

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Border security and irregular migration: The work of the Border Security Command, HC 720

Wednesday 21 October 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Mr Paul Kohler; Ben Maguire; Robbie Moore; Margaret Mullane; Dr Peter Prinsley.

Questions 1-68

Witnesses

[I](#): Duncan Capps CBE, Interim Border Security Commander, Home Office and Rob Jones, Director General (Operations), National Crime Agency.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Duncan Capps and Rob Jones.

Chair: I welcome our witnesses to our Home Affairs Committee one-off sitting on border security and irregular migration. We are grateful to have our two witnesses. Will you introduce yourselves?

Duncan Capps: I am Duncan Capps. I am the border security commander in the Home Office.

Rob Jones: I am Rob Jones, director-general of operations in the National Crime Agency.

Chair: Thank you. We are really pleased you could come. This is a topic of great interest to the public. There have been some very high-profile stories over the summer, which we are keen to explore. We are also keen to find out what has been done and to understand the general situation. We will kick off questions with Ben Maguire.

Q1 **Ben Maguire:** We all welcome the fall in the small boat numbers in recent months. As a Committee, we have been looking at that closely. What evidence is there that it has been driven by enforcement activity or policy changes, rather than by external factors beyond our control?

Duncan Capps: It is worth stating where we are in terms of those numbers. Year on year, compared with this point last year: last year we had just under 37,000 arrivals last year, and this year to date we have had under 21,000, so 16,000 fewer individual migrants have arrived. In terms of boats that have arrived, we have had 305, which compares with 600 boats that had arrived at this point last year. In terms of migrants, that is a 43% reduction, while in terms of boats, it is a 49.8% reduction, or almost 50%. That means that with migrant arrivals, we are at the lowest point that we have had since 2020. I anticipate that by the end of the year—with a little touching of wood—we will come in below 2019, so we will have the lowest numbers really since the big phenomenon of small boats began.

To your question, the Border Security Command has now been in existence for two years, and the Government's intent was to bring together all the various systems and to look across the whole of Government, particularly with international partners, to address what I know you all understand is a very complicated and complex problem. The idea was to try to put in priorities for where the Government were, to bring in the resources and to bring law enforcement, Departments and other Government agencies into that fight and really cohere the work with international partners.



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We break down what we do broadly into three areas. First, those things that attract migrants to the UK—you will be aware of some of the initiatives that have been placed, that the Home Secretary has done, to try to make things less attractive to people who would seek to come here illegally. That includes our organised immigration crime taskforce, Operation Lockstream, under Deputy Chief Constable Wendy Gunney. That has had some great effect on illegal working and some of the pull factors.

The upstream piece is where we work with international partners. That is very much about how we deal with stability in those countries from where people seek to come here, working with those Governments and those along the routes to try to stop migrants making the journeys in the first place. We are very much trying to interdict the supply chains, where the boats, the equipment and the facilitation take place.

We then get into the work that happens in the near borders, principally with France, but also with Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. In that regard, what we are trying to do is obviously to stop the migrants coming across, really digging into the facilitators, the illegal criminal gangs and the small boats equipment.

I will let Rob talk about some of the detail, but I offer that we have had huge success now in terms of working with partners to reduce the flow of migrants into Europe in the first place. We have had great success in terms of reducing the supply of equipment and boats, and particularly with our work with France and near-border partners, of being able to do that last line of defence on the beaches. The French have had a 60% success rate in stopping boat events this year. Put those combinations of factors together and that is why we have seen, month on month this year, a pretty steady and progressive erosion of migrants' ability to come across.

Q2 Ben Maguire: Is that something new that we have been doing though? As a Committee, we have been hearing about lots of those measures for the past two and a half years. Why has that suddenly led to a change in numbers now?

Duncan Capps: I have been involved in this since December 2022, when I started setting up the small boats operational command, and I think that this is now the coming together and bedding-in of all those measures, with some of those upstream relationships now really starting to bear fruit. The resourcing, training and expertise of the people who have been involved in that take time. It is one thing setting out a policy and putting resource into it, but it takes time for some of those things to take place. Rob, you probably ought to comment.

Rob Jones: Thank you, Duncan. To focus on that point about why we are convinced that it is because of something that we have done and not just other environmental factors, we have done everything that Duncan has said, and we have made this the main effort for the NCA. We have built a response that focuses on five key areas: social media, high-value targets, equipment, criminal finance, and the movers and shakers in northern France. Those people all now face unbearable pressure day in, day out.

That makes them desperate; it makes them change their business model. We have seen an adaptation because of that pressure, and what you have seen this summer—we will get on to some of this later, I am sure—is that pressure being exhibited in them changing their behaviour.

There are key indicators of our progress. At any one time, we have around 100 operations running. Those operations use the full suite of tactics available for national security threats. It was not always like that with organised immigration crime. There has been a clear demand signal to the system in the UK that this is an effort right across HMG, and the policy and influencing around that system by the BSC is really helpful. We have a laser-like focus on the operations. We have targeted known suppliers of equipment, and then, after that, that equipment has no longer appeared in crossings. That is point one.

Point two is that we have seen people finding it much harder to bring together the package of engine, boat, lifejacket and migrant at the same time and place in northern France. We have intervened with European partners on multiple occasions, as a direct result of UK intelligence, to prevent what we call a “go kit”—a car with all that equipment—from getting to migrants. We know that crossings would have happened if we had not dealt with that. All those things build up the pressure. We also had a record year last year in terms of seizures of equipment.

We do not just do that; obviously, we are seeking to bring people to justice as well. But, as we know, an awful lot of that criminality is based overseas. That is why, in the upstream effort, we have come away from France and gone further and further upstream, with covert tactics to confront this, to empower the goal-line defence in France and Belgium. By the time people have got that far, it is very hard to stop them. We are working way away from that now, at scale, to disrupt them and prevent them from getting to France. Those factors coming together have contributed to that drop.

Q3 Ben Maguire: What success looks like is obviously how many crossings there are, but do you have specific KPIs in other areas, particularly on reducing gang activity—you also mentioned the seizure of equipment—other than literally just the number of crossings being made across the channel?

Rob Jones: Absolutely. We also track seizures of equipment, disruptions overseas and arrests; we track a whole range of different indicators. There is always a lag from the activity that we undertake, because this is a movement that is dynamic across all the routes. A very strong year last year set us up for what we have seen this summer, and, as the weather deteriorates, we are working really hard to make sure that we are in the strongest position we can be in for next year. It is therefore not just about one factor; it is about monitoring all of those and making sure that there is pressure on all of them.

Sometimes, arrests are not the most effective way of stopping crossings; sometimes, taking disruptive action overseas is much more effective.



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Arresting somebody and getting them imprisoned overseas is good—we need to hold them to account—but driving down the numbers and getting people off the water is the ultimate bottom line for us. We don't want to contest organised immigration crime in the English channel; we want to do it at a time and place of our choice, which means ports and airports, and we need to get migrants off that route. So, sometimes, it is better to disrupt them way away from the UK, even though that might not result in an arrest.

Q4 Robbie Moore: To build on that, I want to discuss the role of the Border Security Command a little more. As has rightly been touched on, one of the reasons for setting it up was to improve inter-agency co-operation. How do you feel co-operation has improved since the command was set up? Do you feel that it is of a status that needs more improvement since your involvement commenced?

Duncan Capps: Without being patronising, that is a very good question. We are two years into this journey, post election and the setting up of this organisation, which you will be aware pulled together some of the existing organisations, including mine. If you recall, my predecessor appeared before you this time last year, when the Maritime Command, the Small Boats Operation Command and Home Office Intelligence were pulled into Border Security Command, making it just under 3,000 people. That brought a really key operational intelligence focus to that.

I would offer that, two years into this, with the relationships, systems and convening authority of this appointment—you will be aware that it is enshrined in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act, but does not require that—everyone understands how they can play their role, whether that is the organisations for which Rob has responsibility, the Crown Prosecution Service or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I think it has taken time for all that to pivot in, so I think the system is working really well.

