recognise that as a wider assessment. If you are asking me specifically about the achievement of our part in a plan, your assessment is entirely accurate because we do not have any part in that.

Chair: Let us get into the detail of this and look at morale.

Q14 John Spellar: You have indicated that control of the numbers does not seem, as far as you are concerned, to be the key metric or indicator of success. Did the British public understand that when the Home Office announced this policy?

James Heapey: I think so, yes. There was an Urgent Question in response to a leak in which I was unequivocal on this. Hansard clearly shows that from the outset we were clear on the role that we were going to play within the plan.

Q15 John Spellar: You might say that you predicted that, although again I would say that was not the way in which this policy was sold by the Home Office to the British public or how the public or the media interpreted it. The Royal Navy now seems to be escorting these vessels in. Is the Navy happy with that work?

James Heapey: I have heard no suggestion otherwise.



John Spellar: None whatsoever.

James Heapey: No.

Q16 **John Spellar:** In the evidence and information we have received, a number of people have indicated that there was a real concern within the Navy that this role could inflict reputational damage on the Navy. Were those concerns misplaced? Have they now been dissipated?

James Heapey: Yes, there is maybe a conflation of two things there. Absolutely everybody in the Ministry of Defence, not just the Royal Navy, right the way up to and including the ministerial team, was very concerned around the reputational risk of the Navy doing pushback tactics, forced interdiction or any other soft kinetic response in the channel. We said we would not do it, and the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister agreed to that position.

When it comes to the Royal Navy performing a function in the channel, the Royal Navy has a long history of playing a role around our domestic maritime security, whether that be from a counter-smuggling perspective, a counter-terror perspective, a counter-migration perspective or a counter-illegal fishing perspective. It is hardly new territory for the home waters squadron of the Royal Navy to be involved with this. Indeed, the Batch 1 offshore patrol vessels, one of which is engaged in this task, were until Q4 last year on contract to Defra to provide counter-illegal fishing activity, which Defra has now contracted out.

There was never any concern within the Royal Navy around the Royal Navy being used in this way in home waters, because that is pretty normal business. There definitely was a concern about the type of things they might be asked to do. We were able to represent those views successfully within Government. We shared those views and we won the argument.

Q17 **John Spellar:** Would it be fair to say that the role of the Royal Navy in this is to be a tour guide for illegal migrants to get them safely on to our shores?

James Heapey: That would be a really unfair reflection of the work they are doing. First and foremost, every single migrant vessel that enters UK waters is considered to be in distress. None of them are loaded to their appropriate capacity. Even if they were, none of them are in waters that are deemed appropriate for that type of vessel. Straightaway at coastguard headquarters, any migrant vessel that enters the UK is a vessel in distress.

John, if you are asking, "Does the Royal Navy object to attending a vessel in distress?", no, 100%, it does not. That is not just a naval thing. All mariners sign up to an obligation to save life at sea.

Q18 **Dave Doogan:** Minister, you said "soft kinetic interdiction" or



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“pushback”.

James Heapey: I said “pushback tactics”.

Dave Doogan: You were explaining that that was what you would not do.

James Heapey: Yes, we would not do pushback tactics; we would not do forced interdiction. People are asking us questions about sound cannons and all sorts of other crazy stuff.

Dave Doogan: Yes, I remember all of that.

James Heapey: We never had any truck with that.

Q19 **Chair:** Do we have any sound cannons, just out of interest?

James Heapey: I do not believe so.

Chair: You just mentioned it. I just wondered.

James Heapey: It was Kevan Jones who asked me the question about sound cannons in the UQ. There were all sorts of things that were being discussed, but we never trialled them; we have never had anything to do with them.

Q20 **Dave Doogan:** In terms of pushback, the discussions that were had within MoD were that this would not be countenanced; this would not be done. You won that argument. You have just said you have won that argument with the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister. Did they ask the Royal Navy to engage in pushback?

James Heapey: No. There was a period of time when the Royal Marines were involved in trials down off Weymouth, around Portland. We looked at all sorts of ways that we might be able to interdict crossings. Our recommendation was that it was operationally unviable to do so. The parallels that were being used elsewhere in the world were not the same as here, mostly because the eastbound and westbound lanes of the traffic separation scheme in the Strait of Dover have no water in between them; they are immediately adjacent.

