



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19

First Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 2 April 2020*

The Foreign Affairs Committee

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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The FCO’s role in international efforts to combat COVID-19

Challenges for multilateral co-operation

1. On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially characterised the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19 as a pandemic. According to the Government, the UK is working closely with international partners both bilaterally and in multilateral forums to combat the spread of the disease, to conduct vital research and to build capacity for the future.¹ The Foreign Secretary, for example, told us the UK was working with “the EU, the WHO and the G7, which is a particularly important format”, noting that “we want to try to forge as much consensus as we can”.² This report examines the FCO’s role in leading that international diplomatic effort, including the fight against disinformation.³

Organisational structures

2. Although effective international and multilateral co-operation are essential in responding to this pandemic, regional and global organisations have largely failed to develop and sustain a co-ordinated international response. As borders close and travel restrictions become stricter, countries are acting alone precisely when co-ordination is most essential. The EU has been slow to act, in part because health policy is a matter for each individual member state.⁴ The G7 has been unable even to agree a joint declaration on the virus because of political differences between its members.⁵ G20 leaders have called for global co-operation and pledged to spend millions on vaccine research and economic stimulus, but their joint statement of 26 March did not announce any other new initiatives.⁶

3. The World Health Organization (WHO), which co-ordinates international health within the United Nations system, supports its member states in preparing for and responding to health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ It has been active and visible in the response to the COVID-19 crisis. However, it is a member-led organisation, and can only work with the data it is given by member states. Moreover, as Professor David Harper, CBE, Senior Consulting Fellow at Chatham House’s Global Health Programme, told the Committee, “the countries have a very powerful voice” in the organisation.⁸ He also said that “it is very difficult for the WHO to be particularly critical of an individual country, because it recognises the sovereignty of countries and states to take their own action.”⁹

1 HC Deb, 17 March 2020, [col 782](#) [Commons Chamber]

2 Oral evidence taken on 19 March 2020, [HC 253](#), Q2

3 The FCO’s other major role is to organise consular support for, and repatriation of, UK citizens abroad. That is outside the scope of this report but the Committee may return to the topic in future. Other select committees are also examining aspects of the Government’s response to COVID-19.

4 EU Observer, “[Coronavirus: What EU can and can’t do](#)”, 25 March 2020

5 The Times, “[G7 united front breaks over Mike Pompeo’s ‘Wuhan virus’ jibe](#)”, 26 March 2020

6 CNN, “[G20 videoconference gathered world leaders coping with coronavirus](#)”, 26 March 2020

7 World Health Organization, [WHO’s role in emergencies](#), last accessed 26 March 2020

8 [Q10](#)

9 [Q10](#)

Bad data and disinformation

4. Professor Harper told the Committee that “communication is always a big issue” in pandemics.¹⁰ Yet some countries, including but not limited to China, Iran, and Russia, appear to be propagating disinformation about the origins and spread of the virus.¹¹

5. As the country in which the virus originated, China should have played a central role in collecting data on its spread and enabling scientists around the world to develop a fast and effective response. Yet according to detailed reports in the Washington Post, New York Times and South China Morning Post, from the outset China has sought to obfuscate the data.¹² Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who initially raised the alarm about the virus on 30 December 2019, was forced by the state to confess to “making false comments” before his death from COVID-19 in February 2020.¹³ Such deliberate misleading of the WHO and scientists in other countries obscured analysis in the critical early stages of the pandemic. On 14 January, for example, the WHO tweeted from its official account:

Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel [#coronavirus](#) (2019-nCoV) identified in [#Wuhan](#), [#China](#).¹⁴

As Professor Harper noted, obscuring the data and spreading disinformation has deadly consequences:

The current situation—what the WHO are calling the “infodemic”—has become a major issue in terms of the impact on public health. It would cost lives.¹⁵

6. The UK Government has acknowledged the extent of the disinformation problem by establishing a cross-Whitehall unit, based in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to rebut false claims about the disease.¹⁶ We asked the Foreign Secretary to comment on the threat of disinformation, but his response focused on cybersecurity.¹⁷ Asked to give more detail about hybrid warfare and disinformation threats, he said “Cyber is pretty high on that pecking order, but you are right that we look at the threat rather than the means of conducting it.”¹⁸

