

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), HC 1256

Tuesday 18 April 2023

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Members present: Theo Clarke (in the Chair); Sarah Champion; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Nigel Mills; David Mundell; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1-37

Witness

I: Dr Tamsyn Barton, Chief Commissioner, Independent Commission for Aid Impact.

Examination of witness

Witness: Dr Barton.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's International Development Committee session on the work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. Can I welcome today's witness and ask you to introduce yourself?

Dr Barton: Thank you. My name is Tamsyn Barton and I am the chief commissioner at the Independent Commission for Aid Impact.

Q2 Chair: Thank you for joining us. My first question is: what do you believe are the biggest challenges the ICAI has faced in holding the Government to account over the past year?

Dr Barton: Thank you for asking me that question. The biggest challenge that immediately comes to my mind is our lack of staff compared to a full complement. It has been a real struggle for the entire year, since the beginning of January last year, when we agreed our work plan with you. We started to lose our review team members, which meant that on the content side of our work we did not have as much support as we needed. We have also been lacking a head of engagement for two years. I can tell you more about that if you like. That has made it difficult to address all the other challenges.

Another challenge has been access to information. Access has improved, and I thank the Committee for the work you did exerting pressure and advocating for us to have access to information where we had particular barriers, for example in relation to our review of Afghanistan.

The second thing I have to thank the Committee for relates to our budget. Pre-merger we had a four-year settlement we could roll over within the four years if for some reason there were delays and we were unable to use that budget. A new system was suddenly proposed, which included an annual limit. Since the merger, it has been much slower for us and others dealing with the FCDO to find out what our budget allocations are. We learned very late—only after the first quarter, in fact—what our budget was to be. That naturally made life more complicated.

Q3 Chair: You just mentioned a couple of challenges with staffing and budget. What have you done to be able to overcome those?

Dr Barton: On the staffing side, my head of secretariat has become a full-time HR expert, because it has taken so much time to overcome and navigate the challenges in the FCDO HR system. I will not bore you with a lot of the detail, but there are a couple of fundamental points to make. One is that the vetting requirements have been higher since the merger. In a merged Department, the priority in the ex-FCO side of the house, which has a higher proportion of staff, is for information security. A decision was made at the time of the merger that everybody should have the highest level of vetting. That has brought in huge delays and has also put off some people that might otherwise be interested in coming to work

for us. There have been barriers to external recruitment. We tend to require external expertise for our review team, and there has not been enough within the Government.

Then there is the combination of human resources capacity and IT capacity. Both of those have been impaired since the merger, so the HR processes have taken a lot longer. In short, we have been able, after great struggles, to recruit people, but we tend to lose them before we can onboard them because the process takes so long. If you have been given a job and it has been more than six months since you have heard anything, you tend to think that there are other options that are better.

Q4 Chair: When you came to the Committee in September 2021 you highlighted a number of problems that ICAI was experiencing following the merger of DfID and the FCO. Have some of the problems you raised with us then now been rectified, or are they still ongoing?

Dr Barton: I would like to pay tribute to those who have tried to help us overcome them, and I do not want you to have the impression that we do not get good co-operation from some in FCDO. We have a sponsor team that has done its best to help us, but the whole of FCDO has experienced HR challenges and delays in budgets, so we recognise that it is not just us who face those challenges.

I would also like to acknowledge that we have received help from Ministers. When Lord Ahmad was the HR Minister, he was able to sign off a number of things for us, which sped up the process, but it was still not enough. Since we have had Andrew Mitchell as the Development Minister, he has also been helpful and we have managed to have some sorts of exemption in some of these areas, such as the security clearance requirements. We are very hopeful that, after a two-year gap, we may next month finally have a head of engagement, who is the person who liaises with this Committee and deals with all our communications and publishing. We are also very hopeful that we may, at some point this year, finally have a head of reviews, but that has been a long gap too. It takes 11 months, on average, to recruit anybody.

Q5 Chair: You mentioned at the beginning that access to information has improved with the Department. Given that you have been raising issues with the FCDO, how effective do you now think the Department is at listening to you and actually tackling any problems?

Dr Barton: We did struggle more with some reviews that were more sensitive, such as the Afghanistan review. But there was, once again, a more fundamental issue that, despite all the best efforts, was still difficult to overcome, which was that there was a problem with the IT systems. It was actually the ex-DfID system, which is where the records were kept. For a very long time—something like nine months—there was no access to it at all, and then you could only get access in a very complicated way, so both for us and for the teams that we were asking to produce documents, there were long delays. I am happy to say that that is much better now. It is a bit cumbersome, but you can get back to old records. It is very



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important for accountability that records are available, which was difficult to overcome. I also think that our efforts have meant that the various teams have got to know us, so that has also helped open up accessibility to our scrutiny.

I should mention that it is not only FCDO, although that is where we had particular challenges. We had a big hold-up in our refugees review with the Home Office. Again, it was not due to a lack of willingness to give us what we were asking for; it was due to a lack of familiarity with our right to access the procurement documents in relation to the asylum support contracts. But once we had demonstrated that we had looked at similar documents in relation to our reviews of DFID, they did produce these documents for us.

Chair: Thank you, Dr Barton.

Q6 **David Mundell:** Dr Barton, how challenging has it been to safeguard ICAI's independence in the current operating environment?

