

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the FCDO - 28 03 23, HC 171

Tuesday 28 March 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Sir Chris Bryant; Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Drew Hendry; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 324-467

Witnesses

I: Sir Philip Barton KCMG OBE, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Juliet Chua CB, Director General, Finance and Corporate., Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Philip Barton and Juliet Chua.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Sir Philip and Juliet, may I ask you kindly to introduce yourselves?

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you very much, Chair. I am Philip Barton, the permanent under-secretary in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Juliet Chua: Thank you, Chair. I am Juliet Chua, director general for finance and corporate at the FCDO.

Q324 **Chair:** Perfect. I'll kick us off. Sir Philip, back in July 2021 the Foreign Office set out the three priority outcomes that it wished to achieve. Can you please update us on whether these have been met and how you are evaluating them?

Sir Philip Barton: The priority outcomes were set out under the then Government. Earlier this month, the current Government set out its priorities for the future in the Integrated Review refresh, which I am sure you will ask me about later, and those will be turned into priority outcomes for the Department going forwards.

When the Foreign Secretary came in last September, he wanted to be really clear with us on what his priorities were for the Department. He wanted us to support Ukraine following the invasion by Russia—obviously, that hadn't happened in July '21. He wanted us to carry on demonstrating our long-term commitment to the Indo-Pacific and to strengthen our relationships with countries like India and Indonesia. He wanted us to play our part in rebuilding the relationship with the European Union, and we have since then had the Windsor framework. He wanted us to carry on doing our work to uphold an open, stable international order. He wanted us to do the other aspects of our international work in support of other Departments—for example, on tackling illegal migration. Finally, he wanted us to support British nationals overseas. Those are the priorities that he set us as he came in as Foreign Secretary in September. Those are what we have put into the Integrated Review refresh; and those are the things that will go into our plan going forwards.

Q325 **Chair:** What is the process for evaluating success against those priorities, and how frequent would that timetable be?

Sir Philip Barton: The Government is using these plans. They will have metrics behind them. Like other Departments, we as a Department will have an outcome delivery plan—it is not yet finalised; it will be published in April or May, if I remember right—and those plans will be published. There will be returns into the Cabinet Office and the Treasury once a quarter. Within the FCDO, we will have both a Minister and a senior official against each priority outcome, to allow us to organise ourselves around



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delivery of those outcomes and hold ourselves to account as well, and then input into the central returns.

Q326 Chair: You have been a cord of stability in a very tumultuous period. There have been lots of changes of Ministers and Foreign Secretaries. How do you think that that has affected the ability to have a coherent foreign policy, and how have you been able to mitigate the impacts on our geopolitical standing and our ability to do our job to keep our country safe?

Sir Philip Barton: The overarching international priorities of the Boris Johnson Government were set out in the Integrated Review of 2021, and Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister has had that review refreshed. That looked at what had stayed constant and what had changed since 2021, and found that actually a lot of things had stayed the same. Some of the things we found then that led to more investment in defence, doing more in terms of standing up to countries trying to do us harm, and the tilt to the Indo-Pacific and making that long term, had stood the test of time, but we found that some things had changed. The international security environment has got worse. We have had the invasion of Ukraine, as I mentioned, and I would say we have a higher risk of conflict in the Indo-Pacific. We have seen more competition—for example, around tech—an increasingly assertive China under the Chinese Communist party, and signs of a growing and unhelpful set of partnerships between China, Russia and Iran.

So things have changed, and the IR refresh sets our international priorities. But although we have had political changes here in the UK, at strategic framework level it has been refreshed after a couple of years, but the broad policies that were agreed in the original Integrated Review and that we have been playing our part in taking forward have stayed the same.

Q327 Chair: In terms of that coherence, the last time you were before us in this format, in 2020, I asked you what your personal legacy would be as permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, and you were very clear with me that your role was to deliver on the requests, wishes and ambitions of your Ministers. Have you had a chance yet to flesh out what your personal ambitions are in your role?

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you for asking me again, Chair. I have thought about that question of my personal priority. The key thing for me is our people, because they are our greatest asset. Yes, we have buildings and things, but our people are the most important, so my top priority, obviously, day to day is their safety and security and wellbeing. But in your terms, thinking about my role, the custodian role I have as the senior civil servant in the Department, it is about their capability. What are the capabilities we need? What have we got? What do we need going forward?

We have been through a merger; we have brought together the diplomatic capabilities of the Foreign Office with the deep development expertise and capabilities of the Department for International Development, but the



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world is also changing, so the key thing for me is building those people capabilities for the future around our analysis of the world ahead of us. Juliet could set out more detail around our capability building and what that looks like in practice, Chair, if you would like.

Q328 Chair: What are the current gaps in our capabilities that you are working to urgently overcome?

Sir Philip Barton: In the areas in which we know we need to do more, we have started, but we have more to do on things such as tech, for example. Earlier this week, we launched an international tech strategy, but we need to ensure that we have some deep expertise, including in our network in places such as the west coast of the United States and among our senior diplomats in relevant countries, and that everyone knows enough about tech to be effective, even if they are not an expert. We need to look at the development expertise we have and ensure that matches what we are trying to do under the new international development strategy. Those are the general areas; Juliet, do you want to say a bit more about the specific areas?

Juliet Chua: Yes. As Philip said, investing in our capability as an organisation is critical. There is a set of things that we want to maintain as we come together as two organisations. Over the last two and a half years, there have been really fantastic examples of where we have been able to achieve more because of the combination of different experiences, and the expertise and professionalism in the different communities within the organisation.

We need to maintain expertise in geopolitics, conflict, human rights and health, our regional and country expertise, and our consular expertise; but we think we need to enhance and develop expertise in areas such as science and technology, national security, our economic security work, sanctions—obviously they have become a big focus in recent years and we have been building up our capability in that area significantly—and climate. The Integrated Review refresh set out significant investment in our China capability, and there is further work on the corporate underpinning of the organisation and ensuring that we have the right capability to support an organisation that is both spending a large amount of public money and running a global network.

This year in particular, we are putting energy into mapping that capability, articulating to our staff what the career paths look like, and setting out the way in which, through quite a comprehensive learning and development offer, we will build that through those different areas.

Q329 Chair: I think we will come back to some of that in more detail later. Philip, before I move on, in the light of the arrest warrant that has been issued for Vladimir Putin for the unlawful deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia, which constitutes a war crime and an attempt at genocide, has the Foreign Office communicated to the Kremlin that, should Vladimir Putin set foot on British soil, he will be arrested?



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Sir Philip Barton: He is already sanctioned, so I do not think he has any intention of coming here. He is clearly not welcome in the United Kingdom. I do not see any possibility of him coming, Chair.

Q330 **Chair:** Do you think that message has been sent loud and clear, particularly since the International Criminal Court indictment?

Sir Philip Barton: The ICC indictment was an important step forward. I do not think there is any prospect, in the current circumstances, of President Putin having any intention of coming anywhere near a country like the United Kingdom.

Chair: Because if he did, he would be arrested immediately?

Q331 **Neil Coyle:** Has there been no formal communication to the Russian embassy?

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, it is clear that he is not going to come. He is a sanctioned individual. He is not welcome in this country. I cannot see a circumstance in which he would come here.

Q332 **Neil Coyle:** So is it an assumption that he is not going to come, rather than you having actually done anything?

Sir Philip Barton: It is a strong assumption. I do not see a prospect of President Putin coming to the United Kingdom.

Q333 **Neil Coyle:** Is there no value in the Foreign Office actually communicating with the Russian ambassador in London to say what the UK position is and to make the feeling very clear? Do you not see any value in doing that?

Sir Philip Barton: I think President Putin will have heard very clearly the meaning of the independent ICC prosecutor's announcement. He is not welcome in the United Kingdom. I cannot see a prospect of him coming here.

Q334 **Neil Coyle:** How does the Russian ambassador in London know that if you have not even bothered to send a letter or an email?

Chair: If I was the Europe Minister, I would have called in the ambassador to make it very clear that was our position.

Sir Philip Barton: To be open with you, Chair, the answer to your question is that I do not think we have sent a direct message in the terms you are questioning me on, but I think President Putin knows he is not welcome in the United Kingdom.

Q335 **Sir Chris Bryant:** What was the last communication we had with the Russian ambassador?

Sir Philip Barton: I would have to come back to you on that. I do not know whether the Department has had communication with the ambassador. We obviously still have diplomatic relations with Russia, so there might have been day-to-day contact. But in recent days, I do not know.



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Chair: I think the point is that we have diplomatic relationships so that we can send strong messages.

Sir Chris Bryant: Exactly. By calling someone in or meeting—anyway, it would be good to have the details of when the last meeting was and what the last communication was.

Chair: I will turn to Neil, but perhaps Leo Docherty, the Minister for Europe, could write to us to reassure us that that has been communicated swiftly.

Q336 **Neil Coyle:** I am intrigued, because there does not seem to be any value attached to doing anything with the Russian ambassador here. When the Russian embassy in the UK has put out messages that contradict the international stand on the war, what have the UK Government sent to the Russian embassy by way of response? Perhaps you could include that in the correspondence, if you do not know.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, I will have to come back to you on that.

Q337 **Neil Coyle:** Do you think anything has gone?

Sir Philip Barton: I did not actually catch what you were referring to, I am sorry.

Neil Coyle: When the Russian embassy in the UK put out misinformation or false claims about what is happening in Ukraine—

Chair: Or on MH17, which they did recently.

Neil Coyle: —has there been any effort to correct or challenge that misinformation?

Sir Philip Barton: We do, we have and we can give you chapter and verse over many years. The period I know best is when I was leading our response to the terrible Salisbury incident. We absolutely do—sometimes in written communications with the ambassador and the embassy—set out when we do not agree with what they are doing. We do not do that on every occasion, as you know. There is a vast volume of misinformation coming out of the Russian embassy and the Russian ambassador. We think a better approach is to counter the totality of that, rather than respond to every single one. But I am very happy to make sure that, when we come back to the Committee, we cover what we have done.

Q338 **Chair:** To touch on one other inquiry, before I turn to Royston, we have been in the final stages of our inquiry into the Wagner Group, and I am slightly concerned that what seems to be appearing is that the focus on Wagner is largely through EECAD—the Eastern Europe and Central Asia directorate—and the Ukraine-Russia lens. We know that they have a significant footprint in Africa, that they have in essence carried out industrial state capture in some countries, and that they are attempting to operate in the Balkans and other places. What is the FCDO doing to make sure that the expertise is joined up across the Departments and not siloed? To be frank, it took a month for the Foreign Office and the



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Ministry of Defence to stop fighting over who was going to give evidence to us on Wagner, which as you can imagine heightened my anxiety that we are not looking at this in a comprehensive, strategic manner.

Sir Philip Barton: Your inquiry is welcome, and I genuinely look forward to seeing what your conclusions are. You have rightly said what the current arrangement is; it is sat alongside EECAD. It is actually the HMG Russia unit, which is hosted in the FCDO but is not only the FCDO, reporting up to the relevant DG. They have a cross-HMG responsibility for work on the Wagner Group. Clearly, where that is their involvement in Ukraine, everything we are doing to support Ukraine is countering the Wagner Group in Ukraine. When you get to Africa, that is the area where I want to look at what you have found as a Committee and to consider whether we are absolutely doing what we should be to make sure that it is joined up across the piece.

We have to be context-specific, so if we are trying to counter it in Mali, for example, we need to do that in whatever the context is in Mali and with what our effort is there, what our levers and abilities are. But you are right, it is co-ordinated through the HMG Russia unit, hosted by us but a cross-HMG unit. We will want to look at what you have found as a Committee and what your recommendations are, and to consider what we should take away from that, thinking about it properly.

