

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Minister for International Development, HC 635

Tuesday 15 September 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 September 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Janet Daby; Tracy Gilbert; Monica Harding; Noah Law; Brian Mathew; James Naish; Dr Sam Rushworth; David Taylor.

Questions 1-78

Witnesses

I: Kirsty McNeill MP, Minister of State for International Development and Africa, and Nick Dyer, Interim Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kirsty McNeill and Nick Dyer.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you, everybody, for being here for the International Development Committee's first session with the new Minister. It is great to have you here. I wonder if you would introduce yourself and your role. Nick does not really require an introduction, but perhaps you could introduce him and his role, too.

Kirsty McNeill: I am Kirsty McNeill, the Member of Parliament for Midlothian and Minister of State for Development and for Africa. I am joined today by Nick.

Nick Dyer: I am Nick Dyer. I am one of the two permanent secretaries in the FCDO.

Q2 **Chair:** We saw the announcement of the new permanent secretary. Do we know when she will take office?

Nick Dyer: She will formally start on 19 October. I will remain as interim until that point. She is in the office this week starting the handover.

Q3 **Chair:** Will you go back to the role where you focused on development? Do we know how the two roles will carve out?

Nick Dyer: She and I will talk that through, but I expect that a reasonable proportion of my time will be spent on development.

Q4 **Chair:** Having worked with you in this role for the past six years, I can say that your work through some quite turbulent times, both here in the UK and internationally, has been exemplary. You have been that steadying figure, which has been really reassuring. Thank you for all that you have done. You have been quite remarkable and incredibly flexible in the roles and challenges that you have taken on. Thank you ever so much for that.

Nick Dyer: Thank you.

Q5 **Chair:** Minister, could you outline your vision and priorities when it comes to international development?

Kirsty McNeill: Thank you, Chair, for your work and that of all Committee members. As you say, this is my first time in front of you, but it certainly will not be the last. Some of you may have seen that I was interviewed in *The Guardian* on Monday. One thing I talked about there was the need to sweat the assets. We simply will not be able to do that without your scrutiny and challenge. Helping to drive our performance through transparency and accountability to you will be incredibly important to me, and I will always be delighted to be in dialogue with you.

I thought it might be helpful to mention areas where there will be some continuity with the Department's previous approach, and others where I hope to bring a slightly new perspective.

Chair: That would be great.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirsty McNeill: There will be continuity on the Africa approach that Baroness Chapman announced at the end of last year—one very much focused on equitable partnership and a modern approach to development, particularly on the continent. There will also be continuity on the four shifts with which you are so familiar: from donor to investor; from service delivery to systems support; from grants to expertise; and from international interventions to local leadership. I am very committed to those and believe the Committee welcomed them. You should expect to see them continue.

There will also be some real continuity on allocations. I am conscious that the Committee has not had a chance to meet and discuss the allocations since they were released towards the end of the last Session. To my mind, the allocations are not up for being reopened, for lots of reasons that we might want to go into. Inside the allocations is a focus on the multilaterals and what can be achieved working with others. So, expect some continuity on those.

There are three areas where I hope to bring something of a new flavour. I hope it will not be a radical departure that would disrupt the work of the Department or partners in any way, but a new focus. The first is to be energetic and unapologetic about a values-led approach, and that the core purpose of our development work is to save and change lives overseas in our partner countries. I will be unashamed about saying so.

Secondly, I will focus on the five securities that I laid out in my NEF speech last night: health security, climate security, food security, human security and economic security. You will see there is something of a read-across to the things that we prioritised in the allocations. I want to focus on those five headings because the security frame is, to my mind, the way we talk about the mutual interests of north and south and also—I hope that this will be welcomed by and of interest to the Committee—the way to bring the full capabilities of the FCDO to bear on our development objectives.

Whatever one feels about the merger, the fact that it has happened means that the Development Minister is now able, if they choose, to pull on a much wider toolkit. I am interested in what those of us from a more thematic background can learn from and draw on from the context and analytical capabilities that the FCDO has in abundance.

The third slightly new thing is a renewed focus on who development is for. I have already telegraphed quite strongly in the Department that I am very keen that we maintain our focus on women and girls, and a women and girls agenda beyond VAWG—although VAWG is critically important and foundational, I want to focus on an agenda for women's liberation that goes much wider—and on children and young people. What that will mean operationally we are still working though, but I have telegraphed quite clearly that a focus on children's rights and the potential and opportunity for young people will be a big focus of what I want to see in every submission.



Q6 Chair: Could we pick away at some of that? I have never been entirely convinced on the Africa approach. I don't think we got that much detail from the last Minister. I believe it came out of the Foreign Secretary's reset—we have had so many, but the David Lammy approach, which seemed to me to be very much a Government-to-Government approach. It was almost treating the African nations as a homogenous lump and, of course, they all have different priorities, different stresses and different successes. I wonder if you could tell us what the Africa approach means to you.

Kirsty McNeill: Lord Collins, the previous Africa Minister, did a very long and intensive set of consultations across Africa with, yes, Government interlocutors, but also people in the private sector and people in civil society. To my mind, what was interesting was that across those three sectors and communities, there was a very consistent message: "We just want a very brisk and businesslike approach. We don't mind if you are being transactional, because we would like to be transactional, too. We all want to do deals that are in our mutual interest."

Some of the reflection from colleagues was that sometimes British interlocutors have not been as straightforward about what they want out of the conversation as some other international partners. Certainly, in the times of geopolitical contestation that we are in, some other partners that were available to African countries were just much more straightforward with them: "We would like access to x, y, z; in return we are willing to offer a, b, c." Colleagues across the continent said, "We actually don't mind if Britain is like that. Just be straightforward with us. Then, when we are doing things that are about our values or about development, and where you are here to help, that's great. Be brisk and honest about that, too."

To my mind, the Africa approach is a much more honest approach to the fact that we have foreign policy objectives across the continent, as well as development ones. It does have contained within it—I think you are right to pick this up, Chair—a degree of primacy on Government, which I think is legitimate and fair, because the state is the duty bearer. So I think it is right for us to focus a lot on the relationships with Government, but I come from a human rights-based approach to development, which is why I say I have put this new focus on women and girls and children and young people.

How I am marrying those in my head is that, yes, we should have brisk, businesslike relationships with Governments, because they are the duty bearers, but if they are to be equitable relationships of genuine partners, that means not us taking a vow of silence and never saying when we think our partners are wrong. They should tell us when they think we are wrong; I will reserve my right to say when I think they are failing in their duties to some of their communities. One of the things I reflected on last night at NEF is that one of my worries about the SDG framework was the language of "leave no one behind". That implies that there is just some sort of force that carries some people along and some people just get left behind. Actually, often, people are pushed behind.

Chair: Absolutely—sometimes by their own Governments.

Kirsty McNeill: Precisely so. The way I am marrying the fact that I come from a human rights background and a human rights-based approach to development with a focus on equitable partnerships with Governments is that some of the content of that partnership will be brisk conversations where we think that Governments are failing to uphold their obligations to their citizens, particularly when we think they are failing to uphold their obligations to citizens on the basis of their identity.

You are right to pull out that there is a focus on Government-to-Government relationships in the Africa approach, but it is not to the exclusion of our relationships with civil society or community leaders or the private sector.

Chair: Could I pause you and bring Noah in?

Q7 **Noah Law:** Minister, thank you for that clarity around the Africa approach. It certainly makes a bit more sense now. To what extent do you think we have seen success in taking some of that more transactional and more commercial approach with our partners?

Kirsty McNeill: I think it is going relatively well. If I could just bring us back to the challenge from the Chair, I don't think it is quite fair to say that it has been interpreted on the continent as a continent-wide approach that does not differentiate between our relationships with different places, because the work we are doing with Nigeria on growth or—I made reference to this last night at NEF—what we have done with Ghana on growth is quite different from what we are doing with some other places, which is much more about the security relationship, access to critical minerals and so on. I think that actually people in African capitals would say we are clear with them and they are clear in their own minds on what we want the content of the relationships to be.

Again, hopefully this gives you some reassurance, Chair. In the last few weeks I have had a lot of bilateral conversations with African Ministers, and I think they would say that for each of them it is a bilateral relationship that is specific to that country, in that they are not being treated in any sense as an unmediated continental whole, although we obviously do care a lot about continental institutions, like the AU and the African Development Bank, with which we are also deepening our relationships.

Q8 **Chair:** The three institutions that you spoke about—Government, business and civil society—probably all know how to engage with you. My concern is how those people who are the most marginalised in society are given, if not support, then a voice and acknowledgement by this Government. Do you think that is part of our role, or is that overstepping our remit?

Kirsty McNeill: I think the focus on localisation, which, as I say, is one of the shifts that I am very much intending to keep up, will help with that. There has been quite a lot of somewhat opportunistic but quite accurate commentary from the development community about whether the Prime



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Minister's focus on devolution is going to inform our international approach. I think it absolutely will, because the same spirit animates both, and it is that the people closest to the problems are best placed to generate the solutions. Neither domestically nor internationally are we operating with a kind of deficit model that says all people have is needs. Actually, people have unending capabilities, and it is our job to put our capabilities at their service. So yes, I think a human-rights-based approach, coupled with localisation, will give us the momentum to continue relationships with communities. That is certainly what I will be hoping to do.

Q9 James Naish: How do you tie that with backing the multilaterals more than bilateral support?

Kirsty McNeill: A number of members of the Committee were in a conversation with me and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, thinking through development finance, and one of the things that we teased out in that conversation is that there is a spectrum, and you can legitimately place yourself at a number of points on that spectrum. It is for this Committee and others in the development community to discuss between ourselves where we want to land on this.

The thing that bilateral is really good for is attributed impact, and the thing that multilaterals are really good for is scaled impact. Is it a tool of British soft power and is it something where we have much more control over both impact and attribution when we do things bilaterally? Yes, but personally I have a strong bias towards scaled impact, and I am personally willing to trade off quite a lot of national attribution to get to scaled results for communities. I think that for this Committee and, as I say, others who have development expertise, that will be a debate that we are having for years.