However, we should be really clear that if we get to the end of this year below 25,000 arrivals, that is still 25,000 arrivals too many. I am not quoting the Home Secretary, but we are relentless. Everyone gets up every morning wanting to drive that down to a level where it is no longer significant, so there is always more to be done in that regard.

I think it was helpful that we managed to sign the deal for the next three years with France, which has given certainty in that space, and it is good to be able to coalesce around. I think that the direction from the previous Prime Minister, as well as this Prime Minister's laser focus—you will be aware that he visited us in the summer—is helping. There is still more to do, but it is in a good place now.

As Rob said, what we have to do is certainly not claim victory now, and none of us are. We have to make sure that we set the conditions now to stop those people who would seek to travel to the north of France next year and make those crossings.



Q5 Robbie Moore: Just to press you, you said that there is still more to do, so are there any areas of the inter-agency co-operation that is lacking at the moment on which you would like to see more emphasis and focus?

Duncan Capps: I certainly would not single anyone out; I think everyone is really behind this. In a lot of cases, some of the initiatives that we have put in—let's take our work upstream with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and our taskforces that deal with the main routes up through the west of Europe, central Europe and the Balkans. Some of that work and those relationships, as well as the rationalisation of the footprint that Rob, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have to make sure that we are all pulling in the right direction, is going to continue to yield real benefit. As Rob said, we need to do as much of that upstream as we can.

There is still more to be done in some of the work that we are doing within the UK to address the pull factors, but I am confident we are getting there. Based on a year's-worth of experience dealing with immigration crime in the UK and illegal working, we can now be more focused on the things that pull migrants to want to come here illegally, and making it really difficult for them to do that. I would say those are some of the areas we can really work into.

Rob Jones: There are areas where we have taken very direct action in relation to illegal migration, and we are quite advanced in those areas, but there are other important areas that are catching up in priority.

Criminal finance, cash-based economy, the grey economy and the high street—all those things are relevant to illegal migration, because you do not want someone to think that they are going to come work for cash in a vape shop in the UK. That has spun up our Operation Machine and our work with the NPCC on really pressurising what could be seen as a pull factor, and it is really important to make sure that the lies told overseas about coming to the UK—that you can melt away and work with impunity—are confronted and that people are arrested.

That is coming up to the level of activity that we have in the more direct areas of chasing facilitators and people who are involved in this directly. The informal value transfer system—the hawaladars—is really important to us, but it is really difficult to deal with. It is hidden from regulation and the reporting regime that we get with suspicious activity reports from banks.

All of these areas are catching up with the higher priority areas, and we need all of those to be flat out to squeeze this. With the help of Duncan and the convening power that we have across Whitehall, that is exactly what we are doing. Everybody is at the table, and that is the important thing.

The other benefit that I have seen is the legislation that came through. I have talked before about acts preparatory and going early to disrupt organised crime at its earliest possible stage, and we are now starting to use that. The business model that I described was largely legal. Ubiquitous

social media is not illegal to run. The equipment is not illegal to possess. Using hawaladars is not illegal, unless we can prove a link to criminality.

We now have section 13 of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025 that allows us to seize equipment, which is brilliant. You have seen some of that recently, with 25 vessels seized in the UK under that legislation. That would have been 25 vessels with at least 79 people in. Criminalising that business model with the new legislation has been important, as well. That is another benefit of what the Border Security Command has helped with.

Q6 Robbie Moore: You touched on what I want to get on to next. Obviously, the statutory responsibilities of Border Security Command are much broader than just dealing with illegal migration and small boats issues, although that has rightly been given huge attention. That has predominantly been the key focus. Is that justified and what are the implications for other areas of work that you are also mandated to focus on, where less attention may be afforded?

Duncan Capps: You are right. The intention for Border Security Command was that it would be a system leader across all illegal immigration into the United Kingdom but, as you say, to start with, the clear and present focus for us was illegal migration by small boat and the facilitation around it. You will recall in the summer, when we talked about the common travel area and some other threats, that we are interested in that. I am sure we will come later to displacement.

If we are successful in the small boats area, is there a demand that has to be satisfied by other ways to get into the United Kingdom? We are very interested in those things. I also have a remit for wider national border security. You will be aware that I have the only law enforcement maritime capability in the UK. That was involved in the boarding of the MV Smyrtos. We facilitated that using our cutters. We still maintain a persistent presence in that.

I oversee the joint maritime security centre. We work very closely on national resilience and critical national infrastructure. That work is still going. We are concerned about the common travel area. We are concerned about clandestine entry into the UK, and we keep that as a plate that is spinning, working with Border Force, NCA and other regional police forces.

The focus at the moment is definitely on small boats, but it cannot be at the expense of not keeping an eye on those things. Because you and Parliament would not thank me if we fixed the small boat problem and all that happens is we get people displaced into other dangerous modes of entry. We all remember the awful situation at Purfleet where people died in a container. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that, Rob.

Rob Jones: I have just a couple of points. The most egregious breach of the border remains small boats. That creates community tension and problems across society. We have got to deal with it, and we will be

relentless in pursuing that. At the same time, there are other breaches of the border in relation to drugs, firearms and other issues. Be assured, we are looking at where displacement might go for organised immigration crime.

At the same time, we must concurrently be alive to the way those threats are developing, as well. We have to maintain our response against other smuggling methods. We have prioritised small boats. Specialists who understand smuggling and global networks and are experts in drugs are now tackling small boats. We are backfilling and developing other people to ensure we retain the level of expertise we need to tackle drugs. You cannot pivot towards one threat without there being an opportunity cost or consequence.

That is what we seek to mitigate with the ongoing work around resourcing where we have had an uplift in resources. We are holding the line, but this is challenging. The national security threat, the National Crime Agency's remit around a range of threats, from child sexual abuse through to OIC and drugs and firearms—none of that has gone away. We are pursuing that concurrently while we get after this.

Duncan Capps: To offer one other thought, this organisation is a little like an athlete: it is now match-fit and getting better. I came in from the military, and when I first got here, I was surprised by the communication and slight stovepiping in some cases. I am not saying that we are completely out of that, but it is so much better, in terms of co-operation, understanding, clear prioritisation, and the link between Parliament making policy or Ministers making directions for resources to be allocated and actually being able to pull levers to make things happen. Those techniques and relationships will endure and are good for all these threats, and you can now pivot into those in a more dynamic way than you could before.

Q7 **Robbie Moore:** That takes me nicely on to my question on funding and its prioritisation. How do you as an organisation decide whether the interventions funded by the Border Security Command are value for money? On prioritisation, what areas of spending are you most confident represent good value for money?

Duncan Capps: Part of the compact to set up the Border Security Command was that it would act as the system leader, so it would run the strategy and plan by allocating funding to the various endeavours. Obviously, there is the core funding that sets up my organisation, but this year, there is £290 million being focused through organisations that have a role, including the NCA, agencies and the CPS.

We covered a little of this in our first statutory report, which was published in the summer, and we will deal with a lot more of it in our report next year. We work through my system leadership board, which all the director-general level representatives are on, and we monitor the progress in all those areas. Of course, when we come to the end of what is essentially our first proper year of doing that, that ongoing assessment

process and bids for what will go on in future will hopefully allow us to identify the things that are having the greatest effect, which we will want to double down on and continue to fund, and the areas where we perhaps have not had as much success, so that we can pivot that funding. That process is pretty dynamic.

Obviously, one of the major parts is the funding that we channel through the National Crime Agency to establish the pivot that Rob talked about and the upstream network for us to work together on this. Rob, do you want to talk about measures of effectiveness in your area?

Rob Jones: To make sure that we are providing real value for the money invested in us, as we go from year to year and as we plan for future interventions, we look at what works and try to double down on it. That is connected to the funding, as the easiest answer to your question is that the Home Office pay on results.

Q8 **Robbie Moore:** What has not worked? In your time in this role, have there been any interventions that you have deemed not value for money and stopped?