Having been involved with the trials and having some expertise around those waters, our view was that it would be a breach of the saving life at sea convention consciously to seek to collide with another vessel in an international shipping lane. We were involved in trials when the concept was being explored. You might say that therefore we were asked to, but, when people heard the evidence from the trials and the professional judgment of the mariners within the Royal Navy, we won the argument and the idea was dropped.

Q21 **Dave Doogan:** Was the moral component against pushback contingent on how busy that shipping lane is or was it contingent on the idea that pushing back civilians in unseaworthy vessels with Royal Navy craft is



unconscionable?

James Heapey: It was all of those things.

Dave Doogan: It was not one or the other.

James Heapey: You could ask yourselves a question about why neighbours on the other side of the channel do not regard those vessels to be in distress and respond to them in such a way, but that is for other Ministers from other Governments to respond to.

The United Kingdom view is that those vessels are overloaded. Even if they were not overloaded, they are inappropriate for the waters. They are regarded as being in distress. The starting point of any interdiction is that it is a saving life at sea situation, which is non-discretionary.

Q22 **Dave Doogan:** I still do not understand, though. If the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary were not asking for pushback to be considered, what was the argument?

James Heapey: They were. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and advisers around Government had seen the successful employment of pushback tactics elsewhere, principally in Greece.

Q23 **Dave Doogan:** Were they concerned by the loss of life?

James Heapey: Give me two seconds. There were also at-sea interdictions that were successfully achieved by the Australian Government. There were international examples of where such tactics had been successfully used. We were asked to explore how those tactics could be used in the Dover Strait.

After a series of trials in Weymouth with various techniques and an analysis of the water and the type of threat that was being faced, our analysis was that it was inappropriate and the argument was won. The Government decided not to do that, because the evidence provided by professional mariners within the Royal Navy was such to compellingly make the case for not doing it.

Q24 **Dave Doogan:** The enterprise is quite an undertaking. It has made a difference. By any stretch of the imagination, the involvement of defence in this dynamic has made a difference. What is the cost in personnel of all three services supporting Isotrope? What is the total quantum of personnel supporting this effort?

James Heapey: At any one time there is one Batch 1 offshore patrol vessel assigned to the task and up to four P2000 in-shore patrol craft. That is not the totality of their responsibilities. They do other things as well, which are threat dependent. There is then a contingent of staff that sit within the channel threat area, which is 37. There are a further 36 maritime personnel involved in the mission and 107 members of the Army. The 107 members of the Army will almost entirely be doing



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marshalling and stewarding roles at the Western Jet Foil and Manston in Kent.

Q25 **Dave Doogan:** Did you have a total figure there?

James Heapey: I can tot it up pretty quickly. Yes, 189.

Q26 **Dave Doogan:** That was Royal Navy personnel. Are there any RAF personnel?

James Heapey: That is Royal Navy and Army. RAF people may be trawled in to augment, but mostly this is being met by the UK standby battalion for the south-east and RN personnel.

Q27 **Dave Doogan:** The thick end of 200 personnel—189—are involved in it, then. What would they have been doing, if they were not doing this?

James Heapey: The UK standby battalion would be the UK standby battalion. The Batch 1 OPV and the P2000s would be involved in home waters maritime security, as they are. You are trying to suggest that there is an opportunity cost around wider operational activity.

Dave Doogan: It is a fair question.

James Heapey: Of course it is, Dave. The people who are being used are people committed to the home waters squadron of the Royal Navy or the UK standby battalion. They are people who are there to do UK ops contingent taskings, which is what they are doing.

Q28 **Chair:** What is the highest rank involved here?

James Heapey: I suppose you could say lieutenant-general, in that Commander SJC commands Isotope.

Chair: A lieutenant-general is in charge of this operation.

James Heapey: Yes, concurrently with the Commonwealth Games, our standing CT response around the country and Op Helvetic.

Chair: It is part of a wider portfolio.

James Heapey: Everything that happens in the UK for UK ops comes under Commander SJC.

Q29 **Chair:** I think you have made the point. That is the strategic oversight of this particular operation, but I am asking from a day-to-day perspective.

James Heapey: It is a one-star, a commodore.

Chair: You have a commodore. A Navy one-star is in charge.

