



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan,
HC 685

Monday 25 April 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 April 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Neil Coyle; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcom McDonald; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 649-732

Witness

I: Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser.



Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Stephen Lovegrove.

Q649 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is a great pleasure to have with us today the National Security Adviser, Sir Stephen Lovegrove. Thank you very much for joining us.

As you know, this inquiry is about the way in which orders are disseminated in Whitehall. We are not, to be honest, particularly interested in the nature of the individual decision that was made in the case of the Nowzad animals; we are concerned about the way in which the decision was made. If I can take you back to 25 August, an FCDO official stated in an email that you had agreed to "seek clear guidance for us from No 10" on the evacuation of Nowzad staff, and you called the FCDO later that morning to confirm that they should call this group forward. May I just check: did you consult No. 10?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have to confess, Chair, that my memory of that morning is very unclear, because there was an awful lot going on. I don't recall at all consulting No. 10 that morning. I have been trying to piece together what would probably have happened, and I am happy to take you through that, if that is helpful.

Chair: Sure.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Clearly, the decision to place eligible vulnerable people on the leave outside the rules cohorts was made around the 21st. In the early hours of 25 August, the Defence Secretary tweeted that Nowzad staff had now been cleared to come forward under LOTR; effectively, that means that a decision would have been made.

The way in which those decisions were made, which I think is the import of your question, is that the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary created a framework and approved a set of lists of people who potentially were on those LOTR cohorts; then the operational delegation of how they were called forward was made to others, most notably PJHQ under Admiral Key. He and they would have decisions on who it made sense to call forward, depending on flight capacity, who was nearby, who could be contacted, and so on.

So the Defence Secretary tweets at about 1.30 in the morning that Nowzad staff had been cleared to come forward under LOTR. At 10 o'clock every morning throughout that whole period, I chaired a meeting with all of our Whitehall colleagues, and I have no doubt that we would have discussed that tweet. It would have been an unusual event—we didn't tweet about other cohorts that were coming forward under LOTR.

I think that what probably happened is that, given the announcement made by the Defence Secretary, I would then have briefly checked with my staff that the Nowzad staff were technically eligible to be called forward, discovered that they were—they were on a list; they were UK



HOUSE OF COMMONS

charity aid workers—and confirmed that as being in order. Looking back at the email chain, that 10 o'clock meeting normally finished at 11; at 11.30 I was in another meeting—a ministerial meeting, in fact—on the settlement programme, so it would have been in that half-hour that I double-checked that they were eligible to be brought forward under LOTR and confirmed that they were, and then moved on from that. I certainly have no recollection of speaking to No. 10.

Q650 Chair: I say again, this is not about the individual decision. The reason this matters to us is that, even in a moment of extreme challenge—in fact, particularly at a moment of extreme challenge—the way decisions are made in the centre of Government is really important, because we need to be able to refer decisions back, check that we made the right ones, learn lessons and all the rest of it. It is at moments when things are particularly difficult—even sometimes a little chaotic—that it is really important to keep records and know how those decisions were made.

As I say, this is not about the dogs or the charity per se; the reason this comes up again and again is that this charity was particularly prominent at the time—we all remember the news reports going round at the time—and it feels like one of those issues where a decision being made without reference to No. 10 is somewhat surprising. I understand what you say about various different things applying, but given that it does not quite fit into any of the earlier categories, it strikes the Committee as a bit of a—well, you know. The aid workers were not aid workers in the traditional sense. They were working for a UK charity, true, but they were remote; they were not directly employed by the UK Government.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am not sure that I agree with that characterisation, Chair. The issue here is whether or not they were on the LOTR list, and they were on that list. Lots of people were on the LOTR list—journalists, human rights activists and so on. To a certain extent, the LOTR list was the edge cases that did not fall under ARAP and had for the most part been brought forward because they had found their way to the attention of parliamentarians and other groups, which had then put them into the system. We felt—Ministers felt—that there needed to be a process for bringing them forward if there was additional space on the flights, so the Nowzad staff were approved under LOTR.

I do not think that it is at all unusual that no reference would have been made to No. 10. I cannot remember a moment in that process when any reference was made to No. 10 about specific cohorts that were going to be brought forward. The whole point of the framework set by Ministers—the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary—was that it was a strategic framework; they had approved a bunch of lists and after that operational tactical detail was, as you would expect, delegated to the people who had the best ability and visibility of what could work on the ground. At the time, we were just desperate to get out as many people as we possibly could. Constantly referring back to the centre of Government would have been the worst possible thing to do and would have led to far fewer people getting out.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q651 **Chair:** As you know, various people who have worked for the Foreign Office gave evidence to us, and two of them said that they—this group—was not on the list before 25 August. As you say, people were added to the LOTR list at various stages. Nigel Casey wrote in an email—admittedly, an internal email—to one of the people who gave evidence to us, Josie Stewart, that “You”, meaning Josie, “also raised this with Stephen Lovegrove, Home Office and MOD just now—explaining the issue and asking Stephen to seek clear guidance for us from No 10 asap on what they would like us to do. Stephen agrees to pursue this urgently”.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Well, I’m afraid I have no memory of speaking to No. 10. As I said, I am struggling to remember the precise events of that morning. Almost certainly I would have checked that they were eligible to be called forward under LOTR, received assurance from my team that they were, and then passed that on. I would not have had time to do very much else because I had another meeting starting at 11.30.

