



Economic
and Social
Research Council

BRIEFING

Border Security

Contracts linked to small boat Channel crossings

April 2025
**Compiled by the Channel Crossings
research team**



Context

This briefing has been produced by a team of researchers from the Universities of Liverpool, York, Sheffield and Nottingham. It is part of a [larger project](#), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which is exploring UK government responses to small boat Channel crossings.

There are **no safe or legal routes** by which to enter the UK in order to make an application for asylum, and we know that a majority of people who cross apply for asylum and are recognised as refugees¹. Small boat Channel crossings started in 2018. This happened because other routes to enter the UK to claim asylum (such as stowing away in lorries) had become very difficult as a consequence of enhanced border security in Northern France. People who cross the Channel in small boats often seek the services of smugglers.

Both the Conservative and Labour governments of recent years have drawn attention to the profits being made from the business of smuggling. As part of our research, we were interested to find out how

much money is being made by the legal flip side of this business of smuggling: **the business of bordering**. In response to the movement of people to Europe and North America, border security is becoming big business globally. Tech companies, arms firms, and private security contractors promise to facilitate control over international borders and police the boundaries between wanted and unwanted mobility. Globally this market is projected to grow from **US\$377 billion in 2023** to **US\$679 billion by 2032**². Driven by rising anti-immigration politics, business is booming for companies involved in border-security markets.

We set out to explore the border security economy as it relates to the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon. To do this, we looked for contracts between government departments and agencies (e.g. the Home Office, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency) from 2015 onwards which related to bordering the Channel and responding to irregular migration, including small boat Channel crossings. We identified **213 contracts** using Crown Commercial Services, ContractFinderPro, the EU

¹ See this fact sheet from the Migration Observatory: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/people-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/>

² Akre, S. (2019) Border Security Market Research Report, Information by System, by Platform, and by Region – Market Forecast Till 2032. MFR/A&D/1131-CR. Market Research Future.

tendering portal, and data from Tussel. We discuss the challenges of accessing this information, and major gaps in the data relating to redacted or undisclosed figures, at the end of this briefing. We have included contracts that are solely for the management of the Channel, contracts that relate to the processing of asylum seekers who arrive by small boats and contracts for broader border surveillance that likely apply to the Channel border zone.

We have identified **£5,021,969,930 (over £5 billion) worth of contracts** in total. The average contract amount is **£24 million** but there is huge variation in the size of

contracts. The two largest contracts are **£1.9 billion** (Bristow Group, for helicopters) and **£1 billion** (Tekever, for drones), while the smallest contract is **£4000** (awarded to Survitec Group to develop a life raft suitable for disabled people). Some contracts exclusively relate to the Channel, while others are part of a larger package of border security work which also relate to other locations and activities.

In this briefing we provide an overview of some key highlights from the contract dataset that we have compiled, but **you are welcome to explore the data yourself in detail [here](#)**.

“Keir Starmer, in his mission to ‘Smash the Gangs,’ stated in January 2025 that ‘*If you’re going to smash a gang that is driven by money, follow the money.*’ That is precisely what we have done. We have followed the money—and uncovered how the UK government is routinely awarding vast sums to a network of private firms.”

Dr. Joe Turner

Key Figures

£5
BILLION

Total value of contracts

£27
MILLION

Average contract worth

213

Contracts identified

£73

from each UK citizen*

* The money siphoned to private firms equates to approximately £73 per UK citizen, based on a population of 68.35 million.

Sectors

The **top five sectors** that contracted companies operate in are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Top Five Sectors

1	Maritime: Selling boats and conducting boat maintenance
2	IT: Hardware and software for IT systems
3	Security: A wide variety of security operations from escorting to fitting CCTV cameras
4	Transport: Primarily transporting Border Force staff between France and the UK, but also transporting people who are being detained or deported.
5	Defense: Mainly selling drones and other high-tech surveillance and tracking equipment

Companies operating in other sectors such as hospitality, interior design, telecommunications, energy, manufacturing, public services, research, legal, and management consultancy have also benefited from contracts relating to border security related to small boat Channel crossings.

The largest contracts

The table below shows the top ten largest contracts, as far as figures are known at this time. Several of these are related to

immigration detention and removal centres. These are connected to small boat Channel crossings because they relate to government asylum policy which was oriented to solving the small boat Channel crossings phenomenon from 2018 onwards. Two factors increased the need for detention places in this period. First, (connected to the Conservative government's Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and Illegal Migration Act 2023) the slowing of assessment of asylum applications without a decrease in the numbers of applications made, creating a

large backlog in the asylum system, and therefore a greater accommodation need. Second, the Rwanda Plan and the need to

significantly expand detention places in readiness for deporting people to Rwanda.