James Heapey: Tobias, that is an important point. That is not a one-star commanding 189 people because it is a one-star point of command. That is a one-star and a battle staff augmenting the coastguard and



Border Force in order to bring greater coherence to the mission in the channel, which is the biggest value we have added thus far.

Q30 **Chair:** Going back to the point that was implied by both Dave and Derek, why is it the Navy? When we first discussed this and things were just settling down, I understood that there was not the capability in the coastguard to do this, not just from a practical operational perspective but in respect of the strategic oversight to make it happen.

The Navy has this experience, and you are bringing in those assets to upgrade what the coastguard should do. Clearly, optics-wise, the scale of movement across the channel is not looking good.

James Heapey: That is probably fair. When we were first being warmed up to this, I went down to Dover. They were achieving 96% or 97% interdiction rates as they were. Admittedly, the RNLI was doing a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of bringing people ashore. The RNLI will always play a role. When a vessel is declared in distress and a saving life at sea incident is ongoing, all available maritime assets are obliged to respond.

Q31 **Chair:** That is absolutely right. The point I am trying to make, though, is that there is a lot going on in the Armed Forces, as you know, as Armed Forces Minister.

James Heapey: There is.

Chair: We are pulled in different directions. Suddenly you have this new duty. Many would argue, "Hang on. It is the coastguard that should do this. Invest in the coastguard. Give them more P2000s; give them more OPVs. Let them do this duty and expand their capability rather than bringing in the Navy".

James Heapey: We would vigorously agree in that analysis, except that, of course, you cannot grow the coastguard overnight. We speak to our colleagues in the Home Office very regularly about their pathway to growing Border Force.

Q32 **Chair:** When did the penny drop that suddenly—oh my goodness—the coastguard cannot manage? As politicians, we have been watching and debating the migration issue for many, many years. It is not like we said, "Wow, suddenly we have a channel issue. Bring in the Navy".

James Heapey: The concern about the scale of crossings started to grow at the backend of last year. If you look at the comparative numbers, 2020 was 8,486; 2021 was 28,526. By the time you get to mid-autumn and the crossings are starting to tail off, it brings this right up the political agenda. Last autumn, there were a number of discussions about how this might be done. Very obviously, Border Force needs to be resourced to do this from within its own means.

If you consider that in Q4 2021 the fishing contract that we had with Defra came to an end, we did have spare capacity in our home waters



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squadron. The P2000s are always committed to home waters. They have just gone across to the Baltic, but that is probably an illustration of how there is not an opportunity cost, because they went over with HMS Defender and we were able to do something quite novel with the P2000s even while maintaining the commitment we now have in the channel.

Chair: That is a nice segue to our next section.

Q33 **Derek Twigg:** Minister, what impact has Operation Isotrope had on training, personnel leave and asset maintenance?

James Heappey: On asset maintenance, I am not aware of any impact. HMS Tyne, which is the Batch 1 that was scheduled to go into dock, is in dock at the moment as planned. As for leave cycles, the home waters squadron operates in the way that it does. The Royal Navy has not indicated to me that it is operating anything other than in its normal routines as far as crew rotations go.

Q34 **Derek Twigg:** What about training?

James Heappey: What do you mean?

Derek Twigg: I mean general training. There is a normal sequence of training that they go through.

James Heappey: HMS Tyne, HMS Mersey and HMS Severn, which are the three Batch 1 offshore patrol vessels, are maintained to perform a whole range of maritime security tasks in UK home waters. They are trained to do what they are doing. There is no additional training burden for them to do what they are doing; nor have they foregone any training because of what they are doing. It is their core business: homeland maritime security.

Q35 **Derek Twigg:** Basically, there is no impact on training, no impact on personal leave and no impact on asset maintenance.

James Heappey: There is definitely no impact on asset maintenance and definitely no impact on training. If there are examples of personal leave that have been brought to your attention, I would welcome the opportunity to take those to the fleet commander. He has indicated to me that there have been none.

Q36 **Chair:** Can we just look at the assets for Operation Isotrope? Where were they before they were doing this? You mentioned Defra. That was a MACA operation, was it not?

James Heappey: I suppose possibly, but it was an enduring contract that we had to provide a certain number of sea days per annum to Defra for the purposes of countering illegal fishing.

Q37 **Chair:** But it was still MACA; the funding of it was under the MACA concept.