Q652 **Chair:** Okay, so you think Nigel is probably just mistaken on this.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Possibly, although I have to be absolutely honest about the state of my memory of that morning, which is far from perfect.

Q653 **Alicia Kearns:** Sir Stephen, you know how much respect I have for you in terms of your experience, but when you say you have difficulty recalling what happened, my question has to be: have you taken the time to check your call logs?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I have.

Alicia Kearns: And what do your call logs show?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: My call logs show nothing at all. My emails of that day show nothing that I can find. I looked in my diary; it shows that I had a half-hour window between the end of the morning co-ordination process and the start of the ministerial meeting at 11.30.

Q654 **Alicia Kearns:** So it was raised at the ministerial meeting, and you said earlier that Ministers were keen that we were able to find them space. Which Ministers?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Defence Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, when it became clear that the rhythm of the flights leaving HKIA meant that some were taking off with seats that could be used by people who wanted to get out of Kabul. That, combined with the incoming from concerned citizens, concerned Afghans and parliamentarians saying, “There are a lot of people who don’t fall under the existing schemes—most notably, the ARAP scheme. Can we not utilise those empty seats?” It was as a result of that combination of factors that the LOTR scheme came into effect.

I think there were two submissions that went to those three Cabinet Ministers, one on 16th-17th and one on 20th-21st, I think, identifying these various categories of people. There was a list including Chevening



HOUSE OF COMMONS

scholars, journalists and others in the media, contractors working in exposed roles, women's rights activists, senior Government officials who had worked closely with us, particularly on counter-terrorism, employees of charities, humanitarian organisations and NGOs. Those were the kinds of people who found themselves approved on those lists.

Q655 **Alicia Kearns:** I do not think that any of us on this Committee disputes the importance of the LOTR programme; we all support it entirely. What we dispute is the decision making around who was allowed to go on those flights under the LOTR programme.

So the meeting you went to that morning, after the supposed email to somebody called Tom saying that you were going to raise it urgently with No. 10, had some Ministers attending.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The meeting at 10 o'clock was chaired by me, and it was always for senior officials. It was to make sure that we knew what the rhythm of the day was going to be, we knew what the actions were going to be, and we were following up on the actions of the previous day. The ministerial meeting was a completely separate meeting at 11.30. That meeting was chaired by Mr Gove, I think, although I might be wrong about that, and it was about domestic resettlement programmes.

Q656 **Alicia Kearns:** Sir Stephen, I recognise that you might not recall everything, but surely from your research you know whether Gove chaired that meeting.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, I'm afraid I haven't looked at that.

Q657 **Alicia Kearns:** I am struggling slightly. You knew you were coming before us. I would have wanted to check every single thing I did that day, who was at every single meeting and what was said at every single meeting. Have you, in preparing for this session, spoken to other people who were at that 10 am meeting and others who were at that 11.30 meeting to discuss whether or not this was raised?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It was certainly not raised at the 11.30 meeting, because that was on an entirely different subject—it was about resettlement, as opposed to eligibility for evacuation flights. I have not spoken to anybody about this particular subject for, well, weeks. Over the course of the last few months, since you have been doing these sessions, I have spoken to Sir Philip, I have not spoken to Nigel Casey about it, and I think I spoke to Tom Drew in the background about it, but I think that is about it.

Q658 **Alicia Kearns:** You knew you were coming to answer these questions and that we were going to try to get to the bottom of whether this decision was based on a tweet, or where the hell this decision was made, because here has to be accountability for every single decision made about who was going to get on a flight. I have to say that it feels slightly disrespectful that you have not tried to work out whether this was discussed at 10 am and whether there were any conversations with No. 10 for definite, yes or no.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There were no conversations, for definite. The idea that I would have spoken with the Prime Minister is definitely wrong. I certainly did not. I would certainly remember doing that and I certainly did not.

In terms of decision making, the way in which it worked was that everybody was focused on operational efficiency. Operational efficiency, in this instance, was Ministers deciding on a basic framework and a basic set of lists of people who could potentially be brought forward under LOTR. Then the actual decision to call them forward was delegated to officials and military officers, who had a better understanding of the way to maximise the number of people we could get safely on to those flights.

