



Oral evidence: [FCO consular services](#), HC 905

Tuesday 1 July 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 July 2014

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Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Sandra Osborne; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 139-220

Witnesses: **Mark Simmonds MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, FCO, **Joanna Roper**, Director, Consular Services, FCO and **Susan Caldwell**, Head, Strategy and Network Department, FCO, gave evidence.

Q139 Chair: May I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee? This is our third and final evidence session for the Committee's inquiry into the FCO consular services. In this session, the Committee will question Mr Mark Simmonds, the FCO Minister with responsibility for consular services, together with his officials. I welcome Susan Caldwell and Joanna Roper as well. Minister, welcome. As I just explained to you, there may well be a vote at 4.15 pm, so let us see whether we can do this by then. If we cannot, we will have to return after the vote.

In your 2013-16 consular strategy, your stated aim is to be "the best consular service in the world". We all welcome that statement. How will you know whether you have achieved that aim? By what criteria will you measure it?

Mark Simmonds: First, I want to take this opportunity to thank all the FCO consular staff around the world for doing an excellent job in often very difficult circumstances, and in particular for the additional work they have put in recently relating to the additional calls coming into the call centres as part of the support we are providing to Her Majesty's Passport Office.

In terms of how we judge the outcomes, it will be by bettering the balance between compliments and complaints that we receive and ensuring that the service is responsive to British nationals' requirements abroad. We are very cognisant of the importance of responding to the feedback that we are getting from British nationals as they get into challenging circumstances and require consular help around the world. But much of that is already being delivered.

I think the ultimate arbiter will be what is already happening. I will not be specific, but there are countries around the world approaching me as the consular Minister who want to use the directorate's expertise and experience to build their own consular services.

Q140 Chair: Do you feel that you are on track? What is the biggest challenge you have had in the implementation so far?

Mark Simmonds: Yes, we are on track. The consular strategy we set out for 2013-16 builds on some of the progress made before that date; in particular, that involved the lessons we learnt out of the Arab spring and crisis management. The focus of the strategy going forward is to enable consular services to focus on the most vulnerable who require our support and to use the expertise that exists not just in the consular directorate, but in the broader non-governmental organisation and private sector community to provide, rather than replace, additional support to consular services.

The strategy is also to disseminate key information for British citizens before they travel abroad, to ensure that they are prepared for the location that they are going to. That is why some of our campaigns, such as “Know Before You Go” and “Be on the Ball”, which specifically relates to England fans travelling to the World cup, have driven down the number of serious consular cases over the past few years and, I think, led to a very comprehensive, consistent and professional consular service around the world.

Q141 Chair: You said that your stated aim is for the consular service to be smaller and better. Has that been driven by a need to cut costs, or is it really in the belief that a smaller service provides a better service?

Mark Simmonds: It is what I call a realigned, more focused service: one that is focusing on the most vulnerable. We have put in place some significant changes to deliver that, which are increased and enhanced staff training and issues surrounding global contact centres that enable us to deal efficiently with the telephone inquiries and have the sufficient number of languages and the requisite locally engaged, locally employed staff.

It is also important to say that—I think for the first time—the consular service is one of the FCO’s top three priorities, as you will be aware, along with security and prosperity. That gives the correct impression that, to us in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, consular services matter, and they matter because, for the vast majority of British nationals, that is the interaction that they have with the Foreign Office. When there are complaints, because people are not satisfied with the service that they are getting, we take them extremely seriously and look for ways to improve the level of service.

Q142 Chair: You talk about the prosperity agenda and consular services being one of the three main priorities for the Foreign Office. If you look at the funding, prosperity gets five times the amount that consular services do. Do you think that that is fair?

Mark Simmonds: Well, interestingly, consular services are not funded directly through taxpayers’ money; they are funded by fees for services provided, but primarily they are funded through top-slicing the cost of passports. Combined, the passport funding and the fees bring in roughly £87 million. That is roughly the cost of providing consular services, so there is no direct burden on the taxpayer in that way.

Q143 Chair: Those fees and that top-slicing come to a finite sum. Is that a cap on what the Foreign Office will spend on consular services or, if necessary, would you top it up from public funding?