Duncan Capps: We have not been through a full cycle yet, so it is probably too early in the gestation of the BSC to identify anything that has been genuinely unsuccessful. If I had to give an example, the work we did to pull together some of the recommendations on work in the UK under Lockstream has perhaps been focused against criminality more generally. Coming into the next year, we will focus that on organised immigration crime much more specifically, rather than on a more general part. I would not say that it has not been effective, as it has been very successful in addressing wider criminality, but given my clear main effort, we will pivot it much more towards what we see as the pull factors for small boat migrants coming to the UK. As you would guess, that is a lower-cost part of the area around people looking to come and work illegally here.

Q9 **Robbie Moore:** On the opposite side of this—maybe this will build on the answer you just gave—if more funding was to be awarded for you to make additional interventions, on whatever you deemed fit, to meet the objectives, where would that funding be allocated to give value for money? Would it be specifically to address the pull factors you mentioned?

Duncan Capps: You might want to touch on this later, but as you will be aware, post the one in, one out deal, the Home Secretary has pulled together all the work that was already happening under a small boats taskforce. That looks at deterrence, potential returns and that element of the issue, so that we can start to build in consequence when people jump the queue and come here illegally. That is an area that I expect the Home Secretary will want to resource using funding from BSC.

As Rob said, it is about addressing these things upstream, with partners in the countries that they come from, and capacity building. Critically, it is about doing that as the whole of Government, so that when we negotiate with those countries, we bring in all the equities cross-Government, not just organised immigration crime. There is a compact here: do they want

things from us? Yes, they do. We need to wrap in those in a way that perhaps did not happen before.

If we can stop people wanting to leave their countries, we can stop the facilitators exploiting them to cross borders, and, critically, we can stop the supply chain. That is far more effective because when people get to the north of France—many of you have been there—broadly, they will keep trying until they are either successful or die, and that causes all sorts of problems. I would offer that the work we have done with France in the new deal, and particularly with the flexibility to look at what we have learned over the last three years and before to focus on the things that are successful—that is a core part of that, but it is only holding the ground.

Rob Jones: On your point around where we are at and what works, it is quite early because we have gone from the build and the uplift to then assessing where we can best place resources. Within the envelope we have, we are constantly looking at whether we can redeploy and get behind something that has had a tangible impact. Across the areas that I talked about—the five key areas that we operate against—the work on criminal finance for OIC is interesting, because the narrative around following the money and organised crime holds good, so there is impact. But on the money and the way the money flows work in relation to organised immigration crime, it is a much smaller pot of money and it is much more organic. The system, because it is based on trust, is harder to penetrate and disrupt. That does not mean that you should not do it; it is about finding the right place to target it.

Those are the areas that are catching up with other elements that we do, and when we get through next year, we will be in a much better place to get behind what we think is most effective. All of those areas are productive—I see benefit in all of them. If there was a wider effort, it would be upstream. On the big issues that draw people to the UK—that push people to the UK—some of those are beyond the NCA in terms of dealing with them. We are tackling the organised crime, but in dealing with the causes of this and making sure that the UK is not an attractive target for smuggling gangs, the price is an efficient and effective system that we support by undermining the organised crime. You need to keep looking further and further away from the UK for the causes of this and try to tackle it as far away from France as you can, as Duncan said.

Duncan Capps: One further point, which goes back to your previous point, is that communications and perception is an area that we are doing quite a lot in but can do more. As Rob said, this is unlike most other crimes, which try and stay under the radar. This is overt: it is on TikTok and all of these other apps. It is about working with those companies to try to put deterrence into this—not just in northern France but in the countries where people are coming from. That is an area we have developed this year and I think we can do more.

We are working with the French now in the camps to try to have communications with them. We do dialogue under a thing called Op Asper,



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where we try and explain the realities of what it means. We are trying to drive down people risking their lives. I think that there is a big piece we can do there to try and bring some truth to the perception of it. You saw some of the work that we did with the French for the first time, using some imagery to show people that might come that the reality is not what they think—particularly if you come from the Horn of Africa, you are going to go through countries and be exploited and so on. I think that is one area that we can do a lot more in: working with our ambassadors and high commissioners in those countries. It is one of the areas I want to develop next year.

Q10 Chair: Have you assessed how many attempts, on average, it takes for someone to get across in a small boat?

Duncan Capps: Yes. On average, I think it is not quite double figures, but seven or eight. I cannot verify that, but you will be aware that since last year, we have a very strong debriefing presence now in Manston. Most of the anecdotal evidence is that people try a number of times to get over.

Q11 Chair: There must be a point where it becomes not economically viable for people to do it. When we were in France last year, we were told that if it got to more than three attempts, people would just stop trying. Are you saying that it is still more than that?

Duncan Capps: I think it is more than that. There are a lot of people in the camps at the moment, which is bad in one respect because a lot of people are there, but it also represents the fact that the French are making it very difficult, particularly in the Dunkirk/Calais area, to get across. To take your logic, you are right that there is a moment—from a criminal perspective, if we look at the business model—where it stops being particularly viable. Part of our strategy is to drive it to a point where it is not worth the criminal gangs doing this, because the cost of getting the boat and the engine, as well as the risk of them being interdicted and jailed, is so much that they stop being in this business.

Q12 Dr Prinsley: You said that there are a lot of people in the camps at the moment. Can you give us an estimate?

Duncan Capps: Under 4,000, but close to 4,000, in the two camps between Calais and Dunkirk. I think the French estimate at the moment is that there are almost 3,800 people between those two camps.

Q13 Chair: What was it previously?

Duncan Capps: In my experience from when I previously did the job in SBOC, it was broadly about 2,000 between them. Our understanding from our French partners, who we work with closely, is that it is almost double what we would normally expect.

Q14 Dr Prinsley: What is your estimate of the average amount of time that somebody would be in a camp before they either get across or give up?

Duncan Capps: I cannot give you an accurate answer to that, but it can be quite a long time. Broadly, the poorer the nationality, the longer they



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tend to stay in the camps. It can be a period of months, if not longer, that they are living in what, as you have seen, are exceptionally unsanitary and difficult conditions.

Chair: Dreadful conditions, yes.

Duncan Capps: I am sorry that I cannot answer accurately.

Q15 **Chair:** Do you have any intelligence on the make-up of those 3,800? Are they predominantly single men or is it mixed with families?

Duncan Capps: In terms of gender, it is predominantly single men. There are some females and some families, but it is 90% single men coming over on small boats. In terms of nationalities, as you would expect, it is those that we most frequently see: those from Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. The number from Afghanistan is slightly higher. Those who are slightly more wealthy will tend to come in more quickly, will take less time on the routes from their original countries and will broadly try to cross more quickly.

Q16 **Margaret Mullane:** We have had many presentations at this Select Committee, and the message—from, I think, Rob and your predecessor—was always that organised crime is very good at adapting, and that that is not going to change any time soon. I agree with the Chair that this is a massive issue in our constituencies. As well as the cost, it is the faith and trust, isn't it? It is rolling on. As organised crime keeps changing, which it is good at doing, what is the biggest challenge now for you?

Rob Jones: My initial response is they do adapt, but we are thinking about their next move, and we are thinking about that now. I do not want to telegraph where we go next, because I want to be ahead and waiting when they change. The symptom we see is a higher number of attempts. That is grit in the business model—that is really good. The fact that there are more migrants in northern France is not a good thing—it shows the intent is high—but it shows that they are struggling to make the crossing. The fact that events have plummeted by something in the region of 50% and the fact about the number of times people are successful are important facts for communities that understandably feel threatened by this.

The assurance I can give is that we have seen the business model starting to shake, and we are actively working to understand where it goes next, if it does displace, to get ahead of it and be waiting. There are not an infinite number of possibilities for the small boats model. You have seen attempts to use larger vessels. You have seen attempts to evade the French patrols by going out of the areas where the French have very tight control. You have seen them try Belgium. The thing about small boats is that they depend on specialist equipment, on a just-in-time logistics model, and on people being able to bring all that together at the right time and in the right place. That is its vulnerability.