Dr Barton: It is a constant challenge in the sense that one needs to be always vigilant. The biggest challenge to our independence came at the time when there was major machinery-of-Government change and we had the merger. That was of course the period in which there was, at some point, the thinking that this Committee and separate scrutiny of international development in addition to the Foreign Affairs Committee would no longer be needed. At that time, it was considered that there might not need to be an Independent Commission for Aid Impact.

Following the decision that there should be an ICAI, which was announced on the first day of the merger at the beginning of September, there was a review that was effectively led by the Foreign Secretary, which we considered to have recommendations that would have compromised our independence. But we went through a process and convinced them not to remove our independence. I have to say that that would not have happened without the assistance of some on this Committee and parliamentarians more broadly.

Since that time, I would say it is more a matter of the smaller, lower-level challenges—getting access to information, getting access if we need it to make country visits, people making room for us to do that, which we have achieved after a lot of challenges in some cases, and insisting on keeping the budgets that we need. In most areas, we have managed to hang on to our independence, but it is hard going sometimes, so I just want to thank the Committee again for the help that you have given us with overcoming those challenges.

Q7 **David Mundell:** Do you think that ICAI's independence is more or less at risk than it was at the start of the current phase?

Dr Barton: I actually feel quite confident at the moment that we could see off any challenges to our independence—with your help. That is, of course, not to rule out that there could be challenges in the future. The longer ICAI continues to operate and be respected for its independent and



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effective operation, the safer it is, I think. But, it does not have statutory powers like the National Audit Office does, so to that extent it is not fully safeguarded. We have the International Development Act, part of which does require that there is provision for independent scrutiny, but it does not specify that it should be ICAI, so that is something perhaps to consider—whether it should be specified now that ICAI has proved that it can do that job.

David Mundell: Thank you.

Q8 Nigel Mills: Is it the change of Minister that has improved things? I mean, Minister Mitchell was very keen on this at the outset, wasn't he? Is that the change that has made you happier?

Dr Barton: I'd definitely have to acknowledge that, since Andrew Mitchell became the Minister for Development, we have discerned a greater enthusiasm about responding to our requests. It is encouraging to us to know that, if we needed to, we could ask for more pressure to be brought to bear. In my regular meetings with him, he provides reassurance if we should need further assistance—you know, he respects our independence, because that is the purpose for which we were set up.

It has not been completely successful, in that we have not been able to recruit everybody as quickly as we want, but there are just systemic challenges there. However, one thing that we have noted is that, regarding the recommendations that we have given since the time that he became the Minister for Development, we have discerned a more embracing attitude and a more apparent commitment to taking forward those recommendations. We really welcome that, but it is only a matter of degrees, I would say.

Q9 Nigel Mills: Speaking of being a bit more embracing, you obviously had some funding challenges last year, when they withheld part of your budget and then announced that they would give you some of it back at the very end. Is that a position that you can work with now? Is that going to lead to effective work?

Dr Barton: Well, we are only able to work with it because we have been able to secure an extension. The challenge of our complicated budget arrangements is that we would be suddenly told that we had an annual limit after operating for a long time without one, and we then had the problem of not knowing whether we had enough money to finish the work plan that we had agreed with you from January 2022.

We did not know until July whether we had enough money left out of our settlement, even though we had underspent what we were originally given, to be able to finish the job. We thought that we were going to have to put seven or eight reviews in just the last three months. We were expecting that we would finish at the end of June this year, so we would have had to put all of those reviews then because of the delays to do with the budget complications.



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To be honest, the budget became less of a problem over time because if you haven't got any staff to help—I mean, I have done my best to produce the terms of reference and so on, and do that sort of thinking work, but obviously there are limits if we do not have the expert staff to help with that. We do have one at the moment—a very new review manager who started with us in February—but obviously that is not many of those people with external expertise compared with the four that we had before, including a senior one.

Q10 Nigel Mills: But you think that, by the end of the extension, you will have got done the work that you wanted to do?

Dr Barton: We do. We think we will have done all of the work that you had asked us for, and that we will be able to do that within the budget that we have. The fundamental problem—which is why the Government have decided to give the extension—is that there remains a very high risk of a gap in scrutiny, as far as ICAI goes. I can very well remember asking the panel, at the time that I was appointed, “What is your biggest worry?”—so that I could be sure to convince them that I could solve it. The biggest worry was clearly that there would be a long gap in scrutiny, because from the beginning of the first commission—a whole commission is four years—it took 10 or 11 months before there was a review, so you have lost almost a quarter of the commission's time. I fear that we may be in a similar situation now.

In my case, I was able already to start selecting reviews that could be done at the time when there was a hearing in this Committee. I was appointed in autumn 2018, so we were ready to be out with a review in September, just after the commission started in July. Here we are—and we are nowhere near that position. I know there is going to be an interview process for my replacement this week. It is good that that is happening, but it is way behind where we were at the beginning of my commission. Even more worrying are the delays with the procurement, because the Government have adopted this model of outsourcing, which means that there can be considerable delays before reviews can start, if there is no inhouse capacity to do them.

Q11 Sarah Champion: Can I stick with this area of procurement, staffing and costs? In your 2021-22 annual report, 75% of ICAI's budget was spent on supply costs, including consultants. Why is it so high?

