



# A spot check inspection of Border Force operations at Portsmouth International Port

29 August 2023

**David Neal**

Independent Chief Inspector of  
Borders and Immigration



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## **Our purpose**

To help improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the Home Office's border and immigration functions through unfettered, impartial and evidence-based inspection.

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# Foreword

This pilot is my first ‘spot check’ inspection. This new methodology, allowing for a short-notice and light-touch observational inspection, will enable me to inspect the work of some of the Home Office’s busy operational settings in an agile way, responding to new and emerging challenges at pace, while remaining committed to supporting the Home Office through recommendations to drive improvements.

I was pleased that the inspection of Border Force operations at Portsmouth International Port – though short by its very nature, offering inspectors a snapshot of operational activity on a particular day – has identified both strengths and areas for improvement.

Firstly, focusing on people, I was pleased to meet staff who were committed, enthusiastic and actively engaged in their role securing the border, and it is clear to me that at a local level there are strong working relationships with stakeholders.

However, the quality of the facilities provided to Border Force is a mixed bag. Improvements to facilities and infrastructure would provide Border Force staff with an environment in which they can perform their duties safely and more effectively. Equally, consideration really should be given to the impression that poor facilities have on people arriving in the UK if the ambition of the UK Border Strategy 2025 is to be realised.

This summary of key findings makes three recommendations and was sent to the Home Secretary on 6 September 2023.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Neal', with a horizontal line underneath.

David Neal  
Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration



# 1. Recommendations

The Home Office should:	
<b>Operations</b>	
1.	Review resourcing processes at Border Force South Central to ensure consistent deployment to all operational priorities within the region, such as port-based anti-smuggling checks at Portsmouth.
<b>Facilities</b>	
2.	Provide clarity to port operators on what statutory facilities they are required to provide to Border Force without cost, and what Border Force must pay for.
3.	Work with the port operator to improve facilities at the car lane primary control point (PCP) booths, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• modernising their appearance and quality</li><li>• better lighting to allow more efficient face-to-passport checks</li><li>• ventilation to improve air quality and regulate temperature, including an assessment of whether the absence of a 'positive pressure' system at the car lane PCP booths represents a health and safety risk to staff</li><li>• a pest control solution to prevent the nesting of pigeons in Border Force's customs examination area after the car lane PCP booths</li></ul>

## 2. Background

### ‘Spot check’ inspection methodology

- 2.1** This inspection was a pilot of a proposed new methodology for short-notice, light-touch observational inspections of some of the Home Office’s busy operational settings. While the approach has its limitations – it can only offer a snapshot of what inspectors see on a particular day – the intention is to allow the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) to be agile, to extend its reach, to gain better awareness of local challenges, and to identify good practice and areas for improvement, while supplementing over time the picture of systemic issues gained through wider inspection activity.

### Portsmouth International Port

- 2.2** Portsmouth is a municipal port owned by Portsmouth City Council. It handles passenger ferries arriving from France and Spain. Passengers arriving from these locations on foot and on coaches are processed at the primary control point (PCP, commonly known as the ‘passport control’) in Portsmouth Ferry Terminal. Passengers in their own vehicles reach the PCP through one of eight dedicated car lanes. Accompanied freight vehicles are checked at one of the two freight lanes. The port also processes ferries arriving from the Channel Islands; as these vessels are traveling within the Common Travel Area, they may only be checked by Border Force in relation to customs anti-smuggling activity.
- 2.3** As a maritime port, Portsmouth International Port also handles a significant volume of freight arriving from abroad. This includes both accompanied and unaccompanied freight. This is processed by Border Force’s International Trade Team.
- 2.4** The port sits in Border Force’s South Region, which stretches from Gatwick Airport across the south coast into the South West of England, and also into Wales. At the time of this inspection in August 2023, Border Force’s resources at Portsmouth were managed as part of a ‘South Central’ command structure, which also included the resourcing of the port of Southampton and Southampton Airport.

## 3. Scope and methodology

- 3.1** The scope of this inspection focused on the efficiency and effectiveness of Border Force operations, particularly concerning preparations for operational readiness.
- 3.2** As part of this pilot spot check inspection, inspectors visited Portsmouth International Port on 29 August 2023 and:
- met with regional managers
  - met with representatives from the port operator
  - met with a local rostering team member to understand the processes and tools used in the resourcing of local staff
  - observed operational Border Force staff activity, including:
    - checks for clandestine entrants using a ‘backscatter’ x-ray machine
    - the clearance of goods arriving into the UK
    - passport checks at the primary control points (PCPs) in the car lanes
  - met and spoke with Border Force officers and Border Force higher officers
  - met and spoke with counter terrorism police
  - toured facilities at the Portsmouth International Port Ferry Terminal, including the PCP area, holding room facilities, customs examination area, and an International Trade office
- 3.3** Inspectors spent a period of six hours at Portsmouth International Port. It should be noted that the below key findings are based on observations over a short period on a single day. While they are an accurate reflection of what inspectors observed, and as such provide insight into both the strengths and weaknesses of the operations inspected, they are unlikely to capture the full range of issues and challenges that might be identified in a longer or more comprehensive inspection.