Exactly where those decisions would have been taken, I am afraid I cannot quite tell you, but it was almost certainly in PJHQ. I think there is a reference here, because clearly the Defence Secretary did not take the decision to call them forward. He was very clear about that in his evidence to you earlier on, and indeed his tweet does not imply that he took the decision to take it forward—he said, “Now that the decision has been taken”. I think Admiral Key said earlier that he had been speaking to the Defence Secretary shortly before the tweet. I suspect that what happened was that he gave him an update as to who was being brought forward under LOTR at that point, but I am afraid that I have not sought to concert my evidence to this Committee with anybody else.

Q659 **Alicia Kearns:** I have a final question. In that case, if the tasking had to be carried out through PJHQ, I cannot imagine, having worked with PJHQ operationally and in non-operational matters, that they would have accepted that tasking without an incredibly clear line from the chain of command, or without something in writing. Surely PJHQ has somebody somewhere trying to get to the bottom of this. We have been told that there is a review taking place internally. I cannot believe that someone, at some point, has not gone to PJHQ and said, “Please provide—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Which tasking in particular?

Alicia Kearns: The tasking to put Nowzad in the spare places on the plane.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid that I have to respectfully disagree with you there. What would have happened was that there was a framework, which had been approved by Ministers and had an awful lot of people on it, and depending on operational judgment—tactical judgments of people who knew the situation on the ground much better than Ministers possibly could—they would have called forward the maximum number of people that they could, consistent with whether or not they were on the list. That is what they would have done.

Q660 **Alicia Kearns:** Consistent with a policy, where the policy had been that they were not permitted. Excuse me, but in my experience of the military, they do not colour outside the lines. The rules were that they were not permitted on the planes. Therefore, that was a big difference



HOUSE OF COMMONS

from, "Look, here is the wide remit; take as many people as you can and get as many people as possible on your plane", when actually you have been told that a specific group are not allowed. I cannot envision the military going, "We've been told that they're not allowed but, do you know what, we've seen a tweet so suddenly we are going to allow it."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have not seen any evidence that the military were told that this group of people were not allowed. They were on the LOTR list, and they certainly had operational discretion to be able to pick people from the LOTR list in order to maximise the number of people we were getting out of harm's way. I have never seen any suggestion that these people were not on the LOTR list.

Alicia Kearns: Chris, please?

Q661 **Chris Bryant:** Well, Raphael Marshall told us, "I was informed by a colleague in a position to know on Sunday 22 August that the Foreign Secretary believed that he had already approved a list of people to be called up for evacuation under the LOTR scheme. However, this list did not yet exist and we were in the process of creating it." So there are those who dispute that these people were on the list at all at that date.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Okay. I am afraid that I don't have any evidence, one way or another, on that. My understanding is that these people were on the LOTR list.

Q662 **Chris Bryant:** Well, you can't just say that if you've just said that you have not got any evidence one way or another.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not know where Raphael Marshall's evidence comes from.

Chris Bryant: From being there and trying to implement it, as I understand it.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: If he has evidence to demonstrate that they were definitely not on the list, I would love to see that, because I have not seen that.

Q663 **Chair:** When did you first see the list?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have not seen the list. I never saw the list.

Q664 **Chair:** You never saw the list?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No.

Chair: He says there wasn't a list, and you say you haven't seen the list.

Q665 **Chris Bryant:** Does that mean there isn't a list?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, the fact that I have not seen a list does not imply that there wasn't a list, and I wouldn't have expected to see a list. That was left to operational commanders on the ground, as you would expect.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q666 **Chris Bryant:** But is there a list?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: There must have been a list, obviously. There was clearly a list of LOTR cohorts, which were put together on the—there were two, as far as I know: one around the 17th or something, and another one around the 21st.

Q667 **Chris Bryant:** The difficulty I have is with all these “must have beens” and “now that a decision has been made” and then nobody can say where the decision was made. Where was the decision made? Who made the decision?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I thought I had explained that.

Chris Bryant: No, you didn't.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: If there is a list of cohorts and people who are eligible under LOTR, that would have been approved by the Ministers in question. And the actual operational decision to call forward people on those lists would have been made by operational commanders, most likely in PJHQ, depending on the circumstances on the ground: whether or not they could get in touch with the people on the lists, whether or not the space fitted—

Q668 **Chris Bryant:** I am sorry to interrupt you, but this flies in the face of what the PUS told us, which is that the Nowzad staff were not prioritised for evacuation under LOTR. That is what the PUS told us.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is not the same as not being on the list.

Q669 **Chris Bryant:** So there is a list which nobody has shown us and nobody has told us when it was created. When we say “a list”, is this a list of names or of categories?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I don't know because I haven't seen the list, but I do know that there were lists of people who were eligible under LOTR. Now, whether or not they were prioritised—

Q670 **Chris Bryant:** When you say “people”, is that categories or names?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would have thought that they were probably categories and names, and I do know that there was a great deal of difficulty at the time in data cleansing, effectively, because list—names got misspelt and so on. I would imagine it was a mixture of the two. But the fact that there was a prioritised list does not mean that operational commanders were not given an ability to take decisions that they thought would maximise the chances of saving the maximum number of lives.