Chair: I suspect our takeaway will be that it is insufficient in the current structure. Royston, please.

Q339 **Royston Smith:** You have a new directorate that is tackling the hostile manipulation of information. Which posts have you taken from in order to fill that directorate?

Sir Philip Barton: I might ask Juliet to say a little about our overall approach. It is not one for one, so it is not necessarily that we can say, "We've cut this post to fill that post." What we have done overall over the past 15 months, since the beginning of last year, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is to recognise that, initially, that required an immediate response, 24/7, and that then we needed to dig in for the long haul with a significantly enhanced effort. One part of that enhanced effort was the creation of this new directorate, building out of the Government Information Cell. This is an area where expertise is important, so people either understand communications in a deep way or understand the connections that we want to make to the parts of our system when we are countering them, or they have the regional expertise required. It is about identifying the right sort of individuals and building up the capability. That is what we have been doing. We now have a director as well. Juliet, do you want to say a bit more about how we have managed the overall pressures on our workforce and made sure that we have the right people in the right places?

Juliet Chua: I am happy to come in on this. We wrote to you in January with the corporate update, Chair. Part of that work has been about prioritising our workforce overall against the priorities Philip set out at the



start of today's session. At the moment, each director is going through a business planning process, identifying the activity they have in front of them and working out what the workforce requirements are. As Philip said, the new directorate has brought together co-ordination and contributions from a range of teams across the Department and incorporates the Government Information Cell's previous work into that central team. It will play a critical role in that area. In this context, we cannot comment specifically on the level of funding for the unit, but we can follow up on that if appropriate. Essentially, what we are doing is making sure we have the resource in place against this as a priority area that has been identified.

Sir Philip Barton: Chair, you will appreciate this better than I, but we did a lot to counter Daesh, for example, in the communications space and we still do that, but the work has lessened because the threat from Daesh, including on the communications side, has reduced, so we have been able to redirect resource on the comms side. What we have done is wider than that, though.

Q340 **Royston Smith:** Can you talk generally about the functions and capabilities of the new directorate?

Sir Philip Barton: It is in the Integrated Review. Russia, China and Iran the three notable countries, but it could be others over time. We are building capabilities that are "actor agnostic", which we will use where they are required—where countries are using information to do damage to UK interests overseas. That is the focus. To be clear, it is distinct from any work in the United Kingdom. As you know, there is work in the United Kingdom; this is parallel to that, but not the same. Its focus is overseas.

We do a range of different things in this space—for example, building capability in other countries through their own media to have trusted media sources as alternatives to false information. We have done a lot of exposing the Kremlin playbook—quite an effective hashtag. We have done some work with the intelligence agencies around declassifying intelligence—we did that effectively in the run-up to the invasion, and we have carried on doing that. We have done work looking at sanctioning individuals involved in the use of information for malign purposes—for example, Kremlin-funded bodies such as TV-Novosti, which owns RT, and Rossiya Segodnya, which owns and controls Sputnik. We collaborate with partners interested in operating in this space. Obviously, we have a partnership with the BBC World Service, which importantly is maintaining its service in 42 languages; some of that is about making sure that there is trusted English-language broadcasting that counters disinformation from others. There is a range of activities that the team is taking forward in collaboration with others.

Q341 **Royston Smith:** How would the public know what you are doing to tackle hostile states' misinformation? How would that make a difference to the man on the street?



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Sir Philip Barton: Do you mean a UK street, or a street in a country where we are supporting this work?

Royston Smith: Either, really.

Sir Philip Barton: In the UK, it is in the Integrated Review refresh, so it is not a secret that we are doing this. It was put in the IRR. To be candid, we do not want to talk about it too much, but it is not a secret and I have set out the broad themes we are working to.

If you are talking about people on the street in other countries, to take one example, we have worked in partnership with countries in the neighbourhood of Russia and their media outlets and others that we want to have the capability to provide trusted information. We could look at the extent to which that work is recognised and whether it is having an impact.

Q342 **Royston Smith:** Is it having an impact?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't have anything in front of me. I think we can be confident that it is. In the Baltic states, for example, we have relatively good data on how we have had an impact in partnership with others. The British Council has done good work in the Baltics: it has reached 10% of the overall population there with its People to People project, which is focused on making sure people know how to be critical when they hear things on the media and make up their own mind about what is and is not true.

Q343 **Royston Smith:** Finally, what is the new open source intelligence hub going to focus on?

Sir Philip Barton: Lots of different bits of the Government use open source material for different purposes, so the hub is going to look at how we make sure that the totality of that effort is more than the sum of its parts. It was announced in the Integrated Review refresh and is now being taken forward, but the point is that, if you look across the full range of UK Government and associated entities, lots of people are considering using open source, and we want to make sure that that is pulled together. It is not about creating one thing that does everything for the whole of Government; it is more about a federated model that makes the most of who is doing what and is more than the sum of its parts.

Q344 **Chair:** I think there is a good amount of interest in this. I would be interested in arranging for the Committee to visit the two units, not least because I want to compare how they operated in 2015, which was the first time we declassified intelligence and used it against hostile states, and now. If you are happy with that, it would be great if we could come and see this work and discuss key performance indicators offline.

Sir Philip Barton: I will be really happy to arrange for you to come and see our new director. We do not completely own the open source hub, but I am sure that people would welcome you to that.

Chair: I am sure we can convince whoever does to let us in.



Q345 **Neil Coyle:** Can you talk us through the benefits of merging the conflict, stability and security fund into the new integrated security fund?

Sir Philip Barton: A substantial amount of money, both official development assistance and non-ODA, has been going to the conflict, stability and security fund. The merger is partly about increasing the focus on international security. It will include within it the new economic deterrence initiative and the £50 million announced in the Integrated Review refresh. That part of it is about building up our ability to enforce sanctions evasion and other economic deterrence tools. Some of the things that the CSSF used to do will continue to happen, so it is not a complete change. Some of it will involve reorientation more into the international security space. One of the powerful things about the fund is the way we can use both security and non-security tools and funding—non-ODA and ODA—to achieve more, so it is an evolution of the CSSF rather than a complete change.

Q346 **Neil Coyle:** What are the losses? One concern raised is about transparency. How are you mitigating any loss of transparency in the new ISF?

Sir Philip Barton: That will have to be worked through. It is already the case that we do not make public some of the things we do under the CSSF—for good reasons. I think our aim will be to continue to be as transparent as possible, and not to be only when there is a very good reason. But as I said, already under the CSSF not everything we do is fully transparent, for good reasons.

Q347 **Neil Coyle:** With the aim of being as transparent as possible in mind, and bearing mind that the CSSF achieved this, will the ISF do an annual report to Parliament?

Sir Philip Barton: I assume so. It is owned by the Cabinet Office, but I do not see why we would change the annual reporting intention. I had better take that away, because I think the formal reporting is owned by the Cabinet Office.

Chair: I am sure that the Cabinet Office permanent secretary can write to us to confirm that. Henry?

Q348 **Henry Smith:** The Integrated Review refresh states that the Indo-Pacific tilt has been achieved. Will there now be a reallocation of resource, and, if so, what will the priorities be?

Sir Philip Barton: I don't think "achieved" means "job done". It means that we have basically leaned into our work in the Indo-Pacific on a long-term basis, and that will carry on. To the extent that that required a shift of emphasis and focus, we have done that, but it is not a matter of saying, "Oh, that's done now; we're going to step away from it." It is absolutely the opposite, actually; it is about doubling down on what we have managed to achieve over the past few years and carrying on.

Q349 **Henry Smith:** Can you say a little more about what the future UK foreign policy engagement will look like in the Indo-Pacific? What are the issues



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that the FCDO, and the Government more generally, will be pursuing?

Sir Philip Barton: I reckon I could answer that in three or four different ways. First, it has stepped up bilateral relationships. I will just pick two examples of what we have done. With India, we have a comprehensive strategic partnership and a road map out to 2030. I think it is a strategic shift in our relationship with India. We are now working through the component parts of that, negotiating a free trade agreement and various other things. With Indonesia, again, we have negotiated a road map as to what we will be doing bilaterally.

Going forward, we will be looking at where else we want to step up our bilateral partnerships. If you look at the security side, the two biggest things are the AUKUS arrangements promised to us in San Diego—we had an announcement recently about the next phase of that—and our agreement with Japan and Italy about the future combat air systems. There is a big security component. Those are two tangible ones. Then, there is the kind of economic, commercial and tech component. We have new tech agreements with Singapore and Japan. We will be doing more of that sort of thing.

Very finally—I just want to kind of namecheck this because it is very important—it is carrying on doing more in the Pacific itself. Some of the smallest islands there face big challenges, both from things such as climate change, and, in some cases, from Chinese involvement, or around sourcing or securing reliable infrastructure. So that is a partnership approach with New Zealand and Australia, in particular, into the Pacific.

Then, at the multilateral level, we managed, in 2021, to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN. We now have a formal agreement and are taking forward an action plan with ASEAN at the regional level. I could carry on, but I suspect that you will want me to stop now. There is a whole series of things that we are going to carry on.

Q350 **Henry Smith:** No, I would have been happy for you to continue. On more specific issues, you mentioned security, AUKUS obviously, the growing influence of China in the Pacific, and our work with allies such as the Australians and New Zealand. Looking more towards the Indian ocean, there are negotiations going on between this country and Mauritius over the future of the Chagos archipelago. Is it the view of the FCDO, and indeed HMG more widely, that the military base on Diego Garcia is an absolutely fundamental part of our strategic defence and foreign policy objectives?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, and I have been lucky enough to visit and see for myself. I have seen, at first hand, quite how important it is. So, yes, absolutely.

Q351 **Henry Smith:** And that would mean that it is HM Government policy that we would seek to maintain UK sovereignty on Diego Garcia and also exclude third powers, such as China, from getting a foothold in that part of the world.



Sir Philip Barton: On China, absolutely. Quite clearly, we absolutely don't want any involvement of China in the British Indian Ocean Territory. On the overall position, I think the Foreign Secretary made a written ministerial statement on 17 March setting out where we are. We have had three rounds now of constructive talks with the Mauritians on the exercise of sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos archipelago, built on the understanding between the two sides covering the issues relating to the continued effective operation—I use the word “effective” deliberately—of the joint military base there between us and the United States and other issues. The two Prime Ministers took stock when they spoke on 14 February and both sides agreed to carry on the discussions and negotiations. So that is where we are.

Q352 **Chair:** Before we move on from the tilt, this Committee in our review of the last Integrated Review before the refresh criticised the fact that we saw the tilt towards the Indo-Pacific as a tilt away from the Middle East. I cannot say, looking through refresh, I feel like that has been recognised or that concern has been taken into account, whether it is looking at the fact that Syria has become a narco-state—there is no question that Captagon will make its way to UK shores in due course—or the crisis in Lebanon and the humanitarian crisis that sits there. However, the one that concerns me most is the lack of reference to the Middle East peace process.

Never before has it felt that we are so far away from a two-state solution. We have historic commitments to Israel and Palestine. Do you think we have the right posture towards Israel? I, for my part, feel that we have failed to be a critical friend. We have a very close and important security friendship but we have yet to adopt that critical one, not least, given the incredibly concerning announcements made by Netanyahu last night and, in general, his agenda. How can the Foreign Office justify continuing to do what I believe to be a tilt away from the Middle East, given our enduring responsibilities and the heightened hostilities, particularly at the moment, around the Middle East peace process?