Dr Barton: Because of the outsourcing model, in effect. We are quite small if you compare us to our counterparts around the world, because we have not got that inhouse model. If you take the German equivalent of us—which used, at least, to be a similar scale aid programme—they have got more than 100 people, so they do not need to outsource as we do. That is the model here, as it was indeed for the way that the aid has been spent more broadly.

Q12 Sarah Champion: What is the benefit of one over the other?

Dr Barton: There are pros and cons. I will say first that the pro that really strikes me at this juncture is that if we had not had an outsourced model,



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we could not have delivered the work plan we had agreed with you, because we simply would not have had the staff. It would have been me and bits of a person. That would not have been sufficient to do it. So that is a definite pro. Another pro is that you can bring in specialist external expertise in relation to whatever the area is. I am a generalist and know a bit about a lot of things, but I don't have that depth—so it is really good to be able to bring that in.

The downsides of having this model are, first, the kind of delays that we risk having at the moment, because we are not able to ask our in-house people to get started on something. Also, inevitably it adds a certain layer of costs to outsource. That is just how it works: you have to pay for the management of the production, so instead of us choosing a team, we are hiring a supplier who were themselves proposed as a team—and there is a cost to that.

Q13 Sarah Champion: What are the costs of a review, on average?

Dr Barton: I checked that beforehand to make sure I have the right figure, with the help of my experts behind me. We look at it as an average cost per product, which makes it about £220,000 per product. That covers full reviews down to information notes, which are a minority of our production; broadly speaking, it is mainly full and rapid reviews. That is the average cost. The most expensive review that we have done, the education review, was £405,000. Interestingly, that was not much more than the most expensive in the previous phase, when it was the review on Syria that cost the most because of the security costs.

Q14 Sarah Champion: Let's take the rapid ones out and look at a standard review that you do. At the beginning, how tight can you be on cost controls? Do you set them—for instance, can you say "This is a £400,000 review"? How tight is your remit, or does the nature of a review start dictating the cost of it?

Dr Barton: You are exactly right: it is really the nature of it that determines the cost. We can cut the costs right down if we decide we do not need to do any country visits or organise local teams to get confidential information from people. All those things cost extra. Basically, you are paying for time.

Q15 Sarah Champion: Is it you who is making that decision or is it the supplier who comes to you with a proposal?

Dr Barton: The supplier comes with a proposal, and we have a to-ing and fro-ing at the design phase. It is a frustrating process for us because the nature of that is that you are always having to decide whether we can risk doing only two instead of three country case studies. What we have sometimes done is a much lighter desk review for the third one. If your visit involves a country where there are more security problems, that increases the cost, but you want to have as representative a set as possible.



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There are many decisions to make. Cost control is certainly important to us, but we feel that we have succeeded in terms of our KPI more broadly because we have spent less than we have been allocated. We did not expect the Government to be hugely generous. That indicates that we have been very careful with our costs.

- Q16 **Chair:** Can I clarify something? Now that phase 3 has been extended, when will the contract with your main supplier be up for renewal?

Dr Barton: Well, because it has been extended, it is clear that we need to extend the current supplier, but a process has been started, in effect at the beginning of this year, with the emerging market engagement, as it is called. The FCDO's procurement and commercial department started letting people know that there would need to be new supplier arrangements for the next commission. That was the first stage of it.

It is quite a complex process. I know about that bit because I was personally involved in talking to interested companies about the opportunities for doing this work. What we are hoping is that the next commission will be able to take part. Once somebody is chosen for the next commission, they would be involved in the selection process, when it gets to that point.

- Q17 **Chair:** What preparations have you already made, then, for the retendering of that contract?

Dr Barton: The thing to be totally clear about is that ICAI is much too tiny to have its own procurement department. Our delivery team works with the procurement department. We have helped them with the terms of reference, with advice about the sorts of services that are required, and as I mentioned, with the personal explanations to suppliers about what they can have. The challenge for us is that, actually, we talked to the procurement department in our first year in order to try to avoid delays, but unfortunately, with all the other pressures on them, there have been delays. That is quite frustrating for us. Naturally, for us it is hugely important, but they have many other priorities.

- Q18 **Chair:** You mentioned delays, but I am also interested in the impact of the changes to your budget, and whether that also impacted your relationship with your main supplier. Was that the case?

Dr Barton: There is no doubt that it created some challenges. Whenever there is a considerable delay or uncertainty about ICAI's future, that inevitably creates a worry. Our main supplier, the head of the consortium, the lead—Agulhas Applied Knowledge—is not a big company. It is a relatively small enterprise, so ICAI is quite a large proportion of what it does. Those uncertainties certainly did not help. Also, as with many situations, we were not able to communicate until the FCDO decided what should be communicated.

- Q19 **Mrs Latham:** You have talked quite a lot about the staffing and budget. I wonder whether you could expand a little on the impact on your day-to-day operations. You talked about having some extra money. How easy



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has it been to spend that money, presumably on staffing?

Dr Barton: I am not sure which extra money you are—

Mrs Latham: I am talking about the £800,000.

Dr Barton: Okay. That was not really extra. It was more—

Mrs Latham: What you were expecting.