Mark Simmonds: The day-to-day consular service provision is entirely funded in the way I described. There are, of course, examples where there may be a crisis and where we have to pull in staff from across the Foreign and Commonwealth Office broader family and

liaise with other Government Departments. In that case, we have an agreement with the Treasury that those additional top-up costs will be provided, with the Treasury's agreement, by structures outside the normal funding for the consulate finance.

Q144 Chair: Okay. Have you had any redundancies from consular services overseas in the last six years, including from reassignments?

Susan Caldwell: Overseas, we have seen some changes due to the transition of passport services from the Foreign Office to Her Majesty's Passport Office. That initially saw the creation of seven regional passport processing centres and we then went through a programme of transitioning that service over to the UK. Staff who were involved in delivering those services have either been redeployed in other parts of the mission and the consular service, or found other jobs in the local area. We have supported them through that process.

Q145 Mr Baron: Minister, one doesn't doubt for one moment that there is an awful lot of expertise in the consular services. In the vast majority of cases, they do a very good job, but we as a Committee are faced with a lot of witnesses making the point that they are not happy with the service they received. They talk about a discourteous service and even a service that is not compassionate enough in extreme cases. I suppose the FCO response would be, "We have to manage expectations." How do you bridge that gap between managing expectations and dealing with what a lot of people perceive to be reasonable requests in dealing with their personal circumstances?

Mark Simmonds: If I may make the obvious point—each individual case is different. While common themes run through some of the consular cases, we need to look at each individual case on its own merit, which is what the consular staff do. There are two strands to this. The first is trying to ensure that expectations are managed and that British nationals abroad understand the services that consular can and cannot provide. I think there is sometimes confusion about that or a lack of understanding of the detail, and I can give you two or three very straightforward examples.

There is a belief—I will not be specific—that, where a British national is detained in a foreign prison, we have an ability to break people out. We don't. We cannot interfere in another country's judicial process. There is also sometimes an expectation that we can and should be paying legal fees. We don't do that. The Foreign Office and the consular directorate are not in the business of providing a legal aid service for British nationals who get into trouble abroad. There is expectation management and there is a communications job required and I think we do that very well, but—certainly having read some of the complaints that came in to your inquiry—in some instances, there is a misunderstanding.

Q146 Mr Baron: I take your two examples, but I think a lot of people would assume those are unreasonable expectations. What the Committee has been hearing about is reasonable expectations not being met. I am not interested in the extremes. I am interested in reasonable expectations. For example, do you think it really strikes the right tone when the FCO releases lists of silly requests to embassies? I do not think that it could be argued that it actually helps to bridge that misunderstanding. If anything, it could put legitimate and reasonable people off pursuing their cause. You cite unreasonable requests, but I am more interested in the reasonable requests that are deemed not to be met.

Mark Simmonds: I understand the point. Clearly, there are examples—I know that you have been talking to officials in the past week or so—where it appears that the level of professionalism and consular service that we would all expect has not been delivered. That is why we have a thorough and detailed complaints structure. We take customer feedback seriously, including both those who complain and those who are complimentary about the services. We are also of course permanently looking to learn the lessons of what has and has not gone well to improve the level of service that we are providing to British nationals wherever they are in the world. We have put in place structures to try to improve the complaints procedure and the lessons learned exercise, such as improving guidance for staff, improving senior oversight, centralising complaints, recording, being more empathetic to customers of the service and ensuring that customers better understand some of the services that we can and cannot provide.

So, where the service has been lacking—it has not been to the high standard that we would expect—I would certainly expect, as the responsible Minister, that service to improve.

Q147 Mr Baron: Minister, can I put it to you like this? We are trying to bridge a gap between managing expectations and what is reasonable. Is it wise that the FCO tends to take the tack of avoiding saying what it will do as opposed to what it will not do? I would suggest that avoiding setting out what you will and can do or putting the emphasis on the other side does not actually help to bridge that gap.

Mark Simmonds: We have tried and continue to try to put into the public domain details about the level of service and the type of service that we can provide, whether through “Support for British nationals abroad: a guide”, through access to information on websites, through getting information into the public domain through social media or, indeed, at the World cup, where we had facilities, alongside our Brazilian hosts, to download apps that provide real-time information about how people could access consular services and what the services were. So I accept that there is still a gap in some people’s minds between the services that they think we are providing and those are we are prepared to provide.