Q10 Noah Law: On that point, Minister, one of our reports, on the future of aid, I think critiqued the level to which we are able to get an understanding, or at least a transparent understanding, particularly from members of the public, about that attributed impact. I appreciate what you are saying about the difference that you are able to make at scale with multilateral approaches, but reflecting on some of those discussions that we have had in this Committee over the last couple of years, do you really think that our bilateral institutions are having the attributed impact that you described? If so, is it clear?

Kirsty McNeill: One of the challenges—and please come back in if you think I am misunderstanding you—is that the bias towards multilateralism, which I hold quite strongly as a prior and which I believe is very obvious from our allocations, is not uncritical, and there are three things that I drew attention to last night about challenges in the multilateral system.

One is around effectiveness. It is not the case that the multilateral system has uniformly delivered results at scale in exactly the way that we would have wanted as taxpayers, so there does need to be reform to secure



HOUSE OF COMMONS

effectiveness and to secure transparency in the way that you are describing. Also, the representation in the multilateral system, particularly the southern voice, is not where we would want it to be. One of the things that I laid out last night is that one of the reasons the Foreign Secretary wanted to become governor of the World Bank—I hope that people took some comfort from that, which he did, I think, on day one in the job; certainly, the announcement was made in the first few days—was so that we can drive that reform agenda.

So, yes, we do have a prior and we do have a bias towards the multilateral system, but it is certainly not uncritical, and that package of investment is going to come with a big set of reform demands as well.

Nick Dyer: One of the reasons why people broadly accept our contributions to Gavi is that we can tell the story that the UK's contribution will immunise 109 million children. We do not do that as much as we should with our contributions to the World Bank. We talk about our £1.98 billion investment. Well, what does that mean in terms of attributed impact? We know that between now and 2030 the World Bank will provide 300 million people with access to energy, so let's talk about that and about our contribution to it. Let's also talk about the World Bank's efforts in terms of the 80 million children it is going to educate. We do not talk enough about the impacts; we are talking too much about the money we put in.

Q11 **Noah Law:** I just wonder whether we do that well enough for bilateral programming. Again, one of our Committee's findings is that, across the board, transparency around impact is often lacking.

Nick Dyer: We have it; we track programmes and we can tell the stories. I could reel off a whole bunch of statistics to you about the number of people in Afghanistan we have reached with humanitarian support. But as a general rule, in terms of our communications, Ministers are challenging us all the time to lead with our impact stories and not with our money commitments. That has got to be the right approach. We have had that conversation many times in this Committee, and I think that is what we have to get much better at doing.

Kirsty McNeill: I think where you are coming from and where we are aligned is that, honestly, we just have not had the level of ministerial confidence in telling the story about why aid works that I think this Committee would like to have seen. I am very happy to be out there in the argument. Of course there is scepticism; there will be editorial scepticism from some outlets and there will be public scepticism at a time of straitened financial circumstances. We should take the argument head on, and I am very willing and happy to do that; I think it is a really core bit of my job.

Q12 **Janet Daby:** Baroness Chapman, who previously had your role as Minister, had a seat at the Cabinet table and attended Cabinet meetings. I just want to get a sense of how you feel, as the Minister responsible for ODA across Government, you can carry out your role effectively without

attending Cabinet.

Kirsty McNeill: This may be a slightly strange thing for a politician to say, but I was profoundly relaxed about that because I am not particularly motivated by the status of whether I am in the Cabinet or not. If we treat a Cabinet seat as a mechanism for being able to have cross-Government conversations, then as long as that can be secured in another way, I am profoundly relaxed, and I think it can be secured in other ways.

As the Committee may know, historically there has been a cross-Government ODA board. Nick and I have been speaking about this from the moment of my appointment. It is very important that the accounting around ODA across Government is done to the very highest standards and I am sure that Nick, as accounting officer, is very alive to the need to get that absolutely right. That cross-Government Committee will need to keep doing that. However, I do not think it should be restricted to just doing that, because the times when the UK Government have had the biggest impact on development have been when there has been a cross-Government development approach, and policy coherence for development.

One of the things that I am looking at and taking advice from officials on is how we can reconstitute that ODA board, so that it still performs that very important accounting function but operates much more as a cross-Government-policy-coherence-for-development board. We are working through what the governance of that would be. If we get that up and running and it works, I would be delighted for the Committee, and the wider development community, to hold me to account on whether we are actually delivering policy coherence for development through that mechanism. It is perfectly possible to sit in the Cabinet and not achieve that, and I believe it is possible to not sit in the Cabinet and achieve that—and achieving that is the prize and the thing I would like to be held to account for.

I have already started conversations with a number of ministerial colleagues; even in the absence of that governance framework, there are lots of people across Government who are very alive to this agenda and want to help. For example, the AI Minister is very alive to the potential around AI for development and the risks of AI to development, and he already wants to work with us on that. I feel pretty heartened at the number of people across Government who are seized of the development imperative. One of my private objectives for my job and my time in this role is that I sort of want everyone to think that they are the Development Minister.

- Q13 **Janet Daby:** That makes complete sense. As a former Minister, I think that ministerial meetings are absolutely the right thing to do and to have across Government, but if you are at Cabinet meeting, you can speak directly to the Secretaries of State and things can probably move a little faster than they sometimes do in Government. How can you navigate those types of conversations and make sure you have the ear of the Secretaries of State across Government to move things on?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirsty McNeill: One of the key things is that we have a development representative in the Cabinet in the form of the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs. The Foreign Secretary could not have been clearer that he sees every element of his job title as important and that development and climate are right at the heart of British foreign policy. They are not an adjunct; he sees them as right at the beating heart. I feel very confident that our Foreign Secretary will be making the case for development in every Cabinet meeting, but also that he will be providing me with licence and support to roam Whitehall to get these arguments won.

- Q14 **James Naish:** Europe is cross-cutting throughout Cabinet. How are our discussions with our European allies progressing in terms of international development? It was confirmed at the last UK-EU summit that there would be a dialogue on international development. Where has that got to?

Kirsty McNeill: In breaking news, I am delighted to say that I have been invited to the EU Development Ministers' meeting. I think that is the first time a British Development Minister has been invited since Brexit.

Chair: Congratulations.

Kirsty McNeill: Thank you. I cannot go for the whole of the session, but we were delighted to receive the invite, and I will be going to have a series of discussions with European partners in early October.

Nick Dyer: Last month I had the first development and humanitarian dialogue with the European Commission—with my counterparts—since Brexit. That is the first in 10 years.

Chair: The first since Brexit?

Nick Dyer: Yes.

Chair: That is shocking.

Nick Dyer: Well, it has taken a while. It illustrates that the relationship has been reset at both official and ministerial levels.

- Q15 **James Naish:** Am I right to believe that there has been an agreement on information exchange as well, or is that what we were working towards? You have both just described relationships, but what technical work is being done to align how we are working with EU partners on development?

Nick Dyer: At a technical level, we have identified two or three themes where working teams are coming together to see what we could do and what we could do more of. I think the key thing with the European Commission is that as it goes into its next financial perspectives next year there will be quite a big reset in terms of how it interprets and sets its policy on international development. We are going to have to see where it overlaps and where it docks in, because it could look and feel quite different.

Kirsty McNeill: I would welcome this Committee's scrutiny of one thing. We have this series of European meetings, the first in a decade, about which we are delighted. I will be seeing the European members of the G7 at the G7 Development Ministers' meetings that are coming up on the margins of other multilateral settings. One of the benefits of having the Development Minister in the FCDO is the ability to pull on the entirety of the network. Ongoing questions from the Committee about how we are using our network and our embassies in European capitals to talk to those partners about development and humanitarian concerns would be very welcome, because I am very alive to the full suite of capabilities that, happily, are now at my fingertips. We need to make sure we are using them and that we do not see this as just a series of conversations I have in Africa, or other regional Ministers have with the regions for which they are responsible in the Global South. This should absolutely be at the heart of all of our European conversations, too. Your ongoing scrutiny of that would be really welcome.

Q16 **James Naish:** Finally, you mentioned chatting to ministerial colleagues. Have there been discussions with Minister Falconer on how he interprets aid or international development as part of his portfolio?

Kirsty McNeill: We have not done that yet. As you will appreciate, we have been hither and yon, and there has been lots of travel for the ministerial team, but we are all going to be together for the rest of this week, so expect to hear more.

Q17 **Tracy Gilbert:** Hello Kirsty. While we are talking about cross-departmental spend, do you know how much underspend there has been in the Home Office on in-donor refugee costs for 2025-26 and 2026-27?

Kirsty McNeill: My understanding is that they are still being calculated but we will not have very long to wait. Nick might be more across that.

Nick Dyer: I think that is right. Our initial indication from the Home Office is that they are tracking pretty close to what their budget and expectation was.

Q18 **Tracy Gilbert:** How optimistic are we that any of those savings will go to ODA spend?

Kirsty McNeill: As you will know, under the spending review settlement, we are no longer the spender and saver of last resort. It certainly does not come automatically, but there will have to be ongoing conversations with the Treasury. There are accounting questions that we are very alive to and tracking closely, but as I say we are still waiting for the Treasury to give us some final figures. At that point, we will be able to enter into dialogue.

Q19 **Chair:** Minister, if there is an underspend, what do you want to happen?

Kirsty McNeill: I do not think you will find any Development Minister who does not want to maximise the resources available for development, but it is also not my role to second guess what the Treasury would decide.

Q20 **Dr Rushworth:** I want some clarity on this. It is a new Government, a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

new Administration. The previous Government were rhetorically committed to 0.7% while actually outlining several years of cuts. Has that position changed? I have heard your commitment to it rhetorically, but I am not sure there is any material change in the policy position between the former Prime Minister and the new Prime Minister.

Kirsty McNeill: We have a manifesto that is operable. I am not going to second guess any of the very difficult decisions that the Treasury has to make, but the manifesto position is public, clear and, in my mind, still operable.

Q21 **Dr Rushworth:** I am a little confused. The manifesto position is clear, but things have obviously changed since we got into government. Cuts to aid have been outlined, but we have still said, "If these fiscal rules are met, we want to get there." There is a clear indication of intent, but I am not sure whether the pathway to getting there has changed at all, or if there is no change from the previous Prime Minister's position.