Dr Barton: It has just moved to the other side of the financial year—I've got you now. There was extra in the sense that we did not use our full allocation to the end of the workplan, but it was not given additionally. I do not think that we will need all of that, although we are still finalising our plans. That is sufficient, but what is complicated is that there are two types of money. You have money that you can use for staff, and money that you can use for outsourcing programme costs. There are limits to what we can use that money for; it is not so straightforward. It took us a very, very, very long time to be able to work out how to get any kind of temporary staffing—obviously, we have massively underspent our staffing budget—and really it is a separate pot of money from which we have made temporary arrangements to cover some aspects of our lack of staff.

For instance, we paid our supplier a bit more to help us with the physical process of publishing at a time when we had no other help to do that. And normally, we do all the meeting arrangements, but we did not have any people to do that, so we had to use our supplier sometimes, which meant that Departments did not have the same level of trust and of knowing who they were dealing with as they do when it is us. It was not really so much a lack of money as a lack of arrangements by which you can get staff—even temporary ones.

Q20 **Mrs Latham:** You talked about how security vetting for people takes a long time. What needs to change so that ICAI can get the level of staffing that it needs? From the sounds of it, you have a lot of temporary staff, so that is no consistency and no one standard. If people come and go, everybody needs training up when they first come. How difficult is that to manage?

Dr Barton: That has indeed been a challenge. We have had a lot of change, particularly in our review team. When I first arrived, there was a team that had been there for something like five years, so it is reasonable that they would move on. But what has happened during this commission is to do with wider changes in, I guess, human resources in Government, and specifically within FCDO. Our wonderful staff have been snapped up on promotion, particularly as we were able to bring in external expertise, which has been quite scarce. So even when we got staff who might normally have stayed for three years, they have stayed maybe for only 18 months before they were happy to be promoted and have their talents appreciated. But that of course created problems for us because, as you say, we had to train up new people.



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I mentioned temporary staff. We have got temporary assistance under a general contract for FCDO where we could not get that kind of expertise. We have project management expertise, which is helpful for some things, but you cannot use it for everything. Basically, it has meant a lot more work for me in particular. As I mentioned, my head of secretariat has become a full-time HR expert.

The good news, though—Andrew Mitchell was helpful in this—is that we have had a derogation in relation to the requirements on security vetting. Initially, the requirement for our secretariat was for the highest level of vetting. My colleague Hugh Bayley and I underwent that as well, because we believed that the Department would only really trust us if we had that level of vetting. It was more complicated for my colleague Tarek because he is a dual national. We did not try to put him through that because, if we had, it probably would not have been finished even by now.

Q21 David Mundell: Over the past year, how satisfied have you been with the Government's responses to the recommendations in your reviews?

Dr Barton: I am going to have to disappoint you a bit, in that, in the immediate past year, we have only had the responses in terms of whether they accept or partially accept them, and of course the proof of the pudding is when we check whether they have actually done what we asked them to do. I can only really talk about the extent to which they have embraced our recommendations. I do feel that that has improved.

Because we discuss recommendations beforehand with the teams, we know the ones that they really resist. Sometimes, we decide that we still need to put the pressure on them; at other times, we think, "Well, something else might get more traction, so let's try it that way."

I think we have seen an improvement in what we have been asking them to do. I can discuss the acceptance process in relation to specific reviews, but the real proof of the pudding will be when we publish our follow-up review in July. Right now, we are doing the process of assessment of how much they have done once we come back after a year. That really gives us a feel for what we are achieving or not.

I can tell you the past statistics on that, which still show that there is a lot of work to be done. The first year that we measured as our own key performance indicator how many of our recommendations the Government had implemented adequately, we had nearly 80%. You can count it as 80%; it was 79%. That is a really high rate of implementation. For the two succeeding years, we have not managed to get to 50% adequate. That reflects the turmoil. In reality, it was extremely difficult. We have gone through the details with the teams. There have been so many shocks, pressures and the sorts of internal barriers I have mentioned, with systems not working or the continual change in structures that has followed the merger and, obviously, above all, the sudden budget reduction. All those things have made it very hard for us to consider that the response has been adequate. We are, at the moment, hoping to see a

bit of a rise, but I would be very surprised if it had gone back to where we were before the merger.

- Q22 **David Mundell:** You referenced specifics. Are there any examples you could give us where a recommendation has been implemented and it has made a difference?

Dr Barton: I am going to have to refer to prior years, but one of the areas that we were really pleased to see—it often takes two years to get the best responses—was when we went back to look at the PSVI and sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers reviews. There was a genuine move to a much more survivor-focused approach. That was an absolute struggle in the first stages of that review and it did not happen immediately, but you could see the shift in resources and the policies, and we saw that there was proper oversight and a more strategic approach. So we really saw some improvements there. I think—I hope—we are going to see the same thing. We saw it in modern slavery, with a greater focus on that. We still did not judge that it was adequate overall.

We saw a very good response in relation to BII—the review that we did. Again, it took more than two years to get what we wanted. However, there is a much better development impact system in place, and when we went back to look at that in our India review, we could see that it has improved. That is not to say that everything is perfect, because you are still dealing with investments that go back much further, but we can see that our reviews have contributed to improvements.

We also saw improvements in relation to research, where we did reviews on the Newton fund, for example, where there was much more attention to gender than in the past. With those kinds of things, there have been improvements.