Table 2: The Ten largest contracts

Year	Company	Detail	Amount
2024-2026	Bristow Group	The UK Second-Generation Search and Rescue programme	£1,959,355,159
2020-2022	Tekever Ltd	Maritime patrol aircrafts: for a UAV Managed Service to enhance maritime awareness	£1,000,000,000
2018-2028	Mitie Care and Custody Limited	In-country and overseas escorting operation and management of short term holding facilities	£514,200,000
2020	Serco	Tinsley House Detention Centre & Brookhouse Removal Centre	£276,600,000
2005-2019	Serco	Fixed Radiation Detection Systems	£149,300,000
2023	Entrust Corporation	Identity verification technology	£109,300,000
2024	Galliford Try Construction Limited	Haslar removal facility (reconstruction) [one of two detention facilities reopened, linked to the detainment of people before they are sent to Rwanda]	£102,000,000
2018-2028	Leidos	Biometrics and fingerprinting	£96,395,438
2016-	UNDISCLOSED	Freight Searching, searching of persons, detention and escorting services in Northern France	£80,000,000
2024	Galliford Try Construction Limited	Campsfield removal facility (reconstruction) [one of two detention facilities reopened, linked to the detainment of people before they are sent to Rwanda]	£70,036,749

Large multinationals

Large multinationals who work in many contexts selling products and services to governments are well represented amongst those benefiting from contracts related to bordering the Channel. For example, **Serco**, a company which sells public services to governments, has a contract totaling **£52,500,000** for freight searching and escorting of persons at the juxtaposed controls in Northern France³. **Capita**, another business that sells outsourced services to the public sector, have received **£3,108,998** to supply, install and support the voice and data communications service to the Border Force Maritime Fleet of five Cutters⁴. UK based defense company **BAE Systems** have had three contracts (that we have found) relating to digital border security infrastructure⁵. **Deloitte**, **Elbit Systems**, **Fujitsu**, **G4S**, **Kongsberg Norcontrol**, and **Mitie** have also all benefited from UK government contracts in this area.

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The public is often told that stopping small boat crossings is about tackling smuggling gangs. But what is rarely mentioned is the legal flip side of the smuggling economy: the business of bordering.”

Dr Lucy Mayblin

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<https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/ec044190-c936-4929-b585-6c33bb48db95>

⁴

<https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/06e3f58f-0843-4e32-9d7e-0b9cc095db8c?origin=SearchResults&p=1>

⁵ For example,
<https://www.contractfinderpro.com/doc/79opx/home-office/helios-digital-capability-partner>

Diversity of contracts

While the aforementioned sectors are prominent, there is a wide diversity of contracts from repairing boats to providing office furniture, coach services and app development. Across the **117 companies** we identified, here are five examples which give a sense of the range of types of contracts:

- Between 2020 and 2024 **The Kings Ferry** coach company received **£2,776,000** for coach services for Border force⁶.
- In 2022 **Aeolian Offshore Ltd** received **£2,739,000** for craft and crew to bring in people on small boats⁷.
- In 2022 **Wagtail UK** received **£23,400,000** (£23.4 million) for the provision of sniffer dogs that can find humans⁸.
- In 2023 **Addleshaw Goddard LLP** received **£300,000** for legal services to support the Border Force maritime programme⁹.
- In 2023 **Speedy Asset Services Limited** received **£7,700,000** for marquees as temporary accommodation during the screening process¹⁰.
- In 2022 **British Event Catering** received **£700,000** to provide emergency catering services to support Border Force operations¹¹.

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Behind every piece of infrastructure, every form of surveillance, and even behind every rescue and processing of Channel migrants, there are private companies working to win contracts and extract profit from government spending and the exploitation of the most vulnerable,” — Dr Tesfalem Yemane

⁶ For example, one of the largest contracts can be viewed here:

<https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/acff6699-d232-4ace-9328-f352501e6f24?origin=SearchResult&p=8>

⁷ <https://www.contractfinderpro.com/doc/3G1r5/home-office/crew-transfer-vessel-seacat>

⁸ <https://ojeu.com/ojdblnk/view-notice.php?id=3380057>

⁹ <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/f662cb31-fb86-4951-9131-f5169c6cb645?origin=SearchResult&p=11>

¹⁰ https://www.stotles.com/explore/notices/5fedf695-64ed-477b-b490-7a8c09d48959/ho-south-of-england-marque-e-requirement-2023?page=4&type=upcoming_expires

¹¹ <https://www.contractfinderpro.com/doc/6BwMJ/atamis-ltd/emergency-catering-services>

The smallest contracts

Some of the diversity of contracts and types of companies is made apparent by looking at the contracts which have the lowest values. Table 3 shows the ten smallest contracts that we have found.