Kirsty McNeill: If you are asking whether a year-by-year road map has been published, the answer is no, that has not changed. What the fiscal conditions allow is a judgment that will be made by the Chancellor and the Treasury, not the FCDO. As I say, the manifesto position, which I reiterated very publicly in *The Guardian* this week, is still operable, but ultimately the assessment of the fiscal conditions is a Treasury decision, not an FCDO decision.

Q22 **Monica Harding:** Minister, you are not in the Cabinet and there does not seem to be a road map back to 0.7%, yet at the same time the Foreign Secretary says that international development is a priority. How do all those things marry up?

Kirsty McNeill: One of the things I am discovering about working with the Foreign Secretary—because he is a man of action and he has got straight stuck into some very big changes in foreign policy, such as the takeover of the governorship of the World Bank in the first few days and the very big change in policy on Israel and Palestine in the first few weeks of Parliament returning—is that he will show you his intent by what he does, and we want to be judged by what we do. At UNGA next week, you will see a lot of focus on development from the Foreign Secretary, which has not always been the case. Historically, a lot of the development engagement, and the diplomatic engagement around development, has been done by the person in my role. The Foreign Secretary will absolutely be leading from the front on that at UNGA, as well as at the annuals. The autumn, as you know, is a very intense period of international engagement. He will also be at COP. We therefore have three huge multilateral moments where he will be leading the development diplomatic efforts from the front.

Nick Dyer: May I add two things to that? The first is that we have deliberately changed our posture, moving away from thinking that we are an organisation that can buy development results in individual countries, towards seeing how we can scale and unlock other resources. I think that is a significant shift and can actually make quite a big difference.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Secondly, as the Minister said, it is about how we use all the convening opportunities that we have. As I am sure we will come on to, next year we have the G20 and then the G7 after that, with the UK chairing both. The question is how we use those convening moments to make differences and demonstrate leadership that can actually effect the difference in the world that we are trying to make.

Q23 Monica Harding: I understand all that, and it is all really welcome, but it should, in my opinion, be happening anyway, alongside the return to 0.7%. Legally, the House has decided that we should go back to 0.7%, and it is in your manifesto. The fiscal circumstances do not seem as though they are going to allow that in this Parliament, so will you be fighting to get to 0.7% anyway in this Parliament?

Kirsty McNeill: I am very committed to the 0.7% target, and I am very committed to the good that aid does, particularly the high-quality aid that we have in this country. As I said in *The Guardian*, if you have more aid, you can have more impact. That is very clearly my position, and I don't think you would ever find a Development Minister who said that they wanted less of it.

At the same time, I am also a Minister in a Government that is dealing with multiple competing pressures, lots of which I would imagine members of this Committee would like to see addressed. We are facing a generational moment for our national security: we have a land war in Europe and a real need to invest in our national defence. As a member of the Government, of course I will litigate the case for development, but equally, I do not resile in any way from our other foreign policy objectives, which need investment and which need to succeed.

Q24 Monica Harding: Do you think that pitching defence against development is the right narrative?

Kirsty McNeill: I don't think that I have pitched them against each other. I have said that there are competing pressures. In the end, money cannot be spent twice. We need to invest in our national security; we need to invest in our public services; we need to invest in the five securities that I have laid out. I am saying simply, as a fact, that how to reconcile those various competing pressures is a decision that the Chancellor will make.

If you are asking whether I am personally committed to scaled investment through ODA, yes, I am, but I am also personally committed to other ways in which we can have an impact: through the mobilisation of private capital and the leveraging of the MDBs. There are a number of other tools at our disposal to secure development, and our ODA spend cannot be the only proxy for our commitment to development, in my view.

Q25 Monica Harding: Can I ask that specific question again? Do you think that the Government pitching defence against development is the right narrative? You said that you cannot have both, essentially—the defence budget needs to be upped, and therefore that money will come from development.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirsty McNeill: I reject the characterisation that they are being pitched against each other. I think the Government have set out for the public and the taxpayer, with what I believe is huge public support, that we are living in unbelievably dangerous times.

- Q26 **Chair:** Minister, could I put it another way? There is a reason why the most vocal defenders of humanitarian and development spending are people in the armed forces, both in this country and internationally. They know that if you use development money well, you can get upstream of the drivers that lead to conflict. I guess the question is whether you will be making that argument internally, exactly as you are saying: that it is not either/or and that the two are intrinsically linked if you want to put prevention and early intervention into this country's strategy when it comes to our defence.

Kirsty McNeill: What you are helpfully teasing out is that one of the other things to which I am committed is prevention. Honestly—I think the Department would say this as well—when the four shifts were being thought through, we probably did not have as strong an emphasis on prevention and anticipatory action as we might have done. I am very much hoping to bring that to the fore. You will have seen the announcement I made yesterday on anticipatory action on El Niño. Yes, prevention should always be our approach, but in the end the Chancellor has choices of nightmares because of the inheritance in the public finances that we faced. I do not envy him his role for a second, because the pressures are enormous.

- Q27 **Noah Law:** Can you measure prevention, and if so, how do you ensure that it links back to our broader foreign policy goals? Is that still the ambition through the integration with FCDO, as I think you suggested at the start?

Kirsty McNeill: That is such a good question. Every funder, every Government, every international institution in the world is wrestling with that challenge. We certainly know that that is much more efficient and effective when conflicts are prevented. We certainly have a track record of success on pre-positioned finance and so on, and our anticipatory action agenda has been relatively successful, but is there a precise measurement that would satisfy every sceptic and critic? Probably not.

Nick Dyer: At the intervention level, yes, you can examine it. We have good evidence on randomised control trials of interventions that prevent violence against women and girls. You can track that. The example from a couple of years ago, when Somalia, after six failed rains, did not fall into a famine as it did in 2011, was purely the result of the fact that we had put in a lot of resilience activities to shore up and make people more adaptable to the shifting climate. That was a direct result of our activities.

There are some ways you can measure it, but overall, it is very difficult to measure an intervention to avoid a conflict in country X if you do not know that that conflict would have happened without your intervention.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirsty McNeill: Can I come back in on that, Chair, because I detect a note of scepticism from you about it? Honestly, I shared that scepticism. When I joined the Department, one briefing I was given was on the Department's work on best buys, and the evidence. To be very blunt, I had a degree of scepticism because one of my other priors is that the process of social change in this country did not happen because of RCTs. We do not have a sanitation system in this country because somebody did a programme intervention that they designed, deployed and evaluated; we have one because, as a society, we decided that it was not acceptable that people were dying of cholera and that we should invest collectively in sanitation. I was somewhat sceptical when I received that briefing, but I was blown away. I think that the Department's evidence and evaluation work is world class. I too opened the folder with a degree of scepticism, but I think that the more the Committee digs into the evidence work of the Department, the more impressed you will be—that was certainly my experience.

Q28 **Chair:** Minister, we would love to dig in, but we do not always get the information. If we could have a copy of that—even if it is just in private—we would be grateful.

Kirsty McNeill: Genuinely, let us not wait for our set-piece interactions. I am incredibly keen to be very proactive with the Committee in giving you as much information as you need to do your job.

Chair: That would be great—thank you very much. Monica, do you want to come back in, or are you satiated at this point?

Q29 **Monica Harding:** I actually wanted to come back in on the earlier point about the relationship with the European Union. How are you talking to like-minded European nations about international development, and how will you nurture those partnerships?

Kirsty McNeill: People may have picked up on a degree of tension between two approaches by the Department. I do not think that they exist in tension, but they have to run concurrently. What I mean by that is that we do have a bias towards a multilateral system—I say “we” because I think that is true of both myself and the Foreign Secretary. I am not one of these world-weary cynics who thinks you prove how intelligent and worldly wise you are by dismissing the multilateral system and saying it is all completely irrelevant. That is not my starting point at all. I think the multilateral system is under huge pressure, in terms of its effectiveness, its financing and its legitimacy. It is under huge pressure, but that is all the more reason for us to buttress and defend it, and to lean into it and help reform it to make it more effective.

There are some brakes on progress in the multilateral system, however, and when we feel them pulling against what we want to achieve, we will also adopt what the Department calls agile alliances. That is the more bespoke work to pull together like-minded partners to get done what we need done. You saw that in the work on sanctions that the Foreign Secretary announced last week. We will do bespoke, but every single time

that we can, we will defend the legitimacy and the work of the established governance and the multilateral system.

Nick Dyer: This is something that the Minister may not be aware of yet, but we have a whole bunch of established, ongoing dialogues and relationships with some of our European partners and beyond. We have the Nordic Plus, which is a partnership with the Nordic countries, and once every two years, I think, there is a ministerial-level conversation that the Minister will be able to go to. At an official level, I am going to Germany at the end of next month to have a development dialogue with my German counterpart. We do that with the French and with other European member states as well, so there is ongoing engagement at the official and political level.

Q30 Monica Harding: That is really reassuring to know. Can I extend that by asking what conversations you are having with the US and your US counterparts about their position on international development at the moment? The USAID cuts were massive and are having an impact right now. Will the relationship with the US change, or will the vibes change, in terms of the conversation you are having about how we might bring that back?

Nick Dyer: We have a number of dialogues with the US, such as on the Hill—so when Ministers go to the US, they talk and engage with the committee structures in the House and the Senate, including on issues around international development. Through the course of the G20, we are also engaging with the US Treasury on some of the issues on development finance.

On the development side, it is harder, because of the changes that have gone on. Many of the established entry points that we had have disappeared. We built a reasonably ongoing relationship with the key US official responsible for development, but he has just been moved. He has moved out of that job, so it is a moving feast. We are always looking for opportunities to find entry points. When we go to the States, we try to find—and we do undertake—engagement.

We then have the formal set pieces like the G7. The G7 Development Ministers' meeting, which the Minister will go to, will include the current US counterpart. That will be an opportunity to build a relationship with them there.