Paul Wyatt: It was under an MoU. It was done in a slightly different construct. It is military aid to the civil authorities, but it was done as a memorandum of understanding rather than as a MACA request.

James Heapey: MACAs are not supposed to be chronic and ongoing, whereas this was. This was an agreement that the home waters squadron of the Royal Navy would provide a number of sea days per annum to counter illegal fishing in UK waters.

Q38 **Chair:** Do we not have illegal fishing anymore? Is it all tickety-boo?

James Heapey: Defra has contracted it privately. In fact, it copied the example of the Scottish Government, which has long had this contracted out to a commercial company.

Chair: A commercial company now does this.

James Heapey: For Defra, yes.

Q39 **Chair:** The commercial company is paid for by Defra. Does that mean you were paid to do this job by Defra too?

James Heapey: Yes. The MoU paid us for a number of sea days.

Q40 **Chair:** I am just checking. The consequences of MACA usually mean that there is a financial agreement being made, and the Department then coughs up to pay the MoD and make sure it is not out of cash.

James Heapey: Exactly, yes. Defra did that. It paid for a number of sea days. Whether we are cheaper than a commercial company remains to be seen, but there we go.

Q41 **Chair:** I do not want you bidding. Our wider concern is that we need the Navy to do Navy things.

James Heapey: It is, Tobias. I really think it is. The Batch 1 OPVs were kept in the fleet—they were given a stay of execution—because we felt we needed a platform of that size that was not a frigate or destroyer and that could attend to the needs of Her Majesty's Government in the UK maritime EEZ. That is for everything from counter-smuggling to counter-terrorism, counter-illegal migration and counter-illegal fishing. That is fundamentally what they are for.

They also do various tasks. The Batch 1 OPVs are used for a number of sea days per annum to do navigation training for the fleet when you have people doing their navigation officers' course. They will be used for escort taskings through our waters for foreign ships, if need be, but they are not designated as the fleet-ready escort. That is always a frigate or destroyer. That is what they do. They are there to be the Navy's contribution to our domestic maritime security.

Q42 **Chair:** There is a huge danger that we are going to bleed into a conversation about whether we need a bigger Navy, on which this Committee has already written a report.



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James Heappey: I always welcome that.

Q43 **Chair:** Just remind us how many Batch 1 OPVs we have.

James Heappey: We have three.

Q44 **Chair:** You just named a whole number of tasks there, which are more than three. This is the point we are trying to make. If you are going to start doing escort duties and, not only that, you are going to be protecting, for example, undersea cables and things, which is where the world is going, you are going to require a greater maritime surface fleet that is on a lower level than the Type 26s and Type 45s.

We do not have that in our Armed Forces. We have some amazing, bespoke, niche and state-of-the-art capabilities; they are the best in the world. What we do not have is a fleet of very nimble assets, more rudimentary constabulary duty assets, such as OPVs, to be able to do these duties, which I believe will increasingly place demands on the Navy, not least with the Russians popping up here and there with their submarines, UAVs and so forth.

James Heappey: Type 31 and Type 32 occupy quite an interesting space.

Q45 **Chair:** Remind us how many of those are at sea right now.

James Heappey: None, because they do not exist yet. They are in build.

Chair: They are not built.

James Heappey: That is exactly what the Royal Navy has envisaged in its plan to expand the fleet. For the first time in decades, the fleet will expand. The area of expansion is the Type 32. Type 31 was effectively to ensure that frigates remained at the same level as we have had for Type 23. Type 32 is a growth in the fleet.

What is envisaged for Type 31 is a platform that has real versatility to move stuff on and off. The Type 26 has been constructed to be the world's best anti-submarine warfare frigate. That is appropriate, given where we sit on the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Beneath that is an ambition for a versatile fleet of frigates that will be able to do all sorts of roles at home and away.

With that said, we have the Batch 1s because they are an extraordinarily capable platform for doing the sorts of thing that we need them to do in home waters. When Type 31 starts to come into service, some of the Batch 2 offshore patrol vessels—HMS Medway, HMS Forth, HMS Trent, HMS Spey and HMS Tamar—will be recovered back to UK waters perhaps to replace the Batch 1s and Type 31s will take over the job they are doing overseas.