- Q23 **Chris Law:** Following on from that upbeat note, on the decline we are having so far in recommendations being taken up, I want to ask you whether, in your review into transparency in UK aid, you found that the FCDO was less transparent about its aid spending than its predecessor, the Department for International Development. Are you surprised, and what do you think are the main causes of that decline in transparency?

Dr Barton: To be honest, we were not very surprised that there was a decline because there was a pattern over some years that the FCO, as it was, was less transparent. That partly relates to a different culture and different priorities. There are obviously good reasons why they have to be careful about information security.

Nevertheless, the pledge at the time of the merger was that we were going to have the best of both, and in our transparency review, we wanted to, once again, push for a higher level of transparency. In the 2015 aid strategy, there was this commitment to reach a “good” or “very good” level. That is actually one of the recommendations where we surmised that the responses improved, perhaps because of Minister Mitchell having taken up his role before our response came. We thought that they were not going to commit to it, because it is challenging. One of the reasons



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that it is challenging is the systems, again. Basically, the IT system is still being built, if you like, and the way it works is you load it up on the internal system and then it should automatically appear externally. There have been huge delays in that happening because of the system not being up. There are higher delays on the ex-FCO side, where I think they are a year behind; on the ex-DFID side, they are still four months behind. This is just the project documentation—the really basic stuff. I am not surprised, is the answer, but we are now optimistic that we will see improvement.

Q24 Chris Law: Is that because we have bottomed out or because you can see real improvements happening?

Dr Barton: I don't think they would have committed to it if they did not think they could do it, so that must mean that, finally, the IT system is reasonably expected to deliver. We also think that it is seen as more of a priority now, so that is very encouraging.

Q25 Chris Law: That follows on to my next question. The FCDO has lost its "very good" rating, but you say it is realistic and possible for it to get its rating back. Other than the IT systems, are there things it can do to achieve that, and what is the timeframe?

Dr Barton: Of course, it is not only the IT systems. That is primarily relevant when it comes to publishing the documentation that is picked up by the International Aid Transparency Initiative, usually, or the public might look forward to finding out what aid is being spent on.

The area that has been really difficult in recent years has been any forward-looking stuff, and I think you have had that problem on this Committee. We lost any kind of forward look at what was going to happen in an individual country. Budgets and forward allocations have appeared unbelievably late in the day compared with the past. That is something that, it is to be hoped—there is now a more stable basis, we believe, for being able to look forward at what the budget is likely to be, although there are still uncertainties when it comes to how much of the budget will be used for refugees in the UK. At least there is some basis for planning; they know what they are reducing now. I am hoping that we will see more forward looks than we did.

Q26 Chris Law: You just touched on refugees. We saw a significant part—it looks like £3.5 billion—gouged out of the budget for domestic priorities, rather than international. How does the FCDO's level of transparency on its aid spending compare with other Departments, and can they be brought in in some sort of policy coherence? I know that DFID used to be the exemplar of how to have openness and transparency, so what are your thoughts on FCDO?

Dr Barton: You are right that DFID was the exemplar. I think it had an 87% score or something of that ilk, whereas the old FCO had more like 50% or less. There was a big gap. I do not think there has actually been a proper comparison across Departments since January 2020. In our transparency review, I was actually quite ambitious for it to include more



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Departments, but I was not the lead on it. It was decided that, in order to do the in-depth work on the biggest spenders, they only looked really at FCDO and the conflict, stability and security fund. That is something that needs to be returned to.

However, in just the annual Publish What You Fund review, the only comparator was the then BEIS Department. That was down to 69%—at least it was above that. The FCDO is the best of a not wonderful bunch on transparency, as things stand.

Q27 Chris Law: In their response to your review of the UK's approach to democracy and human rights, the Government said they were working on a new strategy on open societies, democracy and human rights. What do you expect to see in that strategy, and do you think that the UK Government will be holding the UK to account in terms of its level of openness and transparency? I say that because CIVICUS, which is an INGO that monitors the state of civic freedoms in 195 countries, has put the UK on the same rating as Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Are we in a good position to be making those judgments?

Dr Barton: You have wrapped up a lot in that question. I will start with what we expect to see, and I can tell you what we hope to see. We were really pleased that there was an embracing of the recommendation that they would produce a strategy publicly. The tradition in the Foreign Office would have been to have an internal core script or campaign lines, but this is something where there is a proper process. I think they have already started consulting externally to help bring in expertise to their thinking about this, and they are using the work in this review.

We want to see something that is between the level of the integrated review—where there is a general declaration of the importance of democracy and human rights and the UK's commitment to upholding them—and an actual action. It needs to be something that helps to operationalise these commitments, sets out what the priorities are and, in one place, brings together a framework, which needs to make sense of all the different terminology. Our review documented a huge range of terminology, which was not clear. When we talked to external stakeholders, they said, "We don't really know what 'open societies' means. We're not sure how it relates to the 'network of liberty'", which was another wording. So we want something that will clarify what the framing is.

We want something that brings together the best of both—both the FCO and DfID. So it will include all the traditional strengths of the FCO on human rights and civil and political rights and all their legal expertise, together with the governance expertise and social development expertise, both on the demand side—demands for access to rights—and in the Government's response, the supply side. So it is quite a holistic and comprehensive piece, which will give people practical guidance and say what the priorities are. That is what we are expecting.