Q31 Monica Harding: Another thing that I found when I was in the States was that state governors are very interested in global health and how it is impacting their states. Is that a conversation or a partnership that you are having or might have?

Kirsty McNeill: I cannot say whether it is one that we are having, but the agile alliances approach means that we would like to speak to all sorts of different international institutions and levels of government about how to get done what we need done. Do you have anything to add on that, Nick?

Nick Dyer: Certainly, at the state level, we have had engagement on things like climate in the past. Whether we are engaging on health, I don't know, to be honest—I would have to check with the Department of Health.

Chair: We have just launched an inquiry into global health, so we would be very interested in whatever you can provide us with.

Q32 **Brian Mathew:** Minister, I believe you got real-world experience with Save the Children Fund, if I am not mistaken. Of course, you may not be in the Cabinet, but you will be with us in the Commons, so that is even better.

You have talked about the five securities: health security, food security, climate security, economic security and human security. There is something that goes through every single one of those securities and that is WASH—a blue stream, if you like. It is something that people understand. If you look right across the understanding of what aid is for, people get that; however, that is something that has been absolutely decimated in terms of its backing from the UK Government.

Our report on the future of UK aid raised concerns about the level of Government engagement with the public around aid spending. What will your approach be to communicating the importance of aid to the public? I put it to you that that single aspect of WASH is perhaps something that would work, but let's hear from you.

Kirsty McNeill: You could not be more right to pick up on the point—indeed, the special representative for climate picked this precise point up with me—that there is a relationship between food security, water security and energy security. She was absolutely right to pick me up on it. As you will appreciate, as a speaker, there is always a trade-off between how many securities you get into. I did fold—certainly conceptually, in my mind—water and energy security alongside food security. I hope you forgive me for not calling them out directly, but that does not mean that they do not conceptually belong together in my planning around the securities.

In terms of communication with the public, I would be interested in reflections from the Committee. My reflection is that I have never encountered someone who would be characterised as very isolationist—“No, I don't care at all about people dying overseas. I don't care at all about my obligations to other members of our human family.” That is not where the scepticism, to the degree that it exists, is coming from. Where it is coming from is: “Does this work? If I believe it works and I believe we can afford it, then I believe we should do more of it.” The scepticism is about the effectiveness of our development spend, not its underlying moral purpose.

Like you, I will be energetic and motivated to have the conversation with the public that, yes, it does work, and I am not trying to change your values; I am trying to tell you that we, through this wonderful act of pooling our resources, do something amazing together. We save children's lives, whether it is through access to clean water, immunisation, or access

to food that families would not otherwise get. We do something extraordinary together. As I say, the scepticism that needs to be overcome is not whether we should do that if it works; it is whether it works.

Nick Dyer: You are right, Mr Mathew, about the importance of water. We all understand the importance of water and the fact that 25% of people do not have access to safely managed water. All the evidence shows us that water is really important for health, safe births, etc. It is true that probably about six years ago we shifted away from direct service delivery in water to focusing more on how you improve systems and leverage finance. We are unapologetic about that. We are doing all we can in terms of trying to leverage that resource and that finance through the other relationships that we have, like the MDBs and the World Bank.

I was particularly heartened last spring with the Water Forward initiative. There was a global commitment to ensure that another 1 billion people gain access to water, and the World Bank's contribution to that was 400 million. They have massively stepped up. We talked about attributed impact earlier in the session, and we have talked about the UK's attributed impact with our increased contribution to the World Bank. We are putting more money into water.

Q33 **Chair:** Would they be the sort of initiatives that we would encourage the World Bank to go further on?

Nick Dyer: The World Bank do a whole bunch of activities. The fact is that the world is becoming more urban and peri-urban than rural. The nature of what we would have done in water and sanitation 30 years ago is very different from what we are doing now. We are trying to build water systems, and they do a lot of that.

Q34 **Chair:** I am thinking of the fantastic project that they did in the DRC of getting water in. Their reach in fragile and conflict-affected states is something that could be expanded, I would argue.

Nick Dyer: That is one of our top priorities in terms of our engagement with the World Bank. When the Foreign Secretary went to Washington recently and met Ajay Banga, he talked about fragile and conflict-affected states and the importance of the World Bank stepping up in that area.

Q35 **Dr Rushworth:** We have talked a fair bit already about the Government's decision to protect the multilateral aid spend. Obviously, an outcome of that is that the cuts have to fall somewhere, and bilateral aid has taken the big hit. I am interested to get your thoughts on that and on the likely impact on our bilateral relationships.

Kirsty McNeill: One of the things that the Committee and certainly external observers have reflected on is whether the hit to bilateral spending will disproportionately hit Africa. Thanks to some of the questions that were raised about that, we have dug into it quite a lot, and we think that our proportion to Africa will be pretty steady, because of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

imputed multilateral spend, about which, as Minister for Africa, I am delighted.

It is also important to be realistic, though. Lots of our conversations with people in African capitals is that they do not want the conversation to be about aid. I am always sensitive about this point, but I think we are in a world of aid and beyond, not beyond aid. I am conscious that the language of “beyond aid” makes it sound like we do not think ODA has a role any more, but I am clear that it does have a role. ODA is absolutely the right instrument for some things; it is not the right instrument for everything, and it is not, in my view, the right proxy for how committed we are to development, but it is absolutely the right instrument for some things.

I am not sure that ODA is the right instrument for building bilateral relationships with African Governments any more, given the conversations that they want to have with us. Being completely blunt, there is a challenge in the fact that I have both my roles, because historically, as you know, the development conversation has been—wrongly, in my view, but none the less we should reflect the reality—shrunk to being an ODA conversation. There is some scepticism in African capitals—“Are you actually the aid Minister?”, which I am absolutely not—but I have a completely equitable and businesslike foreign policy conversation with them, of which our shared development ambitions might be a part. Our ODA spend might be a part of that part, but I am very clear to African Ministers that I am not the aid Minister, and that that is not the only conversation that they should expect to have with me, or that I want to have with them.

Q36 Dr Rushworth: Will there be an impact on our diplomatic power in places where we have pulled out quite significant amounts of UK aid?

Kirsty McNeill: I do not want to mislead you—I have not spoken to all my counterparts yet—but it is fair to say that in the conversations that I have had with counterparts so far, that has not been the conversation they want to have. The conversation that they want to have is, as I say, about a number of their foreign policy concerns, about a number of regional conflicts that are destabilising their regions. They 100% want to have a conversation about finance and about what our G20 might do to get skilled finance into their countries, but as a matter of fact, so far my conversations have not been ones in which our aid choices have been raised by African interlocutors. That is not to say that they will not be—I have more this afternoon and in the weeks to come—but as a matter of fact, that is not the case so far.

Q37 Tracy Gilbert: I was wondering about that point in particular. Some of the cuts are across different Departments and responsibilities—I was thinking about Business and Trade within those conversations—so what is your interface with trade envoys across Government and how do you see that working? Is that something that could be developed further?

Kirsty McNeill: I think two current trade envoys are in post—Ben Coleman for francophone west Africa and Kate Osamor for eastern Africa—



but we are still waiting for a southern Africa trade envoy to replace Calvin Bailey, who by all accounts was doing an absolutely outstanding job. I have already been in conversation with the Department about having the trade envoys in when we are back up to a full complement of three. I have already discussed with the new Minister for Trade, Lord Sarwar, about how we might deal with some of the conversations he has been having in the Gulf. We might want to do joint work on business relationships with Africa. There is certainly a lot of interest in DBIST about working with us on Africa. I think it would be fair to say that the potential of Africa has not been at the top of DBIST's list, but there is a desire to move it up, and certainly a lot of openness from the colleagues I have spoken to.

- Q38 Dr Rushworth:** Pivoting slightly, as I am sure you will know from your previous life outside of politics, often a pound can be spent more effectively at grassroots than by very large organisations, yet the FCDO tendering process often excludes a lot of smaller charities and local organisations from accessing that money. Could you speak to that, and what the FCDO is going to do to ensure that we get money right down to the grassroots?

Kirsty McNeill: That is a great question. Nick, I do not know whether you want to talk about this. Certainly, when I was in Abercrombie House—I think I was able to get this done in my first month in post—the colleagues who work on those partnerships in Abercrombie House are very alive to the very real risks of squeezing out smaller organisations. They impressed on me that they were alive to the risk and wanted me to be alive to the risk, but so far I have not commissioned any advice on that.

Nick Dyer: We are looking hard at that because we recognise that if you have major reporting and design requirements on a project, you are going to ensure that small organisations fall over because they cannot do it. If you ask them to submit in English and not their local language, they are not going to be able to do it, so we are thinking about how to make the programme requirements and tendering requirements more proportionate for the size of the organisation. How do we get to a point where we just do due diligence once, not multiple times? How do we make that simpler? We are looking at that because for far too long we have been an organisation that basically squeezed out small and micro-organisations just because of the way we do our business. That needs to change.

- Q39 Dr Rushworth:** One of the ways that can be done is through good international NGOs on the ground, which can often provide a useful intermediary between the local and the donor. The FCDO has described NGOs as important partners with strong development expertise, so how do you plan to engage with UK INGOs, and how do you plan to use them in this capacity as well?

Nick Dyer: The Minister may well have a better perspective than me on this, but quite a lot of the civil society organisations in the UK are going through this question right now in terms of the trade-off between delivery and being a capacity-building organisation. We have a 10-year programme with Comic Relief where we are looking across three countries at how we

can build local organisations, local charities and NGOs to help in terms of service provision.

We are looking at that through that programme, and we have some examples in a number of countries around the world of where we are trying to engage directly with local organisations rather than going through third parties, because then you just add a whole bunch of additional costs. This is a big question if you really want to drive a higher proportion of your funding through local organisations, as USAID tried to do about five or 10 years ago. They actually did not succeed, but they made some progress. You really have to, not necessarily use third parties, but just have a look at your own systems and procedures.

Kirsty McNeill: My approach to civil society is consistent with when I was in civil society; it hasn't come about since I have changed seat. I have always thought that the relationship between Government and civil society should be about real things. You should have a conversation that is substantive about where you agree, where you disagree, what each side knows that the other does not know, and what you might be able to do together.