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We are already trying to build a fleet, Tobias, that has a range of capabilities from low-end maritime security all the way to high-end warfighting.

Q46 **Chair:** I hear that. We went up to see the shipyard for the Type 31. It was really impressive. We are pleased to see that moving forward. It is still a number of years away before we start doing that full replacement.

I have yet to see a design for the Type 32. I hope it is a lot simpler than the Type 31 and that we are going to get at least 18 of them. This is the maritime force presence that we are going to start to need in the various areas across the world where we have an interest. Our sea lanes are getting more and more threatened. That is where we need to lean into.

We are wandering away from Operation Isotrope. We simply make the point, though, that providing duties to the Home Office in this particular area is adding a burden that you were not expecting to do in the integrated review, which I think is a fair statement.

James Heapey: I disagree, insomuch as we knew we would maintain a home waters squadrons to do home waters taskings. We do not consider this to be beyond the scope of those home waters taskings.

Q47 **Chair:** As I say, we have three offshore patrol vessels. The United Kingdom border is long. We are going to become increasingly threatened, not least by smaller Russian vessels in the next five to 10 years.

James Heapey: The three OPVs within home waters are not the totality of the response to a threat within our home waters. There is the fleet-ready escort, which is a frigate or destroyer at very high readiness at all times to escort or interdict shipping from other nations that we think might cause us a threat.

We do not talk about the detail of submarine operations, but I do not think IRF is a particularly secret thing. There is a very high readiness submarine to respond to threats to UK homeland waters. There is all of the P-8 and other maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters that are at our disposal as well. Beyond that, there is the wider fleet that is at various levels of readiness, if it is in home waters or walking up. There is also the P2000s, Border Force and the coastguard.

I am just not sure I accept the premise that the three OPVs were all that there was for home waters taskings. That is clearly not the case. The three OPVs do a certain set of taskings. They do them well. Isotrope is not remotely outside the type of things they normally do.

Q48 **Chair:** When does the operation end?

James Heapey: The review point is January 2023. We are applying all the pressure we can to partners across Government to ensure they are recruiting and capability development is sufficient to release the Navy from this task as soon as possible after that point.



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Q49 **Chair:** Does that mean the Home Office requires more assets?

James Heappey: They certainly require more personnel within Border Force.

Q50 **Chair:** Have they recruited them yet?

James Heappey: They are in the process of doing that, yes.

Chair: They have not recruited them yet.

James Heappey: That is not what I said. I said they are in the process of doing that. I cannot tell you exactly how many have been recruited so far.

Q51 **Chair:** How long does it take to train?

James Heappey: It is about nine months.

Q52 **Chair:** By my calculations, you do not have nine months between today and when you want to hand this over.

James Heappey: I agree.

Q53 **Chair:** Maybe you can write back to us on this transition period. This is my point. We are all with you. We want this to be handed back. Clearly, the Home Office needs to expedite the training and it needs the assets as well. If they need their own P2000s to do this job, they should purchase them.

James Heappey: Agreed, yes. They have leased these crew transfer vessels. They are called Hurricanes. Five of those have been leased. Those give them greater capacity in the channel to safely cross-deck people from their dinghy to the CTV.

On the Border Force cutters, there are the number that there are. The Secretary of State was with you last week. I do not know whether you asked him about the cutter replacement programme when you had evidence from him in his role as shipbuilding tsar. There is a plan with the Home Office to replace the cutters in time. I do not have the detail of that.

Q54 **John Spellar:** We did. Could we have some clarity as to where those are going to be built?

James Heappey: As far as I saw in the transcript, John—

John Spellar: You kindly referenced it.

James Heappey: In the transcript I did not see that you asked the question of him.

Chair: We are asking it now. Thank you for reminding us. We are asking you.



John Spellar: It was answered by the admiral.

James Heapey: Go on. I have no idea. I do not do shipbuilding. I have lots to worry about with international arms dealing and everything else I do for Ukraine. Where on earth the Border Force cutters are going to be built is not something I know, John.

Q55 **John Spellar:** It seems as though the Ministry of Defence is acting as the purchasing agency, or certainly the advising agency, on this. It would be very helpful if we could know what efforts are being made to ensure these vessels are going to be built in UK yards. We have had some clear indications, in fact, that they are going to be built in a Dutch yard. That was denied by the admiral when we had the hearing. Could we have a letter afterwards? I fully accept what you say your role is. Could we have a letter that makes clear what is happening with regard to the purchase?