Q148 Mr Baron: Are you saying that you are satisfied that the FCO has stated exactly what it will do? There is a general view that it tends to avoid doing that and emphasises more what it cannot do. By stating exactly what it will do, there is perhaps a concern—maybe you can clarify this—that you are setting up a legal precedent or obligation going forward. What you are saying is that to your mind you are satisfied to the extent that you have stated quite explicitly what consular services are able to do.

Mark Simmonds: Yes. I think that is true. What I would also say, however, is that sometimes there clearly is a gap. Of course, the level and the type of service that consular services can provide is reiterated and clarified once an individual consular officer is engaged with an individual who requires help in a particular country. The emphasis in a country that does not have English as its national language, for example, would be different from one that did, because of the required translation and signposting to lawyers in that country who speak English. That does not mean that there is not more that we could be doing. We are constantly looking at ways to improve the level of service to British nationals, not just within the directorate but using organisations, including non-governmental organisations such as Prisoners Abroad or ABTA, one of the over-arching travel industry bodies, to engage as many private sector organisations as we can to disseminate this key information before

people decide to go abroad. They are part of the Know Before You Go campaign, so they are fully cognisant and aware of the advice that is coming from the consulate directorate.

Q149 Mr Baron: Can I move this on, Minister, very briefly? We touched earlier on the issue of charging for services. Can you tell the Committee the extent to which costs—charges for documentary and notarial services—have risen over the last five years?

Mark Simmonds: I am going to ask Susan to answer that, but before she does can I just make a specific point? We think that actually, where an alternative to the consular service that relates to notarial services is being provided, an individual should use those alternative services; so where the private sector can provide those services we are winding down, if not stopping, that particular service, because it is more efficient and often more cost-effective for somebody else to do it rather than ourselves.

Q150 Mr Baron: Assuming, of course, that it is going to be received in that light. Sometimes there is no substitute for a letter from a consular service.

Mark Simmonds: It depends on the individual circumstances.

Susan Caldwell: Our fees are designed to be in line with what it costs us to deliver that service, under Treasury guidance. I do not have with me the history of our fees over five years, but would be happy to write to you with how that has changed.

Q151 Mr Baron: Could you supply it?

Susan Caldwell: Yes.

Q152 Mr Baron: I suppose I am leading on to this question. We know that consular services are not funded by the taxpayer and so forth; so one looks at the actual cost of producing the goods and whether there is a cross-subsidy going on, which to a certain extent there is. Do you think it is reasonable, as we have had one witness make clear, that it cost one British national €152 for a letter confirming residence in Canada. Is that reasonable? Does that reflect cost? To what extent is there a heavy cross-subsidy there for other services?

Susan Caldwell: I would not want to comment on the reasonability of that specific cost in that particular case, but I can assure you that, across the range, fees and charges are allocated in accordance with the cost to us to deliver that service.

Q153 Mr Baron: But, if I may ask, has any assessment been done of what it actually costs to produce such a letter? We are trying to get a feel here for the extent of the cross-subsidy that is going on.

Susan Caldwell: Okay, so we look at the broad range of costs to deliver those services, but I want to state that we are a core part of the Foreign Office. We are not a separate organisation acting as an executive agency, so we do not publish our accounts and we are there to provide a core contribution to the broader mission of the Foreign Office.

Q154 Mr Baron: Final question, very briefly. We look forward to receiving those figures. As you withdraw, I suppose, from—this is the point I am getting to—some notarial services, will there automatically be a proportionate rise in the cost of other services you provide?

Joanna Roper: We need to be looking at all of our fees and all of our income over coming years. That needs to take into account expected demand. We need to look at how we are reducing and putting online some of those services, which by its very nature will reduce the costs of actually providing those services; so there is actually quite a lot of change in terms of the level of service that we are providing, and the costs associated with delivering those services. We need to do some more work on how our fees and our income stack up in terms of the structures.

Q155 Mr Baron: I think what you are saying to me, Ms Roper, is that you have not done a cost analysis of the breakdown of services. You need to do that; but you are not disagreeing with the concept that if you withdraw from certain notarial services, from which I presume that you are making only a reasonable profit, you will have to recover that from other services you provide, which can only suggest that prices are going to go up.

Joanna Roper: The cost-benefit analysis has been done, and we will send those details to you.

Q156 Mr Baron: But you do not disagree with where I am coming from generally, that if you withdraw from certain profitable services like certain notarial services, you are going to have to find that money from elsewhere.