Q671 **Chris Bryant:** I can understand operational decision makers going, “Right. Mr and Mrs Jones are two miles away and can easily get here in time, and they are in the listed categories blah-blah, and therefore we will bring them.” What I don't understand is this: when a whole category gets into the list, which had not previously been in the list, who makes that decision?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: They were in the list. I have no—I don't think there is any evidence that they weren't in the list.

Q672 **Chris Bryant:** There's no evidence that they were, actually.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: But there's no evidence that they weren't in the list, and certainly the information that I have is that they were in the list. The submission from 21 August has the full list of organisations under LOTR, including Nowzad.

Q673 **Chris Bryant:** Have we had that? I can't remember. I don't think we have had that, have we?

Alicia Kearns: We haven't.

Q674 **Chris Bryant:** No, we've never had that, and we have repeatedly been asking about this. You would have thought that the Foreign Office might have been able to provide it to us by now.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: And it would have been the case, I would imagine—again, I don't know, because I haven't spent my recent few weeks digging into this in absolute detail. I would imagine that most of the Nowzad staff were together and it would have been possible, under the operational discretion of the people who were actually doing the calling—

Q675 **Chris Bryant:** But you're imagining now, aren't you?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I know, but—

Chris Bryant: You literally just said that you are speculating.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I am speculating, but—

Q676 **Chris Bryant:** And I'm sorry. I can be very, very pompous, I know, and I hate it when we get pompous as MPs, but you knew you were coming here today; this has been hotly contested for months; and you are basically now coming here and speculating about what might or might not have happened.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It wasn't my responsibility to call forward people underneath that scheme.

Q677 **Chris Bryant:** But others said—we have documentary evidence that you were asked to establish what the view was from Downing Street. Let me ask you a different question. If you had asked Downing Street, who would you have asked?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I wouldn't have asked Downing Street, so I am not sure that it is pointful answering a speculative question like that.

Q678 **Chair:** How big a story would it have had to have been for you to ask Downing Street?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: This was a situation where we were focusing particularly on seeking to save as many lives as we possibly could. Over the previous two or three days, the thing that had been obsessing us more than anything else was the increasing likelihood of a terrorist attack, which



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of course happened the following day. We would have, under all circumstances, left it to operational commanders to take decisions that, in their best judgment—they were best positioned to make those judgments—would have saved the maximum number of lives. It would not have been sensible for anybody in No. 10 to try to second-guess a decision like that, under any circumstances.

Chair: Stephen—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Please, let me finish. The only thing I would have checked was whether the Nowzad staff were on the LOTR list.

Q679 **Chair:** You will have seen what was going around in the media at the time. I know you were very busy, but you will have seen the news going around. You know as well as I do that there were many people who we wished we could have got out at the time. We did not. I am certainly not blaming anybody; that is just a reflection of the fact that it was a very difficult time. There were really hard decisions to be made, and it was really tough to decide who would and who would not get priority at that late stage. You also know, as I do, there were people crowding around gates at the airport at the time. There were decisions, therefore, to be made on prioritisation.

I hear what you are saying about the operational decisions on the ground. It strikes me as one of those operational decisions that would have had such a large impact, and with so many equally easy choices to make, it seems the sort of question that may well have gone higher, but it just did not.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It certainly did not. The reason, I imagine, that the question was asked in the morning was that it had a very high public profile. The tweet of the calling forward was unusual. Presumably, that happened because of the high public profile, so, very understandably, colleagues in the morning meeting just wanted to check with the Cabinet Office that everything was in order. I would have checked that everything was in order, and it was.

Q680 **Chris Bryant:** The PUS told us on 25 March this year—I am sure you read all his evidence in preparation for this—that, “Before 25 August, Nowzad staff had not been prioritised to be called forward.”

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is not my information. My information is that they were put on the list on 21 August.

Q681 **Chris Bryant:** By whom?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The lists would have been compiled by officials and put in front of Ministers for approval.

Chris Bryant: Surely there are categories of people. You gave us a list of categories earlier.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid, Mr Bryant, this particular—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chris Bryant: Officials decided that Nowzad should be prioritised, not Ministers at all.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Ministers would have approved the appearance of Nowzad staff on the list.

Q682 **Chris Bryant:** When did they do that?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: My understanding is on 21 August.

Q683 **Chris Bryant:** Which Minister did that, and where is the signature for that?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid I do not know the answer to that. It definitely would have been one of the Home Secretary, the Defence Secretary or the Foreign Secretary.

Chris Bryant: This is a complete contradiction of what the PUS said.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: My information is that Nowzad staff were on the LOTR list. If they were not on the LOTR list in any shape or form, they would not have been called forward.

Q684 **Chris Bryant:** I think you are presenting that as a logical argument. You are saying that the reason you know that they were on the list is not because you have seen the list, because you have not been able to say whether—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have not seen the list, but I will read to you the submission from 21 August, which has the full list of organisations under LOTR, including Nowzad.