Sir Philip Barton: We have definitely tilted towards the Indo-Pacific, but I am not sure I recognise the phrase about tilting away from the Middle East. The Foreign Secretary, for example, in Bahrain last year, at the Manama dialogue in November, set out very clearly our overall approach of being a steadfast friend and partner, committed to all our relationships in the Middle East and North Africa for the long term. We are committed to their security and we have a military presence, as you know. We work very intensely with our close partners in the E3—France and Germany—and the United States. Also, on what is one of the bigger threats in the region—the activities of Iran—we remain very engaged, for example on issues around Yemen. We have good, strong partnerships across the full range of prosperity and security with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states. We remain engaged on the Middle East peace process; you know our long-standing position. We do have a deep partnership with Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu was here the end of last week. He saw the Prime Minister and you will have seen what was said in the wake of that around our views on the importance of democracy in Israel.



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Q353 **Chair:** I do welcome the fact that Rishi Sunak, as should be the case with a good friend, was clearly critical of the judicial reforms and clearly critical of some of the other efforts of the current Israeli Government. However, it is very easy, when in the room when in Bahrain, to give a speech about how much you care about the Middle East. What I really struggle with is that the IR refresh does not suggest that we are that invested, beyond Daesh and a few other things like that. If I am honest, it feels increasingly to me that the reason we are silent around the Middle East is because there is no Instagram diplomacy to be won. There are no easy wins. We are not like Ukraine, where we are the No. 1 partner. I spent the day today with Ukrainian MPs. You ask them what they need and they say: "Britain is the best partner in the world. We do not need to ask any more of you." Then you push further until you determine what they do need.

The silence on the Middle East to me is really concerning because we know that what happens in the Middle East has a direct impact not only on the feeling of communities in our country, and therefore the stability and cohesion of our society, but on our security. So on the Middle East peace process, how can I feel reassured that we are not forgetting it? The strategy document that we are going to be assessing yourselves against and which we will be holding you to account on in a year's time does not in any way talk about the Middle East peace process being important.

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, the overall policy remains unchanged. We have a presence in Jerusalem; we have a very close relationship with the Palestinian Authority. We use the influence we have, including in our discussions with the Israelis around the day-to-day issues that we have seen across the board. On the wider picture, we have done and are doing a lot in the wider Gulf region. The Foreign Secretary hosted his Kuwaiti opposite number only last week. We have had a strategic dialogue with the Qataris. We are doing a lot in the Middle East. We aim to host the Gulf Cooperation Council later in the year. We are thickening our wider economic partnerships. You may have seen the announcements with the UAE from the year before last. We are doing a lot in the Gulf region.

Q354 **Chair:** I think you have to take away from this session a plea, because what I am hearing from Arab Foreign Secretaries, whom I have met at the Munich peace conference and around the world, is that the UK is not engaged in the Middle East. Liz Truss did not meet the Arab ambassadors' group once when she was Foreign Secretary. We have not seen the current Foreign Secretary visit the Middle East, and let me be clear, if they visit Israel, they must also visit an Arab nation at the same time. Will you please take away a plea from me that it feels like we need to see more engagement. It is not just about suddenly turning up and signing a treaty; we need meaningful hard work and diplomatic effort behind the scenes from Ministers, not just civil servants.

Sir Philip Barton: I will absolutely take that back to the Foreign Secretary. Lord Ahmed was in Israel and the occupied territories in January, and I know the Foreign Secretary is very keen to go. He had to postpone a visit that was on his schedule when we managed to reach



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agreement on the Windsor framework and he needed to be here. It is at the forefront of his mind to go to both. Chair, when I see him next, I will reflect back to him your strong views.

Chair: I think they are broadly shared across the Committee.

Q355 **Drew Hendry:** Following the IR refresh, why do you need to renew and reskill core diplomatic capabilities? What has gone wrong with learning and development in your office?

Sir Philip Barton: What the refresh is trying to say at the back end, and I referred to this in answer to the question about my priorities, is what are the capabilities that we need in the future? It is not so much that something has gone wrong, it is that no organisation can stay still and we need to change. I will ask Juliet to say a little bit about our learning and development approach overall, but to give you one example, during the cold war the UK system had deep expertise around deterrence and other arms control issues. We still have that; it is just thinner than it was. Given the world that we have moved into, and it has become starker following the invasion of Ukraine, we know that we need to invest more than we have been in that going forward. That is when you see reference to increased focus on nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence, that's what that's referring to.

Q356 **Drew Hendry:** Sorry, before Juliet comes in, are you saying there has been an underinvestment? I think that is what I have picked up from you.

Sir Philip Barton: No, I am saying that looking forward we need more than we have had. At the end of the cold war, and the period after that, there was less need for that. We had a settled Euro-Atlantic security architecture, and a set of agreements at the end of the cold war and the first period of this century. We had less need for that expertise. We still have some, but it is less than we are going to need going forward. We need to invest in it in the future. Do you want to say a bit about the overall approach to learning and development?

Juliet Chua: Learning and development is obviously critical to the ability of our staff to be able to perform in whatever roles they are in. We have the International Academy, which is essentially the vehicle for learning and development across the full range of different skills and expertise that we need. That is made up of a series of faculties of each of the different capabilities and areas—thematically and geographically—that we need staff to be learning in. That involves defining both foundational skills as well as expert practitioner level, so that staff can move through a series of different training offers—masterclasses, quite practical and specific skills, and on-the job learning.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this year we are really keen to push hard in terms of that learning and development offer. At the level of the individual, it requires line managers to work with individuals so that they have got their learning plan in place. At the level of teams, and around the network, we have got a set of learning advisers who work with different posts and teams to set objectives for that as well.



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This is an area where we have got architecture. We do not take that for granted; we need to keep pushing at it. We also know, as Philip described, that there are areas where we need to enhance those capabilities. As the integrated review refresh set out, there is some additional resource for that, particularly, as mentioned, on the China capability front. That is an area where we need to keep making sure the staff get the time to do it—we have an expectation of a set of time commitments around it—and we will plan all the way through.

Q357 Drew Hendry: Let us come to that. The term “European partner of choice” is the UK Government’s aim for the Indo-Pacific region. Obviously, proficiency in the main languages used will be vital. What are you doing to achieve that?

Juliet Chua: Language proficiency—the ability to communicate across the network—is obviously central to what the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is about. We have 500 language slots—speaker slots—where staff are required to have language at a certain level to fulfil those roles, with a set of targets against that, in terms of the level they are required to achieve.

In addition to that, we recognise that we have staff who are highly motivated and come to us with languages already, so we are making sure they reuse their languages and keep them fresh. We have a wider offer, in terms of making sure people have an opportunity to do part-time learning and refresh those languages. We are currently training staff in 38 languages around the world, and we are making sure there is a pipeline in key areas, so we have staff ready at the right level of language proficiency to go into the different regions, depending on their previous experience and the roles they are moving into.

Q358 Drew Hendry: On that, how will the doubling of funding in China capabilities be spent? How many more staff will undergo Mandarin and Cantonese courses each year?

Sir Philip Barton: There are two things. One is the FCDO’s investment in the language capabilities of people we are posting overseas. We will carry on doing that as we post people into our China network. That is funded out of our baseline, and that money will go to wider capability-building in language across HMG.

Q359 Drew Hendry: To be clear, my question was about how many more staff will do that. I understand you are doing these things, but what will the return, in terms of the number of people, be?

Sir Philip Barton: My understanding is that it is 170 civil servants at the moment. There will be 100 new places, but that is outside the FCDO. Our approach is that we will train people who will be using the language in their role, and that is funded already.¹

¹ The witness wanted to provide the following additional information after the session: “It is 170 civil servants at the moment. This includes 100 new places in FY22/23, from outside the FCDO. We will continue to expand this year.”



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Drew Hendry: Have you made an estimate of how many more people it will be? I am still not hearing the answer to that question.

Q360 **Chair:** So 170 currently speak Mandarin. Do they speak Cantonese too, or just Mandarin?

Sir Philip Barton: No, that is those who are taking part-time Mandarin courses. That is about the capability.

Q361 **Chair:** 170 across Government?

Sir Philip Barton: That's right. Sorry to be boring about this, but there are two things. There is our investment as a Department in people who are doing that, whether it is Mandarin or anything else. That is funded, and we will carry on funding it against the number of people we want in particular parts of the world.

Drew Hendry: I want to ask you about carrying on, but I am still not hearing about the increase in numbers or the increase in capacity.

Q362 **Chair:** Is that because you don't want to say how big the post is in China?

Juliet Chua: We don't publicly disclose the number of people preparing to go overseas to specific postings in China with full-time current language training.

Q363 **Chair:** On the basis that China likes to reject as many visas as it can, if they know we have only 10 people in training, they can reject 10 and we have no one who can go out with language training?

Juliet Chua: *indicated assent.*

Sir Philip Barton: *indicated assent.*

Juliet Chua: But we are continuing to make sure we have a strong pipeline of those with appropriate language skills to fill those posts, alongside this wider investment in capability that is going on across Government, which is for part-time Mandarin training for civil servants. There is essentially an increase of 100 new places coming through outside

The FCDO will spend around £7m this financial year on the range of language training provided for its staff, of which just under half will support learning Mandarin for FCDO and other HMG staff. As part of our increased investment in China Capability, we have made part-time Mandarin lessons open to staff in all government departments – at beginner, intermediate and advanced level. 170 people undertook part time lessons in FY2022/23.

The FCDO only holds data for its staff who have completed FCDO-certified training at C1 / C2 levels. The number in any given year fluctuates as passes expire and exams are taken. Currently we have 53 Mandarin speakers with a valid C1 pass and 25 with a valid C2 pass. This data does not include speakers at other levels or those not certified through FCDO exams, Country-Based Staff (many of whom are multilingual), those who brought language skills from outside the FCDO, or those who have undertaken informal training across the FCDO."



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FCDO to complement what we are doing with our full-time pipeline.

Q364 **Drew Hendry:** Okay. I understand your difficulties in giving that information. That is accepted. You talked about funding. Is the funding in-year, or is it year on year? What is the proposal?

Sir Philip Barton: The £3.2 million will be for the remainder of the spending review period, so that is this coming financial year.

Q365 **Drew Hendry:** And plans for the future?

Sir Philip Barton: They are beyond the spending review period, so there will not be a commitment beyond that yet.

Q366 **Drew Hendry:** But you have a plan to spend in the future? There is a commitment there?

Sir Philip Barton: We, the FCDO, will carry on funding the language training we need in Mandarin and Cantonese, and indeed other languages, to make sure we have the staff with the language skills we need around the world. We will fund that; that will carry on being a priority. I can't put a figure on it, but that will be a priority, and it will be funded forever more. It is a key part of our departmental capability.

Q367 **Drew Hendry:** Is your ambition to have a similar level of funding year on year?

Sir Philip Barton: My instinct tells me that, over time, I would expect the costs to be increasing and we will be doubling down on our language capability and be putting more money into it.

Q368 **Drew Hendry:** Again, just so that I am clear on where this is going, is that a doubling year on year or a doubling over a period of a decade?

Sir Philip Barton: I apologise; I did not mean to say "doubling"—I do not think I did. We will not be doubling. We can set out in more detail how much we spend as a Department on language training across the board, if that would be helpful. It will be a priority. Our geographic expertise is a fundamental part of our USP, and a key part of our geographic expertise is knowledge of languages and using them overseas.

Q369 **Chair:** Before I bring in Royston, can I just quickly ask: across how many Departments are those 170 Mandarin speakers working?

Sir Philip Barton: I am afraid I don't know, Chair.

Q370 **Chair:** I would very much like to see which Departments have Mandarin speakers, given that I am always amazed at how many civil servants seem to have China in their brief but do not speak to other people with China in their brief across Government. I know that you have an amazing language centre full of language teachers. Can I confirm that none of your language teachers is from Confucius Institutes?