Joanna Roper: We are going to have to look at how our income and our costs are balanced out, yes.

Mr Baron: You should be a politician.

Mark Simmonds: Before we move off Mr Baron's question, can I just make the general point that at £1.50 per year per passport holder I think the service that is being provided is excellent value for money.

Chair: We are coming to passports. Sandra Osborne.

Q157 Sandra Osborne: Last year, the FCO promised to complete its transfer of its passport operations to the Home Office by March 2014 in a way that ensured a "consistent, secure, efficient and cost-effective service". It also told us, "This has been a major transition project, which is now close to successful completion." Instead, there has been chaos and long delays. What happened?

Joanna Roper: I will start, then I will ask Susan to fill in some of the background. The period over which we brought all passport production back to the UK was about four years. In terms of structure, we brought the passports being produced in about 100 posts overseas into about seven regional centres, and finally back to the UK. That was done hand in hand with HM Passport Office. It was a staggered, sequenced series of events over those four years, in which the lessons from each of the closures were learned and applied to the next phase of the process. That took us up to April 2014.

It would be fair to say that the Passport Office experienced an unexpected surge in demand. Therefore, we put in place, in concert with HMPO, a package of measures to manage the demand and alleviate the delays in getting the passports. The Home Secretary announced that on 12 June. The two elements that the Foreign Office is able to provide are a 12-month extension to passports overseas and the issuing of emergency travel documents to children for the first time, which is something we haven't been able to do. Both those measures were put in place to manage the demand on passports overseas. That is the overarching position on bringing passports back to the UK. We could probably say a little more about the backdrop and how we came to the decisions, if that would be helpful.

Q158 Sandra Osborne: Before you do that, did you say you had an unexpected surge in demand?

Joanna Roper: It was something like 40,000 or 50,000 more passports per year than had been expected.

Q159 Sandra Osborne: But there is a huge backlog of 400,000 passports, 300,000 of which could have been anticipated. Why was that not planned for?

Susan Caldwell: The response to the backlog is for HMPO to answer on. In terms of the transfer of responsibility from the Foreign Office to the Home Office, the first stage was to move production of the passport book from local centres to a couple of centres in the UK. That first stage of the transition was managed very well, with no change in the service levels for customers.

The second stage was to allow customers to apply directly to HMPO, and to allow the examination or decision making process to be conducted by HMPO. The main benefit of that was a consistency in the examination process and fraud checks for British nationals applying from overseas and from the UK. That was managed in a stage-by-stage process. At each stage, as we transitioned from one of those regional processing centres to HMPO in the UK, we tested the impact on customers, service delivery and fraud, and HMPO's ability to deliver. The second stage of transition was delivered across a year, and it ended in April this year. At each stage, we managed the risk. We were looking at risk to delivery of services, and we had no concerns at that stage that HMPO was not operating to the service levels that it had committed to deliver to customers.

Q160 Sandra Osborne: So why didn't you know?

Susan Caldwell: Because at that stage HMPO was still meeting the public targets for service to customers. Throughout this process, we have committed together to maintaining the existing service standards of passport delivery. I will have to confirm this—I will confirm it shortly—but I think it is three to four weeks for a renewal process and up to six weeks for a first-time applicant.

At no time through that transition period did HMPO fall below that target, as far as we were aware at the point that transition happened in April. We had managed the risk throughout that process.

Q161 Sandra Osborne: But you were not aware that HMPO were not able to manage the process, because clearly they were not.

Susan Caldwell: Those questions are for HMPO to answer.

Q162 Sandra Osborne: But you are supposed to be working together on this.

Susan Caldwell: Yes. We have been working together on that safe transition of passport—

Mark Simmonds: There are two elements. One was the handover. I think the point that Susan is making is that at no point during the handover did HMPO fail to meet the targets. Therefore, no alarm bells went off in the FCO before the handover took place. Subsequently, the FCO and consular director have stepped in to assist with the additional measures, which is to help by both extending the date that passports expire and providing emergency travel documents for children. Our consular call centres have been heavily involved with that, taking additional calls, providing additional services, so making appointments on behalf of people to access these additional services.

In addition we have, through our diplomatic network, been lobbying countries abroad to ensure that they accept these emergency travel documents and the passport stamp to extend the passports. So far 88 countries have said they are willing to accept these passport extensions. The Foreign Secretary and I have been heavily involved in writing to countries to ask them to expedite this process while HMPO get to grips with the backlog of passports that you are referring to.