## 4. Key findings

### Operations

- 4.1** Throughout the spot check inspection, inspectors were hosted by local managers. Through discussions with local managers and staff, inspectors observed that there appeared to be a culture of strong management and leadership. On the day of the inspection, a local manager briefed staff on a sensitive matter, doing so in person, which demonstrated a commitment to the welfare of the teams.
- 4.2** Inspectors witnessed an informative briefing by Border Force higher officers to Border Force officers at the beginning of a shift. Officers were provided with salient information about the upcoming shift; a summary of recent alerts, trends, and safety bulletins; and clear information about roles and responsibilities, for example, who in the team was responsible for forgery enquiries, first aid, and other critical functions.
- 4.3** During onsite observations, inspectors accompanied staff who were deployed to the freight search area and to the car lane primary control point (PCP) booths. In these locations, inspectors witnessed Border Force officers working at the PCP and searching for clandestine entrants using x-ray equipment.
- 4.4** At the car lane PCP booths, officers worked effectively and with enthusiasm over the short period of observation, and inspectors observed that the checks being conducted were robust. Staff processing arriving passengers were observed to be undertaking checks of Home Office databases and full face-to-passport checks of arriving passengers, and officers walked around vehicles that were fully occupied to see all occupants more clearly. In addition, where applicable, staff were asking the drivers of vehicles to open roof boxes for further inspection. Inspectors also observed a vehicle with a trailer in tow diverted to the search area so that a more detailed check for potential clandestine entrants could be undertaken. Interactions with passengers were courteous and professional while officers maintained the security of the border.
- 4.5** At the freight search area, inspectors observed the use of x-ray equipment to screen arriving freight vehicles for clandestine entrants and Border Force officers engaging with hauliers awaiting approval of their importation paperwork. In addition to the work of the x-ray equipment, inspectors observed various aspects of vehicles being visually searched. All interactions were professional and courteous.
- 4.6** Resourcing was based on operational need, using data from ferry operators, and taking into consideration the wider resourcing needs of the region, such as the staffing requirements of Southampton Airport, the port of Southampton, and the International Trade Team. Rosters were reviewed at regular intervals by a dedicated resourcing officer. However, on a shift-by-shift basis, the duty Border Force higher officers had the flexibility to deploy their rostered staff, in line with the priorities of the Border Force Operating Mandate.

- 4.7** Customs anti-smuggling work is undertaken by locally-based staff, multifunctional staff, the Portsmouth Freight Intensification Team (FIT) and the South Central Customs Team (SCCT). The SCCT deploy to both ports conducting 'intensification' work, led by national and local intelligence. This team comprises staff from across the command who deploy to the team for a dedicated period. The Portsmouth FIT are a dedicated resource within the command. [Redacted]
- 4.8** [Redacted]
- 4.9** [Redacted] Overall, inspectors considered that more advanced planning for, and resourcing of, customs anti-smuggling work would provide better coverage of Border Force's overall priorities beyond immigration checks on arriving passengers.

## Other priorities

- 4.10** International trade across Border Force's South Region is handled by a dedicated team, which was originally established to prepare for EU exit, and is also based at Portsmouth International Port. Portsmouth was treated as a priority location for this work, given the volume of freight passing through the port. [Redacted] Due to the current size of the team versus its intended size, international trade work was supported by Border Force officers from the operational team at Portsmouth.
- 4.11** A senior manager informed inspectors that, despite their limited headcount, the International Trade Team's work had been well received by port operators, and that plans were being made for the team to take on work at other ports along the south coast, in line with the expansion of the team to their full FTE. Inspectors were also advised that, as a measure of their success, the team had identified under-declared revenue worth £444,000 for the taxpayer.
- 4.12** FIT has specific training and experience in the detection of Class A drugs. Working with Border Force Intelligence, the FIT team target and search incoming freight and containers. Portsmouth and Southampton receive the majority of the UK's imported bananas, and the team was reported to have had considerable success in detecting cocaine concealed in banana containers.
- 4.13** In conclusion, operations at Border Force Portsmouth appeared well-resourced, with dedicated and enthusiastic staff who were, at the time of this spot check inspection, observed to be securing the border where they were deployed. Resourcing was proactive, with rosters being reviewed and adjusted in advance to match resources to business needs. However, opportunities existed to plan deployments more broadly across all of Border Force's priorities.