The strength of the model is that it was low cost, but we are increasing the cost because we are increasing the risk. We are increasing the cost to



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OCGs not just financially. Up till now, they have tried to absorb a lot of that, but they cannot do that forever, because they are driven by profit. We have also increased the cost to them in terms of risk. It is more likely than ever that you are going to get arrested. It is more likely than ever that your equipment is going to be seized. Every time that happens, they need to go again.

People will continue to attempt organised immigration crime and people smuggling. Attempting them in the English channel is getting riskier and riskier for everybody involved. We just need to continue and stay flat out until that viability is no longer there.

Duncan Capps: This is a very good question. The things that have worried me most this year have been the increasing size of the boats and the increasing occupancy. You will have seen that this year we had a boat with 230 people in it—extraordinary. It ought to be put on the record that it is only a matter of time until we have a mass casualty event in the channel. It is extraordinary that that has not happened so far. You will be aware that my officers were involved in a rescue with the French in French waters, on one of the western launches, where we rescued 168 people. None of them drowned—quite an extraordinary thing. That worries me.

You will probably want to do in a bit of detail the displacement into Belgium and down to the western beaches, particularly Normandy. That represents the fact that they are finding it more difficult to launch around Dunkirk and Calais; it is not impossible, but more difficult. The displacement into Belgium was a real fear of mine at the beginning of the year. We set up a taskforce with the Belgians to address that. Not only have we pretty much shut down that route, but we have increased co-operation between France and Belgium and Belgium and the Netherlands, noting that the Belgians have far more permissive use of number-plate and facial recognition. That has had the bigger effect of making it much more difficult for the boats and the engines to be moved from broadly where they were being stored—in the Venlo area around the border with Germany and the Netherlands—in time, as Rob said, with a ready pack. That has made it much more difficult and is one of the contributing factors, so that co-operation has been effective.

Again, on the western launch, it is much more difficult for the criminal gangs to operate in that part of France. It is a very long way. They have to get the migrants to move down there. They have to move the boats and the engines. As you can imagine, we are working very closely with the French to deal with that.

One thing that has made a big difference this year is the French changing their on-water maritime posture. They have physically interdicted 15 boats on the water. Their view, which I share, is that that has had not just a direct effect but a deterrent effect. We have seen boats giving up rather than being stopped by the French. Principally, that has addressed the taxi boat methodology when there are fewer people in the boat when they go and pick people up. That is one of the other displacements that was difficult.



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At the risk of going on, there are a lot of things. We think about it and we work very closely with the French because most of it is in that space, but you will understand that the difficulty is that it is France. We have to work with the French in the way they do it, while offering every bit of support and intelligence that we can.

- Q17 **Margaret Mullane:** That brings me to my next question. The displacement of where the boats are launching from leads us to attempts in other areas outside Kent. How have you responded to that?

Duncan Capps: Let me start with the Dieppe area launches. We have had four of the larger boats, which we think was a criminal gang in that area. Three of those made their way up successfully and came across, and the other was the one that we rescued. We then had three boats, larger ones again, that launched from the old D-Day beaches in Normandy. The first one launched on the 6th and entered UK waters on the 7th. We picked it up with the French coastguard and it was intercepted by the RNLI. The reason for that is we obviously patrol Border Security Command assets in the short straits, because that is where the vast majority come across. You will be aware that the two RNLI vessels that picked up those migrants came into Eastney marina. There was then a public disorder incident and the police had to try to put a cordon around it.

Chair: We have some questions about that later.

Duncan Capps: That was all very difficult, and I share your concerns about how we deal with that. The short answer to your question is that there were two further ones—one that we moved by sea to Dover and one that was brought ashore at Gosport. There is no intention for us to set up a reception facility in that south coast area around Portsmouth. My absolute aim over this next two or three months, working with French partners, is to shut that route down for lots of very good reasons, not least that it is nearly 60 nautical miles. If people try that in the winter, we are going to have loss of life, and it really, really concerns me—not just that, but the reception is much more difficult, with the issues of the RNLI, which you might want to talk about, and the problems that we had bringing people ashore in Portsmouth, which is not well set up for it. It is probably my No. 1 concern at the moment, and it is the one that I am working hardest on.

- Q18 **Chair:** How are they getting the migrants from those camps? France is a big country, and it is not easy to move people—

Duncan Capps: That is a seven-hour train journey from Paris. I go down there. The French préfet maritime—the senior officer who runs it—is based out of Cherbourg, so we go out there quite a lot. We believe they are moving down either by van, facilitated by the OCGs, or using public transport.

Chair: So it is taking hours and hours.

Duncan Capps: Just that. There are no camps in that area, and the

French are very, very keen that that does not develop in the same way as it has in the north.

Q19 **Chair:** How much are migrants now being charged on average for passage?

Duncan Capps: We did some investigations into that, and it has broadly come down. It is over €1,000 but under €2,000.

Chair: That is a lot lower than we were hearing last year.

Duncan Capps: Yes, and depending on the nationality, they are price-sensitive. The OCGs will charge more for those who they think can pay, who will broadly get perhaps a better service. If you are coming from Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia, you will be packed into enormous boats. As Rob said, the average occupancy this year is 69. Those who have been following this for a long time will remember that it used to be a few people in a boat, and the average is now almost 70.

Q20 **Chair:** How much do the boats cost them?

Duncan Capps: We do not know that.

Rob Jones: They can expect to pay in the region of £14,000 or potentially more.

Q21 **Chair:** And they expect that once the boat is gone, it is lost.

Rob Jones: It is, yes.

Duncan Capps: It is one use.

Q22 **Chair:** So you need to make sure that they are losing enough boats that it is no longer economically viable.

Rob Jones: Absolutely, and that is what we seek to do. On the way it is priced, that figure is a symptom of OCGs trying to maintain the business model by less events, because they are so vulnerable and they have less access to equipment, and pushing them into bigger arrivals with larger boats.

Q23 **Chair:** I guess if you can put 200 migrants on a boat and make €200,000 from that crossing, it is economically viable. If you cannot do that and you are losing enough boats, it is not.

Duncan Capps: The migrant numbers reducing is a good thing, but the most stark one is that we are at pretty much half the number of boats that came over last year, and we pretty much directly attribute that to the work we are doing.

Q24 **Dr Prinsley:** First, I think you should be congratulated on what you have been doing. It is a huge triumph that you have managed to bring this situation so much more under control. As you said, the job is not done, but you are making an enormous difference. We are very grateful to you and your teams for doing that, and I think the country is grateful to you.



I want to ask about the intelligence that this whole thing depends upon. Is there more that you could do, or more that we could help you to do, with your intelligence so that you can take pre-emptive action? I am thinking particularly of increasing uncertainty in various parts of the world. We were hearing yesterday in another meeting about the terribly deteriorating situation in Yemen. I am expecting that you may improve the situation from some countries, but there will be other countries where things deteriorate. My question is about how you look at things further upstream and whether there is intelligence that we could assist you to resource.

Rob Jones: Thank you. In tackling organised crime, the target I would have is 100% coverage. I am never going to get that, but I am as close to that as I can get with the access we have to everything that is available in the UK. In terms of upstream intelligence and our relationship with the intelligence community in the UK, that is a very helpful element of what we do. The SOC mission is supported and avowed by that community as a priority for them as well. I am very grateful for that support, and we benefit from it.

In the key areas where we work, we are looking to maximise all the intelligence collection that we can upstream, and we are doing that with UK partners and overseas partners. We have a large presence in Europol, which accesses European intelligence. We have more joint investigations running in Europol on this than we have had before. We have more intelligence collection. In short, we have a well-resourced intelligence effort in the key areas where we are working. We do have support from colleagues across the UK system. It is a priority for them, and we are benefiting from it.

Duncan Capps: Bringing Home Office intelligence into Border Security Command and pivoting that organisation's efforts to focus on organised immigration crime and small boats have been very effective. Rob alluded to working with international partners. This is not just a UK problem; it is a worldwide problem. It is destabilising: the countries that are losing their people don't want to lose their brightest and best. And no one wants to pay facilitators, who are in some cases poly-criminal and doing bad things with the money that they are getting from this. There is a shared zone of interest in that, and actually we do a lot of reciprocal work, both on the law enforcement side and on the prevention side, with those partners.