Q685 **Chris Bryant:** And which Minister signed that off?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I do not have that information. I am happy to try to find out from colleagues.

Q686 **Chris Bryant:** Presumably, you knew when you came today that you would be contradicting the evidence that had been given to us by the PUS. And you haven't checked that fact.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Could you just read out the specific reference from the PUS?

Chris Bryant: "Before 25 August, Nowzad staff had not been prioritised to be called forward." That is from the PUS.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is a different statement, I'm afraid. Not being on the list is not the same as being not prioritised to be called forward. They can be on the list, but they do not have to be prioritised on the list. It is within operational commanders' discretion to call forward people who are not prioritised—after all, those prioritisation decisions would have been made in London without the benefit of operational understanding on the ground. They would have been perfectly capable of saying, "Actually, the most sensible way of getting the maximum number of people on these planes is to go outside the priority and to call someone



HOUSE OF COMMONS

else forward from the list," so I am afraid that those two things are consistent, Mr Bryant.

Q687 **Chris Bryant:** I do not think they are. The reason this matters is twofold. One is because in a moment of crisis, when you are evacuating people, you want to make sure that you have prioritised the right people, yes?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes.

Chris Bryant: Insofar as it is humanly possible.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: And that is one factor, certainly.

Q688 **Chris Bryant:** What are the other factors?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: How many lives you can save.

Q689 **Chris Bryant:** I do not know why that conflicts.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I will tell you why it might conflict. If you were prepared only to put people who are on a priority list on a plane and you could not get in contact with any of those on the priority list, you would end up not saving the same number.

Q690 **Chris Bryant:** I get that. Within the parameters of chaos—chaos may interfere in lots of different ways—you are none the less trying to make sure that the highest-priority people are the most likely to be evacuated. The worry is that Ministers put so many people in priority categories that, in the end, there was no prioritisation at all.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would not agree with that. Anybody who was on a LOTR list would have been prioritised to be got out of the country if we could. Clearly, within those LOTR lists, there were different types of priority. The operational commanders would have used their own judgment to call forward the maximum number of people, so that they could save the maximum number of lives.

Q691 **Chris Bryant:** You yourself said earlier that there were an awful lot of people on the list, which implied a criticism of the fact that there were too many people on the list.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, I do not think it implies anything of the sort. It implies that there were a lot of people who needed to be saved, and we are all deeply conscious that we left a lot of people behind. It is a great regret that we left so many people behind. It is a source of pride that we got out so many, but it is a great regret that we did not get out everybody.

Q692 **Chris Bryant:** What we cannot know is whether we implemented a proper prioritisation process. Today has not elucidated much. If anything, it has made it worse. Every single time we dig into this, we find lots of people implementing the policy. The FCDO thought that you were going to ring Downing Street. I do not know who in Downing Street it would be, because you still have not answered that question. Who in Downing Street would you ring?



Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The reason I haven't answered that is that it is not the kind of question that I would have asked of policy makers in Downing Street. This was a framework, and a process, that was designed to allow the maximum number of people to be saved. I would have worked out whether the decision that had been announced by the Defence Secretary in the early part of the morning was in accordance with the framework. Those people were on the LOTR list, and I would have communicated that very rapidly back to the team so that we could have got on with trying to get people through the gate, which of course they sadly did not.

Q693 **Chris Bryant:** Let me just go back to this point and then I will stop. You say that the decision had been announced by the Defence Secretary. What was the decision that was announced, and who had made that decision?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: If we look back at his tweet, he says: "Now that Pen Farthing's staff have been cleared to come forward under LOTR I have authorised MOD to facilitate their processing". He would have received from operational commanders—I am afraid I do not know which one of those it would have been—that these people who were on the LOTR list had been called forward. He then chose to tweet about it, and no doubt he chose to do so because of the very high public profile of this particular group of people. I think it was the only group of people that anybody did tweet about.

Chris Bryant: Indeed, which is why you might think that there would be a bit more attention paid to the decision-making process around it. I give up.

Q694 **Alicia Kearns:** There are questions about the fact that, yes, we should evacuate as many people as possible, but they should be people who are at risk. The problem is that, wrongly or rightly, the perception within the system was that this was a No. 10 decision via you, and very specifically you. The Permanent Secretary first told us that they were on a list of potential evacuees and were called forward when space became available, as you have just said. He then told us that Nowzad staff were called forward not simply because space had become available, but because of the Defence Secretary's intervention and in consultation with you and the Foreign Secretary, which directly contradicts—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I'm afraid I do not remember that as being the case. The Defence Secretary would not have said, "Now that the staff have been cleared to come forward under LOTR," I would submit, if he did not know that they had been cleared by the operational commanders to come forward under LOTR. As I say, I do not have perfect recall of that morning—I apologise for that. The only thing I would have checked in the morning, in the brief half-an-hour window that I had, would have been that, yes indeed, these people were eligible to come forward.