## Stakeholders

- 4.14** Inspectors met two representatives of Portsmouth International Port's team to gain the views of the port operator on Border Force's efficiency and effectiveness. Both port representatives from the port's operational management team reported a good collaborative working relationship with local Border Force teams. They noted that they had meetings with the senior most local Border Force manager at port on a routine basis and that they were kept informed of key issues from these meetings. In addition, local 'operational' meetings attended by a range of the port's stakeholders were attended daily by Border Force so that they could feed into the daily operational priorities of the port.
- 4.15** However, port management found engaging more strategically with Border Force and the Home Office at a national level more difficult. As an example, it was noted that UK Border Strategy 2025 was often raised in meetings, but the port representatives did not have any further details on how the ambitions within the strategy would be achieved.
- 4.16** One port representative told inspectors that the Home Office does not properly consider the local impact of national directives nor communicates these in a timely manner. They gave the example of a mandated operation to examine all arriving freight being stood up at short notice. The local Border Force team complied with the directive. However, the port operator considered that, while they completely understood the reason for the operational activity stemming from the tragic death of migrants at Purfleet, there had been little consideration, at a higher level, of the impact this directive would have on their own operations.
- 4.17** In conclusion, Border Force has a good relationship with the port operator, with good lines of communication and a collaborative attitude. More broadly, the port operator's representatives felt that Border Force senior management and the wider Home Office could better consider the needs of local ports and improve communication with stakeholders.

## Infrastructure

- 4.18** Following the deaths of clandestine illegal migrants at Purfleet in 2019, Border Force procured a mobile 'backscatter' x-ray system. This was deployed to Portsmouth as part of Op AMANITA, a national operation to examine all accompanied and unaccompanied freight for clandestine entrants. Border Force officers oversee the use of this partially driver-operated system, which allows hauliers to drive safely through the scanner without leaving their vehicle. The aim is to scan 100% of all accompanied freight arriving in Portsmouth. Inspectors were told that knowledge of the policy of scanning all accompanied freight had led to a significant drop in the number of clandestine migrants attempting to hide in lorries. This system required less resourcing of Border Force officers than the conducting of searches manually.
- 4.19** However, this positive view of the effectiveness of the system of scanning for clandestine entrants was not universally shared, with examples being provided of anecdotal instances where the equipment had failed to locate illegal migrants who were later found in lorries that had been examined. [Redacted]

- 4.20** Passengers arriving in private vehicles pass through the PCP at one of eight dedicated car lane PCP booths staffed by Border Force officers. Inspectors noted a number of challenges in these facilities. They observed that the booths were dated and that the working environment inside them was poor.
- 4.21** Officers told inspectors that the lighting around the vehicles at the PCP booths at night was “terrible”, which added to the challenge of conducting face-to-face checks from inside booths. To do face-to-face identity checks of passengers inside their vehicles, officers frequently had to walk around the vehicle to ensure they discharged this duty properly.
- 4.22** In some instances, the low position of officers meant that they had to walk out to vehicles to ensure that they could properly see inside roof boxes when drivers presented them for inspection to ensure no clandestine entrants were present.
- 4.23** The booths did not have a positive air pressure system to prevent vehicle fumes from entering them, and the ventilation system designed to remove vehicle fumes was not working in any of the booths. Staff told inspectors that it was not possible to regulate the temperature adequately, leading to uncomfortable working conditions.
- 4.24** The customs examination area beyond the PCP lanes were also in poor condition. Inspectors noted the presence of a large amount of pigeon excrement around the perimeter and the absence of any system to prevent the nesting of wildlife.
- 4.25** The facilities for processing foot and coach passengers are, in sharp contrast to the car lanes, housed in a modern building. Foot passengers are bussed from their ships, and coach passengers disembark outside this building before entering on foot. The building features a small PCP, with a holding area and a customs examination room.
- 4.26** Inspectors were shown modern holding rooms with adjacent interview facilities to conduct further examination of arriving passengers to establish whether they met the requirements of the Immigration Rules.
- 4.27** Inspectors were shown a well-presented International Trade office, which sits between the controlled zone and the landside zone. The office has guichet windows at either end, so freight drivers with uncleared consignments can make enquiries at one side and the public can make enquiries at the other from within the passenger terminal.
- 4.28** Both Border Force staff and stakeholders spoke of the complexity of “trader-provided-free” legislation, which sets out an obligation for port operators to provide, free of charge, suitable facilities on their sites for the exercise of border functions. Interpretations of the extent of this obligation differ, however, which can be an obstacle to efficient co-operation. At Portsmouth, inspectors observed an infestation problem in the customs area to the detriment of Border Force operations and arriving passengers.
- 4.29** In conclusion, inspectors noted that, while facilities were adequate overall, some key improvements would enhance Border Force’s operational efficiency and effectiveness, and the passenger experience at Portsmouth, including better lighting in which to conduct passports checks, improved ventilation of PCP booths in the car lanes, and the installation of infrastructure to prevent the nesting of pigeons in the customs examination area.

