

Integrated Maritime Policy for Managing Maritime Migration in the English Channel: A Comprehensive Approach

Executive Summary

This briefing outlines how the UK Government could implement a comprehensive and integrated policy for managing maritime migration in the English Channel that would dramatically reduce unsafe migration in small boats and protect human life, at zero cost to the UK taxpayer.

Objective 1: Ensure a practical, humane, and enforceable deterrent for maritime migration in the English Channel that effectively reduces small boat crossings while remaining legally compliant with the UK's commitments to international conventions and obligations.

Objective 2: Ensure a robust and effective maritime emergency response framework in the English Channel that is legally compliant with the UK's commitments to international conventions and obligations at no cost to the tax payer.

Backdrop

- Over 34,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats this year, with at least 54 fatalities—the highest annual toll recorded.
- Geopolitical instability in the Middle East and Africa continues to drive migration toward Europe, with 175,000 sea arrivals recorded in Europe this year alone. Some of these individuals seek to reach the UK after arriving in Europe.
- The ongoing “small boats crisis” poses significant political challenges for the UK Government while creating the risk of further avoidable deaths in UK waters.

Current Situation

Search and Rescue (SAR) Response:

- Under UK policy, all migrant vessels in the UK Search and Rescue Region are classified as “in distress,” mandating a statutory SAR response.
- The UK's SAR system is under-resourced, reliant on volunteers, and inadequate for the rising scale of risk and boats in the English Channel.
- The absence of routine Channel patrols results in slow response times—RNLI's average of 20 minutes is insufficient to save those already in the water.
- Unlike other European nations like Greece and Italy (experiencing a similar maritime migration situation), the UK lacks a government agency equipped with statutory responsibility and resources for sea-based SAR.

Comparative SAR Capacity:

- Greek Coastguard: 250 SAR-enabled boats, 8,000 staff, 8,500 mile coastline.
- Italian Coastguard: 600 SAR-enabled boats, 10,700 staff, 4,900 mile coastline.
- UK Coastguard: 0 SAR-enabled boats, 400 staff (all shore-based), 7,700 mile coastline.

Lack of Maritime Deterrents:

- The UK Government currently does not apply maritime deterrents to prevent crossings.
 - Prosecutions under existing laws, such as the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, are non-existent. Only cases involving loss of life, such as the conviction of Ibrahim Abar, have led to arrests, and not under Merchant Shipping legislation.
 - The Merchant Shipping Act 1995 already prohibits taking a “dangerously unsafe” vessel to sea, with penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment and £50,000 fines. Expanding this enforcement to all migrant boats would provide a strong deterrent.
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Recommendations

1. Enhanced SAR and Security Capabilities:
 - Introduce a sustainable, taxpayer-free funding model for SAR operations, modeled on the existing Light Dues system, which generates significant revenue (£83m in 2022-23) from commercial vessels using UK ports.
 - This funding could support the creation of a government-led SAR & law enforcement framework, complete with properly equipped vessels and trained personnel. For a medium-sized cargo ship, the average cost of calling into a UK port ranges from £30,000 to £40,000. Introducing a SAR due, modeled on the existing Light Dues system, would add approximately £900 per call—a modest increase compared to overall port charges, when SAR and security services are currently used by the commercial maritime sector with no charge.
 - Merging HM Coastguard’s SAR operations with Border Force’s law enforcement functions into a single organisation would improve response efficiency, enforce maritime laws, and deter unsafe crossings. The merger would also reduce service duplication, consolidate resources, and ensure a more efficient use of funds. This unified agency would take sole responsibility for managing the English Channel crisis, ensuring clear accountability and eliminating conflicting responsibilities.
2. Legally Backed Deterrents:
 - Fully enforce the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, prosecuting every individual steering unsafe vessels across the English Channel.
 - Arrests for each boat entering UK waters would send a clear message and discourage participation in crossings.
3. Balancing Humanitarian and Legal Obligations:

- An enhanced SAR system should address potential concerns about a “pull factor” by pairing lifesaving measures with strong deterrents to dissuade dangerous crossings.
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Conclusion

The UK Government faces mounting pressure to deliver on its pledge to stop maritime migration in the English Channel. The current approach is failing, with rising fatalities and inadequate resources.

By implementing:

1. A taxpayer-free SAR & security framework, funded by the commercial maritime sector;
2. A strong maritime deterrents utilising existing legislation; and
3. A single agency with sole accountability and responsibility to deliver by merging HM Coastguard and Border Force Maritime Command

The Government can simultaneously save lives and reduce crossings. These integrated measures would not only address the immediate crisis but also provide a credible and enforceable policy to manage migration in the English Channel effectively, appealing to both humanitarian and security-focused perspectives.

About the Author

- Captain Matthew Schanck is an internationally-recognised maritime migration expert and Maritime & Coastguard Agency-qualified Captain with 15 years' experience in maritime search and rescue, including 8 years in command of SAR vessels and 8 years in the international maritime migration context.
- He has been called as an expert witness in several high-profile legal cases impacting government policy, maritime migration, migrant SAR, multi-agency integration in maritime incidents, and mass rescue operations, including serving as an expert witness on the legal challenge against the previous Government's proposed migrant pushback policy in the English Channel, which led to the policy's withdrawal.
- He has worked with government and non-government organisations globally to develop and enhance maritime search and rescue capabilities, with a focus on maritime migration, SAR governance, operational and strategic planning, risk management, and maritime legal compliance.
- He is the Chairperson and Fellow of the Maritime Search and Rescue Council, and Fellow of the Institute of Search and Technical Rescue.