

Timothy Compston takes a closer look at concerns being raised over the assets available to deal with people smuggling and other border control and security issues around Britain's coast

COASTAL CONCERNS

A number of recent incidents in and around the English Channel, in particular, serve to spotlight the fact that people smuggling isn't just an activity focused on ports like Calais or something that is happening in the Mediterranean. In June, the UK Border Force cutter HMC Seeker rescued three individuals - believed to be Iranian nationals - from a small boat off the coast near Hastings in South Sussex. Two weeks prior to that, 18 Albanians were rescued from a dingy off the Kent coast. These incidents are likely to be the tip of the iceberg, with residents along the South coast reporting other suspicious nighttime activity and abandoned boats. Back in April the National Crime Agency (NCA) was already warning that criminal gangs engaged in migrant smuggling were targeting quieter ports after efforts to tighten security elsewhere and using rigid-hulled inflatable boats to access shallow beaches.

When it comes to maritime security around Britain's coasts, from an immigration and border perspective, it is the UK Border Force - formed in 2012 - which takes the lead in its capacity as the law enforcement command of the Home Office. With pressure on all areas of Government to cut costs to help balance the books, the UK Border Force has certainly not escaped from the austerity drive.

One money-saving decision, that initially slipped under the radar but was more widely reported when a series of people smuggling incidents came to light, was the move in January by Home Secretary Teresa May to stop a £4 million aerial surveillance contract with Cobham - the aviation services provider - which had been in place for more than 20 years. Many commentators - including Frank Hurst, a former head of maritime operations at HM Customs and Excise, who was quoted in *The Telegraph* newspaper - were quick to criticise the move. Hurst said that the aerial surveillance had been extremely helpful in spotting vessels: "You can cover a huge amount of ground. It [the decision] seems short-sighted because we built up a lot of expertise over the years," said Hurst. In addition, a letter from Baroness Neville-Jones, the chairperson of the Joint Intelligence Committee, was leaked to the media. In the letter to the Home Secretary, Baroness Neville-Jones also voiced her fears over the ramifications of the contract not being renewed: "If the intention is for Border Force to rely from January [2016] solely on the services that can be procured on an ad hoc basis under the MMO's

Migrants being rescued in the Mediterranean after their boat ran into trouble



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“The French have 40 cutters patrolling their seas, we have three. It is an absolute scandal.”

Framework Agreement, this is likely to lead to reliance on less capable aircraft with much less experienced and practised crews – if indeed there is any availability at all when needed”.

Having said this, there appears to be a recognition by Government that more needs to be done to tackle illegal immigration via the maritime route. A case in point is the fact that at the end of May the Government,



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specifically the Home Office, announced new powers as part of a wide-ranging Immigration Act. The powers are designed, according to the Government, to combat three immigration offences in the territorial waters of the UK, specifically: assisting unlawful immigration; assisting an asylum seeker to arrive in the UK and assisting entry to the UK in breach of a deportation or exclusion order. Despite the growing concerns over the vulnerability of Britain's coasts, commenting on the additional powers and more investment, James Brokenshire – the Immigration Minister – was upbeat about the current state of play, even before the new measures have had a chance to kick in: “Our investments and improvements over the past six years have left us with one of the most secure borders in the world. But we know we must go further and continue to adapt and react to the challenges that we face”. Offering up more detail on the future plans, Brokenshire spotlighted plans to establish a series of operational hubs, the procurement of additional boats and the introduction of the new powers.

On the subject of new patrol vessels in a statement issued at the time, it was suggested that the first batch of boats for the UK Border Force would be in place “in the coming months”, with all of the vessels to be operational by the end of next year to help tackle the smuggling of weapons, drugs and migrants into the UK. Beyond this, three maritime coordination hubs are being set up in Cornwall, the Thames Estuary and the Humber this summer. These are designed, so the Government says, to allow the Border Force to build greater partnership working with law enforcement and maritime partners, to increase its presence at small ports and to deploy officers to the coastline when required.

More light was shone on the current and future vessel plans for the UK Border Force when the Marquess of Lothian put forward a written question in the House of Lords in June asking: “How many Border Force vessels patrol UK territorial waters at any one time, and how many are needed to ensure the required level of surveillance and security of the UK's coastline?” The response from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, said that the UK Border Force is committed to operating three cutters in UK waters at any given time: “We currently have a total of four available for use in UK waters, with one rotated into use where required”. Lord Ahmad stressed that these figures did not include additional military and law enforcement vessels available.

Drilling down to the type of new boats planned for the UK Border Force, rather than more cutters - like those currently in service, it appears that Border Force is instead to invest in a new fleet of rigid hull inflatable boats (RHIBs) as part of its future maritime strategy. Also in his written answer, Lord Ahmed explained that Border Force takes a multi-layered approach to maritime security “using a combination of cutters, radar and aerial surveillance to detect efforts to smuggle guns drugs or facilitate illegal entry into the country”.

While the Government's pronouncements certainly sound encouraging, and any new boats and other assets

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are certainly welcome, many feel that the resources that the UK Border Agency has at its disposal are a far cry from that available to other countries. On the subject of the safety and security of Britain's coasts, Dorset's Crime Commissioner, Martyn Underhill, did not pull his punches when speaking to Sky News at the end of May saying: "The French have 40 cutters patrolling their seas, we have three. It is an absolute scandal. We've lost our aerial surveillance. We don't know who is coming into this country".

Regarding the way forward, among the many recommendations that came out of a report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration – *An inspection of General Aviation and General Maritime* (February – July 2015), looking at the UK Border Force, was to "ensure that sufficient priority is given by Border Force to improving knowledge and understanding of the threats and risks surrounding General Aviation and General Maritime". Specifically, on the maritime side it was proposed that the Home Office (which has ultimate responsibility for the UK Border Force) should "develop and implement a strategy to improve the flows of information about General Maritime (GM)". In practical terms the Chief Inspector said that this should include: "ways to encourage greater voluntary reporting by GM craft, working with the Royal Yacht Association (RYA) to explore solutions to the practical difficulties for pleasure craft providing advance notification of arrival into the UK". He also suggested "better engagement by Border Force with small port authorities as a key source of information about GM vessels arriving in the UK".

So where does the Royal Navy fit into the maritime

security equation here? There have been some stories in the media already that the UK Border Force has been in talks with military planners regarding the type of assistance, which could be offered here from naval ships to offshore raiding craft manned by Royal Marines. Seeking some clarity on the position, I contacted the MOD where a spokesperson told me that: "There is currently no request for military support in the English Channel". The spokesperson was unwilling at this stage to comment on speculation around any possible Navy involvement in controlling illegal immigration in the English Channel. He also stressed that: "We [the Royal Navy] do not routinely engage in enforcement of the UK maritime border, or the monitoring or control of illegal immigration across the English Channel, which remains a task of the UK Border Force under the Home Office".

Of course, whatever the resources of the UK Border Agency and other assets that the Government can call upon, it has to be stressed that the English Channel and other wider UK coastal waters are a very different proposition from the Mediterranean where there has been a large amount of people smuggling activity by boat to date. While the challenge of stopping this illegal activity may appear similar at a strategic level, naval experts suggest that from an operational and tactical perspective there are a number of practical differences to factor in, from the distances involved, to weather, the numbers, the high density of shipping traffic, different contiguous nations, the fact that Schengen and non-Schengen countries are involved, and that unlike somewhere like Libya, the criminal gangs don't have a 'safe country' to operate out of.

The Border Force cutter HMC Protector makes her way up the River Thames

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