Q163 Sandra Osborne: We are trying to identify how this came about. When was the FCO aware that there was a problem?

Mark Simmonds: I cannot be specific about a date but I would have thought I personally was aware about mid-May.

Sandra Osborne: That is astounding.

Mark Simmonds: I was aware mid-May because, when I went to visit the call centre and some of our missions around the world, they were saying to me that there was an issue now with people not being able to access their passports, not even able to establish where they were in the system. At that point we started talking to the Home Office, which has resulted in these additional supportive measures being put in place.

Q164 Sandra Osborne: Was the FCO involved in the inaccurate forecasting in HMPO?

Susan Caldwell: Together we will have shared the history of passport volumes over the previous year, so HMPO will have received that information. As articulated previously, it has been an unprecedented level of demand, over and above that normal level of passport demand, both overseas and I believe in the UK.

Q165 Sandra Osborne: I think it has been established that the problems are not just down to increased demand that could not have been anticipated. Can you tell me when the handover date was?

Joanna Roper: The transition back to the UK? That finished in April this year.

Q166 Sandra Osborne: This Committee has previously pointed up concerns about the whole issue, in terms of reputational damage to the FCO. Do you think it has been damaged by this recent disaster, and also the managed transfer, which has increased waiting times for ex-pats?

Mark Simmonds: No. I think that the effective way that the FCO responded in providing the additional measures to assist HMPO puts the FCO in a very positive light. We were not saying it was nothing to do with us any more, but rolling our sleeves up, getting stuck in and helping HMPO deliver what everybody who is applying for a new passport wants to see.

Joanna Roper: May I add to that? The announcement was made on 12 June. By the following Monday, our contact centres were taking about 2,000 calls a day, which is about double what they would ordinarily be taking, setting up appointments for people for the following week, to start going into post and applying for their emergency travel documents or passport extensions. In the course of those 10 days—or just over a week—we had sent out from HMPO, and posts had received, the stamps. We had trained our staff how to use the stamps; what the policy guidance was; and how to implement the new policies on both emergency travel documents and passports. By the following Monday—in fact, on the Sunday in some of the Gulf states—we were taking people face to face in our embassies and posts overseas to make this happen in the course of a working week. In terms of trying to look at where we needed to put people to make it happen and to support resources around our network, it was, as the Minister says, pretty fast-moving. We got there by 23 June.

Q167 Sandra Osborne: With respect, I think we are aware of the measures that have been taken by both the Home Office and the FCO. As constituency MPs, we are very much aware, because we have been dealing with lots of individual cases. What I am trying to get at here is reputational damage that may have been done by the whole fiasco happening in the first place. By closing overseas passport offices, did you undermine the resilience of the system and its ability to respond to such a surge in demand?

Mark Simmonds: No, I don't think we did. The decision to transfer overseas passport production to HMPO—based on National Audit Office advice—was the right thing to do, particularly in terms of the security aspect, which you will be aware of.

Clearly, there is a challenge that we are all working together to resolve at the moment. As a constituency MP, I have the same postbag, as this relates, as you do. But there needs to be an understanding that this was the right decision, not only in terms of security, but in our ability to drive efficiency and to reduce the cost of passports to those applying for them.

Q168 Sandra Osborne: With the reduced costs, my constituents have had to travel the length of the country to go to an interview, but never mind; that is a different story.

You have talked about emergency travel documents. Have more than usual of these been issued over the past two months as a result of the delay? What are the figures for that?

Susan Caldwell: We can provide the exact figures to you.

Joanna Roper: Is that figures of how many we have issued?

Sandra Osborne: Yes.

Joanna Roper: In the first week we received 431 applications for adults and 160 for children. We made 500 appointments in the first week as well.

Q169 Sandra Osborne: How would that compare with what usually happens?

Joanna Roper: I don't have that information with me.

Q170 Sandra Osborne: Could you supply it?

Joanna Roper: Yes.

Q171 Mike Gapes: May I follow up on Sandra's questions? In January, we received a memo where you said that this transfer to HMPO was going to be done by March 2014. But Ms Roper, you just said that it was done in April. Clearly, the process had already slipped. Then, the fiasco disaster seems to have been drawn to your attention in May. Was the passport office not ready to take over in April, and was that the reason that these issues suddenly erupted? Would it not have been better, given that you had slipped from March to April, to phase it a bit longer, in order to make sure that we were not going to get this kind of problem?