10 [Q9](#)

11 See, for example, [this report](#) by the European External Action Service’s Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, published 19 March 2020. See also: The Washington Post, “[State Department blames ‘swarms of online, false personas’ from Russia for wave of coronavirus misinformation online](#)”, 5 March 2020; Deutsche Welle, “[Coronavirus in Iran: A case of misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda](#)”, 9 March 2020; The Guardian, “[Russian media ‘spreading COVID-19 disinformation’](#)”, 18 March 2020; Politico, “[China is winning the coronavirus propaganda war](#)”, 18 March 2020

12 The Washington Post, “[Early missteps and state secrecy in China probably allowed the coronavirus to spread farther and faster](#)”, 1 February 2020; The New York Times, “[As New Coronavirus Spread, China’s Old Habits Delayed Fight](#)”, 1 February 2020; The Washington Post, “[World Health Organization: China not sharing data on coronavirus infections among health-care workers](#)”, 26 February 2020; South China Morning Post, “[A third of coronavirus cases may be ‘silent carriers’, classified Chinese data suggests](#)”, 24 March 2020

13 BBC News, “[Li Wenliang: Coronavirus kills Chinese whistleblower doctor](#)”, 7 February 2020

14 Twitter.com, [@WHO](#), 14 January 2020

15 [Q29](#)

16 The Guardian, “[Cross-Whitehall unit set up to counter false coronavirus claims](#)”, 9 March 2020

17 Oral evidence taken on 19 March 2020, [HC 253](#), Q58

18 Oral evidence taken on 19 March 2020, [HC 253](#), Q59

Learning lessons

7. When he appeared before the Committee on 19 March, the Foreign Secretary emphasised the importance of learning the lessons of this pandemic, telling us:

We are constantly learning from past pandemics. We work quite closely with the World Health Organisation. It is not perfect, but it is the key international multilateral organisation that we work through, whether it is on the research that we are doing on vaccines or capacity building for vulnerable countries.

... We have learnt from things such as Ebola. We are looking at ways to reinforce, strengthen and indeed reform the WHO. It needs to be more action-specific and more agile, but equally it is an incredibly important multilateral institution.¹⁹

8. Countries in the midst of attempting to fight the pandemic may be stretched but it remains critical to collect, share and store accurate data, and share it honestly. Failing to take those steps now may make the next pandemic worse. Professor Harper told us:

it’s important to set up the framework to learn those lessons during the outbreak; it’s not always something that can be done retrospectively, because the chance might have gone.²⁰

Professor Harper told us that he did not believe the WHO had “forgotten” lessons from the H1N1 pandemic, SARS, MERS or Ebola, including the need to communicate clearly, to obtain information about the disease as quickly as possible and to use quarantine practices effectively.²¹ However, asked what he would do if empowered to attend the next World Health Assembly, Professor Harper said that lessons from H1N1 and Ebola in 2014 should now be implemented urgently.²²

A new global framework for action

9. **Pandemics do not respect borders. They require a response based on science, evidence and international co-operation. We welcome the Foreign Secretary’s assurances that the Government is working closely with partner countries to combat COVID-19, both bilaterally and through multilateral forums including the EU, G7 and G20. We also welcome the UK’s financial support for the World Health Organization. But it is clear that existing regional and multilateral organisations, including the WHO, are not achieving the international co-operation needed to fight a global pandemic. It is up to Governments to forge consensus on action required to save lives now and to prepare for future pandemics.**

10. *Disinformation about COVID-19 has already cost lives. It is essential that the Government issues clear and transparent messages at home to confront and rebut*

19 Oral evidence taken on 19 March 2020, [HC 253](#), Q1

20 [Q48](#)

21 [Q13](#)

22 [Q38](#)

disinformation spread by foreign powers. It must also work closely with allies to present a united front where possible, and to help ensure that vital international research efforts are not compromised by propaganda and bad data.