I know in times past there has been a desire to ask how big the civil society team is, and whether there is a Government civil society strategy. Honestly, I do not think that that is the test. For me, the test is whether we are convening the relevant expert bits of civil society, either because they are expert from a research perspective or from a programme delivery perspective. Are we convening the relevant bits of civil society on absolutely equal terms with other partners who are feeding in, and indeed on equal terms with our own internal analysis? Are we convening people about real things on which they are well placed to contribute?

I would not want the fact that I have not had a sector meeting to be read as a signal of the value that I place on civil society voices; it should be read as a signal of the value that I place on choreographed set-piece meetings. I do not think that choreographed set-piece meetings are the best way to get the best out of very busy people, as those civil society representatives often are.

I am not in the business of doing lots of bilateral meetings to hear about people's organisational agendas. I know their organisational agendas for the most part, and they can write to me. I am not in the business of doing set-piece, choreographed, lowest common denominator meetings; I want to engage intensively with civil society experts about their biggest priorities on meaty topics where there is an urgency about their contribution.

Q40 Chair: To push you a little on detail, Minister, I hope you would go further than civil society and down to the actual individuals that are living the issue, such as a fisherwoman who has no fish stock or ability to buy a boat to go out further. I am concerned that "civil society" and "localism" are becoming just phrases, and I wonder how you might be able to get to the level of talking to the people who are directly impacted.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Something I have seen that has always blown me away is the Chevening scholars—the investment that we make in the people who we think are the brightest or best. They become the CEOs or Government Ministers with whom we have a relationship. I have seen in-country teams engage with the fisherwoman who has told them the solution, and she then becomes the entrepreneur. We recently met a woman who set up an egg production business and now employs 1,000 women. If we can get to those people, they know the solutions.

Over several Parliaments, this Committee has been pushing the concept of the FCDO office in the country having the business skills to act as a mentor, to help people through things. Even a simplified process is quite complex if you do not speak the language, but if there was the willingness to put microfinance—thousands of pounds, rather than tens of thousands of pounds—into projects, whether those be pilots, investments or just tokens of goodwill, even if you are talking to civil society, that is still, for me, an organised group that knows how to lobby, engage and come to a roundtable. Do you have any appetite to go more granular, to use that annoying expression?

Kirsty McNeill: I might let Nick come back on the use of money in posts through the network. Forgive me Chair—when I was talking about the set-piece, choreographed meetings, that was more about UK civil society. One of the reasons I have not done that so far is precisely because of the challenge that you raised: I am reluctant to privilege the voices of people who happen to live in London and happen to be able to get to the FCDO over voices in country, or voices in other bits of our country. I am sorry if I gave a misleading impression, but that was in answer to Sam's question about UK civil society engagement.

On getting to hear from people directly, I have asked that time with children and young people and women be programmed in for each visit. I was very struck by two things during my Ethiopia visit. First, I visited what was essentially a one-stop shop for survivors of sexual violence; we would be delighted if that were made available in this country. It is an extraordinary place where physical and, if necessary, reconstructive surgery, and psychosocial support, is available, and where there are embedded specialist police officers. It puts in one place access to every piece of support a survivor of sexual violence might need. What I heard from the people who were using that service will stay with me for a long time.

Secondly, I met a number of women who were under a social protection system that can scale in response to climate shock. I know that you are talking about organisations rather than people, but as well as social protection, they received brilliant business mentoring. When you are in receipt of this social protection, we will give you start-up capital and business mentoring support. The only conditions are that you have to complete a business plan in a certain period of time. They all went on to create successful businesses, including the business that was catering our session—they were fantastic.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I wanted to reflect that in part because, like you, I have a deep hunger to actually speak to people with whom, theoretically, the work is being done in partnership. It also gives me the chance to put on the record that social protection is a very powerful tool of development that the development community more generally does not speak about enough. I would welcome ongoing dialogue with the Committee about it, because it is some of the best work I have seen, and it is supported by the UK.

Nick Dyer: I would de-conflate two questions: one is whether it is the right thing to do, and the second is how best to do it. Thirty years ago at ODA, as it was then, I sat down with communities and co-designed projects that we then implemented. As we scaled up our funding and as we moved to 0.7%, we became a wholesaler, not a retailer. We basically worked through third parties, because we just couldn't do anything else. We have kept that model ever since. To be frank, we do not have the resources to run projects directly. When I go in-country, I sit down with people and talk to them about what their needs are and how things are affecting their lives. That is part of what we need to do, but we just do not have the resources to do that kind of micro, direct engagement, co-design, implementation and monitoring.

Q41 **Chair:** I would push back on that by asking do you need to? That is where all the layering, the bureaucracy and the costs come from. I am incredibly glad that my town has some Pride in Place money and we are doing micro-grants of under £1,000. Yes, we are quite robust about asking, "What are you going to do? Why are you going to do it? What are the benefits going to be?" and then we give them £1,000. There was all the hesitancy around the cash transfers, but then we actually did it and trusted people, and it is transformative.

Nick Dyer: This Government are prepared to look more readily at insourcing rather than outsourcing, if you can make a value for money judgment on that. We could look at that, and in some cases we have done so, and make judgments that we will do it ourselves, but those are quite big projects. When you are dealing with micro-projects, where you are dealing with hundreds of individuals, you need a lot of people on the ground to be able to do that, and that is very expensive. Sure, perhaps we should look at it again, but given the way we are currently structured, I have my doubts about whether we would be able to do it.

Q42 **David Taylor:** I want to come back to the previous question about public awareness of international development. Last night, one of your arguments in your wonderful speech was, "People cannot be expected to feel concern for a stranger if they have had no love from their neighbour." You put down a challenge to the international development sector to deepen its roots in local communities. I want to give you the opportunity to elaborate on what you meant by that and to give some practical examples.

Secondly, we have spoken about our passion for development education, which is fundamental to rebuilding support for international development. The Government have brought in a new natural history GCSE, and I



HOUSE OF COMMONS

whether there might be opportunities to bolt development education on to that or on to the geography GCSE. Any thoughts on that will be very welcome.

Kirsty McNeill: One of the things I was trying to get at last night is that, for far too long, there has been a suggestion that there is a place called the poor world, which is a completely different place inhabited by completely different kinds of people, to whom we either owe a benevolent obligation of charity or owe an obligation of justice. It is an obligation that we owe to them, and there is still in that framework an “us” and a “them”. One of the things I was trying to say last night is that there is just us—the billions of people alive at the same time on this very small and fragile planet, and we owe obligations to each other. Although people’s experience of poverty or crisis may be more intense in other countries, it is none the less not an unknowable experience, because in our own neighbourhoods we all have people experiencing poverty, crisis, discrimination or denial of their rights.

At the FCDO, although our obligation is to think through our support to people overseas, as citizens of this country, it is also to think about our neighbours in the real, physical, literal sense—the people in our neighbourhoods and communities—and our neighbours on this planet, in a more scaled sense.

In practical terms for the international development community, I know that boards have nightmarish decisions to make. I do not want to pre-empt the difficult decisions that charity trustees have to make. I understand why people might want to invest in global work and, in such straitened circumstances, deprioritise a chain of charity shops, or the work being done in Fairtrade towns—the Fairtrade Foundation’s work on Fairtrade towns is extraordinary—or in schools. I understand that impulse, but we will miss something when those things are gone.

If you are an international funder, or in the philanthropy community, continuing to fund efforts to engage the British public is a legitimate and wise use of your scaled funding. That was a plea to those with institutional power to make sure they are not leaving behind a UK audience, but it was also a plea to all of us as citizens to develop our muscles of solidarity from the minute we get up to the minute we go to bed. That might mean shopping for a neighbour, or joining our local social club, co-op or football team. That means every bit as much as giving support to people overseas.

I was absolutely thrilled that someone shared the speech earlier and said, “I’ve read this, and I’ve decided that my two tasks for today are: I’m going to give some money to maternity hospitals in Gaza, and I’m off to join my local social club.” That was my hope for it; those two obligations are equally important, in my view.

Q43 David Taylor: And on the development education side, specifically?

Kirsty McNeill: I have had a lot of representations on that, which I take very seriously, because there is something in it. I cannot give any undertakings about what will happen as a result.

Chair: There is a pledging summit coming up—GPE—next week or the week after.

Kirsty McNeill: Sorry, I thought you were talking about development education in schools domestically. GPE is coming up and we can talk about that shortly.

On development education, I cannot promise what will happen from any conversations I have with DFE, but I am very happy to have them, because the representations I have had from organisations such as Oxfam, Save the Children and CAFOD, which have a long track record in development education—there are many such organisations, as you know—are that they have scaled back their funding, seen the consequences of that, and started some interesting pilots, the results of which are promising. I found those representations persuasive, so I am happy to go and have conversations with DFE, but I cannot promise on their behalf what will happen.

Let's chat GPE: the UK has traditionally been a strong supporter of GPE and of Education Cannot Wait. We are in ongoing discussions with GPE, and I met the executive director last week, or the week before. I am attending the replenishment session, and I will be making our pledge there.

Q44 **Chair:** This Committee has been very focused on the restructure at the FCDO. While we understand the reasons for it, we have been concerned about whether the horse is being put before the cart on the direction of travel, and the number of people and the skills you would need to do it. I know that you are reasonably new in your post, Minister, but what steps have you taken to ensure that you will have the skills in the team to go forward and deliver your vision?

Kirsty McNeill: When I have spoken to colleagues with a development background, they have two questions. One is about whether the capability in the organisation is at the level we need. Personally, I am as satisfied as one can reasonably be, given the level of information I have and the time I have been in the role for, that we have retained what we need to deliver our programme of work.

The other set of questions is more about culture than strictly capability and capacity. People want reassurance that development is still of value to the organisation. We have just announced the new permanent secretary, who comes from a DFID background, so we will have two from that side of things. As I say, the Foreign Secretary could not have been clearer about the priority he puts on development. I hope that my conversations with colleagues following my appointment have somewhat reassured them that they have someone who knows, understands and values, and has always valued, their work. I hope those conversations have been reassuring for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

colleagues; they have certainly been reassuring for me, as once we talked through our degree of capability and the cultural primacy that development has, they have been relatively satisfied, as have I.