Q695 **Alicia Kearns:** The problem is that the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office thinks that it happened because of the Defence Secretary,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and that the decision was made in consultation with you.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I can assure you that there was no consultation between me and the Defence Secretary on the calling forward of Nowzad staff.

Q696 **Alicia Kearns:** And between you and the Permanent Secretary?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Certainly not between me and the Permanent Secretary, certainly not between me and anybody in No. 10, and certainly not between me and the Prime Minister.

Q697 **Alicia Kearns:** Because again, the PUS later, when giving evidence, said to us that Nowzad staff were called forward on the basis of the Defence Secretary's statement, not the other way around. Within the system, a tweet was taken as the basis on which to call people forward. The Permanent Secretary has said that. I am not going to ask you to challenge it; that is what he has said factually. Then Josie Stewart said to us that the NSA "subsequently confirmed to a senior FCDO official later that morning that they should proceed to call forward Nowzad's staff." As you said, you checked. I'm not sure who you checked with.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Probably my staff.

Q698 **Alicia Kearns:** Right, so you checked with your staff, and then permission was given for it to go forward. But staff took away that this was a PM decision, via you, and the Permanent Secretary has directly contradicted your evidence that there was space and therefore they were put on, but that it happened solely because of the Defence Secretary's tweet.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That is certainly not my memory of it. The Defence Secretary's tweet and his subsequent evidence, which I have read, as you would suggest, says that the decision had been taken by operational command. He said in his evidence that he does not know exactly who took the decision, but that the decision had been taken, so they had been cleared to come forward under LOTR, and he authorised the MOD to facilitate their processing.

Q699 **Alicia Kearns:** Putting to one side who did or didn't, and what the process was or wasn't, what lessons have you taken away so far from this inquiry and the meaningful concerns, which are legitimate, about the accountability of decision making, the transparency of decision making and the process of decision making in this affair? The inquiry into the Afghanistan evacuation has been going on since September in the Foreign Office and across Government. Are there any lessons that have been learned as yet?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would probably pull the focus back a bit, if I am honest. There is certainly no doubt that, in what was a very fraught environment, with people working very, very long hours, and extraordinary bravery being shown by colleagues—both civilian and military—on the ground in Kabul, any number of mistakes would have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been made in any number of different ways. That is just the nature of that type of operation.

Do I look upon the evacuation from Kabul as a failure? No, I don't. We anticipated getting out no more than 6,000 people, and we got out 15,000 people, which, in the words of General Milley in front of the Senate Committee, represents a tactical success. His observations were that the Afghanistan campaign and the way the decision to withdraw was made—those were obviously political decisions in the main driven by Washington—were a strategic failure. That is probably the focus that I would look to. If I really wanted to draw big lessons from this, it would be around that.

Q700 Alicia Kearns: I will make two points. First, no one in this room has suggested that it was a failure in any way, shape or form. Many of us worked every single hour of every single day to try to get people out and to support them. The problem is that the job of the Permanent Secretary and the National Security Adviser is to make sure that the infrastructure and decision-making processes across Whitehall on matters of national security are what they should be—the structures, the decision making and the approvals process. The problem here is that there is clearly a perception that, within the crisis centre, decisions were made based on gossip and hearsay, tweets and misunderstanding. That is the problem.

Yes, the inquiry should be looking at the big picture in the macro, but it is within our power to improve decision-making processes, frameworks and accountability. Clearly there was a problem here, because nobody, despite having weeks to provide us with evidence, can give us an accurate perception. Two Foreign Office staff have given up careers in what is a dream job—I can say that with hand on heart, because the two and a half years I spent working at the Foreign Office were the best of my life. They have thrown away their careers.

You and the Permanent Secretary should be looking at these decision-making processes, at the framework and at accountability so that we do not see people having to throw away their careers, and so that we do not have to sit here asking, "Who made the decision and why was it made?" on what was the most controversial aspect over those two weeks. It was a controversial decision for everyone, including MPs in this room who have had death threats as a result—I am on that side. This was an important decision, so it is not just about the macro; we also have to review decision making.

Is there any commitment from the Foreign Office, or from your own office, to go away and look at accountability, the framework and decision-making processes, because that matters for future evacuations?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office certainly did a lessons-learned exercise—I think he came and gave you evidence on that—and we have done some lessons-learned exercises in the Cabinet Office. I think I would make a distinction between the overall framework, which was put in place at great speed in order to be able to deal with these difficult cases—not the ARAP ones, because the ARAP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

scheme was set up 15 months before. The process was that the cohorts in that framework were approved by Ministers and then, understandably, operational decisions were delegated down to operational commanders to maximise the saving of life.

On the whole, notwithstanding the fact that some mistakes may have been made on the way, and that difficult decisions were made, I think that that was a very, very successful exercise. I am afraid I don't think I would accept that this was some kind of disaster of process, because it simply was not. These people were on a pre-approved list in a pre-approved framework. They were brought forward in a perfectly reasonable way. I was asked to check that it was all in order the following day because, as you say, this case had a certain degree of public profile. I would have checked that things were in order—they were in order. I quickly went back to my colleagues and said that that was okay, and they were brought forward.