Joanna Roper: Let me clarify. Perhaps what I should have said is "by April". I suppose, in my mind, I was thinking the end of the financial year, in terms of the transfer.

Q172 Mike Gapes: In the note we got in January, you told us that it was going to be done by March 2014. Are you telling me that what happened in fact was consistent with that, or did the date slip?

Joanna Roper: It is consistent.

Q173 Mike Gapes: So it was by March, although you said by April.

Susan Caldwell: By the end of March.

Q174 Mike Gapes: You mean 1 April is the date? Is that what you are telling me? I am just trying to understand who has responsibility. Was it the FCO, or was it HMPO? Suddenly, within a few weeks, we have lots of MPs getting phone calls from irate constituents. There were delays and people were having to get emergency documents. We were ringing up and saying, "Can you process this quickly?" I have been in Parliament 22 years, and I have never had a problem of this kind, relating to this issue. Suddenly, this year, when you do the transition, bang!—we've got a problem. I am trying to be clear whether it is the FCO's responsibility, or whether it is another Home Office disaster.

Joanna Roper: In terms of the transition I would say it was a joint responsibility, given that we used to host passport-issuing posts in the regional centres. In terms of owning the policy, that would be a passport office responsibility.

Q175 Mike Gapes: So the transfer over took place—I want to be clear—consistent with the original plans and there was no slippage. Therefore, on 1 April, it was no longer your responsibility. Is that accurate?

Susan Caldwell: Yes, the Foreign Office and the Home Office signed an accord and set out that date and it was delivered on the date as set out in the accord.

Q176 Mike Gapes: So everything that happened between 1 April and the middle of May when you became aware, Minister, that there were problems is not the responsibility of the FCO; it is entirely the responsibility of the Home Office.

Mark Simmonds: HMPO took responsibility at the beginning of April for the provision of passports.

Q177 Mike Gapes: Perhaps I will pursue that later because I have other questions to ask.

On the question of the changes that we have made generally, we went to Malaga, as you know, and visited one of the three local consular contact centres—the other two are in Ottawa and Hong Kong. Are all three now fully operational? Have they taken over all the responsibilities from the local consular centres that used to exist?

Joanna Roper: No, because the concept behind setting up the contact centres was to provide a faster, swifter, more responsive service to members of the public who call and do a first-line point of inquiry into the FCO overseas. In the past, members of our consular section would be picking up the phone and trying to answer those questions, but introducing the contact centres around the world means we have a dedicated core team who are able to pick up and answer the queries by the member of the public on the end of the phone. That could be anything from a consular query, to where they can get such and such stamps, to “I have a problem and I need help.”

In the case of people who need help and assistance, that will be escalated straightaway back to the post in the country from which the member of the public is calling, so they will be helped and assisted throughout whatever their query might be.

Q178 Mike Gapes: In terms of the consequences of this change, have there been positions lost or posts eliminated at local consular posts around the world as a result of the move towards having these three huge contact centres?

Susan Caldwell: No, the contact centres were designed to enable a shift and rebalancing of staff time at local consular posts so that they can focus on providing assistance.

When the original pilot contact centre was set up in Malaga, that was a local initiative and they took some of their local staff to create that very first pilot and that contact centre. That original germination is different, but as we set out the business case for provision of contact centres for all consular posts, it was not done on the basis of a cost-saving measure; it was done to release staff time.

Q179 Mike Gapes: So if I am in Germany or the Philippines I am not going to lose my job in consular because there is a regional part?

Joanna Roper: No, because the whole concept was to free people up to do the front-line assistance work that we want them to do.

Q180 Mike Gapes: You referred in the documentation that we have received to your aim to have a core resolution rate of 80%. Can you clarify what you define as a resolution?

Susan Caldwell: I would be happy to do that. The first thing I want to say is that this is the first time that we have had all of our calls coming into one place, so we know what customers are calling about. It means we can start to do something with that and start to change and improve our services to help customers before they have to call us. We are currently finding that 7% of those calls are British nationals requiring urgent assistance. They are people who need to be put through to post as quickly as possible, and we will not let go of that customer until they speak to an individual at post. So it is no longer the case that if it is a small post and someone has had to travel out on a prison visit for the day—there will now be an alternative arrangement, so a customer in need will get to speak to somebody.