- Q45 **Chair:** What are you going to do? To be honest, for six years, Departments have been under huge pressure and trauma as a consequence of cuts, changes, reprioritisations and changes of Ministers and staff. How are you seeking to give them stability?

Kirsty McNeill: I hope that internal colleagues heard what I said at the beginning of this meeting about areas where there is continuity. One thing I have been really explicit about is that telegraphing back to the UK what we are doing in my trips is unbelievably important, for the taxpayer, for parliamentary colleagues, across Whitehall and also for our colleagues, who are toiling in unbelievably difficult circumstances in some cases. It is important that they know that I want to be a tribune and a platform from which their stories can be told.

I was unbelievably moved and struck by the conditions in which our colleagues in Somalia are operating—I know I could not do it. I was really humbled by the psychological resilience and raw physical courage that is required to operate in Mogadishu. It is important that I can telegraph that back and reaffirm the importance of their work across Parliament and Whitehall, and to the public. As you can imagine, a lot of travel bids have been coming, and I have also been very explicit with the network. I think that morale is partly my job.

Chair: I agree.

Kirsty McNeill: I am very happy to go to posts for no other reason than they are difficult and people there are labouring under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. I hope I have telegraphed across the organisation that I take my responsibilities as an employer very seriously. As I say, I have been so awed and impressed by the quality of our officials. Making them feel valued is a huge part of my job.

- Q46 **Chair:** In all our travels and inquiries, I have never been as dazzled as by the staff that the FCDO has at every level. They really are exceptional people, which is why it is so painful that they have had a turbulent six years.

You mentioned the locations that we have around the world. I think—forgive me if I am wrong—that the London, UK-based restructure is being managed centrally, but the posts are managing their own restructures. One of the concerns that we have as a Committee is about how those two things marry up. It takes a long time and a lot of investment to get to ambassador or director level. How is that pipeline of skills being linked back together again, if the restructures are happening separately?

Nick Dyer: You are right to say that the restructuring in the UK has been in advance of the restructuring overseas. We launched the new structure last Monday; people have now moved into their jobs, and we are filling the

remaining jobs. People are feeling at least some stability in terms of that structure.

The overseas network was always going to be a second phase. Part of that is asking ourselves what the lay-down should look like and what the balance should be between the particular regions and, within regions, between the particular posts. We have not finalised the decisions on that. We have given some indicative signals to the business about what they can expect for the future and what the broad shifts might be. People are starting to look at how they would structure themselves under that scenario.

We will then take receipt of those proposals and do exactly what you are concerned about: stand back and ask ourselves whether we have the capability to deliver on the shifts that we want to deliver and on the allocations that we have laid out. Does it make sense in terms of a rotational workforce model, in which people come back to the UK and then go back overseas? We are very conscious of that, and we need to take stock of it.

In terms of the rotational model, the problem we have had in the past is that over the last 10 years the number of UK-based staff has grown by 40%, and overseas it has not grown at all. We have ended up with far more people chasing a smaller number of jobs. That will balance out a bit better going forward.

Q47 Chair: A lot closer to home, this Committee has been concerned about East Kilbride for a long time—the talk of moving it, refurbishing it and upgrading it. What reassurance can you give the staff who are there?

Kirsty McNeill: I am going to be there at least once a quarter, and hopefully more, because—as some colleagues will know—I am substantially based in Scotland. I live in Scotland, and my family are in Scotland. I hope to be there a lot. It was important to me to get there very quickly and offer them reassurance, face to face, that we are completely committed to them and their work. I think you are based there once a month, Nick?

Nick Dyer: I go up very regularly.

Q48 Chair: On ICAI, the independent scrutiny body that reports to this Committee, we were very disappointed that while the staff in King Charles Street got a 25% cut, ICAI got a 40% cut to its resources. It is still basically meant to scrutinise where the ODA is spent. With such a strong cut, do you believe that ICAI can still fulfil its legally mandated role to scrutinise your Department?

Kirsty McNeill: I believe that it can. I met the chief commissioner last week. I do not mean to diminish ICAI's role in any way, but I would differentiate between its legally mandated role—it was in our manifesto, and the role of ICAI is really important—and the wider transparency agenda, to which I am incredibly committed. I hope that you will have taken from my appearance here today that I really welcome the scrutiny.



Chair: The work that it does is fantastic, Minister. It really is.

Kirsty McNeill: Every pound that we spend and every hour of either official or ministerial time has to be optimised for impact. I very much welcome ICAI's scrutiny. I was delighted to meet with the chief commissioner and reaffirm for her my commitment to its work. I am relatively confident, after that meeting, that it can continue to fulfil its function, but it will not be the only driver of our transparency and therefore of our performance. I am committed to the Committee and to parliamentary scrutiny. I am committed to being as proactive as we possibly can be about seeking scrutiny and accountability from as many sources as possible.

Q49 **Chair:** We have been wrestling with what communities of expertise actually are since they were first mooted. Each time we ask, this seems to have morphed into something different, and the title has changed slightly. Can you tell us where it is at, what it is, what its remit is, and what you want it to achieve?

Kirsty McNeill: Nick might want to come in on this. Likewise, when I was briefed on it, I was trying to get my head around, tangibly, what it does. For me, the measure is the level of demand on them, and the level of demand on them is already incredibly high. Colleagues in country value what they do and find this a very helpful source of technical expertise. I don't know what you would say the one-line, corporate explanation of what they are doing is, but for me, what they are doing is meeting demand from our colleagues who are delivering work on the ground.

Nick Dyer: This is about how we bring into effect the shift from service delivery to system support. How do we make available to countries world-class expertise that can help partners to think through their policy challenges, their regulatory choices and how to make their own resources go further? That is at the heart of what this is—how do we build a capability that can do that on a demand basis? Frankly, this is going to take us two to three years to build. This is not going to happen overnight. We have nine communities of expertise, some—

Q50 **Chair:** I think there are more every time we talk to you.

Nick Dyer: Because every time we look at this, we have more areas where we think, "This would be a good place to build some capacity because it is a real live challenge for the countries that we are working with." There are certain things that we want. My ideal is to have, in communities of expertise, people who are tracking the evidence about what works.

Q51 **Chair:** Is it like a living library-cum-research centre-cum-signposting?

Nick Dyer: The reality is that there is not one standard model, because some of them have been in existence for quite some time and have built their own operating model and some are being built from scratch and we have to think about how we have a balance between internal capability and drawing on capabilities that may be within the UK Government, the

private sector, the City of London, consultancy firms or research bodies. It will differ according to the area.

We have asked ourselves, "Do we basically bring one brand, one consistent approach, to all of this?", and that is something that we are, if I'm honest, slightly struggling to work through.

Chair: We're glad we're not the only ones!

Nick Dyer: No, you're not. I would not sit here saying that it is all perfect and we know exactly what we are doing. We know what we are doing, but bringing it into effect is quite tricky to do.

Q52 **Chair:** Say there is, for example, a new Minister in Mali who goes to our office and says, "I am really interested in drawing private finance into education. How do I do that?" They would then get in touch with the relevant centre, who would bring this together and send it back out again?

Nick Dyer: Yes, or they can look locally to start with. They can say, "Is there somebody locally that we can draw on, somebody from a local body, to use their own resources—

Q53 **Chair:** Or "We funded something like that 10 years ago. Here's the"—

Nick Dyer: Indeed. The challenge of this is going to be how you scale it. We are bringing communities of expertise in—some are at the moment covering only five, six or seven countries, but then you want to expand that in the course of two or three years. It could well be that one of our offices in the Sahel asks for support and actually we have not got the bandwidth to do it. That is the reality. Then we may deliberately look to ask whether there is somebody locally or regionally who can support that.

Yes, that is the concept: somebody needs support, and we are nimble and agile enough and can draw down support really rapidly, get somebody on a plane and get them out there.

Q54 **Chair:** Another of our concerns was the money that goes alongside this. Originally, we were looking at a lot more trust in our ambassadorial or director teams to spend the money as they saw fit in their country. Then it seemed as though the centre for communities of expertise was effectively replicating the centrally managed funds model, or making the decision about where the money goes. Where has this ended up? I think we were quite supportive of the idea that posts ought to have the responsibility and the trust.

Nick Dyer: It is a mixed model. You have posts with their own resources. As you have seen from the allocation, some do not have anything at all and they will be more reliant on asking the centre whether there is resource that they can draw on. So you can do one or the other.

We did, in one of our early communities of expertise models, say, "Okay, we have this money. Let's give it to the countries and let them see how they want to spend it—demand the resource and run the resource themselves." But actually a lot of countries do not want to do that. They



HOUSE OF COMMONS

do not want the transaction costs of having to run it. They would rather that it was centralised, and frankly it is more efficient to have somebody at the centre who knows where the resource and advice is and can draw this down quickly and get it out at pace.

Q55 Chair: How do you avoid the situation that we have had, in which our staff in a country do not know about the centrally managed funds that are being run in the country?

Nick Dyer: As part of the allocation process, we have, as much as we can, basically shut some of the centrally managed programmes, because they do and can distort some of the activities that are going on in country. In some cases, like our research programme, which has been cut by 50% as well—they fund through universities a lot of projects in country, because ultimately that is where everything happens; it happens in the country.

The challenge for us has always been how we ensure that our heads of mission know what is going on and how we bring that knowledge to them. So we have built into our centrally managed activities a process that is in effect a double lock: you cannot do something unless the country office know what is going on and have an opportunity to comment on it; otherwise it does not get funded. So there are ways whereby we are institutionalising the incentives for people to know better what is actually happening in country.

Chair: Minister, this has the potential to be amazing, but we would be interested, as we go forward, to hear your thoughts on whether it is reaching its potential. Can I bring James in, please?

Q56 James Naish: There have been a couple of references to Ukraine, but there is a flurry of questions that we just want to cover off with you, Minister. How do you see the UK's ODA commitment to Ukraine evolving over the coming years?