Table 3: The Ten Smallest Contracts

Year	Company	Detail	Amount
2020	Survitec Group	Life raft concept development: disabled life raft	£4,000
2015-2017	Fast Engineering Ltd	Border force custody suite bedding	£6,000
2019	Docnloc	Collection, loading, unloading & transportation of small craft seized by Border Force	£7,000
2022-2024	Bell Container Trading Ltd	Hire of two containers at Dover, one accommodation the other storage	£9,999
2024	UNDISCLOSED	Three Yearly Service of Valise Liferafts	£10,000
2021	AMBEX LIMITED	Supply and Installation of Satellite Telephone Systems. Dover	£10,259
2023	Lifting Gear & Safety Ltd	Inflatable rafts maintenance	£10,294
2020	RGES International Ltd	Development of vessel arrest boom	£12,395
2023	Versa Dock	Supply, delivery and installation of x1 floating dock for 7.5 metre rigid hulled inflatable boats	£13,212
2020	ENTERPRISE RENT-A-CAR UK LIMITED	Annual rental of 2 x specialist 4 x 4 vehicles to transport Border Force small maritime vessels to remote launch locations	£13,500

Our methods, data gaps, and public accountability

The Parliamentary Research Office has noted the difficulty of tracking the amounts of money given to the French government in numerous deals over time as they are not consistently and transparently reported¹². We have had a similar experience in researching contracts with private companies. This leads us to believe that there is a **lack of public accountability** in this area.

Contracts are not made accessible for public scrutiny. We have trawled through databases which are designed for private companies to identify tender and contract opportunities, searching for the types of contracts that we are looking for. These databases are listed on page 2 and 3. The government contract finder database has poor searchability, and the contract titles are often highly obscure. We found it more straightforward to go through commercial providers (such as Contract Finder Pro) to find the links back to the government

contracting pages. Even then, we sought help from Tussel to identify a number of larger contracts which we could not find through these methods. We are certain that there are many contracts that we have not found through this trawling method.

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Our research reveals a system where governments manufacture crises and private companies profit from the supposed ‘fix’.”

Dr Arshad Isakjee

The information within the publicly available contracts as reported on the government contracts pages are not designed for non-specialist scrutiny. They appear designed to be legible to people who work in specialist fields (e.g. containing many acronyms and technical language) and have attended sector briefing events about upcoming tender opportunities. It is unusual for the location that a technology will be deployed in to be mentioned. This makes identifying which contracts connected to the Channel difficult.

In addition to the challenges of finding contracts and understanding what they are

¹² Gower, M. (2024) Unauthorised migration: Timeline and overview of UK-French cooperation, London: House of Commons Library, accessible: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9681/CBP-9681.pdf>

specifically related to, there is also information which is missing. For four contracts the company name is undisclosed, and nine of the contracts found do not disclose the contract figures.

Often this appears to be because the figure is large. In some cases this could significantly impact the total contracted. For example, a **£1 billion contract** with Portuguese drone company Tekever 2020-2022 was renewed in 2022 but the cost of renewal has been **redacted**. If the renewal contract cost the same amount as the original contract, then this adds a fifth again to our headline figure.

Our total figure of **£5 billion** is therefore certainly an **underestimation** owing to these difficulties, as well as contracts that we have not included as we could not find the paper trail. For example, we cannot find a record of the Sentry Watch Tower sold to the Home Office by Anduril Industries, which we have physically seen in Dover, and which has been reported in the press¹³ and has been the subject of a (refused) Freedom of Information Request by other researchers.¹⁴

“In this time of austerity, a gang of companies are profiting from government policies that simply don’t work. While the UK government happily strips £5 billion from the pockets of disabled people, our research shows how a similar amount of taxpayers’ money is being funneled into the border industry, lining the pockets of private firms.”

Dr Thom Davies

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<https://www.ft.com/content/4e01883a-2d54-4bd0-93e7-5a9f087443f3>

¹⁴ FOI regarding this contract
https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/english_channel_anduril_maritime

OFFICIAL - SENSITIVE

Background

1. The overarching requirement is to provide enhanced maritime domain awareness, to support UK decision making and the tasking and coordination of operational assets.
2. This requirement can be met by UAS platforms, that are capable of detecting, identifying, and monitoring vessels, within the UK area of interest.
[REDACTED]
3. This requirement will need to be delivered in two phases:
 - a. Phase 1: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
 - b. Phase 2: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

User Community Operational Requirements

1. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
2. The primary operational requirement is for a system that is capable of conducting routine surveillance flights to detect and identify vessels within the UK area of interest.
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
3. The target vessels range in size from the very small slow inflatable craft [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], larger high-speed RHIBS used for commodity smuggling, pleasure craft, fishing vessels, and larger commercial vessels.
4. [REDACTED]
5. [REDACTED]

Image 1. Redacted Home Office and Tekever tender for Maritime Aerial Surveillance Systems

Putting the Contracts into Perspective

Our investigation has uncovered **over £5 billion** in UK government spending on border security contracts linked to small boat Channel crossings. While some contracts date back to 2015, the vast majority are much more recent — revealing a rapid and significant expansion of this outsourcing.