Sir Philip Barton: That is correct.

Chair: Fabulous.



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Q371 **Royston Smith:** I know that numbers are not terribly helpful, but what about Cantonese training? Could you give us a reasonable percentage relating to Mandarin and Cantonese? There are a lot of Cantonese speakers as well as Mandarin speakers in the diaspora all over the world, actually.

Sir Philip Barton: I would have thought we can, but we will have to come back to you. It is a reasonable question; I just do not have the figure. We do teach Cantonese; I am not sure of the proportions.

Q372 **Royston Smith:** Sir Philip, you talked about priorities and about staff and how important staff are. Can I talk about the security of staff? For example, have you got a current assessment of the security of staff in the embassy in Tehran? Do they have an evacuation plan in place in the event that their security is compromised?

Sir Philip Barton: I am going to be a little cautious about what I say about particular countries, but let me describe the overall approach, because I do not want to be unhelpful.

First, the responsibility I take most seriously as Permanent Under-Secretary is the safety of our people around the world. It is not the biggest call on my time, but it is the single thing that I absolutely interrogate. It is not that I have to do everything on it myself, although I do take the decisions on the thorniest ones, but I absolutely want to be confident that we have the right systems in place.

We have a system where the geographical director in the FCDO is the overall risk owner. In a particular post, we will often have someone at the UK end who is giving overseas security advice, but we will also have people on the ground ensuring that they have the day-to-day management of the security of our people in hand and the ambassador on the ground is properly advised.

In the most acute situations, that is regularly reviewed. That can sometimes, in a very acute situation, be on a daily basis, so we can ensure that our posture is right. Clearly, we had to withdraw from Kyiv last year temporarily via Lviv, and then managed to go back. In all places—not just Ukraine—where we need to, there absolutely are up-to-date and tested evacuation plans.

Q373 **Royston Smith:** Are you completely confident in the FCDO's assessment of the safety of all staff in embassies? If you do not want to mention a specific place, I sort of understand that, but in Kyiv perhaps we could see that coming and an evacuation plan would be a bit more straightforward than something that sparked from riots on the street and then got out of hand.

Sir Philip Barton: Given the way you phrased your question, I will answer it like this: we look in a systematic and organised way at where and how we want to take risk. We want to be able to operate in difficult places. That is part of what I think we should do and are doing. It is really important that we have the ability to do that.



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We have, to use a technical phrase, a cautious risk appetite around the safety and security of our people, and that is right. But we do ask our people to serve in difficult and dangerous places. What we do then is look at how we can mitigate those risks and ensure that we are as confident as we can be about their security. We make risk-based judgments around what we think is sensible where we do think it is safe enough to have our people.

That is what I would say, Royston. It is the single most important duty that I feel. I pay tribute to all my colleagues around the world in difficult, dangerous places for what they do day in, day out. It is important, and the work they deliver is vital. That is the other side of it, that what we are achieving through their presence is worth it.

Q374 Chair: I think the whole Committee would like to put on the record a tribute, particularly to Melinda and her team in Ukraine, to Deborah and her team in Russia—I cannot imagine the sorts of pressures they are coming under—and to Simon and his team in Iran. I suspect that I am not the only person you have heard this analysis from, but I question whether our relationship with Iran has gone back to where it was in 2011, so I am very concerned, given that we have protests daily outside our embassy in Tehran, bright lights shone into the embassy so that they cannot work, loud music, and intimidation tactics on a daily basis. I put on the record my particular concern that it is not necessarily safe any more for our staff to remain in place in Tehran.

In contrast, when I was in Kyiv for the anniversary of the renewed illegal invasion, I was surprised, because embassies from other parts of the world were travelling quite freely around Ukraine to do their business. When I asked the ambassador and her team whether they wanted to join me on a visit to outside the centre of Kyiv, they informed me that they were not allowed to, so it does seem a bit of a mismatch: we have determined that it is safe enough to have an embassy in Kyiv, where there are airstrikes, so why is it not safe for them to travel to other parts of Ukraine, where there are also airstrikes, not least because their international counterparts are travelling around?

Sir Philip Barton: Let me tackle both parts of that. First, on Iran, in addition to what I said to Royston about our overall approach, I have had several pieces of advice on a regular basis this year. There were some particularly nasty incidents around the turn of the year, around our overall posture in Tehran. We keep it under review. You are right to flag the risks. We are very mindful of them, and we will carry on reviewing that on a regular basis. Your observations are well taken, and we will carry on looking at it very closely.

On Kyiv, I went out there I think shortly after you—I cannot remember, but it was about a month ago. I spent a couple of days there, because I wanted to see at first hand the situation, which brings to life what I then receive on paper or in terms of advice. As you would expect, we discussed the full range of issues and challenges, and I got a feel for them myself. There were no airstrikes while I was there, although I note that there was



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another series of drone attacks this morning, fortunately mostly shot down, but the circumstances are difficult there.

On your question about the ability to travel around the country, in acute places like Ukraine—going back to my generic answer to Royston—we have a system of travel risk assessments, which is a systematic look at what the risks and mitigations are. That then gets signed off formally—coming to me personally, if necessary—as to whether something is safe enough. You are right that other nationalities travel around Ukraine more than we do, but I think that our system is robust and sensible. We are looking at whether we have got it in the right place going forward, and at whether we could change it a bit. I do not want to say too much about that, but I think if you look at our ambassador’s Twitter account, you will see that she has, I understand, done a bit of travel outside of Kyiv in recent weeks.

Clearly, going back to what I said about having people in these tough places who are able to do things, I think that to the extent that we sensibly can, being able to travel outside Kyiv is important. We will carry on testing ourselves on whether we have the line drawn in the right place, but we need to be confident, if we agree to movements around the country, that they are safe enough. However, your point is well made and well taken.

Q375 Chair: It sounds like the posture has changed slightly, but I look back to time in Iraq, where we were allowed to do moves. If you wanted to move in the green zone, you had to have 24-hour notice preapproval, and if a convoy wanted to go outside the green zone, you had to have 40-hour notice preapproval. It feels like we could at least move to that sort of model. If there is complete freedom of movement within Kyiv where there are airstrikes, it seems sensible that we could do that, but I will leave that with you to have a think about.

Sir Philip Barton: One of the things I looked at and discussed with the team when I was there is whether we could move to a slightly more flexible model, and we are working that through.

Chair: Thank you.

Q376 Sir Chris Bryant: I am going to ask some questions about Xinjiang and sanctions, but may I first ask a different question, which I have asked previously, about bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct across the whole Foreign Office staff? I know you do a survey of staff all the time, and I just wonder how that is going. Are you seeing an improvement? It is one of your risks as well.

Sir Philip Barton: I will ask Juliet to do the numbers. I have said this before, but I want to repeat it: first, we, I, take very seriously any allegations of bullying, harassment or discrimination. I have put kindness and respect at the heart of my leadership and have said that from day one. That is the way I try to lead myself and that is the way I expect others to do so, too. It is really important to me personally that we have the best possible environment, because that is where people flourish and



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give their best, but we always have more to do. Juliet can tell you what the data set tells us.

Juliet Chua: Our main source of data is our annual staff survey, which comes forward in October. In our October results, we saw bullying, harassment and discrimination at 12%. That is too high. As an organisation, we really want, as Philip described, an environment where all staff can flourish, and we absolutely have no tolerance for any form of bullying, harassment and discrimination. What we have done in that context is introduce a new policy that explicitly leads on prevention, looks at the role of leadership to create a different type of culture in the post team's environment and sets a new environment for the way in which we are transparent about the cases that come through. We have been very clear about the number of formal complaints coming through and the formal sanctions as a result. Of the 120 formal complaints last year, 30% of them led to formal sanctions up to and including dismissal, so we are talking explicitly about some of the impacts and the positions we take.

Q377 **Sir Chris Bryant:** How many dismissals was that?

Juliet Chua: I am not in a position to give the number for dismissals, but 30% of those led to a formal sanction up to and including dismissal?

Q378 **Sir Chris Bryant:** What is that number? 30% equals—

Juliet Chua: It is 30% of 121 complaints. Alongside that, clearly, we also have a network of 300 fairness champions in teams right across our global network. They will work with colleagues in terms of the sorts of conversations about bullying, harassment and discrimination and talking about the types of behaviours you want in an inclusive workplace, but also creating an environment where everyone has a responsibility to speak out, tackle and not tolerate bullying, harassment and discrimination. We are also looking at other forms of data, such as staff survey data, and across different teams, patterns and ways to explore the issues across the organisation.

Q379 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I have read articles in newspapers—some of which I dismiss, especially because they often do not name names or anything—about MPs going on visits and being abusive to Foreign Office officials and to staff. What would you do in such a situation?

Sir Philip Barton: These things are always context specific, so I would look at the nature of the allegation. We normally make sure that either we personally or someone else talks to the victim or whoever is complaining about behaviour in the first instance, establish their account and whether they want it taken forward. We would consider it in the light of that. To be honest, what happens after that would depend on the severity of the allegation.

Q380 **Sir Chris Bryant:** My worry is that what would actually happen is that everybody would go, "Oh, this is all very embarrassing. Let's try to sweep it under the carpet," because it is about MPs and Parliament is wanting to be as robust as the Foreign Office. That 12% figure is more than double



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that for the rest of the civil service. I just worry about this leadership element.

Sir Philip Barton: I absolutely would not sweep it under the carpet. If things are brought to my attention, I want to see them resolved. It would depend on the circumstances, but if there was a serious allegation involving the behaviour of an MP, I would look at what the routes were to bring that up.

Q381 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So your message to staff would be that if there are issues out there, you want to know about them. You do not want them—

Sir Philip Barton: Absolutely. One of the things we need to do is build the confidence of colleagues that they should speak up and it is worth it, because something will be done. You are right about that.

Juliet Chua: Part of that is creating a range of different channels for staff to feel confident to be able to come forward—so, line managers. We have what is called a staff counsellor—somebody who essentially sits outside the line management chain who you can go to—as well as a very strong expectation of leadership in terms of having a zero-tolerance approach and being confident to be able to speak up. I agree with Philip that we need to create the culture and context, but I think we have sent some very clear messages as an organisation that we do not tolerate bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Q382 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Thank you. Following on from our Xinjiang report, the Government agreed to run training courses on forced labour risks for trade officials. How many training courses have been run with trade officials since November 2021?

Sir Philip Barton: Thank you for the forewarning of this question.

Q383 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I thought it would be helpful; otherwise, you might have been writing to us.

Sir Philip Barton: We have a trade policy negotiations faculty in the international academy that Juliet was talking about earlier and two e-learning units—one, launched in June 2021, was accessed multiple times by 332 officials, and another, “Business and Human Rights: Tackling Modern Slavery”, launched in June last year, was accessed by 93 officials.

We are also working with the Department for Business and Trade to develop further training on forced labour for our trade commissioners, envoys and other officials overseas to make sure they are fully informed of the risks associated with that, as I think the Committee recommended in its report.

Q384 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Thank you. Moving on to sanctions, congratulations on winning your first challenge in the courts in the Belarussian case: that is really good news. Will that embolden you to feel that you can go a bit further?

Sir Philip Barton: When we look at individual possible designations, we look at the legal risks—I am sure that the result in the court will inform



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our risk-based judgments around that. I do not think we have particularly held back in terms of where we sanctioned. As you know, we have done a very significant set of sanctions since the invasion, but yes, of course, our judgments around legal risk going forward will be informed by the outcome of that case.