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On your point about how such a strategy will be perceived externally if it is coming from the UK—are there question marks over the UK?—that was something that came up in our review. There were external stakeholders who questioned the UK's commitment. It mostly came up in relation to the Open Government Partnership. The UK is a founding member and has done a huge amount to promote open government, but the UK's own performance in relation to this partnership did decline very dramatically. At one point, it looked as if it might, like Tanzania, drop out entirely. I believe that that isn't going to happen; there has been some agreement to continue. But it certainly did bring some question marks over that and it was not well perceived. So I think you are right that if you want to promote anything, you need to be seen as exemplifying it.

- Q28 Chris Law:** Thank you. Based on what you found during your review, what are some of the biggest threats to democracy and human rights currently? How effectively has UK aid programming responded to new and emerging threats, and is it consistent? I ask because my reading of it is that it is not consistent, country to country.

Dr Barton: Well, it is appropriate that you have different responses depending on context, and one thing that was done generally quite well was the contextual analysis. We found pretty consistently that whatever the major risks were—for the most part, they had focused on them. I am talking about the most at-risk groups.

There were some exceptions, which clearly were quite challenging for the Government to work well on. LGBTQ rights, for example, is a very challenging area, and I think it is accepted to be. We felt they could do more, but we saw that they had made attempts. Sometimes it was not lack of effort but more bureaucratic failings that had led to them not actually delivering in that area.

The analysis and the prioritisation were good. It was sometimes those failings to be able to carry through—mostly, it might have worked out okay had there not been the budget reductions. It was the budget reductions that in the end stopped the delivery of well prioritised responses, and that is a worry, going forward.

- Q29 Chris Law:** This is the last question from me. You recommended that the FCDO should consider taking more risks to support those who are facing the most serious threats from repression, and I am sure that most of us on this Committee agree, but are there specific areas where you think that the FCDO could take more risks, and how could this strengthen their programming?

Dr Barton: This is one that you can perceive that the FCDO wanted to resist a bit. They tell us that they consider that by making this recommendation, we are asking them to put vulnerable people at more risk. That is certainly not our intent. We believe that it is probably going to be more important to have some kind of response when people are at high risk; it could be more dangerous if there is no response for those people.



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The specific areas that we are thinking about are where the reason why the British Government is not helping in a case of repression—it might be a human rights defender, a journalist, a media platform or a civil society organisation that is at threat of repression—could be to do with other diplomatic priorities. We recognise, of course, that it is the obligation of the FCDO to pursue the range of UK priorities, but we think, if we look at how other countries manage this, that there is the potential to take a bit more risk to do that.

I will give you an example: our India review. Clearly, that is a country where all the indices suggest that there has been a decline in civic space. As part of that, the Indian Government has imposed new restrictions on foreign financing of civil society organisations. It is true that many donors have reduced their support to such organisations, but not all have, and certainly most have not reduced it entirely, whereas the UK, which used to be a big supporter of these local-level actions, has stopped. We thought that a good example in that case was Germany, which has found ways to continue to provide support. Given that I think there is widespread interest—not least, I imagine, in this Committee—in democracy and human rights in India, we hope that that is something that you would support.

Q30 Mr Sharma: In your review of the UK's approaches to peacebuilding, you found that UK aid programmes could have achieved better results if they had more reliable long-term funding. Based on what you saw during your review, how have cuts to the UK aid budget affected the Government's work on peacebuilding?

Dr Barton: I suppose I should say first that we did give a lot of credit to the Government for its very patient and strategic approach in general in the case studies that we looked at. In that review, we asked the Government, "Where can we look around the world, given how difficult it is to build peace? There are not very many successful examples. Let's try to learn lessons from the best." We saw that they were willing in Colombia, for example, to take a 10-year approach. Of course, that was a case where a peace process brought to an end a conflict that had lasted more than 50 years, so patience was required; it is a slow and difficult business to build and maintain a peace.

That is the context in which we are struck by the fact that there is all that patience and effort, yet progress can be lost very quickly if funding is suddenly removed. We saw this particularly in the case of Nigeria, which is also incredibly complex. There are a number of different conflicts in different regions of Nigeria. There is a particular case that immediately comes to mind when you ask about harm. We did find very good work here, as elsewhere: the Government's implementation of its women, peace and security strategy is a success of recent years, with a lot more gender-sensitive efforts. But unfortunately, if you stop a programme where women are taking a visible role in peacebuilding, then they are left at risk of harm. That was something that we felt we needed to put on the record.



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In general, given that grievance—people feeling that they are unjustly dealt with—is one of the main reasons for conflict bursting out, clearly, if you make promises and you do not fulfil them, that is more likely to fan the flames of conflict than to reduce it. It could be worse than never having promised anything at all. We saw examples in Nigeria and in Colombia where promises had been made to local people about infrastructure, for example, that never happened because of the reductions.

Q31 Mr Sharma: How did the FCDO's decision to end some programmes early affect the beneficiaries of those programmes?

Dr Barton: The example of the women, peace and security programme is the one that comes to mind. It is particularly where women have not traditionally been given these roles at the forefront. As conflict was seen as primarily a matter for men, it was assumed that the way to bring an end to it would be only having men talking to men.