This spending represents a **massive transfer of public wealth into private hands**. It is an extraordinary use of taxpayer money, and one that demands scrutiny.

To put £5,021,969,930 into perspective:

- It is **a quarter of the entire Home Office annual budget**¹⁵.
- It is **almost double the budget** of the Department for Business and Trade.
- It is **nearly as much as the entire Environment Department (DEFRA)** gets each year.
- It is **more than 5% of the national education budget**.
- It is the equivalent of **£73** from every single UK citizen.

And this is **almost certainly an underestimate**. Many contracts are redacted or buried deep within opaque procurement systems. What we've found likely only **scratches the surface** of the true scale of this spending.

We're often told that stopping small boats is about dismantling smuggling networks. But far less attention is paid to the **legal, profitable counterpart to that illicit trade**: the booming industry built around border enforcement.

This is a **system that costs billions**, continues to grow, and benefits a handful of companies — while serious questions remain about its effectiveness, oversight, and accountability.

¹⁵

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-spending-statistics-release-july-2024/public-spending-statistics-july-2024>

Responses from Migrant Rights and Civil Society Organisations

Tim Naor Hilton, Chief Executive of Refugee Action, said:

"Successive governments' obsession with tough borders has created a boom for private contractors while record numbers of people drown off our south coast.

"Perversely, some of these companies making profit from this border misery also work in industries such as defence that displace people in the first place.

"At Refugee Action we see this play out in the accommodation system, where firms make eye watering profits while people languish in segregated and unhealthy housing.

"The Government must turn off this tap of taxpayer cash and start to invest in solutions that will make positive changes to the lives of refugees and the communities that welcome them."

Tomi Amole, Divest Borders Coordinator for People and Planet, said:

"The Channel Crossings research team have produced an important report that draws attention to the ways that corporations are profiting from the violence of bordering and the moral panic around "small boats". The border industry operates with the support of British universities, whose investments and research partnerships with companies like Serco, Mitie, G4S, BAE, Elbit and Fujitsu make them complicit in the violence of bordering. But students across the country are campaigning for their universities to stand for justice, not oppression, calling for an end to these investments that give social license to corporations in the border industry to continue profiting from the violence they enact."

Corporate Watch said:

"This excellent research highlights how corporate profiteers continue to reap millions from the violence of the UK's border industry. We need to dismantle the alarming rhetoric coming from Starmer's Labour and far-right agitators and instead focus on the financial gains made by these companies directly from public money.

Many companies that appear on this list - such as Capgemini, Accenture, Deloitte, Fujitsu, G4S, IBM, Mastek, Mitie, and Serco - are not only gaining massive profits from Border Force contracts but also collectively reap billions from work across multiple sectors, including the NHS, defence, education and social services. People continue to seek safety and asylum as a direct result of wars, climate-driven chaos and political unrest that many of these same companies also profit from.

The 'enemy' is not individuals trying to cross the Channel: the true enemy is the brutal, profit-driven capitalist machine and the policymakers who enable it. If these capitalists are protecting their interests and expanding their power across different sectors then our grassroots organising needs to be doing the same."

Could you help?

As you can see above, it is very challenging finding clear and reliable information about who has been contracted to do what, and at what cost. While we believe that our methods are as robust as possible, given the challenges of accessing the data, these challenges mean that there may be omissions or miscategorisations.

If you have: evidence of additional contracts; evidence that any of the contracts that we have found are not connected small boat Channel crossings; verifiable information about what proportion of the more general contracts relates to Channel crossings; or anything else that you think could be useful in this work, please get in touch. We are happy to correct any inaccuracies if these can be evidenced.

Email the Channel Crossings team:

Lucy Mayblin	l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk
Joe Turner	joe.turner@york.ac.uk
Arshad Isakjee	aisakjee@liverpool.ac.uk
Tesfalem Yemane	T.Yemane@liverpool.ac.uk
Thom Davies	thom.davies@nottingham.ac.uk

Channelcrossings.org