I do think we have moved now into a space where we are better able to share intelligence, in a way we couldn't, and—even if it's not intelligence—information, awareness and some of the debriefing stuff we do. We can track all the way back through the migrant journey, using the taskforce approach. What we are trying to do, as Rob said, is make this much more, not haphazard, but intelligence led and really focused, using all the sources we have, including the powers to look at magnetic media, phones and open-source intelligence, which is a massive area because all this is happening in plain sight, all the way through those journeys. So it is an improving picture, but one that we need to keep working on.

Q25 **Dr Prinsley:** One thing that sometimes concerns people is the idea that



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people pitch up in this country without any identity documents whatever and there doesn't seem to be a simple way for us to identify who they are. Of course, there are worries that some of them may have criminal intent or criminal backgrounds. People are a bit worried about that. Obviously, many people coming here are people of good intent, who are genuinely seeking asylum, and those people should be supported, but in among them are these unidentified individuals. What more can we do about that?

Rob Jones: The story there probably starts with Manston and the reception committee to fix identity, so perhaps Duncan, you want to take that question.

Duncan Capps: As you set it out is correct. A lot of them will, if they have travel or identity documents, get rid of them before they come through the system. In almost all cases—it's 99% of those who arrive by small boat—they are seeking to gain asylum in this country. So in most cases, they are compliant; they want to portray a story that allows them to do that. It is broadly our belief that most people who would seek ill, on the terrorist side of things, will not come by small boat, because those who do are all biometrically enrolled: they all go through facial recognition; they all go through fingerprints.

But your point about those who might have criminal records or seek to do bad things in this country is our concern. The Home Secretary has been really clear that we need to have zero tolerance of that. So identifying those people, through all the ways we can, monitoring them and making sure we use intelligence to stop that and to deal with it as firmly as we can if it happens is absolutely part of what she has now directed us to be able to do. You will be aware that we have counter-terrorism officers embedded with our teams at Manston and Western Jet Foil.

Q26 **Dr Prinsley:** I want to ask a separate question, about the equipment and boats that we have to rescue people who are at sea. Our rescue service is a volunteer service, which is a bit different from some other countries'. We have the RNLI. Are the boats that the RNLI have to fish people out of the water and out of these fragile rubber boats the correct vessels, or do we need to invest in better vessels to do that?

Duncan Capps: It is worth being really clear here that 98% of rescues of small boat migrants are done by Border Security Command, by the maritime and small boats organisation. To be really clear, only 2% of rescues of small boats are done by the RNLI. They do an amazing job, but should not be pulled into this unless they have to be.

I arrived in this role at the end of 2022, and we had just established the contract for crew transfer vessels. Essentially, these are the vessels that are normally used to take crews out to the wind farms. We have adapted those to be able to rescue small boat migrants. No boat, apart from a lifeboat, is designed to do rescues. In most cases, there is a mayday and somebody will go and assist, but of course you need a boat that can actually do that. These have been designed or modified specifically to be able to come alongside small boats and rescue them. The high-profile



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incidents on the Normandy launches into Portsmouth were RNLI, because they cover that area. We now have a plan in place to stop them having to do that. I deal very closely with RNLI—the chief executive is a personal friend of mine. We are also procuring an additional crew transfer vessel to allow us to do that.

The reason that that was set up was twofold. First, it was to be able to ensure that we can fulfil our safety of life at sea responsibilities—as a signatory of the maritime conventions, we have to do that. Secondly, it was to provide control for people coming into the United Kingdom.

Q27 Dr Prinsley: It would be great if the message that rescuing these individuals in the sea is not the work of the RNLI could be more widely dispersed. As you know, we have had a terrible situation of RNLI people being vilified by some people who would wish us ill.

Duncan Capps: It is worth being really clear to the Committee that it has been absolutely appalling. Peter Sparkes, the chief executive, is a personal friend. We served together: he was Royal Navy and I was Army. The abuse that his people, and their families and children, have had is extraordinary.

I have to be honest with you: it is the same abuse that my staff get. You will be aware of the protests that routinely happen outside Manston and Western Jet Foil. So-called auditors film it. I will not give the names of the people who have done it, but you will have seen that. It is absolutely extraordinary.

These people are hugely proud of what they do; their role is to save life at sea and control the borders of this country, which they do with incredible professionalism and humanity—you have seen them in action—and they have been subject to the same kind of abuse.

I am hugely grateful that we have the RNLI as partners. They particularly assist us when the seas are really bad and in the worst rescue conditions, because they are the experts in that, working with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. We work very closely with them.

Q28 Chair: Could you set out what the auditors are? On our trips and in meetings with parliamentarians from around the rest of the world, we have heard the view that in the UK you get arrested for free speech, and that we are an authoritarian state. Could you set that out so that there is a factual, on-the-record position of what these people are?

Duncan Capps: Yes, 100%. As you can imagine, having spent nearly 40 years serving my country, I believe that free speech and the right to democratic representation are a core part of what we are. We have absolutely no difficulty with people who protest, but violent protest is obviously more difficult. What we tend to get is a lot of people who film our activities. The so-called auditors often post those videos, live or subsequently, on various social media channels—YouTube or whatever. They can be quite antagonistic. We do not stop them doing that, because they are on public property and it is not for us to do that, but a lot of time



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they are filming our officers and their cars, and there is some intimidation involved in some of that. We don't stop them doing it. The police are exceptionally good around Dover—as you might imagine, we work very closely with them—and it is only stopped if there is criminality. But the act of filming and communicating is not illegal and is allowed to continue.

Q29 Dr Prinsley: Would you like some rules to be changed to make it illegal to make films of people who are engaged in this life-saving activity?

Duncan Capps: As you might imagine, I would be cautious about calling for legislation. The police have been very good at putting containment areas around our key facilities—particularly at Dover—where we are doing safety of life at sea and you have very vulnerable people. They respond to that pretty sensitively and quite dynamically. If this continues—the debate around this is not a sensible one; it can be very febrile—we need to be very cautious about where it leads.

Q30 Margaret Mullane: I just wondered how it happened that the boats arrived outside Kent and seemed to catch everybody out. Following on from what Peter said earlier, the public want to know whether all those people who arrived in those boats, which you were not aware of, have been security checked, and whether all checks have been sorted.

Duncan Capps: I think what you are describing are the two incidents that happened in September at Folkestone and Samphire Hoe, when we did not intercept the boats on the water. To put it in perspective, I took over this role in December 2022. We had one boat in August last year that we did not intercept on the water and met on the beach. And we had those two, one that came into Samphire Hoe and one that came into Folkestone, both of which were met on the beach by the police. In that time, we had 2,316 small boat arrivals, so that represents less than 0.1% of arrivals. We always seek to interdict on the water. It wasn't that we did not detect those, but they were detected too late for us to mobilise one of the crew transfer vessels and other assets to actually meet them on the water. They were intercepted—

Q31 Margaret Mullane: So that the public can understand that, why were they detected so late?

Duncan Capps: It was an extremely busy day on the water and the surveillance conditions were really difficult. We have a networked system of surveillance and intelligence. We map them with the Coastguard coming off the beach. We have crewed surveillance aircraft and drones, and then we have coastal surveillance towers. That all comes together and networks into a system that then queues the assets. It was a particularly busy day, with multiple rescues going on. The boat was identified about 4 km off the beach, and it was too late by that stage to get a crew transfer vessel to meet it. It was met on the beach by law enforcement, immediately then supported by our officers. In one case there were five people on one boat, and the other one on the subsequent day had 21. I will not go into detail.

There are a couple of procedural issues that we identified in terms of the notifications that came off the system. I am confident that any errors that



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happened have been identified. We should be really clear: it wasn't that they were not detected. They just were not controlled on the water. It represents an exceptionally small number. That is why, with a lot of people saying we are acting as a taxi service, we intercept them on the water, because we do not want them getting to the beach. Some of you who have been around this a long time will recall that when this started off, people would get on to the beaches and then get into the hinterland of the UK with none of the checks that we have discussed today. I am not blasé, but I am very focused.