About 6% are less urgent assistance cases, so that means they will be put forward to post and need handling in the next day or so, or we need to help them make an appointment so that they can go and visit the local post. Currently, about 35% of those other calls are signposting people and helping them get access to other Government services, such as passports and visa services. We signpost them to where they can get the information they need and advice about their specific application. Some 17% are notarial, so people are trying to understand the notarial service in a particular location and, again, make an appointment if they need to come in. Some 10% to 20% are calls from people inquiring about services that are not a core consular service, so we will politely and with respect talk to them, saying, “Actually, this is not a consular service. We cannot help you. We suggest you go”—

Q181 Mike Gapes: Can you give an example of that?

Susan Caldwell: There are lots of stories that our contact centre colleagues could provide. I have heard about somebody asking how to import olives into Italy, for example.

Q182 Mike Gapes: You mentioned signposting. If you tell a caller to go to the website to find a service, does that count as a satisfactory call resolution within your 80% target?

Susan Caldwell: Within that 80% measure, and the way the contact centres are looking at it, that is within that measure. However, we have done some work with those callers. We undertook a survey for a full month to talk to those exact customers who were calling us, saying, “Well, the information you can find is on gov.uk”. We took the time to ask them, “How did you find our number? Why couldn’t you get the information you needed under gov.uk? What do we need to provide to make it faster and easier for you to get the information you need more quickly?” Let’s face it, some people want the security; having read gov.uk, the evidence was showing us that they still wanted to speak to a person to validate what they were seeing.

A great example would be people calling about the marriage process in Italy. That was a specific example where people were calling us and we were able to learn from that and update our marriage guidance for that particular country’s advice on the internet, to make it a bit more transparent.

Q183 Mike Gapes: When we went to Malaga, we saw good co-operation between the consulate and local organisations in the Mijas foreigners department. We were also told about work with Age Concern and other groups, such as Soroptimists dealing with domestic

violence, and with mental health services and social workers. Is the FCO dealing with specialist organisations and local partners generally because it is a cheaper way to provide services or is it because these organisations can better provide a service for the local British people?

Mark Simmonds: I have seen the work that Age Concern does in southern Spain, as well as the work that Prisoners Abroad does there. It was the first visit I went on when I was asked to do this job. I went to Benidorm and Alicante and saw the excellent work that the busiest consular office in the world does.

It is because they have expertise and skill sets that we in the FCO do not have, which enables us to provide a better level of consular service to British nationals, not just in those areas that we have mentioned, but in others as well, including people dealing with mental health, victims of forced marriage, and in terms of preventive campaigning. So it is building capacity within the system, rather than replacing it.

Q184 Mike Gapes: So it is not to save money?

Joanna Roper: It is not to save money. Typically, in the course of a day or a week, a consular officer might need to be a consular officer, a bereavement counsellor, a child protection officer, and they might offer support in terms of forced marriage and be a translator or interpreter, helping with property or age concerns. There are lots of different scenarios that any consular officer will have to deal with and we cannot possibly manage the expertise, which is why, if we work with partner organisations—and we part-fund quite a lot of those organisations, for exactly this reason—and NGOs, the package that we can offer British nationals overseas is more holistic and, I hope, more effective and more appropriate.

Q185 Mike Gapes: When you refer people to an organisation that is external to the FCO, perhaps even an organisation that we are funding or part-funding, how do you monitor the quality and consistency of the service that people will get? And once you have referred them, is that the end of your involvement?

Joanna Roper: No, it is not. It will depend very much on the scenario, on the case and on the support and assistance that we are giving to any individual. For example, if an individual is looking for legal assistance, they will go to one particular organisation, or they will go to bereavement care if one of their loved ones has been involved in a traffic accident or has died overseas. Depending on what the scenario is, we will work with that organisation, but it does not mean to say that we stop contact with the individual at all. It means that we continue to work with them, with their family, with their legal representatives and with the organisation as well.

Mark Simmonds: If it would help the Committee, I would be happy to provide details of those organisations that we fund.