Q385 Sir Chris Bryant: You have got quite a network—you could call it a hodgepodge—of different sanctions regimes. If you look up online or try to look up online whether somebody has been sanctioned or not, it is really difficult to find. Apart from anything else, it is all in capital letters, which sounds like somebody is shouting at you. It is a really difficult website to negotiate. My guess is that most estate agents who might be approached about buying or selling a property in Mayfair would never bother to look. How much resource is put into ensuring our sanctions policy is pursued vigorously and rigorously?

Sir Philip Barton: That is a good question. Let me take it away. We need to make the information available in a usable form for people who need to access it to live up to their legal obligations in this space. As I said earlier, one of the purposes of the £50 million economic deterrence funding that was announced in the Integrated Review refresh is absolutely to build our capability around enforcement of sanctions across—

Q386 Sir Chris Bryant: I think you said £50 billion, but it is £50 million. It is not a large amount really, is it?

Sir Philip Barton: It is £50 million. To build up our capability in that area, it is done on a sectoral basis, with individual departments in charge of enforcement in their areas.

Q387 Sir Chris Bryant: I want to go on to the number of staff, because I think at various times I have been told it has been doubled or trebled or there has been a surge number. It would be quite useful to have a number. What is the actual number of permanent, full-time equivalent staff in the sanctions team?

Sir Philip Barton: Juliet can give you that.

Juliet Chua: As of January this year, over 120 staff are in the sanctions directorate. If you go back to December 2021, there were 48 staff, so this is an area that has grown significantly. In addition to that, that figure obviously doesn't capture those working across the FCDO and across the network who will be supporting the work of the sanctions directorate. But the core group of staff, who are essentially full-time within the sanctions directorate group—that is 120.

Q388 Sir Chris Bryant: I can't tell you how pleased I am to get an actual number. It feels like it has taken a very long time to get there.

But we still only sanction, under the Magnitsky Act and other sanctions regimes, 20% of the people who are sanctioned by the United States of America. This is an old case, in a sense: Oleg Deripaska was sanctioned by the United States a long time before we got round to him, let alone Abramovich and various others.



Are we going to need to increase that number yet again?

Sir Philip Barton: On Magnitsky, you are right. On Russia, I think actually, now—obviously, we have put in the accelerated procedure, as you know. That is not the full explanation on Magnitsky, but we only do the holding companies, and they do subsidiaries, so in some areas, they are not like-for-like comparisons. But I accept that, overall on Magnitsky, we are not at the same level.

In terms of your question on numbers, we will keep that under review. We are at 120. It is a more than doubling, or a near tripling, depending on how you present it, from where we were at the beginning of the year². It is a capability we have stood up very significantly over the last 12 months. Sanctions is an important tool, but not the only tool of our international work. If we conclude that we need to give it even higher importance and put more resource in, we will look to do that—recognising, though, that that will involve choices of doing less on other things.

Q389 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Because I hate wasting money, I always think that any policy that we adopt that costs money should have deliverable outcomes that are provable. There are two kinds of outcomes you could have here. One is the outcome that it is affecting the individuals, or the businesses, which requires tough enforcement. The other is whether it is having the desired diplomatic, political effect. How do we measure those? How do we know whether we are prioritising the right areas?

Sir Philip Barton: It is a really hard thing to measure in an exact way. In Russia's case, if you look at the fall in the Russian economy, with the decline of nearly 3% last year, and the biggest and longest recession³ they have had for 25 years, you can see very clearly the economic impact of not just our sanctions but global sanctions on Russia in the wake of the invasion. You can then see some impact, but self-evidently, not yet behaviour change, in terms of the impact that has had on the Russian regime. You can look at what people are saying about that.

In other circumstances, where someone is a sanctioned leader and is no longer able to travel, you can clearly see an impact on them as an individual being unable to do something they were doing in the past. Then you can look, as you go along, at the extent to which that does or does not change their behaviours and attitudes behind the issue we are trying to address by the sanctions in the first place.

It is not an exact science, and it is hard to measure. Where we have seen changes over time, there is often a range of factors that have led people to change their overall approach, not just sanctions.

Q390 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Let me just make a suggestion to you—you don't have to respond. There might be a value in having an annual review day,

² Note by witness: When saying "beginning of the year" I misspoke. What I meant to say was: "beginning of last year".

³ Witness wished to provide the following clarification: "Russia's recession is not the biggest, but it will be the longest if it declines again this year."



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possibly with other stakeholders who are involved, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary, where you go, "Right, this is our main thrust at the moment. These are our three priorities. These are the areas where we think we are having success. These are the areas we still need to do work on." I think you would have bind-in from quite a lot of people.

Sir Philip Barton: Let me take that away. As I say, we are building a new capability and we are using it a lot more, and it is worth testing from time to time, and sharing and discussing with others where we are and where we are heading, and what people think of that. Let me take that away.

Chair: That would be an important opportunity. Increasingly, there is a feeling that sanctions have become quite a blunt, punitive tool, when they should be about deterring and changing behaviour.

It does feel like perhaps we need some sort of multilateral economic Ramstein equivalent for economic activity alongside the military effort. Whether it be in the discussion on, "Is it time for secondary sanctions?" or a discussion on how we truly suffocate the components that are feeding the Russian military machine and the technologies that are still getting in, we need to move beyond the facile focus on oligarchs and individuals, which we were right to start with, to now what will truly stop the Russian war machine.

It does feel that we need to have, first, a start on the domestic conversation about that, and then, secondly, a multilateral Ramstein-style economics, which might be the only way we get there. I would just place on record the strong appetite from Parliament to see the 12 individuals—two of whom we have done already, so the 10 remaining individuals—most heavily involved with the abduction of children in Ukraine sanctioned. The UK Government have the evidence, and I think there is a keenness to see that come forward. Graham, you wanted to touch on this.

Q391 **Graham Stringer:** I have a more general question, following on what Chris was saying. I think it is fair to say that since Tiananmen Square, there has been a steady improvement in the relationship with China, until perhaps the last four or five years, as China has got more regressive—the evidence that they are committing genocide in the west and evidence of intellectual property theft. One can go on and on about bad things that China has done. Yet when I speak to officials, they seem to think that, apart from the specific instances, having a generally more negative attitude to China is, to quote one, "for the birds." How do you see our general relationship with China progressing, given the individual instances of threats, genocide and so on?

Sir Philip Barton: The Integrated Review refresh very usefully sets out in some detail the Government's overall approach now to our relationship with China. I am sure you will have seen the headline description of China under the Chinese Communist party as an "epoch-defining and systemic challenge" with very broad implications for us.

We are taking that forward with others across Government in three areas. We are doing more to protect ourselves in our national security where that



is threatened. We are doing more to make sure that we are aligned with our close partners and others—recognising that the UK alone will have rather less impact on a country such as China but that with others we will have more. But then, when it is in our interests and where we think we can make progress, we will engage with the Chinese—for example, on an issue such as climate change, where, if we do not see Chinese action, we will not be able to meet global ambitions in that space. That is the overall approach, and that was what was set out in the Integrated Review refresh.

Q392 Graham Stringer: I suppose I was looking for a simpler answer than that in terms of the direction—whether we will more generally be disengaging or engaging. As I say, I get the impression from officials that they want to engage more. When you look at the individual instances of China breaking rules, that seems a bit strange to me.

Sir Philip Barton: I would disconnect the amount of engagement from the state of the relationship. At one end of the spectrum, not talking at all is obviously a very poor relationship, and talking a lot all the time is a sign of a good relationship. In the end, the overall approach of the Government is to engage and be clear when it is in our interest to do so. So the Foreign Secretary had his first one with his opposite number in the margins of the UN General Assembly last September, when he was first appointed. He has been engaging with the Chinese, but in those interactions he is really clear about the things about Chinese behaviour that we do not like and think are wrong, whether those are human rights in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or other issues on which we have fundamentally opposed views.

Q393 Liam Byrne: I want to finish on sanctions enforcement before I switch to international development. Do you have a dual key over the Treasury's issue of general licences to issue sanction waivers? We have about £18 billion in Russian assets now frozen. It is obvious that there are now so many cases that the Treasury has shifted from the position of issuing sanction licences one by one to issuing general licences for whole categories of spending. Do you see those general licences before they are authorised?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not sure that I recognise the phrase "dual key," to be honest.

Q394 Liam Byrne: For example, for legal expenditure, whole categories of legal expenditure are now covered by a general licence issued by OFSI last year. Before those general licences are authorised, do you in the FCDO get to sign them off?

Sir Philip Barton: I think in the end OFSI will consult as they deem necessary within their acting as OFSI. I cannot give you a hard and fast "we see every one"; I doubt we see every one, but I'd have to give you a categoric answer. I don't have in front of me a figure around how many we do or do not see.

Q395 Liam Byrne: Okay, so there isn't a Whitehall write-round on licences before they are authorised?



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Juliet Chua: In this part of regular OFSI and FCDO working practices, OFSI officials will sight FCDO counterparts on their general licensing pipeline, but FCDO Ministers do not have any involvement in the specific sign-off or the decision to issue those licences.

Q396 **Liam Byrne:** So when a licence was issued for Mr Prigozhin to fly his Discreet Law lawyers to St Petersburg to prepare a case to sue Eliot Higgins in an English court, FCDO would not have been consulted on the issue of that licence.

Sir Philip Barton: For good reason, we do not comment on individual cases. I totally understand why you are asking that question—it is important—but we do not comment publicly on individual cases, I am afraid. I will just have to stick to that line.

Q397 **Liam Byrne:** When we had Leo Docherty in front of us and we put this set of questions to him, he seemed rather unaware of the detail of OFSI rules. He seemed to pretend, or seemed to believe, that there was some fundamental unfettered right to have legal expenses allowed under a sanctions waiver. Of course, that was never the Government's position. The question that Leo concluded with, I suppose, was that it could well be that OFSI is undermining—in his words—the utility of our foreign policy. Is that an analysis that you share?

Sir Philip Barton: OFSI, in the end, will look at each case and at whether or not, in the way in which they are applying the policies—including people's right to legal representation, although I wouldn't use the word unfettered—they should be issuing a licence or a waiver.

Q398 **Liam Byrne:** You have 120 staff who are basically writing sanctions and writing the regs to implement those sanctions, but you do now have a risk that OFSI granting general licences is undermining their work. Is that a concern?

Sir Philip Barton: I think in any sanctions regime, you need the ability to have waivers or other measures. There are always going to be reasons why you do not want to have an absolute sanction; having a mechanism is, I think, perfectly legitimate. Your question is a good one. It then comes down to whether the line is drawn in the right place.

Q399 **Liam Byrne:** Let me put the question in a different way: would you welcome stronger FCDO input into sanctions waivers before they are authorised by OFSI?

Sir Philip Barton: I would have to look at whether having more involvement would actually throw up things where we would be saying to OFSI, "You've got the line in the wrong place", so I am not confident in saying yes to that question. I am not saying the answer is no, but I am not confident in saying yes. More involvement would obviously mean that we would put resource on that that would not perhaps be doing other work around sanctions that we might want, so I would want to be confident that by putting more FCDO involvement in we were actually achieving a desirable effect. As I say, I am not disagreeing with your question—I



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would want to actually ask the team whether they thought that was a useful thing to do.

Q400 **Liam Byrne:** Would you share your reflections back with us, then, once you have consulted?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Q401 **Liam Byrne:** Thanks. It was great to see the integrated review declare that we are going to reinvigorate UK leadership on development assistance, which rather implies that you feel we have lost some of that leadership. You are now recruiting a permanent under-secretary for development, which I think is a welcome step. Is that an admission, however, that it is impossible for you to do your job as the permanent secretary for the Foreign Office and cover off development policy as well?