One of the things that was striking in the Nigeria case study—this is one of the potential secrets of success—was the way the UK operates at different levels. It might be holding the pen or convening the ambassadors—holding the pen in the UN Security Council, in the case of Colombia—and yet also operating at a really local level.

The biggest successes were local, not that that was easy either in these situations. They are always very fragile because in each case you are building community cohesion and you just need one thing to happen before all that patient work can break down. That is why we felt particularly strongly about the risk of sudden reductions and disappointments with the ends to programming.

Q32 Sarah Champion: Both ICAI and this Committee did reviews into UK aid being spent in this country, predominantly by the Home Office. In your review you recommended that the Government introduce a cap on how much ODA can be spent in the UK, or a floor on how much ODA should be spent by the FCDO. Did you actually put figures or percentages to those amounts?

Dr Barton: We recognise that it is probably not appropriate for us to be very precise in the way that we make recommendations because we are not going to know all the variables and we are not going to be able to future-proof unless we allow the Government some leeway in working out how best to do something, so we give them a general direction. What we did in this case was point to the fact that Sweden had chosen to have an 8% cap, so you have an example there. I do not know whether we are going to see other countries also introducing caps in the wake of the reporting last week from the OECD DAC, which showed, interestingly, that the UK proportion is almost exactly double the average. In the final statistical figures, we of course only had estimates, which were from February and did not include all Departments, and we do not cover the devolved.



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The final percentage was 29%, which is obviously very high, whereas in general it is about 14%. At the very least, you would hope that the UK would not want to be worse than the average, but we have not specified that in our recommendations. Generally, we point the UK to other countries that they can learn from. We think that Sweden did a good job in this case. We also referred them to Iceland, which carried out a review. Initially it was at a similar level—about 30% costs. By reviewing how conservative they were, they brought that down to 13%. Obviously, either of those would be an improvement.

Having a cap would allow certainty. If you do not have certainty, you cannot plan. When Philip Barton came before this Committee, I can remember very well how he said to you, “We don’t know what our budget is.” That is not a way that Government can work.

- Q33 Sarah Champion:** No, it isn’t. There has been a direct impact on the UK spend. This Committee received a letter from Minister Mitchell about the allocations, and he directly referenced reduced budgets because of the spend of aid in the UK. Your review highlighted examples of how humanitarian aid around the world has been undermined by this spend. How has aid spending in specific sectors—for example, health and education—been affected? Did you go into that?

Dr Barton: In our review, we only went into it in a limited way because we did not have the forward allocations. We listened with interest when Minister Mitchell said in this Committee that the reductions might be of the order of 30%. In our review, we picked out areas where we could be absolutely sure that we knew it was an impact of the pause last year. That is why we referenced the floods in Pakistan and the drought in Somalia. It was absolutely clear in both those cases how there was a delay and a reduction compared with previous years. It was also appropriate because expenditure on refugees in the UK is considered to be humanitarian expenditure. In a way, you can see it being directly set off what happens in the humanitarian space.

There was another context in which we could clearly see the impact, because we happened to be doing our review looking at the replenishment of the Global Fund. The UK was traditionally a very major donor to the Global Fund—a leading donor—and was certainly under considerable pressure to be very generous, as it had been in the past, in particular from the US, which was leading the replenishment. There was also a knock-on impact because 50% of what the UK promised would then be given by the US. We could see that there was huge pressure, yet the replenishment process ended with nothing promised from the UK. It was only subsequently possible for Minister Mitchell to announce that they would in fact give £1 billion to the Global Fund. That was still less than was asked for and less than previously, but I think it was higher than perhaps had been anticipated at the time we were looking at it.

- Q34 Sarah Champion:** When this Committee has pushed Ministers—and, indeed, the Prime Minister—on the spend of aid in the UK, the line they come back with is that it is within the OECD DAC rules. My opinion is that



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it might be within the rules but it is not really within the spirit. Did you make any assessment of whether it was within the rules morally, or within the spirit of those rules?

Dr Barton: We did make an assessment as best we could. We were able to interact with the officials who deal with the OECD DAC rules, and we looked at their clarifications and interviewed people in FCDO who advise on eligibility. We can see that it is within the rules in that you are allowed to use aid spending for the first year of an asylum seeker or refugee being in your country or in another donor country. To that extent, it is true.

It is also meant to be only for humanitarian or immediate needs, such as shelter, food and so on. It is more difficult to be absolutely sure that in every case it is only for that humanitarian use rather than for integration, which does not qualify. You could consider anything that would be part of integrating a refugee into the UK work scene, or, potentially, you could consider schooling as part of integration. I suppose it is questionable what you will count. That is not something on which there is a precise ruling from the DAC.

It is more of a matter of taking a conservative approach, which is the way in which the DAC has decided to advise countries to use the rules: "You have this ability, but please be conservative in how you apply it." We did not find that the UK was very conservative, because we could see that many other countries were adopting a different approach on specific areas. The UK has the option not to consider something as eligible; instead, it uses a modelling technique most of the time, and you simply cannot tell exactly what the money is used for.