My only real regret, frankly, is that on that day some flights did leave with some empty seats, and my real regret is that those people—the Nowzad staff—were not able to get through the gate.

Q701 Alicia Kearns: This is my final point. Unfortunately, what you have just set out is the opposite of the Permanent Secretary's evidence. I am sorry, but that has to be repeated, because it is a fact: it is the opposite of what you are giving to us as evidence.

If I were running the FCDO's lessons-learned process, given the fact that this Committee has had to devote so much time to this, I would have been looking at that within lessons learned—where did things go wrong; what happens in a situation where you have a lot of publicity around a particular group; what approach should the institution take.

My final question is about ARAP. There are people who applied through the ARAP scheme to come to this country last February who have heard nothing since November. I have had private conversations with whistleblowers in the Ministry of Defence who have told me that there is no movement on ARAP cases at the moment because of a lock between the Home Office and the MOD. What are we still doing to get back those people who need to be here, and what communication is there, because I am aware of at least 10 people who have not heard a single word from us since November and who applied last February?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid that I am not sighted on those cases, but I am happy to take that away and see where we can make improvements. I am sorry to hear about those cases. ARAP, as you know, is an open-ended scheme, so if we are not making it work now, then we should be. I am very happy to take that away and look into it.

Q702 Neil Coyle: I am a bit concerned about some of the semantics here. Several times, Sir Stephen, you have made reference to the fact that you checked whether Nowzad was on this list to come forward. Who did you check that with?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid I can't remember.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q703 **Neil Coyle:** You remember you checked? You are very sure you checked?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, I actually cannot remember the conversation with Mr Drew, but I assume that I must have checked, because there is an email that says, "Stephen has got back to us and said that this is okay," so I must have checked. They would not have written that down for any other reason.

Q704 **Neil Coyle:** It has been checked that you checked, and you have told us that it definitely was not the Prime Minister, because you would remember that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would have remembered that.

Q705 **Neil Coyle:** You have told us that it was not the Defence Secretary, because you would have remembered that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I would have remembered that as well.

Q706 **Neil Coyle:** It was not the Permanent Secretary, because you would have remembered that. You have told us that much.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have said that I would imagine that I checked with my staff that these people were on the list.

Q707 **Neil Coyle:** Your imagination is strong.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, my imagination is not strong. That is not what I am seeking to say.

Q708 **Neil Coyle:** You have told us that the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary are the only four who could have made that decision.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, that was not quite what I said. The Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary were the three Cabinet Ministers to whom a submission went about the construction of the LOTR scheme and the cohorts that would have gone on it.

Q709 **Neil Coyle:** We know that the Defence Secretary would not have approved this group to be on it, so that only leaves the other two. Did you check with either of those other two Cabinet members whether Nowzad should be on the pre-approved list?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No, I did not, because I checked with my colleagues, and they have assured me—

Q710 **Neil Coyle:** Your colleagues where? Which colleagues are you talking about?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: They would have been in the National Security Secretariat.

Q711 **Neil Coyle:** Why would the National Security Secretariat know more than the FCDO or the Home Office?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Because there is a great deal of communication between the two.

Q712 **Neil Coyle:** You know there is a lot of communication, but you do not remember your own communication?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid that I do not remember the exact course of events nearly a year ago in a half-hour period in a very fraught and complex environment—no, I do not. The thing that was on my mind at that particular time was what we were going to do about the intelligence of a major terrorist attack, which happened the following day and killed 250 people.

Q713 **Neil Coyle:** I know you are saying that it is a long time ago, but you have had a very long time in which to make sure that you checked more recently than today the specific version of events. May I ask directly whether you have had discussions with any Minister from the Home Office or Foreign Office about Nowzad specifically?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: No.

Q714 **Neil Coyle:** Not a single Minister?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Not a single Minister.

Q715 **Chris Bryant:** Let me try again—and thanks for going through this. As I understand it, leave outside the rules was decided by the Home Office, yes?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The lists, as I understand it, were approved—*[Interruption.]* There were submissions that went up in parallel to the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary after they had gone to the Home Secretary. I believe that that is what happened.

Q716 **Chris Bryant:** As an MP who was trying to get people out and trying to help in the process, one of the frustrations was that there were three Departments and we did not know who to send things to. That seemed a part of the mess, to be honest. There were three Departments crawling all over it and different people making priorities. That just did not help.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I have no doubt that there was friction in the system. I suppose that that is one of the reasons that the Cabinet Office exists—to try to minimise that friction. Did we eradicate it? Surely not.

Q717 **Chris Bryant:** The danger is that it ends up being a fourth, rather than a resolution of the three.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I hope that that is not the case.