Sir Philip Barton: No. I think the words used in the IRR are “reinvigorate progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. We then picked up the international development strategy and the four headlines from that, and particularly focused on the seven key things where we think we can make a difference over the year.

Q402 **Liam Byrne:** I think it says, “The UK will work to reinvigorate its position as a global leader on international development.”

Sir Philip Barton: I am reading a different sentence with “reinvigorate”—I take it back. On your good question about the second permanent under-secretary, where we are is a recognition at official and ministerial level that having somebody who is overtly leading the development path of our work—in the case of the Minister, under the Foreign Secretary; in the case of the second permanent under-secretary, under me as permanent secretary—is a good thing to have. We made a step towards that about a year ago when we created a director general for humanitarian and development, and then in September, when Liz Truss became Prime Minister, she created the role of Minister. I think this will make us stronger going forwards. It will look across the whole Department at our development work. It will provide a senior official with a development background as an interlocutor at official level for counterparts around the world. It will also allow us to do more around our programme abilities in this space.

Q403 **Liam Byrne:** If you have a permanent under-secretary for development, are you not basically reintroducing a split in the Department at the very top, having spent all this time and effort integrating the Department?

Sir Philip Barton: No, because the change is only really at the top, as it were. The merger of teams and areas is not changed by this. It gives us more firepower at senior level on the development side, and that is a good thing.

Q404 **Liam Byrne:** I think the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has currently red-rated the integration of IT, finance and HR, which of course means that the successful delivery of the project appears to be unachievable. Do you want to tell us why it is in fact all going according



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to plan?

Sir Philip Barton: I think that is an old rating, is it not, Juliet?

Juliet Chua: The IPA came in and saw us in July—so after that point—and looked at us again. It granted us to move from red to green on what we call the integration portfolio, which is the seven programmes that are about bringing together the Department in the context of the merger. They consist of IT, HR and finance systems, people and process implementation.

Q405 **Liam Byrne:** So you are satisfied that the resources are in place now to effect the integration of HR, finance and payroll systems?

Juliet Chua: We are now just over two and a half years into the merger. Through the course of the implementation of the FCDO, we have essentially stepped through the different stages that you need to do to bring the Department together to be able to operate as a single organisation. Initially, it was very much about the single structure and making sure that teams were brought together where there were duplicates—single vision, single mission.

Alongside that, it was about the infrastructure necessary to operate as one. Hera, which is our single HR finance system, went live in December. Ex-FCO and ex-DFID staff are now on the same system, which means one single set of management information. Alongside that, we have Osprey, which is the technology platform. All the ex-DFID users are basically on that platform, which means they have the same access as ex-FCO users, so it meets the security requirements as a single platform. We now have a single pay structure on the HR side.

Q406 **Liam Byrne:** Is that now fully implemented?

Juliet Chua: There is a remaining section within that about our international allowances, and a small number of domestic allowances that we are still working through. We expect to make significant progress on that in this coming financial year. But there were over 300 HR policies. This was a highly complex merger because the two different organisations started from quite different places in terms of their systems and processes. We are now nearly complete on that piece and on a number of other building blocks, such as our aid-management platform. When the IPA came in last summer and essentially looked at progress, it judged us to be green. So that was a significant shift from when it was red at the beginning of 2022.

Q407 **Liam Byrne:** Your accounts for 2012-22 show that you are spending £31 million more than in the previous year on consultants and temporary staff. Is one of the impacts of the merger that you are struggling to hold on to staff and now having to hire temporary staff and consultants?

Juliet Chua: The use of contingent labour and consultants in that period particularly picked up with the fact that we were using necessary specialist expertise to assist us with the implementation of those big programmes. Those are the sorts of skills that we wouldn't necessarily want to have



permanently on our books, but they absolutely enable us to implement. In addition to that, we went through quite a significant period initially in the merger of some headcount controls. That meant we used contingent labour in key places, and around the technology side particularly. I anticipate that as the programme completes in 2023, that figure should come down in terms of use of consultancy.

Q408 Liam Byrne: The 2022-23 supplementary estimates show that you have a £1.7 billion fall in ODA expenditure. That has been absorbed almost entirely by the Home Office. Is this tantamount to a fundamental change in UK aid policy?

Sir Philip Barton: No, because in the end the international development strategy remains the strategy. We are still trying to do the same things around the world in terms of our overall approach. The fiscal constraints in the United Kingdom first led to the step down from 0.7% to 0.5% on a temporary basis with a commitment to return. Then there was in-year pressure this financial year, which we are coming to the end of, caused by the migration costs in the light of people from Afghanistan, Ukraine and elsewhere.

Q409 Liam Byrne: Are you not concerned about £1.7 billion-worth of ODA going to the Home Office rather than being deployed by your staff?

Sir Philip Barton: In the end, all permanent secretaries want as much money as possible, and it is very challenging to implement reductions in the middle of a financial year. As you rightly say, this figure appeared in the supplementary estimates, not in the original allocations that we had, and that was difficult. But I also recognise that wider fiscal pressures on the Government as a whole are behind the decisions. Behind that, obviously, is us as a country welcoming Ukrainians and, indeed, Afghans fleeing conflict in difficult circumstances.

Q410 Liam Byrne: There are a couple of other opportunities to enlarge the impact of development assistance. One is through our membership of the World Bank and the other is through our membership of the IMF. On page 168 of the accounts, it says that there is about £14.8 billion-worth of callable capital that we have subscribed to multilateral development banks. You will know that one of the proposals at the Spring Meetings this year will be considering whether we use callable capital to enlarge the loan book of the World Bank and other development authorities. Is that something you are comfortable with? It is obviously recorded as a contingent liability at the moment. Do you think we could be using callable capital as the basis for expanding the loan books of the multilateral development banks of which we are members?

Sir Philip Barton: I know that Andrew Mitchell, who will be there as the relevant Minister and will be attending the meetings, will look at it. We have an agreed approach with HM Treasury for how we look at our overall contingent liability and financial risk. That allows us to look at things like this—the multilateral risk—but also, for example, at offering guarantees to individual countries. We have done some of that on Ukraine, and it is about how we can have sensible limits to that, to make sure that we are



not stacking up too many possible liabilities going forward. We want to look at it in that context.

Q411 **Liam Byrne:** So it doesn't look like there is an in-principle objection to this.

Sir Philip Barton: No. We want to look at the details and discuss it with the Treasury. But in the end, we want to find ways for both the World Bank and the IMF to make more of their capital available. We have seen a very big impact from covid first and foremost, but then obviously some of the secondary consequences of the invasion for big parts of the world, and we need to find ways of making more financing available, and more quickly, to countries who are going through a stressed financial period.

Q412 **Liam Byrne:** One of the ways we can do more is by rechanneling more of the special drawing rights that we have been given. We have been given £19 billion, and we have declared that we are going to share 20%. That is behind both France and China. Who took the decision that we were going to share only 20% of our special drawing rights, rather than 25%? Was that you, or was it the Treasury?

Sir Philip Barton: From memory, it is a Chancellor decision. It is an area where we collaborate closely, including on the instruments that we look to use. I think we set a target of £100 billion for the G7—

Liam Byrne: The G20.

Sir Philip Barton: The G20, rather. We have got to £80-something billion. I think the UK is looking at what more it can be doing in this space. We have made some announcements, and Ministers are actively discussing—

Q413 **Liam Byrne:** Are you lobbying the Treasury for us to do more?

Sir Philip Barton: We are discussing—I am not going to use the word “lobbying”—with the Treasury where we can be doing more with the channelling of SDRs.

Q414 **Liam Byrne:** We are putting all our SDRs at the moment through the poverty reduction and growth trust rather than the resilience and sustainability trust, unlike other countries. Why are we only putting it through PRGT?

Juliet Chua: No, we are putting £1 billion through the poverty reduction and growth trust, and we aim to contribute a further £2.5 billion through the resilience and sustainability trust.

Q415 **Liam Byrne:** That is not on the IMF website, interestingly. According to Andrew Griffith, we have not yet committed the full £4 billion that we have said we will share to the IMF. That leaves about £500 million of SDRs. One of the proposals is that that goes to organisations such as the African Development Bank, which can then use it as hybrid capital to expand their loan book. Is that something we are considering?



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Juliet Chua: Yes. We are looking at options around engaging with other potential international contributors. Working with the African Development Bank could enable scale-up in the way you describe.

Sir Philip Barton: It is actually under active consideration by Minister Mitchell.

Q416 **Liam Byrne:** At the moment, most of the news flow is coming from Mia Mottley, the German Development Minister and Secretary Yellen. Are we going to see some UK public statements on this, and potentially some creative diplomacy of our own, in order to expand the amount of concessional finance that is available?

Sir Philip Barton: I think this is an area of keen focus for the Minister, and I am sure he will be looking at what we should be doing in this space, in discussion with the Treasury, but also at what we should be advocating to others. So yes.

Q417 **Drew Hendry:** I have a quick question on the spending that has been taken over by the Home Office. How much has that further reduced spending on civilian peacebuilding? Are there plans to reverse the continued decline of that spending and perhaps get that budget raised again to support this important initiative?

Sir Philip Barton: Would you mind saying a little bit more about what you mean by civilian peacebuilding, to make sure I am answering your question?

Drew Hendry: Quite literally, civilian peacebuilding has been part of the UK's Foreign Office responsibility for quite a period of time. In other words, it is about taking proactive steps to avoid conflict, as opposed to reactive steps on conflict. That budget has been decreasing and must have been impacted by the Home Office decision. I am asking whether that is going to continue to decline, or is it going to be arrested? Are there plans to increase spending in that area?

Sir Philip Barton: Juliet, do you want to say where we are on allocations for the future?

Juliet Chua: We are intending to set out publicly where we are on allocations shortly. We have been working internally through the final position for 2022-23, setting budgets for the organisation for 2023-24 and then looking ahead to 2024-25. Minister Mitchell has been leading that process with officials internally, essentially working through how we ensure that we are living within the overall Government position around 0.5%. We recognise that the Treasury did put some additional resources in at the autumn statement; nevertheless, it does mean some difficult choices for 2023-24, and then looking ahead to 2024-25. We are expecting to set out what that looks like shortly, in terms of allocations both regionally and thematically.

Q418 **Drew Hendry:** For clarity, you say "shortly"; when do you expect to do that?



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Sir Philip Barton: We are discussing it with the Treasury at the moment—so soon, I hope.

Q419 **Neil Coyle:** The Committee was very critical of the abysmal departmental response to the collapse of Afghanistan. In response to the “Missing in action” report you have been examining departmental systems. Can you tell us, 18 months on, what gaps have you identified in the FCDO’s contingency planning, through the lessons-learned exercise, and the subsequent Cobra tabletop exercises?

Sir Philip Barton: I wrote to the then Chair with the original headlines from the report that we did. I wanted to make sure, in the wake of the events in the summer of 2021, that we had a proper, thorough and detailed look at what those lessons were. I wrote to you, Chair, a couple of months ago on where we have got to.

On contingency planning, we have expanded our capability. We have a geographic risk report that comes to the management board, which I chair with the other DGs and our non-execs, on a monthly basis. We are building up our foresight capability to look over the horizon in our strategy directorate. Once a quarter, we look as an executive committee at what the big risks ahead are and where we need to thicken our contingency plans. You mentioned a couple of countries earlier where we are going through that exercise. Iran is one example where we have done that. We have put increased resources into our crisis-management department to look at that.

In terms of what you then do if you have to go into crisis-response mode and have to access people quickly, one of the learnings from the Afghan period is that we are ensuring that we continuously think about, in our individual directorates, lists of named individuals who would be made available to respond to an acute crisis phase where we needed more people.