In relation to the Ukraine scheme, for example, something called a tariff is applied. To be practical, you do not want to give funding to local authorities where you say, "You can spend it on this, but not on that." On the other hand, though, what is the verification to make sure that this is actually legitimately within the rules? That is why we recommended a review, as Iceland did, and a more conservative approach. Just the fact that the UK is spending double the proportion that others are suggests that they must not be taking a conservative approach—although that is partly to do with how much it costs here.

Q35 **Nigel Mills:** Tamsyn, the end is near—or nearer than it was. Perhaps this is your chance to reflect on your period as commissioner. What do you think has gone well? What might you recommend that your successor could do a bit differently, or what would you like to see changed?

Dr Barton: Yes, indeed, the end is coming at the end of September. This gives me a brief moment to plug the fact that we are going to be doing an overarching review, as at the end of the previous phase, where we will bring together all our findings and the recurrent themes across reviews, some of which we have just been discussing, in relation to all the crises, the internal changes and so on. There I will have a lot more to say about what has been happening more broadly. You are helping me, in a way,



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because I am about to write the foreword to our annual report so I need to think about what I should say there.

I am very proud of what we have achieved in our time at ICAI, in what you will agree has been a pretty difficult time to do scrutiny. Probably the thing I am most proud of is that ICAI is still here and still independent. Once again, thank you for your help with that. More than that, we have produced about the right number of reviews covering the right range of topics, so we are reasonably representative. We always try to be fair. That is overarchingly important. I like to think that we are respected by all our stakeholders for being true and fair in our assessments, and I think we have managed that.

I am very proud of my fellow commissioners and I really hope that the next commission will be as great as they are, because we have had a really good range of skills to bring to bear, which has helped us to cover the waterfront. For those reviews with a more audit focus, for example, we have been able to draw on the expertise of my colleague Tarek, and we have had the expertise of my colleague Hugh on areas like Afghanistan, where he had a strong background. I look back with a lot of satisfaction on what we have managed to publish and the improvements that we have seen despite the adverse circumstances in Government delivery over time.

What should we have done better? I can instantly tell you a huge frustration to me that we haven't done better, because it was my top priority at the beginning and I have failed to deliver it: better communication of our reviews and results. That is, I fear, partly down to our lack of staff. As I mentioned, for half the commission we have not had a head of engagement, which has made that more challenging.

I think we have nevertheless managed to get the appropriate level of coverage in the national and international media. We do not chase headlines—we just want to make people aware—but we have not done enough, I feel, in communicating with the stakeholders who are most expert and we do not do as many learning events as we should. I planned to do a lot more going to universities, for example. I started off doing much more than I have been able to do since. I think covid really damaged our ability to communicate well.

I am hoping that the next commission, fully staffed, with a whole new level of energy to achieve that and a set of stakeholders more ready to do it, will do a lot more on the communications front. I am sure the Committee can help with that as well—you have already helped a lot with the communication of our work—because everybody is listening to you, even if they might not notice us otherwise.

Q36 Nigel Mills: There are some people—probably not us on the Committee—who just think, “What is the point? Why don't we just get the NAO to occasionally look at the spend?” How would you answer that?

Dr Barton: I am an enormous fan of the NAO and I am very pleased to say that we have had very good collaboration during this commission. We



have seen a real uptick in how that has worked. The most effective scrutiny is when we can bring our different models of working together.

Long ago, when I worked in DFID, the NAO was the main scrutineer and it did not have enormous resources to do that scrutiny. It would do one and a half major topics a year—the departmental overview, a few financial audits. You would not have been able to have, as we have in the last year, 13 projects looking in depth at the full range of different types of aid. You would not have had, for example, one of the innovations during my time, which is that we brought in something called citizen engagement, or effective people engagement, whereby we brought in the voices of people directly affected by UK aid. As a matter of principle, we think it is important that their voice should be included in our reviews, but it is also extremely important evidence of what has really happened. That sort of thing would be very difficult for an organisation like the NAO to organise.

I think we work better in a complementary way. For example, on the management of the spending target, we did a couple of reviews on the back of earlier NAO reviews. The baton went back to them and I think that, between us, that was more effective scrutiny. On refugees, too, we have been working with the NAO, and I think they are likely to produce something in the not-to-distant future where they will benefit from the work we did on procurement, because we were able to access those documents. It is a stronger model of scrutiny as it stands now.

Q37 Nigel Mills: If you were setting out the requirements for an effective chief commissioner, what would they be? Perhaps if you were to ask a question at the interview panels this week, what would you ask?

Dr Barton: It does very much depend on the context. Looking at these last four years, you needed somebody to be quite tough and independent-minded. I hope that is not going to be needed quite so much in the next four years. You need quite a multi-skilled person in the role. I am sure I possess only a small fraction of the skills required.

Stakeholder management is probably top of the list. ICAI has many, many stakeholders, and many people to speak to, and that is something that I know that I have not done as well as I would like to have done with the full range of stakeholders. I hope the next commissioner will do even better. During my time, we have at least managed to bring in external stakeholders earlier in our review process for the most part, which they have welcomed. I think, on the whole, that the Government have, at least in relation to most of the people we deal with, found that our approach of trying to listen to them before we insist on recommendations has helped to get better traction. That is probably the most important skill.

Chair: Dr Barton, on behalf of the Committee I thank you for all your work as our chief commissioner.