Q718 **Chris Bryant:** We all hope that that is not the case, but it is the danger. The decision as to whether Nowzad should be on the list—not the calling forward note, but the category list of priorities—comes from the Home Office, plus maybe the others. There must be a paper trail for that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am afraid that I do not routinely—in fact very rarely or almost never—get copied into submissions from departmental



HOUSE OF COMMONS

officials to their departmental masters. That is advice that is confidential between those officials and those Ministers.

Q719 **Chris Bryant:** It must be possible to establish that.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It must, but those submissions would not exist in the Cabinet Office; they would most likely exist in the Home Office, the Foreign Office or the Ministry of Defence.

Q720 **Chris Bryant:** But the answer to the question, "Who put them on the list?" may lie in that paper trail.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: In that paper trail, there were two sets of submissions, one establishing LOTR, and the second expanding the number of people and organisations that would go on LOTR. I think they were on the 17th and the 21st, and the latter one of those is the one that had Nowzad on it.

Q721 **Chris Bryant:** The Defence Secretary said to me that one of his anxieties during that whole period was that the Foreign Secretary kept putting new categories of people on the list, so it just grew like Topsy and it ended up being impossible to prioritise because it was asked, "How do I choose between a female judge and somebody who has worked with us as a contractor?" Anyway, that is not for you.

You have said that you would have checked. I understand that, because you can't remember who you checked with and all the rest of it, but you are aware of the fact that people have said that they came to you and you then said, "It's fine to go."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes.

Q722 **Chris Bryant:** And those people, or that person, said: "We had a direction from the National Security Adviser, which we could only assume was given on the authority of somebody in power who could make that direction."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I can't—

Chris Bryant: You can see how they would come to that conclusion.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I suppose it is a plausible interpretation. It is not the right interpretation.

Chris Bryant: No, because you went to your staff, and they are—

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I don't know why they would have come to that particular conclusion, but the idea that I gave a direction—I certainly did not give a direction. All I would have done was check that it was in order to call forward Nowzad on the basis that they were included in the LOTR list.

Q723 **Chris Bryant:** In terms of the decision-making process, it is a bit disturbing that the FCDO thinks, "Right, what we have to do is go to you, and you will get authority from somebody above," but actually, you've



HOUSE OF COMMONS

just gone to your staff and gone, "It is okay to proceed."

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I'm afraid I can't answer for the perceptions of FCDO staff and how they would interpret something coming to them I don't know how many—second, third, fourth or fifth hand. The reality is that it would not have been as that, I'm afraid, implies.

Q724 **Chris Bryant:** I guarantee you that this is genuinely my last question. Who do you report to?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: The Prime Minister.

Q725 **Chris Bryant:** So you can imagine a circumstance in which somebody in the Foreign Office thinks that if they ask the National Security Adviser, "Is this good to go?" and the National Security Adviser gives, in their words, "a direction" that it is okay to go, they think that this must have come from somebody in power and that it has come from the Prime Minister.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: It's not uncommon, I suppose, that somebody might be under that misapprehension, but the reality would have been that I would have checked that something was administratively in order, confirmed that that was the case and got back. As I say, if they took a different interpretation, I can't do anything about that.

Q726 **Chris Bryant:** One could argue that that is a fundamental problem in chain of command.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I give instructions to people multiple times a day. It is very rare, to put it mildly, that anybody thinks that I have taken specific direction from the Prime Minister in order to be able to give those directions.

Q727 **Chair:** We are going to end that there. May I ask a couple of quick questions on Newport Wafer Fab? You have completed your review, haven't you?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Yes, I have.

Q728 **Chair:** Your recommendation is going to BEIS—is that correct?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: My report was submitted to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has responded to me, and that correspondence has been copied to BEIS.

Q729 **Chair:** The next decision is going to be taken by, presumably, the BEIS Secretary.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: That's correct.

Q730 **Chair:** How much of our report do you think should be updated, given the US's recent decision?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I doubt that it should be updated for that, because the BEIS Secretary is going to be taking a decision in his quasi-judicial capacity, although I do understand the point you are making about the evidence base. I am happy to look at the report again. In fact, I am



HOUSE OF COMMONS

actually having a quick look at the report again to see whether or not there are any other factors that might have changed, because I think the BEIS Secretary has until 4 July to make his decision.

Q731 **Chair:** My understanding is that he does have until then. Given that the US has now made pretty clear statements—indeed, Members of the House of Representatives and the Senate have also made very clear statements—it would seem that a review would be advisable. We would, therefore, be very grateful if you might choose to write again, on the basis of your review of your report, when you get the chance to do so, which should be pretty soon, I hope. Do you know when you might have a chance to look again?

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: I am actually taking a meeting on this particular subject tomorrow. As a result of that meeting, I think I will probably be in a better position to be able to answer your question.

Q732 **Chair:** I would be very grateful if you could let us know whether we are looking at a few weeks, a month or whatever it is that you are considering.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove: Sure.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming this afternoon at short notice. We are very grateful to you for your time.