James Heapey: So the admiral denied it, but you want a letter just to confirm that the admiral is right.

John Spellar: I want to confirm the detail of that.

James Heapey: That is no problem. I am sure somebody will know. We will find out.

Q56 **Chair:** It is in your interest, though. I know you are saying you are not part of shipbuilding and so forth. You cannot relinquish this task unless you are satisfied that the Home Office is ready and able to get back to doing what is its duty.

James Heapey: The Home Office is not going to have more cutters by January. No one is claiming that. If you bear in mind what the P2000s and the Batch 1 OPV are doing, they are not involved in the physical interdiction of vessels. As we discussed in the UQ, the height they sit off the water means you cannot move migrants from one to the other. They are really there in a command and control function. There are other ways of doing that command and control, which is what we are working with the coastguard and Border Force to develop over the course of the year.

There is contracted ISR—surveillance assets that are being brought on as part of the £50 million the Prime Minister put into this. It is not as binary as, “Each Royal Navy ship comes off only at the moment when a new Border Force vessel comes on”, because a lot of what the Navy is doing is C2 and surveillance. There are other ways of achieving that.

Q57 **Chair:** I am still slightly confused about what the Home Office needs to achieve in order for you to back away from this.

James Heapey: Principally, the Home Office needs more people to man the Western Jet Foil. There are 107 people from the Army involved in facilitating the processing of migrants on the Western Jet Foil. That is the bit that the Border Force really needs to do.

Q58 **Chair:** This is a land-based task, and you are saying that they still have



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not trained those people yet. You said that about 100 Army people are involved.

James Heappey: For a fully warranted Border Force official, the training is nine months. Clearly, those are not the sorts of roles we are doing. They need more of those, by the way. As you will have seen in your wider viewing of the news, our airports and ports require that workforce. The Home Secretary has a plan for doing this, but there are other roles that are non-specialist, which one would think they could recruit more quickly.

Q59 **Chair:** You gave 189 personnel as a total, did you not? Does that include the crews of the OPVs and indeed the P2000?

James Heappey: No.

Chair: They are in addition to that.

James Heappey: Yes. Those are not people who have been removed from their normal duties to go and do Isotrope.

Q60 **Chair:** They are still on the Operation Isotrope mission.

James Heappey: Among other things, yes. Some days they are doing fleet navigation training; some days they are doing other things.

Chair: That is true, but, if you are asking Operation Isotrope what the numbers are at any one time, would it not be wise to include those as well?

James Heappey: It is impossible to say. You know three to five days ahead what the weather looks like. When you have a red day coming, a day when it looks like you will have a particularly high volume of crossings, you might have more P2000s committed than not.

Q61 **Derek Twigg:** When was the last time Ministry of Defence Ministers met with Home Office Ministers to discuss the progress on Operation Isotrope?

James Heappey: The Defence Secretary wrote to the Home Secretary last month. I have had a number of conversations with the Immigration Minister informally on an ongoing basis. We talk about this a lot.

Derek Twigg: You have not had a meeting, though.

James Heappey: I will have to write to you with the date on which we last formally sat down.

Q62 **Chair:** Can I talk about the co-ordinating aspects of this? The Joint Maritime Security Centre is a fairly new concept. Is that right?

James Heappey: No.

Q63 **Chair:** You put this together in 2020. It was a merger of two other—



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James Heappey: The Joint Maritime Security Centre is a couple of years old, but the idea of inter-agency co-ordination has been going for some time.

Q64 **Chair:** If I am correct, you have had the National Maritime Information Centre and the Joint Maritime Operations Co-ordination Centre, which have merged to create this new—

James Heappey: That is absolutely correct. It is a rebadge rather than an entirely new concept.

Chair: It is a relaunch, if you like.

James Heappey: No, it is a rebadge.

Chair: It is two organisations that have come together under a new badge.

James Heappey: The idea that you might seek to bring some coherence to a whole range of domestic maritime security activities is not that revolutionary. The previous iterations of those organisations attempted to do that. The Joint Maritime Security Centre is what was arrived at in 2020. For my money, it is working well.

Q65 **Chair:** It is a multi-agency operation. Is that right?