Q32 Margaret Mullane: I know you're not. Would you say that there is an issue with messaging for the public? There is a public perception, obviously fanned, I feel, by certain sections of the media, but it is not what it appears, is it?

Duncan Capps: I think people genuinely think that most small boats arrive here on the coast, people disappear, and we do not intercept them. However, the reality, as I have said, is that in the last four years we have had 2,316, and there have only been three that we have not met on the water—and one last year was a person on a jet ski.¹

Q33 Mr Kohler: I apologise for being late—I was at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. How do you liaise with the media? Do you suggest they come with you to see what is happening?

Duncan Capps: I have been very keen to open our doors and show people more of what we do. It slightly plays to the humanity of what we are trying to do, the efforts that we are making and the protection we are trying to put in there. There will be people that you never persuade, but there will be those that perhaps just do not know and could be informed. We have worked with the French this year. You will have seen some of the quite difficult coverage. People's perception would be that we are overrun, not that we are nearly 50% down.

I would like to do more. We have been able to do more. We have been able to publicise more the work that we are doing. For the people that would like to understand this better, there is more that we can do. There are very sensible journalists out there that have covered this in a very straight way and have been honest and involved when the Home Secretary went out to deal with this. A lot of them are very good. There is a story, but they are very honest. There are others for whom it is always a story. You might imagine that for my people it is pretty difficult at times. I am not looking for sympathy, but we would like it to be a more even story.

¹ Following the evidence session, Duncan Capps provided the following clarification: Further to my evidence at HASC, I just wanted to clarify a remark I made about the 2025 uncontrolled landing being a man on a jetski. An abandoned jetski was initially linked to the report of an uncontrolled landing on 6 September 2025 at Kinsgdown, but that subsequent investigations ruled this out as a Channel crossing attempt. This was what I had in mind when I made my jetski comment, but I confirm that the actual uncontrolled landing involved 5 people in a small boat, all of whom were successfully recovered on the day.



Q34 **Mr Kohler:** Do you invite politicians—MPs?

Duncan Capps: The all-party parliamentary group and all the local MPs are invited to operations. We are always happy to have any MPs, county councils, and all the people involved in it. As you know, Sir, we are inspected and audited a great deal—rightly so, because it is such a sensitive operation. But I would be very happy to show anyone around our facilities, have those conversations and do those briefings.

Rob Jones: On the organised crime element and what we can do with the media, we have briefed in great detail our strategic approach. We have briefed the Crime Reporters Association. We engage as much as we can. Obviously, sometimes we have to wait before we tell the story. But it is a really important point. We see the legitimate public interest and understand it. We completely understand the need to get the truth of the way the UK is tackling this out there. We will do our best to address that.

Duncan Capps: We need not to avoid the difficult conversations that we are having here. We need to confront this, because it is something that most people in this country are concerned about.

Q35 **Ben Maguire:** I want to move on to international co-operation on enforcement. What type of international co-operation has been most effective in reducing small boat crossings?

Rob Jones: I will start with pre-planned operations on organised crime, and then, Duncan, you may want to come in on the taskforces.

We have developed our presence in Europol. We work in operational taskforces and in joint investigation teams on judicialised investigations with partners. That has resulted in a number of successes in Europe, particularly Germany, where we have had large days of action, with hundreds of officers out on the ground, to seize equipment that is on its way to France. The way this model works is that there is a lay-up point before materials are called down. Targeting that with European colleagues has worked and has had an impact on crossings. That is an important part of what we do.

As well as co-operating in Europe with judicialised investigations, we have bilateral relationships in all the source countries for migrants, and will target facilitators in those countries, as well as money launderers and the controlling minds. We do that at a scale that we have never done before. That is important to us. We are dealing with the equipment and the supply of equipment in Europe, with the middlemen in France, and with colleagues in OLTIM in France and with other French units, as well as bilaterally in some of the source countries. We have spoken publicly about work in Iraq and elsewhere to try to stem the flow.

That is the high-level view of that. It is difficult to go into specific operations that are still running. Many are running today and will come to fruition. We will talk about those when we can.

Q36 **Ben Maguire:** Can I mention one specific measure, which I put to the



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Home Secretary? I would be interested to hear your thoughts on the UK rejoining the Eurodac system, which is the data-sharing system with other European countries. As far as I understand it, we are essentially going blind when asylum seekers and refugees come to this country. We do not have any of that data sharing any more. That is something the Home Secretary seemed to intimate would be a helpful measure. Is that something you would see as a helpful step?

Rob Jones: Yes, completely. I welcome more access to European data and access to Eurodac. You are absolutely right. We absolutely welcome real-time alerts, more biometric data and all those things to make this as efficient as it can be.

Duncan Capps: Riffing on Rob's point, despite the fact that we are out of the structures of the European Union, we work every day to try to bring those things closer. It is in the European Union's interest for us to work as a partner. Those borders of France are the European borders—and the criminality and everything that goes with it.

Your question is a really interesting one. I have been involved in the past, in my military career, with a lot of upstream work and capacity building. What is innovative in what we have done here is that, rather than have just country-specific stuff, we have tried to link up those countries and those areas where we see the broad migrant roots.

We essentially have three major, and one slightly more minor, taskforces. One basically comes out of north-east Africa, through Italy and the central Mediterranean. One comes through Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Kuwait. The final one is through the western part of Europe and the Balkans. Then we have a slight side piece, which works in Vietnam and those countries there—you might remember that, a couple of years ago, there was a large influx of Vietnamese, who are broadly being trafficked into quite unpleasant stuff in the United Kingdom.

Rather than look at those as individual, isolated countries, we work across that entire route not only to deal with the causes of people leaving in the first place—working with the security agents and Government organisations to interdict those—but to get in the supply of boats and equipment. That allows us to share that in a way that is not restricted by the boundaries of those countries. That is joint piece of work that we do with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; the NCA, as the law enforcement lead for all operations in overseas jurisdictions; and other partners across Government. That has been has been effective in interdicting boats and equipment. It is also a vehicle through which we share information and intelligence, which they are very interested in.

That does not just help us with channel crossings; those facilitators are trying to get people across the Mediterranean to other countries. We focus on the countries that have equities—France into Morocco; Italy into Libya. Working with them in a partnership has been really innovative and effective.



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Rob Jones: To bring back to life the point about what we are doing upstream and to build on Duncan's point, we have 160 international liaison officers in over 50 countries now supporting all those taskforces and working with the equivalents of the NCA on law enforcement. For all those people, wherever they are, illegal migration is a top priority now.

Q37 **Ben Maguire:** I will follow up very quickly; I know we are getting short of time. You touched on the co-operation on the various routes that migrants come through. How are we checking that the funding we provide to other nations, particularly to countries like Iraq that have a history of human rights abuses, is being used correctly and for the reasons we provided it in the first place?

Duncan Capps: That is a really good question. We always work through high commissioners and embassies under Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office auspices. We make sure that we accord with all their processes and assurances. But there is a tension here: some of the countries that people are leaving are the ones that potentially have questionable pasts. We have to be pragmatic about that while making sure that we adhere to our rules of law and our values and standards. The short answer to your question is that it is all done through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in accordance with their platform and their assurances.

Q38 **Mr Kohler:** I echo Peter Prinsley's comments and congratulate you. Rob, we have met many times; Duncan, I think this is the first time. Many of us on the Committee were very sceptical. To halve the number this year is phenomenally good. I know we should not get overexcited, but it is hugely impressive, so thank you.

Turning to something that perhaps was not such a great success—although it was a pilot, and that is the point of pilots—can you tell us about one in, one out and why it ended?

Duncan Capps: I would slightly push back on the idea that it was not a success. I would say that it was. It was the first bilateral agreement that we made with any country within Europe after leaving the EU. We managed to return 1,631 illegal entrants to the United Kingdom, all of whom were from countries that we would have had difficulty returning to otherwise.