# Annex A: Role and remit of the Independent Chief Inspector

The role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (until 2012, the Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency) was established by the UK Borders Act 2007. Sections 48-56 of the UK Borders Act 2007 (as amended) provide the legislative framework for the inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of functions relating to immigration, asylum, nationality and customs by the Home Secretary and by any person exercising such functions on her behalf. The legislation empowers the Independent Chief Inspector to monitor, report on and make recommendations about all such functions in particular:

- consistency of approach
- the practice and performance of listed persons compared to other persons doing similar activities
- the procedure in making decisions
- the treatment of claimants and applicants
- certification under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (c. 41) (unfounded claim)
- the law about discrimination in the exercise of functions, including reliance on paragraph 17 of Schedule 3 to the Equality Act 2010 (exception for immigration functions)
- the procedure in relation to the exercise of enforcement powers (including powers of arrest, entry, search and seizure)
- practice and procedure in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of offences
- the procedure in relation to the conduct of criminal proceedings
- whether customs functions have been appropriately exercised by the Secretary of State and the Director of Border Revenue
- the provision of information
- the handling of complaints; and
- the content of information about conditions in countries outside the United Kingdom, which the Secretary of State compiles and makes available, for purposes connected with immigration and asylum, to immigration officers and other officials.

In addition, the legislation enables the Secretary of State to request the Independent Chief Inspector to report to her in writing in relation to specified matters.

The legislation requires the Independent Chief Inspector to report in writing to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State lays all reports before Parliament, which she has committed to do within eight weeks of receipt, subject to both Houses of Parliament being in session.

Reports are published in full except for any material that the Secretary of State determines it is undesirable to publish for reasons of national security or where publication might jeopardise an individual's safety, in which case the legislation permits the Secretary of State to omit the relevant passages from the published report.



As soon as a report has been laid in Parliament, it is published on the Inspectorate's website, together with the Home Office's response to the report and recommendations.

## Annex B: ICIBI ‘expectations’

**Background and explanatory documents are easy to understand and use (e.g., statements of intent (both ministerial and managerial), impact assessments, legislation, policies, guidance, instructions, strategies, business plans, intranet and GOV.UK pages, posters, leaflets etc.)**

- They are written in plain, unambiguous English (with foreign language versions available, where appropriate)
- They are kept up to date
- They are readily accessible to anyone who needs to rely on them (with online signposting and links, wherever possible)

**Processes are simple to follow and transparent**

- They are IT-enabled and include input formatting to prevent users from making data entry errors
- Mandatory requirements, including the nature and extent of evidence required to support applications and claims, are clearly defined
- The potential for blockages and delays is designed out, wherever possible
- They are resourced to meet time and quality standards (including legal requirements, Service Level Agreements, published targets)

**Anyone exercising an immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function on behalf of the Home Secretary is fully competent**

- Individuals understand their role, responsibilities, accountabilities and powers
- Everyone receives the training they need for their current role and for their professional development, plus regular feedback on their performance
- Individuals and teams have the tools, support and leadership they need to perform efficiently, effectively and lawfully
- Everyone is making full use of their powers and capabilities, including to prevent, detect, investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute offences
- The workplace culture ensures that individuals feel able to raise concerns and issues without fear of the consequences

## **Decisions and actions are ‘right first time’**

- They are demonstrably evidence-based or, where appropriate, intelligence-led
- They are made in accordance with relevant legislation and guidance
- They are reasonable (in light of the available evidence) and consistent
- They are recorded and communicated accurately, in the required format and detail, and can be readily retrieved (with due regard to data protection requirements)

## **Errors are identified, acknowledged and promptly ‘put right’**

- Safeguards, management oversight, and quality assurance measures are in place, are tested and are seen to be effective
- Complaints are handled efficiently, effectively and consistently
- Lessons are learned and shared, including from administrative reviews and litigation
- There is a commitment to continuous improvement, including by the prompt implementation of recommendations from reviews, inspections and audits

## **Each immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function has a Home Office ‘owner’**

The Home Office ‘owner’ is accountable for:

- implementation of relevant policies and processes
- performance (informed by routine collection and analysis of Management Information (MI) and data, and monitoring of agreed targets/deliverables/budgets)
- resourcing (including workforce planning and capability development, including knowledge and information management)
- managing risks (including maintaining a Risk Register)
- communications, collaborations and deconfliction within the Home Office, with other government departments and agencies, and other affected bodies
- effective monitoring and management of relevant contracted out services
- stakeholder engagement (including customers, applicants, claimants and their representatives)

# Acknowledgements

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## Inspection team members

Lead Inspector: Daniel Cartwright

Inspector: Harry Palmer

Inspector: Gary Slevin