James Heappey: It is multi-agency.

Q66 **Chair:** Who is involved in it?

James Heappey: It is all the maritime agencies: the coastguard; Border Force; the Royal Navy; fisheries protection, so Defra; and Customs and Excise. It is pretty much everybody who has an interest in our maritime EEZ.

Q67 **Chair:** If something untoward or out of place is seen in the channel, that is where it will first ping up on your ops board.

James Heappey: It depends on what you mean. If it was a Russian corvette coming out of St Petersburg that we thought was likely to transit UK waters, that would not sit with the Joint Maritime Security Centre. That would sit with the Royal Navy.

Q68 **Chair:** The Royal Navy has a separate overview of our maritime waters, looking out for assets—

James Heappey: State threats sit with the Royal Navy and the Maritime Command Centre at Northwood.

Q69 **Chair:** You would also have Royal Navy inside the—

James Heappey: The deputy director of the JMSC is always RN and a number of RN personnel contribute to that effort.

Q70 **Chair:** I presume there is co-ordination and communication between



Northwood and indeed the JMSC.

James Heapey: Yes, 100%. Something that might start as a business as usual maritime security threat might escalate to a level that is not appropriate for the sort of assets the JMSC controls.

Q71 **Chair:** What role is this maritime security centre playing in Operation Isotrope?

James Heapey: It has a vague overview of it. "Vague" is an unfair word. It has an overview, but the operation is being controlled from the Clandestine Channel Threat Command in Dover.

Q72 **Chair:** That is the little bit that confuses me. Given that you have merged to make this new operations centre, it does seem that it would be best placed to cover this. This is not a clandestine operation. This is very, very clear. These are overt attempts to cross the channel as migrants. You have created this new entity, the Joint Maritime Security Centre. Why is it not looking after the operation?

James Heapey: The JMSC has a co-ordinating and cohering function across all the agencies that have a role to play. That does not mean the JMSC is controlling every bit of coastguard activity in any given day; nor is it controlling every bit of Border Force activity in any given day. When there is a requirement to cohere Government assets across different agencies, that is the role the JMSC successfully plays.

This is quite a discrete mission. It is a mission within the Dover Strait to interdict illegal migrant boats. Initially, when the two-star Rear Admiral Mike Utley went down to look at this, he had the option of moving his battle staff to the Joint Maritime Security Centre. He had the option of reinforcing the Clandestine Channel Threat Command. He chose the latter. My judgment is to trust his judgment.

Q73 **Chair:** I do not doubt that, but our job is to scrutinise those judgments. I am still a bit concerned. When we want to hand this back, it will not be the Clandestine Channel Threat Command that will operate this, I am guessing. It will then be slid across to the Joint Maritime Security Centre.

James Heapey: That is not right. It was the Clandestine Channel Threat Command to begin with. They were achieving a 96% interdiction rate, which is actually pretty good. We were saying the channel was going really badly when they were achieving something quite good. I am at pains to say that Border Force and coastguard colleagues were doing a pretty good job before we have arrived. The improvements we have made—

Q74 **Chair:** It was not so good that you were not called in.

James Heapey: Yes, fair enough, but the improvements we have made are marginal. They have got us to the point where, since the time we took on primacy, only one boat has been able to get across in what we would describe as an uncontrolled way. My expectation would be that,



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once we have brought greater levels of coherence to the operation, as we are, we would hand it back to Border Force/coastguard primacy, perhaps with some RN personnel still within the headquarters to assist—who knows?

That is all to be discussed another day. I do not see why it would necessarily have to go within the JMSC. It does not feel to me as if that is appropriate.

Q75 Chair: The Navy has been brought in to upgrade the coastguard's capability. "There is a challenge here. Bring in the Navy. Let us get this sorted". You then want to step back.

James Heapey: It is probably Border Force more than the coastguard.

Q76 Chair: I am sorry—Border Force. You then want to extract yourself from this in due course. That is very clear indeed. You can only extract yourself if you start to build the capabilities that allow you to slowly let go. What I am puzzled about is that you have this Clandestine Channel Threat Command, which you are running now. You have chosen to use something that you are very familiar with and that works really well. Surely you should be using the maritime security centre, which in the longer term will probably be the organisation that will then take this on in the future. Get them to start working and doing it today.