We facilitated safe and legal routes. We worked closely with UNHCR and other agencies to do that. We got a great education programme in place. Did it scale to the level that I would have liked it to? No, but it absolutely proved that we can make these things work. As an exemplar of how it could be done in the future, it was very successful. I would like to take it as a model in the future and potentially be able to do something else with it.

Q39 **Mr Kohler:** That is really interesting and very positive. Why did it end? Why is it not being continued?

Duncan Capps: It was always intended to be a pilot, as you know. It was meant to run for a year from the summer of last year to the summer of



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this year. The Home Secretary negotiated with Minister Nuñez, her counterpart in France, to extend it until the beginning of this month to get us through what is, as you well know, traditionally the peak season, but the French were not willing to extend it. It was always intended to be a pilot. We will have a couple of flights this month and then that process will finish.

Going back to the EU piece, the French position was that they see their border as the edge of the European border, not just the French border, and that an arrangement for returns should be with the European Union, not just France.

Q40 **Mr Kohler:** I will come to that in a moment, but before I do, do you think that it was a deterrent at the size it was, or did it need to be bigger to be a deterrent?

Duncan Capps: It is very interesting. I was not convinced to start with that it would be a deterrent, but I think it has been. The UNHCR processed up to 10,000 applications on our behalf, regardless of the fact that we only accepted just over 1,400—I think the number into this country was 1,496. But that meant that there were 10,000 or so migrants who had applied through a safe and legal process who did not cross during that period because they had their applications in place. Therefore, rather than being a deterrent just because you had the return to France, it also served as a process that stopped people making their crossings by small boat.

Q41 **Mr Kohler:** Do you agree, Rob?

Rob Jones: I do. Obviously, you were concerned that organised crime would just allow them to constantly traverse the channel. That did not play out. There were attempts to do that, but the vast majority of those removals stuck. That is important. It is one to watch in the future because the ability to return people quickly is helpful to our undermining of the business.

Q42 **Mr Kohler:** Do you know what happened to them once they were in France? Did they stay in France?

Duncan Capps: I went on one of the return flights, which returned 45 people. They were processed through Paris-Charles de Gaulle. The French then put them into a holding centre, gave them details and they were then supported to resettle into France.

Interestingly, and slightly counter to the narrative, I was very surprised that the mood on the plane was generally very positive and the people were thanking the escorts as they went back into France. That is very counterintuitive, but a tribute to the way that they had been treated. I know that there has been some slightly negative press around how they were treated and the way that it was done, but that was not my experience.

Q43 **Mr Kohler:** How do you account for them wanting to leave France in the first place and paying good money to do so, and then being happy to return?



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Duncan Capps: It is a very interesting conundrum. Some of them come from countries where they are not treated well by law enforcement. I think that they were slightly surprised that, notwithstanding the fact they were put into immigration retention centres and returned to France, it was done to them in a humane and decent way.

Rob Jones: But they are also sold a lie.

Q44 **Mr Kohler:** I wondered about that

Rob Jones: Resetting that is important. The best antidote is sunlight and making sure that people understand just how hard it is going to be if you run the gauntlet of the English channel, end up here having entered illegally, and then realise—

Q45 **Mr Kohler:** That the streets are not paved with gold.

Rob Jones: Exactly.

Q46 **Mr Kohler:** Can we do more to get that message out?

Duncan Capps: One of the questions earlier was: what more could we do in the future? One of the areas is communications, both online and in the countries of origin. It is one of the big things that we want to expand into and which we are resourcing now to get that message out. The FCDO will help us with that.

Q47 **Mr Kohler:** One of the issues is returning people who are over here and whose application fails. What are the numbers like on that at the moment?

Duncan Capps: It is really difficult. You find that our “frequent flyers” who come over mostly by small boat are from countries that we do not have returns agreements with. Since the beginning of the small boats phenomenon in 2018, we have broadly returned about 5% of those who have arrived here; the number is under 7,000. Operation Hillmore, the one in, one out deal, made a big difference because it allowed us to return Afghans, Iranians, Yemenis and Somalians in a way that we could not do before.

However, you are absolutely right that one of the things that I would like to see, and that the Home Secretary is absolutely focused on, is being able to do more returns to those countries from which most of the people arriving illegally originally come. You will have seen the work she is trying to do with Eritrea and some of the others.

Q48 **Mr Kohler:** And do the return hubs have a role to play?

Duncan Capps: I think they almost certainly do. You will be aware that the Home Secretary publicly announced that she had set up a small boats returns taskforce. That will be looking at all those options and working with partners to see what else we can do after learning from the Hillmore experience. Is there is a role in that to give me all of the tools we can possibly have to continue the good work that we have done?

Q49 **Mr Kohler:** Of course, we used to have tools under the EU and the Dublin



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agreement, and now we have the successor: the EU pact on migration and asylum. Would being within that have a role to play and would that be useful?

Duncan Capps: Rob talked about Eurodac and the sharing of information. We would very much like to be part of that, however we can make that work. If we were part of a European returns agreement, that would not be unhelpful to us. However, there might be other ways that we can do it. You will be aware of the work that we are trying to do with the Calais group and partners to try and facilitate some of that.

Mr Kohler: That was a hugely diplomatic answer. Well done, that was good.

Q50 **Chair:** You see a role for safe and legal routes?

Duncan Capps: That is a personal view. I have slightly crossed the Rubicon. I was not sure that they were useful. However, if we accept that migration is a worldwide problem and that there will always be people who would seek to come to this country and that they are not all bad people, part of that could be safe and legal routes. We have safe and legal routes but the focus on the one that we did for the small boats deal was effective not only because of the returns but particularly because of the deterrent. My sense from that was that a lot of people did not want to cross to here by small boats. They would like to come here, but that allowed us to process their applications in France, to do their biometrics and to do all the checks that Rob was talking about in advance so that we were not having to do that when they arrived here. Speaking from a personal point of view, I think that is potentially something we would look at in the future.

Q51 **Chair:** Is the small boats returns task force part of your organisation, BSC?

Duncan Capps: It sits at the moment under Dan Hobbs in migration, borders and international, but I am intimately involved in it and my teams are in it.

Q52 **Chair:** What is it doing in addition that was not being done before?

Duncan Capps: It is looking at all the potential options that we could have above and beyond those things that we are doing, such as returns hubs, returns to more difficult countries. It will bring in immigration enforcement and all that work because, as you might imagine, the Home Secretary is very keen, after Op Hillmore, to be able to put something in place that will achieve some of the effects that we wanted from that, as obviously we cannot continue it.

Q53 **Chair:** So if you were designing policy, there would be upstream work, first, to communicate that the streets are not paved with gold and to give them a reason not to leave their home country, there would be communications that we need to improve, and in an ideal world there would be some form of safe and legal route so that someone who is a genuine asylum seeker could make an application without having to get on a small boat.



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Duncan Capps: Working with partners.

Chair: Would you have zero tolerance on people arriving by irregular means?

Duncan Capps: That is a difficult question for me, isn't it? I personally think, having listened to the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, that it is not British to jump the queue. Some of the people who are jumping the queue are the youngest and the fittest, not necessarily the most deserving. My personal view is that we adhere to the rule of law in this country and one reason, ma'am, that people are not happy in this country is that people are seen to be getting away with it and there is not consequence. Part of that is about consequence. In a perfect world, yes, you would like a situation where you have policies in place that would mean that if you came in illegally there were consequences and you could deal with that.

Q54 **Chair:** We have heard, in international examples, that some countries have sanctions on migrants who break the conditions of their being an asylum seeker. For example, we heard that in Sweden if an asylum seeker is found working illegally, that is considered when their decision is finally made. Would that help you?

Duncan Capps: Again, I am moving into a policy formulation area, but I think it comes under the area of consequence. If you break the rules, there has to be a consequence for that, otherwise it does not form a deterrent. Part of what you laid out, which is our strategy, is the deterrent effect that, if you do break those rules, there is consequence in that: either return, not being able to work or whatever it might be.

Q55 **Chair:** It strikes me that working illegally is one of the big problems because people come here and they may be in debt bondage. We have heard takeaway companies telling us that prices will go up if they cannot employ people who have arrived by irregular means, but they are breaking the law. It is against the law to employ those people.