Kirsty McNeill: The first thing to say is that I am proud of it. I have dug into it a fair amount with our colleagues in Kyiv, because it is a big allocation. We shouldn't and won't shy away from the fact that it is a big allocation, and because it is a big allocation from a shrinking pot it was very important for me to hear at first hand from colleagues in Kyiv what it is being used for and its impact.

I was incredibly satisfied by what those colleagues told me, but I am also incredibly moved that we are doing so much to support Ukraine. We obviously have the 100-year partnership. A three-year allocation doesn't feel that long in the context of a 100-year partnership, but the allocation is about £240 million a year and it is going to stay at that sort of level.

Nick Dyer: I would say two things on that. One is that the really big sums we are putting into Ukraine are the \$5 billion-worth of guarantees to fund their fiscal support. If you cannot fund the fiscal side of the Government, that is war-losing. It really is as serious as that. We are looking at what our next phase of support could be to the fiscal side, because that is



particularly important. So I don't see that particularly evolving, because it is essential and fundamental.

When I went to Ukraine, I saw fantastic work on the humanitarian side in terms of looking after displaced people, working with first responders to the Russian strikes, looking at people who had been hit by drones and doing medical support and looking after displaced and traumatised children. It was fantastic work.

Then, I was expecting that the programme would evolve to shift more to supporting reconstruction and investment, but the reality is that the war is still going on. We do want to do that, but the humanitarian need is just as high as it has been and I would expect that to continue. We are, through the investment summits that we are doing, looking at how the broader investment work can be progressed, and we are doing quite a lot of support to small enterprises—SMEs—which will continue, but there will be a big humanitarian requirement for quite some time, sadly.

Q57 Monica Harding: I want to talk about the Chelsea fund. We have passed the 90 days that Roman Abramovich was given to comply with the terms of the licence that would see the proceeds directed to humanitarian purposes, so what is the current position regarding release of those funds?

Kirsty McNeill: I am going to speak carefully here, because of the importance of getting the language right. We are 100% clear that the proceeds of this fund urgently need to be released. Our priority is doing everything that is legally necessary to get them released and to get them into the hands of vulnerable people.

As you will know, and as has been reported to Parliament, the previous Government did strive to reach an agreement with Mr Abramovich to transfer the proceeds of the fund to humanitarian needs in Ukraine. He committed to make that donation over four years ago. For four years we have waited for that commitment to be fulfilled, and that has not happened. The UK Government's position was that we would make that legally possible through the creation of an OFSI licence. We did that in December last year.

There cannot be further delays. The Government are urgently exploring what further action we can take to release the funds, including preparing for a possible legal case. Given that, you will appreciate that I will not want to say much more on this, but I can assure you of our absolute commitment to getting the money where it needs to go as fast as it can get there.

Q58 David Taylor: A plethora of different groups around the UK donate, and have donated across the course of the war, convoys of supplies, humanitarian aid and, in some cases, vehicles from the UK to Ukraine—sometimes driving them themselves. This is an issue I have raised in Parliament multiple times. In his previous role, Minister Doughty was very helpful in facilitating a meeting with an FCDO official in the humanitarian team around this.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Earlier this week, in Wes Streeting's statement, I asked about trying to get a meeting with an MOD official, because there is a bit of an overlap between some of the groups who are donating purely humanitarian aid and some of them who are donating old vehicles that, frankly, soldiers can use. Either way, a bit of joint work between the FCDO and the MOD would be helpful in making these guys' lives easier. Sometimes unnecessary paperwork, delays on the Polish border and nitty-gritty issues are holding up these convoys and demoralising the guys and girls a bit.

Making the process of these charities getting hold of old ambulances or fire trucks, or taking them from the Government estate, if they are no longer used, would be really helpful. We had a couple of meetings with an FCDO official, and then things slowed down a bit. It would be fantastic if we could pick it up again, perhaps jointly with an MOD official, so that we can make this work a bit better.

Nick Dyer: We will take that away and come back to you.

Q59 Dr Rushworth: Through the Council of Europe I sit on the network for Ukrainian children, and our chair is a Ukrainian Member of Parliament. They were talking to me about the simple challenges that schools face. I was reflecting on your earlier point about the solidarity of the British public; as David has just said, we are seeing that in relation to Ukraine.

We want to explore together something as simple as linking schools—having partner schools so they can meet each other, have pen friends or fundraise. Is that the sort of thing that the Government could look at supporting, to help unlock the natural charity of the British public—people who want to give more but do not always know how or where, and who to be linked to?

Kirsty McNeill: I mentioned Save the Children in response to the question about development education. It has done some interesting work on piloting modern school twinning of the sort that lots of us grew up with. It is piloting how you do that in a digital age, and I have been very impressed by the results of that so far.

One of the questions from lots of colleagues who come from a development education background is about what role posts can have in facilitating that sort of link-up. That is something we can take away.

Q60 Brian Mathew: I think I can probably say that most of us in this room and across the House of Commons, if not all of us, were very pleased to see what the Foreign Secretary said about what is happening in Israel and about stopping trade with the illegal settlements.

I want to ask a rather hard-nosed question—I tried to ask this yesterday in the Chamber, but we did not get an answer. You may have seen the headline from back in April this year, "Foreign Office shuts unit tracking potential law breaches by Israel." That refers to the IHL cell that deals with the middle east inside FCDO and the funding that went from it to the Centre for Information Resilience, which is a unit that had a massive database of all the dreadful things that have been going on. From that, how do you expect the Government's change in approach on Israel to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

effect change? This is probably a good place to start, because if the Government are blind to what is going on there because funds have been cut from this cell and the Centre for Information Resilience, how will it be dealt with? This is so important. This is a very hard-nosed, specific question.

Chair: It was a cell that was specifically gathering data around potential war crimes.

Kirsty McNeill: There may be more to say on the Centre for Information Resilience in coming days, but I might defer to Nick on the size of the team in the cell.

Nick Dyer: Originally, that IHL cell was spun out of the export control joint unit. We have an export control unit, and then we spun out the IHL cell specifically to track the Israel situation. It has now gone back into the export control unit, so it has not disappeared. The 21 staff are now working back in the export control unit. There is this misunderstanding that we have stopped doing the work—we have not. The work continues; we are still doing it—they are just sitting somewhere else in the structure.

On the Centre for Information Resilience, we still have access to its reports. We are not relying only on that source of information to make our judgments; we are relying on open-source information, NGO reports and feedback on the ground. There is a whole range of information that we are relying on, including that centre.

Q61 **Chair:** Nick, you said that we still have access to the reports—is that future reports or do we have access to the data that has already been collated?

Nick Dyer: We certainly have access to the data that has already been collated. Let me check on the other data—I will be surprised if we do not, but I will try.

Chair: I think that was the concern—about the historical data and our access to it.

Nick Dyer: I will check and come back to you on that.

Q62 **Brian Mathew:** Do you want to say anything else about how the Government's change in approach on Israel will effect change?

Kirsty McNeill: It is very important to put on record—I think the Foreign Secretary has done likewise—the speed and professionalism with which the Department has responded to what is, by any measure, a very significant shift in policy. I am pleased to have you reflect that it has been welcomed so warmly by Parliament. Honestly, it is a really significant change in policy in terms of how we talk about the settlements and the legality of the occupation.

What remains unchanged is our humanitarian commitment to the Palestinian people. What I hope we have done is effect a policy change that means that that sort of commitment is enduring—as you will know,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

during the cuts, our aid for the Palestinian people is one of the things that was protected. As with so many conflicts, humanitarian aid is trying to deal with a problem that has a political cause and a political source, and it is trying to mitigate risks the origin of which lie elsewhere, so this change that we have effected is to try to keep the prospect of a two-state solution alive. That is really the only way we will get to a situation where the duty bearer to the Palestinian people is a Palestinian Government and they are not reliant on humanitarian funding and support in the way that they have been for so very long.

On a personal note, I went to Gaza before the more recent war, and conditions were completely intolerable then. I met Gazan children, and it was sort of mortifying to have them say, "We're so pleased you've come because we thought the world had forgotten us." The conditions that children were enduring were horrifying. This policy change is an attempt to keep the conditions alive for a future two-state settlement that means that this ceases to be the FCDO's humanitarian priority, protected above others, because the duties will be borne by a functioning state.

- Q63 **Chair:** Minister, can I just say, personally, how disappointing it is to hear it referred to as a policy change? The ICJ advisory ruling two years ago was very clear that Israel was occupying Palestine, and therefore we as a country had duties that were signed up to that. You rightly talk about the horrendous humanitarian situation in Gaza years ago—we have known about this for a long time. It surprises me that it is a surprise to the Department that it now needs to change to scale up to do what legally we should have been doing the whole way through.

Kirsty McNeill: I would not characterise it as a surprise to the Department. All I would say is that it is a really significant shift in UK policy—

- Q64 **Chair:** That pains me, Minister. Our international credibility has been dented because we did not follow the very clear rules of law, particularly when it comes to protecting humanitarians. I hope that one of the big shifts that we will get with this change is being a lot more front-footed when it comes to honouring international law.

Kirsty McNeill: I think you will hear a lot more from the Foreign Secretary on precisely that.

Chair: We look forward to it.

- Q65 **James Naish:** As colleagues have said, a lot of people welcomed the announcement last week. However, 1.4 million people in Gaza are likely to face acute food insecurity leading up to December this year, yet the UK has reduced its funding to the World Food Programme by 78% since 2024. Can you explain why that makes sense?

Kirsty McNeill: It is important to restate that our humanitarian commitment to the Palestinian people is ongoing. I met with the interim executive director of the World Food Programme about our support to the programme more generally. The thing that he impressed upon me that I



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have been really wrestling with since the conversation is that we have a series of choices that are the stuff of nightmares. There are so many acute emergencies where lives are at stake right now, and there is a need to invest in ongoing resilience so that there are fewer such instances in the future. Now that we are past peak aid, these are the nightmare choices in front of every World Food Programme donor: does our money do more good, and is it more successful in building the world we want to see, if we are investing it in long-term resilience or if we are constantly responding to emergencies? I would welcome reflections and challenge from the Committee about whether we are getting the balance between those two things right, because this is the stuff of nightmares.