James Heapey: I am not sure I understand. Why would the JMSC take it on in the future?

Q77 Chair: You are saying that the Clandestine Channel Threat Command will continue to do this. It is a naval asset, is it not?

James Heapey: No. In the coastguard station above Dover for the last couple of years was the Clandestine Channel Threat Command.

Q78 Chair: If you are saying that, it begs the question as to why you have created this other operations centre. What does it do?

James Heapey: Not everything that happens in the channel is around illegal migration.

Q79 Chair: I do not dispute that. It is also to do with having eyes on the channel and understanding the intelligence picture.

James Heapey: Yes.

Chair: You still have two separate groupings in different localities operated by different people.

James Heapey: No, you have a subordinate specialist headquarters dealing with one line of activity within the channel, and then you have a higher headquarters that is looking at the totality of activity in the UK EEZ in response to all maritime threats.

Q80 Chair: The question to take away is about where this goes next. That is



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the question. I always have huge confidence and respect for the idea that the MoD comes in, in any situation, whether it is flooding or whatever, with a can-do attitude and gets it fixed. We do need to extract ourselves and move on; we need to hand this back to the right people.

This is the question I am asking. Which top-tier organisation will take this forward? Are they being trained now to do the capabilities? You mentioned that one-star commodore. Is there a civilian component being brought in? Will they be told shortly, hopefully in January, "Over to you—you are in charge"?

James Heapey: There was already. Dan O'Mahoney was the two-star Border Force commander of the Clandestine Channel Threat Command. He is a good man and an ex-Royal Marine. He does a good job. He has been very grateful for the assistance the RN has provided in bringing greater capability and coherence to his headquarters. When our work is done, my expectation is that Dan will resume command of the effort and will do so very competently.

Q81 **Chair:** That is good. We can probably bring this to a close in good time. Thank you very much indeed for painting a wider picture, given the last time we were able to put this together. I have spoken to a number of retired First Sea Lords and indeed heads of the Armed Forces. They were perhaps slightly surprised that there was not greater pushback when the Navy was asked to do this. That was a political judgment itself. The decision was made, and I hope you agree that the sooner the Navy can hand this over to a competent Border Force, the better.

James Heapey: I agree with the premise of that. I am not sure either the current First Sea Lord or the previous First Sea Lord, who is now the Chief of the Defence Staff, had those concerns. Their view is that the Royal Navy has, since the beginning of its existence, had a role to play in the maritime security of our home waters. That is what they are doing.

Tobias, that is not to say that I disagree that we are seeking to transition out of this as quickly as possible. Nobody in the senior leadership of the Royal Navy right now has expressed to me a view that this is not an entirely legitimate task for the Royal Navy to be doing within our home waters.

Q82 **Chair:** I am not sure the culture is there for that view to be expressed. We know that is the reality of it. That perhaps is why the First Sea Lord, promoted to Chief of the Defence Staff, was in an invidious situation, given that he was only a couple of weeks in the job when he was then presented with this. He probably felt he had to.

James Heapey: He has slightly more capacity than that. I think he was well aware of the issue and made a very considered judgment. Admiral Tony can speak for himself on these things. As we have sat in horror watching generals in the Kremlin too scared to speak truth to political power over the last five months, we have often challenged ourselves to



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make sure we do not have that culture. The fact you think we do is a concern.

Our generals, admirals and air marshals all have the courage to speak up for their service and say when they are uncomfortable with something they are being asked to do. That is why they are the best set of chiefs in the world, in my view.

Q83 **Chair:** Having worked there as a Minister myself, they absolutely do that in private. What they will not do is share their concerns publicly. Perhaps that is wise.

James Heapey: Unless the suggestion is that I am inaccurately reflecting their view to you today, you will have to take my word for it that in private they have not raised any objection.

Chair: No. That is alright. It is also our job to speak truth to power, and we have done that here successfully today. Minister, thank you very much indeed. Mr Wyatt, I feel you were left out a little bit.

John Spellar: He is devastated.

Chair: Maybe you can come back next time, hopefully in September, when we pursue some of the wider issues. If there are no other questions from my colleagues, can I say thank you very much indeed to the Minister, to Paul Wyatt, to the staff and to the team? That brings us to the conclusion of this Defence Committee hearing today.