Duncan Capps: Just to reassure you, part of the really significant work that we do with immigration enforcement criminal finance and investigation is to try to get into those companies and stop them employing people illegally.

Q56 **Chair:** Are you involved in that?

Duncan Capps: Yes, I am.

Chair: So that comes under your brief as well. We will finish with some questions on public disorder and small boat arrivals. I know that you touched on it earlier, but we are keen to explore it before we finish.

Q57 **Ben Maguire:** I will go back to some of the issues that Peter Prinsley raised earlier about the protests and public disorder on the south coast prompted by the small boat arrivals. What challenges does that create for ensuring that those travelling by small boat are intercepted and processed safely and securely?



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Duncan Capps: I laid some of that out earlier, sir. First, there is the danger of their crossing, which is such an enormously long journey. Through our work with the French coastguard we actually get pretty good early warning that they are arriving. You can imagine that although we saw it as a possible scenario, we saw it as unlikely just because of the sheer distance they were crossing.

The first boat that arrived on 6th into 7th September was unexpected and the response was the best we could put together at the time. My team went down there to do the landside response, supported by Border Force. You will be aware that that came under the coastguard's responsibility because the RNLi worked with them—they were tasked to do it. The marina they were taken into was the one that they were allocated, which, as it turned out, was less secure or unsecure and not where you would want to do it. You will be aware that there was a protest that turned violent. I commend the Hampshire and Isle of Wight police for being incredibly professional in terms of what they did there. It allowed us to remove those migrants.

We subsequently had two more. The second arrival was intercepted by the RNLi. Because the sea was incredibly smooth and there were only 49 young men on the boat, all of whom were fit enough, we cross-decked them from the RNLi vessels into one of my cutters, a law enforcement vessel—it is a 42-metre, grey funnel boat. We moved that up to Dover, where we disembarked them at Western Jet Foil in the way that we normally would.

That is not particularly easy. If you have people who are obviously suffering medical problems or children, that would be difficult. We have to do it in circumstances. The final arrival, because it was night and it was a significant number, we brought into the site in Gosport, which was secured by the police. We then moved them by road to Western Jet Foil, and then on to Manston for onward processing.

Q58 **Ben Maguire:** You touched earlier on the fact that only about 2% of cases are dealt with by the RNLi. You mentioned that one of the arrivals was transferred to one of the Border Force vessels. Why did that not happen in the first place? Why did RNLi come in and get involved at that point?

Duncan Capps: To be clear, we have the boats that operate in the short straits that are principally there to intercept migrant boats. The cutters, of which there are four, are coastal patrol vessels whose job is law enforcement, interdicting drugs and dealing with criminality. They are supported by some smaller coastal patrol vessels. Their function is not to do rescues, and they are not suitable for it because they have high freeboard and they are not designed to be able to do that.

But because we had it down there—it berths at Portsmouth—we were able to transfer the migrants to it, because of the difficulty that we had seen the first time with public disorder. We worked with the local chief constable down there, Alexis Boon. We thought that was the least-risk option, to move them by sea, but that is not a standard response for us to



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be able to do that, and we cannot always guarantee that we will be able to do it.

- Q59 **Ben Maguire:** So why was it that the RNLI picked them up in that? Who should have been picking them up? You said your cutters should not, so who should have been picking them up?

Duncan Capps: We patrol the short straits principally, where the majority of the risk is.

- Q60 **Ben Maguire:** Your cutters would not, so who should have been there? You mentioned the coastguard.

Duncan Capps: Yes; but bear in mind, the thing that people do not actually realise that the coastguard in this country does not have its own boats. The coastguard works under the Department for Transport, but it does not have its own boats, which is why we have set the operation up in the short straits. The coastguard, if there is a mayday or an emergency will task any vessel that happens to be there or the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, which in this case was what responded to the vessels coming across.

They were in the right place. To put it into perspective, it is a seven-hour steaming for a boat to come from Dover to that area, so they could not be on task—and that day I think we had 500 arrivals in the short straits. They were occupied with that. The RNLI responded to that as it would to any other.

- Q61 **Ben Maguire:** If that happens again, presumably the RNLI will be called into action again.

Duncan Capps: No, because we have an operational contingency in place where we will look to do those rescues.

- Q62 **Ben Maguire:** Is that a new contingency that you did not have in place at the time?

Duncan Capps: That is correct.

- Q63 **Chair:** How long did the crossing take?

Duncan Capps: The best part of two days. I think by the time they got to Dover they had been on the water for about 40 hours. By the time they were intercepted it was 30 hours. It is extraordinary. I can see what you are thinking: if that happened at this time of year, as the temperatures go down. Bear in mind that a lot of those people will have fuel burns from when the petrol mixes with the salt water in the bottom. I really do worry about this.

- Q64 **Ben Maguire:** May I ask one more question? Sorry, I know we are running out of time. We touched again earlier on the protest, and also on people interfering with the rescue of small vessels. Could you tell us a bit more? It is obvious that that is hampering operations. You mentioned the contingency to stop the RNLI having to step in, but what contingencies have you put in place for this?



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Duncan Capps: There are two questions. The first is about where the RNLI brought the migrant boat ashore at Eastney marina. You saw protesters in the water and at the tents that were rapidly set up to try to process the migrants, interfering with all of that. There were a number of arrests. That was really difficult.

Q65 **Chair:** Can we be clear that that is a potential impact on public safety? You cannot identify who the migrants are, and they could potentially just disappear. You would not know who they were, and the public are in danger because of that.

Duncan Capps: Yes, 100%. I do not need to say to you that there are safeguarding issues and vulnerable people. That is where we do the immediate lifesaving: getting people into dry clothing so that no one gets hypothermia, and making sure that no one is suffering from secondary drowning. All of that was really difficult because of the violence. You might remember that some of the people who were in the water were subsequently rescued by the RNLI, towards whom they were being violent. It was extraordinary.

For the second landing, we moved them by sea, so there was not an issue. The third one was at night. We could not do that and cross-deck, so the police put in a very significant operation to protect the site where we brought the migrants ashore, to allow us to do the initial triage and medical support and then move them out by boat. However, I will seek to avoid having to do that in the future by making sure that I have a Border Security Command vessel in that area to do those interceptions if we need to, while all the time trying to stop them in the first place.

Ben Maguire: That was my next question.

Duncan Capps: Obviously, it is about cutting it off at source. To be clear, the French want to shut this down as much as we do, for various obvious reasons. That is my main effort over this winter period.

Q66 **Chair:** To conclude, because I am conscious that we will suddenly hear some bells and Parliament will start again: from the public's point of view, is it better for you to intercept these boats and process the individuals. They are going to arrive anyway, and we do not want them arriving without you having the chance to deal with them and potentially identify the criminals and others who are there.

Duncan Capps: It is just that—and, of course, to make sure, because we are a humane country, that people do not die. We broadly have an incredible record for saving life when you look at the number of people who come across.

Rob Jones: I agree with all of that. It is vital that you fix identity and get to them, and you can only do that if you intercept them and bring them back. It is an interception, and a consequence of that is that you save life. All of that is positive.

Q67 **Chair:** To conclude on the gangs, you must know who the gangs are,



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where they are from and what work is being done to tackle them. Is there work being done diplomatically with their source countries?

Rob Jones: Yes, there is. We have talked before about the over-representation of Iraqi Kurds and Afghans in this. There are some now who have come in to this from sub-Saharan Africa, and we are working on all of those to break the links that they have to Europe and to prevent them from moving people to Europe. They are getting arrested and disrupted at a scale that we have never done before.

Q68 **Chair:** Duncan, do you have anything to add?

Duncan Capps: I just want to say how much I appreciate the work of Rob and his team; I pay tribute to that.

Chair: We do appreciate that you are working in both the public and national interest, and we are very grateful for it. I recognise the frustration that people feel when they see those pictures, and particularly when they see things online, so it is very good that you have set out that there is some misinformation out there, as well as why you do the work you do. Thank you very much for your time. I will conclude the session before the bells ring.