Nick Dyer: The issue in Gaza is not money; it is access. Averting famine cannot be a measure of success. We know exactly why there is not the access, and we know exactly why the dual-use goods are not being allowed into Gaza: it is purely because of the actions of the Israeli Government. We need more crossing points to be opened and more flexibility on what comes in, and we need Israel to live up to the commitments it made in the 20-point peace plan. I would not say that this is a money problem.

Q66 **James Naish:** In short, the money is having to be spent elsewhere because we do not have the access.

Nick Dyer: Well, money can be spent—the needs are enormous inside Gaza. We are still funding UNRWA, despite what the Israeli Government is trying to do in terms of shutting it down, because we think it is incredibly important for the services of the Palestinian people. We are going to be, and are, supporting the Palestinian Authority itself. There are ways that you can provide and spend the money well, but ultimately, the scale of the resources going into Gaza needs to increase fundamentally.

Chair: We have 11 minutes of your time left, Minister, so we will go into quick-fire questions and we would be very grateful for quick-fire answers.

Kirsty McNeill: I will do my best.

Q67 **Monica Harding:** I need to pick up on that point. The World Food Programme is very specific that this is about need, not access. I 100% agree with you on dual use, but we are the ninth largest donor to the World Food Programme, and we have cut funding by 78%. With respect, you can see the frustration when we say that there should be a pathway to 0.7% so that this is not the stuff of nightmares any more, but we are not hearing that pathway from the Government.

I will move on to Sudan. Talking of countries that think that we may have forgotten them, and the Government's very welcome shift to adherence to international law and international humanitarian law and calling out our friends as well as our foes, will there be a shift in how the Government approaches Sudan?

Kirsty McNeill: I said last night that you should expect to hear more from us on Sudan in coming weeks and months. The volume of humanitarian



HOUSE OF COMMONS

assistance going into Sudan, and its being maintained, is important, but there has also been the track around the conflict more widely and making sure that we are straining absolutely every diplomatic sinew. Both I and the Foreign Secretary have sought and received briefings on Sudan from day one. I think we are going to be speaking in coming weeks and months to satisfy ourselves that we have strained absolutely every sinew to get an enduring settlement in Sudan that means that the humanitarian needs are not as great. I would expect to hear more from us in coming weeks and months.

Monica Harding: Can you give us any indication of where that might go and what that means?

Chair: Monica, the Minister has answered.

Q68 **James Naish:** The situation with Ebola in Africa is very serious and there continue to be grave concerns about the progress of Ebola across the continent. How is the UK supporting efforts in the region to make sure that we are containing it as best as possible?

Kirsty McNeill: I think you will have seen that I announced to Parliament two weeks ago extra funding. I spoke to Africa CDC and the African Union when I was in Ethiopia, and they both said that British money is fast and wise. We are spending it on the right things and disbursing fast. As you know, other donors have made commitments but have not moved as fast to disbursement. As I noted earlier, I am having a number of bilateral conversations with African Ministers, of which this is very much a feature. I am confident that we have stepped up to the plate and that all of our conversations for the Africa-led response are being had with the right African interlocutors.

Q69 **James Naish:** How is the vaccination programme developing?

Nick Dyer: The first trial, which includes Oxford, has started on the vaccine for this particular Ebola strain. We will have to wait and see how that progresses. The bottom line is that this is now the second largest Ebola outbreak ever. We have been playing catch-up right from the beginning. Our support has been terrific and well-targeted, but this is a marathon, not a sprint. This thing is going to go on for two years.

Chair: While we are on the DRC, I put on record my gratitude for the commitment to the TFFF fund, but also my concern that it is a loan rather than a grant.

Q70 **Brian Mathew:** In the next 12 months, food supply systems are likely to come under considerable stress through war and climate events. Being an agricultural engineer, I will talk about the importance of soil and compost in improving moisture-holding capacity and preventing famine.

Chair: Briefly, please, Brian.

Brian Mathew: What priority are you placing on strengthening these systems and addressing malnutrition?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kirsty McNeill: A huge priority. As you will have heard me say at the outset, food security is a huge issue for me. One of the changes we need to effect—it is not about a reprioritisation, and it is certainly not about the allocations—is that organisationally, at the moment, food and the food system sit in our corporate mind in humanitarian, and I think they need to sit alongside climate, health and economic security and human security. They are so cross-cutting. Of the five securities, food security and the pressure on the international food system is the thing that keeps me awake most at night. I will be very keen to continue these conversations with you, because I think we are both expressing a similar level of alarm.

Q71 Tracy Gilbert: My question is about women, peace and security—sorry, it is a very large topic. We were told previously by the Minister that they would be reviewing the current commitments in relation to conflict prevention and resolution as part of the NAP. When will that be published, and when will the planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning framework be published?

Kirsty McNeill: I cannot give you a date for when it will be published, but to reassure, I think there was some disquiet about whether a refresh was adequate and whether there needed to be a completely new plan and strategy, and having spoken to the colleagues working on it, I think they would want me to signal and telegraph that, actually, the fact that it is a refresh is a sign of how highly we prize it. We do not want the work to be slowed down. We want to crack on with the work and scale it, rather than restarting it from first principles. I cannot give you a publication date, but I will get back to you.

Q72 Tracy Gilbert: Thank you. We have heard a lot about mainstreaming of women and girls through specific programmes and commitments towards their inclusion. Is that still the direction of travel? Also, will the FCDO collate the data on how these projects have been engaging with women and girls, people with disabilities, the LGBT community and other minority groups?

Kirsty McNeill: Human rights and equalities, yes, will be an ongoing feature. Minister Elmore, as you know, is leading on all those, and I will be working with him very closely on that.

More widely, I think lots of feminists have a legitimate anxiety that mainstreaming is code for: “It will be everywhere, but potentially nowhere”. To give a very public undertaking, women and girls is absolutely central to everything that I want to achieve. I want held to account on it, and I want held to account for the agenda beyond VAWG, as I have said repeatedly in public. I need you all to hold me to it. Next week at UNGA, I will be doing some interventions on SRHR and a wider rights framework. As I say, VAWG is foundational, but it has to be the floor, not the ceiling.

Q73 Chair: Minister, may I reiterate the point that Tracy made? If we could, or you could, ask for a commitment to data collection, that seems to be the best way to hold people to account, because we are talking about

structural inequality here, not access to resources. That seems to be the one way that we can make significant change.

Kirsty McNeill: Understood.

- Q74 **Dr Rushworth:** I want to ask you about children—I have heard you use the phrase today. UNICEF found that bilateral aid for child-focused programmes was cut by 57% from 2019 to 2023. It has obviously been cut even more deeply since then. We have heard evidence that when the previous Home Secretary made women and girls a priority, that made a material difference to the way that NGOs were writing their programmes and applications. Will you consider making children an explicit priority of Government, so that we can reverse the decline in child-focused funding?

Kirsty McNeill: I have received a number of very persuasive technical representations about the mechanisms—for example, about whether there should be a special envoy for children and young people, and how we do programme design. I have received a number of very helpful representations. I do not want to pre-empt where we are going to land, but I do want to underscore in public my level of ambition. I am not yet completely set on what the right mechanism is, but to reassure, I am taking advice from officials about how we do the organisational design piece right, to put children and young people at the heart. I can very happily reiterate my level of ambition, but I do not want to give you a commitment on the mechanism until I am sure that the mechanism is the right one—perhaps the next time I come.

Nick Dyer: I will just flag that I do not actually recognise that number.

- Q75 **Chair:** Minister, talking of structural inequality, with UN80, the restructure that the UN is trying to do, the male Secretary-General put forward that the only two women-specific organisations, UN Women and UNFPA on sexual health, will be merged, even though they are very different. What is your view on that?

Kirsty McNeill: Minister Elmore holds the decision making on this. My understanding is that we are trying to balance two separate and competing progressive priorities here. We absolutely do not want to see a reopening of the mandate of either of those very important organisations, and we stand four-square behind the legitimacy and importance of the mandate. At the same time, we do think it is a progressive imperative to make the UN slimmer and more fit for purpose. We are balancing those two at the moment, but if I may, I will get Minister Elmore to come back to you on our current negotiating and voting position.

Chair: We would really appreciate that. We hear that the proposal is back on the table, which would effectively halve women's bodies within the UN.

- Q76 **Noah Law:** Minister, have the FCDO's strategic priorities on climate and nature changed under the new leadership?

Kirsty McNeill: In terms of substantively what is on the agenda, I would not say so, but in terms of the level of primacy that this agenda has in all our diplomacy, I would say that it has rocketed up the agenda.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q77 Noah Law: Great. How do you plan to deliver the UK's international climate finance commitments effectively in an increasingly climate-affected world?

Kirsty McNeill: It will be a huge feature of everything that we do in the upcoming multilateral settings. The Foreign Secretary and I have a discussion tabled on financing tomorrow to address this and other questions. I will be delighted to come back to you after that, but I think the Foreign Secretary would want me to underscore just how committed he is to this and how happy he is to spend significant international political capital on it.

Nick Dyer: We will be tracking that £6 billion commitment over the next three years.

Q78 Noah Law: That is really appreciated. What reforms of those multilaterals are you looking at to increase the accessibility, volume and reach of climate finance flows?

Kirsty McNeill: I think this is something we will want to come back to the Committee on, not least because it is going to be such a huge part of our G20 agenda. With your forgiveness, Chair, perhaps we could table that and do a really chunky session on it, because it is going to be such a huge part of what we do.

Noah Law: That would be great.

Chair: Let me just say that we will be publishing our report on international climate finance on Thursday, and we really hope that it is a very practical tool for you. Basically, we need more data on what works and where you have spent, but the principles we absolutely stand behind. We look forward to you hopefully being able to use that.

Minister and Nick, it has been a real pleasure. It has been fascinating to learn your approach. Thank you for being so generous with your time and sharing your thoughts on all of this. We hope that this is a regular occurrence. We wish you well for the rest of your day. Committee, thank you very much.