Q420 **Neil Coyle:** Part of the explanation—if that is the right term—was that Brexit had impacted the Department and the merger had affected the Department. Have all of the newbies who came through from international development now been trained on the crisis structures? Are they all aware of those systems?

Sir Philip Barton: I am sure they are aware of them; I do not think they will all have been trained. You do not necessarily want everybody in your Department held to do this. But we have put significant investment into training in this area, in particular on the leadership side. For example, when we mounted a crisis response to the earthquakes in Turkey and north-east Syria, people leading that response had been through the training and were ready to lead in the acute and intense period in the aftermath of something terrible like that. We have put a big investment into training in that area.

Juliet Chua: I was going to say about the list that you described that in a crisis instance essentially 20% of our staff are able to surge in and will now cover the entire Department, so those with development or diplomatic



experience will be covered within that. In addition to which we are reaching out and essentially giving gold training and silver training to senior leaders, regardless of their background, and also in addition to which we are thinking about—I think this came through in Russia-Ukraine, when we surged over 500 staff—some of the issues, for example, that I described from the merger. Essentially, we have got all staff on the same technology, and that makes a big difference in terms of being able to work seamlessly, share calendars and essentially work as a single team.

Q421 Neil Coyle: Obviously, there have been crises since, so how confident are you that we will never see the Department missing in action again?

Sir Philip Barton: I am very confident that since the summer of 2021 we have made significant improvements and learned the lessons. We have a systematic, programmatic approach to some of the longer-term things that we need to do. As we prepared for what we feared, and then it did happen with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we made sure that we had looked at the key lessons and implemented those in the response that we mounted to that incident.

Q422 Neil Coyle: How well have you managed that delicate balance between an internal review of what had gone wrong alongside the ongoing crisis and the need to help other people?

Sir Philip Barton: I am not sure that I completely follow you.

Neil Coyle: How well do you think the Department has managed the balance between looking at what had gone wrong in the immediate impact of the Taliban takeover alongside the need to continue support for those people to whom our country owes a debt in Afghanistan?

Sir Philip Barton: The lessons-learning exercise was done outside of those carrying on our Afghanistan-facing work, including the work on relocating and resettling people here in the UK. We made a conscious decision to put in a separate resource, partly to make sure that we were not diverting those whom we needed to carry on the Afghanistan-facing work and partly also to make sure that there were people who were outside of the initial response, and therefore looking without having been involved in it, so that we did not make a trade-off between the work we needed to carry on doing in Afghanistan and the lessons learning.

Q423 Neil Coyle: So you are saying, Sir Philip, that you are very confident that lessons have been learned, but at the same time many of us will still be trying to help constituents' families and those who worked for UK forces and international organisations who are still trapped in Afghanistan. How can you demonstrate that the lessons have been learned if that is not reflected in the support reaching those people who are still in the clutches of the Taliban, and who are being attacked and in some cases murdered?

Sir Philip Barton: I understand that the situation of people in Afghanistan, particularly those in danger, is terrible, and I recognise that. But I think there are two different things here. One is our departmental capability to respond to a really intense crisis, and whether we have the capability to respond to that. There are a set of issues that I am happy to



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talk about and answer questions on around the relocation and then settlement in the UK of people who you rightly say we have either made a commitment to or we owe a debt to. I am very conscious that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs made a statement in the House earlier today.

Q424 **Neil Coyle:** The Minister was saying they are going to move people out of hotels. I am not sure that is has gone further than that. How many people are still owed that debt, either in Afghanistan or in other countries, who are trying to reach the UK?

Sir Philip Barton: Just to make sure that we are not talking apples and pears—

Neil Coyle: I am talking people.

Sir Philip Barton: There are two headline different schemes, as you know—and please stop me if you know. There is the MOD-led Afghan Relocation Assistance Programme, and that relates to those people who essentially assisted our military mostly, or our core UK Government effort, and then there are those we are resettling under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, to whom we made a commitment, but it is not quite the same debt as to those people who worked for our military in that direct way.

Q425 **Neil Coyle:** So there are two schemes supporting Afghans to reach the UK because of the debt that we owe. How many people do the Government intend to support through both those schemes?

Sir Philip Barton: Under the ARAP scheme, it is open-ended and not capped. It is about eligibility rather than anything else. I think there are about 12,000 already here in the UK. I think it is for the MOD to answer this, but I think the expectation is that there are a few thousand more, but it is not a capped scheme. Under the resettlement scheme, the Government committed to 20,000 in total over the coming years, but crucially it is important to remember that that includes those who came out under that scheme in Op Pitting. ACRS included the people bought out of Kabul in August 2021. I think you know that.

Q426 **Neil Coyle:** The ACRS scheme is your Department's responsibility. How many people have been resettled under pathway 3 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme?

Sir Philip Barton: Pathway 3 commits us this year to 1,500 places. There are three things. The headline is that we are obviously very mindful of the risk to people still in Afghanistan. There are three steps. On eligibility, we need to make sure we are fair. We are subject to legal challenge, so we have to do this properly. We had an expressions of interest exercise; we invited people to express their interest and went through and established eligibility. There is then the Home Office security check to make sure we are protecting the United Kingdom. Finally, we want to bring people to the UK when there is accommodation for them.



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Of the 1,500 places this year, we have made clear decisions on 200 heads of families, bringing the total to about 1,100. The first arrivals have been welcomed in the UK.

Q427 **Neil Coyle:** The first arrivals? So they are beginning to arrive.

Sir Philip Barton: Yes, they are beginning to. That is the right phrase.

Q428 **Neil Coyle:** Twenty thousand are estimated to come through ACRS. You are still under 7,000 for ACRS in total from the three pathways. Pathway 3 is beginning to take effect. Where are you at—

Chair: I thought no one had entered the UK at the end of January under pathway 3.

Q429 **Neil Coyle:** That was by the end of 2022, but you are saying they are beginning to arrive now.

Sir Philip Barton: Under pathway 3, yes—just beginning.

Q430 **Neil Coyle:** How many people are still being told to get papers and passports from the Taliban?

Sir Philip Barton: To leave Afghanistan legally, people need to be able to prove their identity. It is a matter of practicalities. I don't want to go into too much detail about how people leave Afghanistan, but—

Q431 **Neil Coyle:** It is still a requirement of FCDO policy for people who face persecution by the Taliban for working for our country to go to the Taliban to access information to leave the country?

Sir Philip Barton: With respect, I didn't use the word "requirement". I didn't say that. As a matter of practicality, people need to be able to travel legally. I didn't say there is a requirement.

Q432 **Neil Coyle:** Let me give an example. You say you understand the situation that some people are in. The former commander of Kabul was injured and couldn't leave with British forces. He worked for our armed forces. He is now out of Afghanistan after attempts on his life and attacks on his family. He doesn't have his papers. How can he reach the UK legally and safely without those documents?

Sir Philip Barton: As I said, it is not a requirement. In the end, it sounds as though he would be under the MOD-led ARAP scheme. I don't know about the individual case, but I am confident that there are ways in which people without papers can do that. There are examples of that. If there is a particular case, I am happy to pass it on, as it were, after this conversation and to ask the MOD to go over to the Home Office to look at it. It is not an absolute requirement.

Q433 **Neil Coyle:** It is an ARAP case, and 18 months on he is still not here. I will take that up with the Minister.

The Guardian ran some figures about how many of your staff are working on the ACRS scheme. Can you tell us whether those figures were accurate? In January, were there only a handful of staff working on it?



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How many people are working on the ACRS?

Sir Philip Barton: We have 35 staff working on relocation and resettlement, and 20 of them are working on delivering ACRS pathway 3. We keep it under review, and I would absolutely put more people on to that if that would speed up bringing people to the UK.

Q434 **Neil Coyle:** Thirty-five. How does that compare with the Ukraine equivalent?

Sir Philip Barton: The Ukraine scheme is different. We don't have people in the FCDO working on Ukraine resettlement in the same way. It is a different kind of scheme. It is not administered by the FCDO.

Q435 **Neil Coyle:** Okay. So *The Guardian's* figure of 500 FCDO's staff is inaccurate? Far be it for me to criticise the Grauniad.

Sir Philip Barton: To be honest, I don't recall the article. Coincidentally, 500 is the number that Juliet gave earlier, which we surged overall on to our initial response. I don't recall the *Guardian* article.

Q436 **Neil Coyle:** Why the difference, then? Why would so many more people be pushed or driven into supporting Ukrainian refugees rather than Afghan refugees?

Sir Philip Barton: The 500 are not supporting refugees. Juliet, do you want to explain the 500 you are referring to? I do not know what *The Guardian* was talking about.

Juliet Chua: The 500 were essentially surged during the period of the heightened response, at the point where we essentially stepped up our structures around the Government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was a temporary structure for a time-limited period; essentially, because we were working through shift staff, an increased number of staff were required. So that is not the permanent number—the core team who are working in the region. But as you say, this is not a group of people who are administering the Ukraine refugee scheme. The lead on that sits with DLUHC, working with the Home Office.

Sir Philip Barton: That was the totality of our effort across everything—all our work on Russia-Ukraine.

Q437 **Neil Coyle:** I will send you the piece from January from *The Guardian*. In it, one of your officials was quoted as saying that there was "no sense that Afghanistan is any kind of priority". Is it a priority?

Sir Philip Barton: It is a priority. We have a team dedicated just to this within a wider Afghan effort. We do a lot of wider work around, for example, the humanitarian situation. We are still working very closely, although the circumstances are incredibly challenging, to do our level best to work with partners to get in humanitarian assistance. When we can, we visit to try our best to have at least some influence on the Taliban. We have worked intensely where we have had particular difficulties around British nationals detained, and we have carried on, when we need to, in that sort of vein as well. So yes, it is still a priority.



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Q438 **Neil Coyle:** We are sending food to people who used to be teachers and police officers and people who used to work with the British Army. That is the sense I get. There are so few people working on this, and there are so many people who still to help. What is the Department's assessment of when you expect to wrap up the Afghanistan refugee operations—the ACRS scheme? A decade?

Sir Philip Barton: We have a first-year commitment of 1,500. As I say, in terms of identifying, we have got to 1,100, and we have further decisions to come. Then, we are committed, in terms of pathway 3, to working with NGOs to identify others. The key constraint—and you have heard this from the Minister—is that we want to make sure that, as people come to the UK, there is accommodation for them to go into and they can be settled properly. So I cannot put a timeframe on it; it is not in my departmental gift.

Q439 **Graham Stringer:** When will the embassy in Kabul open?

Sir Philip Barton: When it is safe enough for us to have a permanent presence there.

Q440 **Graham Stringer:** Can you be more specific about what criteria you will use, rather than a general safety criterion, to come to that conclusion?

Sir Philip Barton: I described earlier, in answering Royston's question, our overall approach to looking at security. We have visited a few times in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul, and we did that in a particular way. We have managed to evolve that. I do not want to go into too much detail, but we have had longer visits than we first did. We need to keep the security situation under review, and I hope that, over time, we will be able to build up our presence, starting off by visiting more and for longer periods, and then looking at the possibility of reopening the embassy. At the moment, it is not secure enough for us to do that. If anything, actually, in the last period the security has got a little bit worse, and that makes it a bit less likely. We will want to be absolutely sure that we can protect our people before we have them deployed there on a permanent basis.

Q441 **Graham Stringer:** You say that the situation is getting worse. Do you have any time horizon for when you might expect to reopen it?

Sir Philip Barton: The challenge is—I am not being evasive; it is actually a hard question to answer—that the single biggest threat is the threat from ISKP in Afghanistan. The extent to which the Taliban, as the lead security actor, for example in Kabul, is successful or not in containing that threat, which is just as often to them as to anyone else, is one of the key drivers of what our assessment will be of the situation. It is not the only one, but that is the sort of thing. It is a very hard question to answer. I don't want to put a timeframe on it. It could be that the situation gets worse rather than better and actually looks harder and more distant.