11. *Although the Government is focused rightly on resolving the current crisis, it would be a catastrophic error to deprioritise learning lessons from this pandemic and implementing them before the next one. This must be a cross-Government effort, and the FCO should play a key role in its international and diplomatic dimensions. In its response to this report, the FCO should set out:*

- *how data on the virus is being collected and shared with partner countries, and what efforts it has made to encourage and facilitate the sharing of comparable data collected by those countries;*
- *how it supports UK researchers in verifying data arriving from other countries; and*
- *what financial and operational support it is offering to developing countries where infrastructure may be unable to cope with the pandemic, both bilaterally and through multilateral organisations.*

12. *The FCO should lead the way in building international support for reforming existing multilateral organisations and building new structures to respond more effectively to the next pandemic. A 'G20 for Public Health', for example, could ensure that co-operation between expert researchers across the globe can flourish, even in the absence of united political leadership. Such a framework should be science-led, with participation contingent on honest co-operation in the open and transparent sharing of public health data.*

Conclusions and recommendations

A new global framework for action

1. Pandemics do not respect borders. They require a response based on science, evidence and international co-operation. We welcome the Foreign Secretary's assurances that the Government is working closely with partner countries to combat COVID-19, both bilaterally and through multilateral forums including the EU, G7 and G20. We also welcome the UK's financial support for the World Health Organization. But it is clear that existing regional and multilateral organisations, including the WHO, are not achieving the international co-operation needed to fight a global pandemic. It is up to Governments to forge consensus on action required to save lives now and to prepare for future pandemics. (Paragraph 9)
2. *Disinformation about COVID-19 has already cost lives. It is essential that the Government issues clear and transparent messages at home to confront and rebut disinformation spread by foreign powers. It must also work closely with allies to present a united front where possible, and to help ensure that vital international research efforts are not compromised by propaganda and bad data.* (Paragraph 10)
3. *Although the Government is focused rightly on resolving the current crisis, it would be a catastrophic error to deprioritise learning lessons from this pandemic and implementing them before the next one. This must be a cross-Government effort, and the FCO should play a key role in its international and diplomatic dimensions. In its response to this report, the FCO should set out:*
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 - *how it supports UK researchers in verifying data arriving from other countries; and*
 - *what financial and operational support it is offering to developing countries where infrastructure may be unable to cope with the pandemic, both bilaterally and through multilateral organisations.* (Paragraph 11)
4. *The FCO should lead the way in building international support for reforming existing multilateral organisations and building new structures to respond more effectively to the next pandemic. A 'G20 for Public Health', for example, could ensure that co-operation between expert researchers across the globe can flourish, even in the absence of united political leadership. Such a framework should be science-led, with participation contingent on honest co-operation in the open and transparent sharing of public health data.* (Paragraph 12)

Formal minutes

Thursday 2 April 2020

Tom Tugendhat, in the Chair

Chris Bryant	Andrew Rosindell
Chris Elmore	Bob Seely
Alicia Kearns	Henry Smith
Stewart Malcolm McDonald	Royston Smith
Ian Murray	Graham Stringer

First Report of Session 2019–21: *Viral Immunity—The FCO’s role in building a coalition against COVID-19*

After consulting all Members of the Committee, the Chair was satisfied that the Report represented a decision of the majority of the Committee and reported it to the House. (Order of the House of 24 March 2020).

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 17 March 2020

Professor David R Harper CBE, Senior Consulting Fellow, Global Health Programme, Chatham House and Managing Director, Harper Public Health Consulting Limited

[Q1-50](#)

Thursday 19 March 2020

Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and **Sir Simon McDonald**, Permanent Under-Secretary and Head of the Diplomatic Service.

[Q1-120](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee’s website. The reference number of the Government’s response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2019–21

First Special Report	A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies: Government Response to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2019	HC 116
Second Special Report	“Media freedom is under attack”: The FCO’s defence of an endangered liberty: Government Response to the Committee’s Twenty First Report of Session 2017–19	HC 269