Q442 **Graham Stringer:** Are former DFID officials and Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials now working from the same integrated computer system?



Sir Philip Barton: Yes.

Q443 **Graham Stringer:** When did that start?

Juliet Chua: There are a number of elements. In terms of a single IT platform, last summer the ex-DFID users moved across to what we call Osprey, which is the single technology platform, and we are currently updating the ex-FCO community to the Osprey platform alongside that. We have now got a single HR/finance system, so one version of management information for the whole organisation, which went live in December, and we are currently going through the stages of stabilising that and making sure that it does all that we need in terms of being able to give us a single set of information.

Q444 **Graham Stringer:** Does “stabilising” mean it is not fully functioning?

Juliet Chua: It is a very large, complex IT programme. Actually, the IPA have just been in and they gave us a really positive report. They expect it be delivered on time and within the original budget, and the sorts of work that we are doing to fix forward some of the key areas are exactly as we expected when we went live.

Q445 **Graham Stringer:** If there is another crisis, would the system enable co-ordination between all the different officials?

Juliet Chua: Essentially, at the point of merger, there were two different organisations, two different systems, two different computer systems. That is very difficult at times to co-ordinate. I am confident, now, that you would have groups of staff on the same IT platform and able to access the same information.

Q446 **Graham Stringer:** My final question: do all personnel keep secure records of all staff with evacuation plans associated with them?

Sir Philip Barton: Sorry, could you say that again?

Graham Stringer: Do all posts now keep secure records of staff with evacuation plans? The staff records weren’t secure, were they, in the end?

Sir Philip Barton: We had—sorry; Juliet, do you want to answer this?

Juliet Chua: As Philip described earlier, each post needs to make sure that it has got the appropriate business continuity and evacuation plans in readiness. Part of that includes preparing and anticipating for any sort of data protection necessary in terms of individual information. One of the lessons learned was to make sure that, as posts update and keep those plans up to date, they need to make sure that they have taken appropriate account of the data that they are responsible for.

Q447 **Graham Stringer:** And that includes plans for essential evacuation.

Juliet Chua: That would be part of making sure that your plans are up to date—making sure that you have considered what you need to do in terms of any potential data.



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Q448 **Chair:** In 2020, the Civil Service Commission concluded that civil servants could be in breach of the civil service code, even if there was no ill intent, if they whistleblow. What process have you undertaken to update FCDO internal whistleblowing procedures?

Sir Philip Barton: We had a look at the two legacy procedures, and we compared the overall with best practice externally. We have basically put in place a single FCDO whistleblowing policy and made sure that that meets best practice. Crucially, we have also done a lot on, and carry on, publicising it, so that people know it is there and know what they can use it for. Juliet can say a bit more about the detail.

Q449 **Juliet Chua:** At the heart of this is making sure that staff feel free and confident to speak up if they have concerns, without fear of discrimination or consequences. The new policy sets out very clearly the range of routes that can be used to raise concerns. I mentioned earlier that we have a staff counsellor and the nominated officer network, but also a confidential hotline and mailbox, to make sure that people can come forward and that those whistleblowing concerns can then be appropriately and independently engaged with. As part of that, we also run a campaign to make sure that people understand and can see that—it is called Speak Up Week, which is held annually. There are other aspects, such as Fraud Awareness Week, and I am the fraud champion on the board. We are also making sure that our heads of mission and directors are updating their assurance approaches so that they remind their staff of whistleblowing procedures and our guidance.

Q450 **Chair:** Do you think whistleblowers have adequate protection, or will they end up, like the other two, having to leave the Foreign Office?

Sir Philip Barton: I do not think that is the right way of putting the question. Do I think they have adequate protection if people use our whistleblowing routes? Yes.

Q451 **Chair:** But the two people who whistleblow to this Committee have both felt they had no choice but to leave the Foreign Office as a result.

Sir Philip Barton: I don't want to comment on specific cases, but if people use our formal whistleblowing routes, they are protected and they will be protected.

Q452 **Chair:** So is the view that, if people go outside the formal process, then, essentially, they can't be protected because they should have followed a proper process?

Sir Philip Barton: In the end, there are legal protections around whistleblowing and, therefore, legal standards for someone to be declared legally a whistleblower and have legal protections; there are avenues that meet that and avenues that don't.

Chair: We may come back to that at a later session. I am very aware of time, so I will just ask some quick questions, and I would like short responses as well. Has China made any representations to the Government since the decision was made to remove TikTok from



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Government devices?

Sir Philip Barton: Not that I'm aware of, but I'll have to doublecheck to be really confident.

Q453 **Chair:** That would be helpful, since they did to the US Government.

Last year, the JMC, which is when all the OTs come together in the UK, was cancelled at incredibly short notice, when half of them were already on planes on their way here. What impact assessment have you made of the impact of that on the relationships we have with our OTs?

Sir Philip Barton: We reached out to all of them. I think that we have had at least one ministerial visit to a number of them.⁴ We have rescheduled the JMC, if I remember rightly, for later this year⁵. So we are putting it back in place, as it were, and we have made sure that we have talked to all of those we are most concerned about the postponement.

Q454 **Chair:** We have seen China step forward supposedly as a foremost expert in peace around the world. I would be interested to know whether the UK has seen the detail of the so-called Chinese Ukraine-Russia peace deal.

Sir Philip Barton: I am not sure there is that much detail behind the headlines the Chinese have announced, to be honest, Chair. You know our position, but it is to stand behind what the Ukrainians want, and President Zelensky set out what I think could be a nascent peace plan. I don't think that is what the Chinese have done. I think they would have made a diplomatic move—

Q455 **Chair:** So the answer is that, no, the Chinese have not made any efforts to tell us what their so-called peace deal would include?

Sir Philip Barton: No.

Q456 **Chair:** Okay. When it comes to the Iran-Saudi peace deal that the Chinese have supposedly brokered, how much engagement has there been between the Chinese Government and the British Government?

Sir Philip Barton: I would have to check whether they came to us and talked about it.

Q457 **Chair:** Finally, on the Kosovo-Serbia deal, where I very much welcome the fact that the UK Government made it clear that we do not support the creation of an enclave within Kosovo, the Germans and the French were very keen to keep the British out of that process, despite the fact that the Kosovan Government specifically wanted the British involved. What is our view on how well that has gone? The EU seems very pleased with that

⁴ The witness wished to provide the following additional information after the session: "Lord Goldsmith, Minister for Overseas Territories, recently visited Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands."



agreement.

Sir Philip Barton: We are supportive. It looks like a step forward. Clearly, as with all these things, implementation is going to be the key aspect. We will carry on talking to both sides and also our partners in Europe.

Q458 **Chair:** Do you think there is a challenge with the fact that, only a day after having refused to sign it, Vučić said that his hand was broken and he would be unable to sign such an agreement for at least four years, then made various deeply offensive comments, particularly for those who survived various attempted genocides, and has also made various heinous signals with his hands that he claims are broken?

Sir Philip Barton: Yes. Those clearly are problematic statements, Chair, but—

Q459 **Chair:** Okay. At some point, I would very much like to come back to the UK's posture towards Serbia. I have a feeling that, if we look at our approach towards autocratic states or, shall we say, countries with some interesting approaches to things, we have failed over the last two decades to adequately deter bad behaviours and to protect ourselves. I wonder whether we are blindly following the path of a Euro-Atlantic accession for Serbia without questioning whether our policy is actually in the right place to deter the most worrying behaviours that could be seen.

Sir Philip Barton: May I just make one point? I am very happy to have a longer conversation on Serbia or to write with more detail of our overall approach. My one observation is that I am confident that you are right in some cases, but in some cases it is hard to prove the counterfactual, where something bad hasn't happened. I think it's possibly, in at least some instances, more nuanced than that.

Chair: I would love that to be the case. I am normally one who has full hope in diplomacy, but even I am struggling to think of an example off the top of my head. Chris, please.

Q460 **Sir Chris Bryant:** British people with driving licences in Spain—I think that's sorted.

Sir Philip Barton: It is sorted.

Q461 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Well done to the embassy team in Madrid, but is there a similar issue in any other EU country?

Sir Philip Barton: I would need to come back to you. There was one in Italy, but we resolved that. I can't promise you that there aren't one or two places where it's still an issue, so let me come back to you.

Q462 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Artists touring Europe—Lord Frost told us many times that he was going to get it all sorted, or that it was all sorted, or whatever. But it doesn't feel sorted yet.

Sir Philip Barton: We have made progress. I will have to dig out the chapter and verse, but we have made progress on that.



Sir Chris Bryant: Could you write to us then? That is fine.

Sir Philip Barton: It is not completely solved, but we have made progress and reached some mainly, I think, bilateral agreements to make it easier for people to tour. But let me come back to you with the chapter and verse.

Q463 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Gibraltar—is Gibraltar sorted?

Sir Philip Barton: No. We are in mid-flight, negotiating hard with the Spanish Government and obviously with the Commission.

Q464 **Sir Chris Bryant:** When do you think that will be done?

Sir Philip Barton: It is a work in progress. I do not want to put a deadline on it, partly because you need to make sure that deadlines put pressure in the right direction. The Foreign Secretary is personally deeply involved in this very intense effort. We are doing our best and standing shoulder to shoulder with the Government of Gibraltar and the Chief Minister.

Q465 **Liam Byrne:** You have £80 million-worth of efficiency savings to secure over the next year. Will you be setting out for the Committee in detail where that savings number will come from?

Juliet Chua: We committed to £79 million⁶ over the course of the spending review. Essentially, that comes from a range of different sources: estates, IT, some workforce efficiency and also a proportion of it from the British Council in terms of their transformation programme. We have essentially identified in advance areas of efficiency, and we will be reporting against that. I anticipate that our annual report will include an update about where we are on our efficiency savings.

Q466 **Liam Byrne:** You have 33,000 bottles of wine in the Government wine cellar, worth over £3 million, which is about 4% of the efficiency savings. Could we rationalise some of that? Do we need 32,000 bottles of wine in store?

Sir Philip Barton: That is a capital value, so the Treasury would not count it as an efficiency if we reduced our wine cellar.

Liam Byrne: We are keeping that then, are we? I will take that as a yes.

Q467 **Chair:** Finally, I do not know if anyone wants to come in on estate, but I wonder what discussions we have had internally. As we look at trying to ensure that the coalition supporting our friends in Ukraine remains firm, there are questions around some countries that are suffering incredibly from famine and food crises. Have we looked at whether, rather than relying on Zelensky to reach out and form bilateral relationships, we could, for example, up our aid in specific countries to ensure that they receive the grain and food they need to feed their people?

⁶ The witness wanted to provide the following clarification after the session: "Juliet quoted the FCDO's Spending Review efficiency savings figure as £79m, and it is actually £79.5m by 2024-25 per the FCDO's Settlement Letter."



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Sir Philip Barton: There are two things. First, when I was in Kyiv, I went to the Foreign Ministry, and one thing I discussed was how we helped Ukrainians talk to Africa, Latin America and countries elsewhere, where they are sometimes not represented. We now have a dialogue to take that forward, recognising that that Ukrainian story is more powerful when they tell it themselves than when we tell it.

On your point around humanitarian aid, our overall approach is to look where the needs are greatest, and therefore invest our humanitarian resource and support in those places—in the horn of Africa, around Somalia and Ethiopia. It will, in effect, do what you say, but we take a needs-based approach.

Chair: In which case, I will bring us to a close. Thank you both ever so much for your time.