Q186 Mike Gapes: That would be very helpful. However, can I just press you on the question of legal assistance? From previous conversations that I have had, both informally and in other places, I know that you do not actually produce recommended lawyers' lists; you just produce lists of lawyers who are available in that locality. Does that not potentially get you into some problems, if the lawyers are not very good, are corrupt or do not do the proper job?

Joanna Roper: We touched on this last week, and I hope you have received my letter, which I hope set out in a little—

Q187 Mike Gapes: Yes, I have received your letter, but I am not going to quote from it, because I do not want to breach the basis on which I think I received it. However, I am glad you have mentioned it. Are you going to look into this issue?

Joanna Roper: We are looking into it and we can set out the criteria in even more detail, if you would like. I think we have already covered the criteria on which somebody should be on our list. However we make it very clear, for the reasons we have already talked about, that this is a factual list of organisations and legal services in the area that people will be able to look at, but we do not give any recommendation or any particular lead one way or the other, for the reasons we have talked about.

Q188 Mike Gapes: But you can remove people from the list?

Joanna Roper: We can, and we will remove people if they do not hit the standards we are looking for.

Chair: Minister, I expressed a view that there may well be a vote at 4.15 pm and that we would try to finish before then. I gather that there will be a vote, possibly even before 4.15 pm, and clearly we are not going to finish by 4.15 pm. So you might like to tip off those behind you to warn your office. I would say that we are about 25 minutes away from finishing, as we have effectively lost the time for two votes; they have branched in on our time.

Q189 Nadhim Zahawi: Welcome, Minister. What support have you put in place for British nationals who cannot or do not use the internet?

Susan Caldwell: British nationals can still come to a consular post and they can call us through our contact centre, so our level of service has not declined; we have increased it by trying to provide more services through the internet. We have not withdrawn any services.

Q190 Nadhim Zahawi: And they can secure consular appointments or access consular information if they do not use the internet?

Susan Caldwell: They can call us or they can come to a consular post, and we would assist them.

Q191 Nadhim Zahawi: Of course, this by-default strategy means that if appropriate—
[Interruption.]

Sitting suspended.

4.20 pm

On resuming—

Chair: Mr Zahawi, you have the floor.

Q192 Nadhim Zahawi: I just wanted to probe a little further on this point. One way that the Government talks about mitigating the digital divide is that people can seek help to input the

information face-to-face. Do you think it appropriate that British nationals must seek help from, say, local authorities in other countries in order to make sense of or input information into UK Government websites? If they cannot get to an appointment, for example, they would have to go face-to-face somewhere and try to input that information.

Susan Caldwell: Would you clarify the question, please?

Nadhim Zahawi: One way to mitigate the situation for those who do not have a digital device is a face-to-face meeting, but if they cannot get to that, they would have to go, say, to a local library or office of some sort and seek help to input information into a UK Government online platform. Do you think that is an appropriate way of dealing with British nationals?

Susan Caldwell: A few comments there. I stated earlier that we have not withdrawn any services and made them digital-only. I have sat in on some calls in the contact centre. When citizens are facing exactly that scenario—they have said, “I am old; I don’t have access to the internet, or I struggle with it,”—we support them and talk them through it. “Actually, can you get somebody?” Often, people have friends, family or others around them in the community who can help them access online services.

We are aware of the work that the Government are doing on digital inclusion. That is focused primarily in the UK, but we are linked into that thought process. Again, where we have particular communities of people who may not have access to the internet—for example, in southern Spain, where we have an ageing population—we work with local communities that provide that type of support to those communities. But I say again that we have not withdrawn any services and made them digital-only. People can call us, and we will always seek to help them where we can.

Q193 Nadhim Zahawi: My next question is on the crisis response system. Has it been used during the ongoing crisis in Iraq?

Joanna Roper: No. We are on crisis watch, so we are watching very, very closely what is happening, but we have not actually had to invoke it. We have used it in other crises. We used it when we were looking to withdraw people from Sudan and during Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Mark Simmonds: South Sudan.

Joanna Roper: Sorry, South Sudan.

Susan Caldwell: Can I just add to that? Going back to your point on digital, I think it often surprises us. In South Sudan, over 50% of people contacted us via social media, in a country where you would not expect that to be the case. We do offer that channel, and it surprises us how many people are able and willing to use it.

Q194 Nadhim Zahawi: The flip side of that is that sometimes, that is what gets pulled down. In a crisis, networks go offline, so you have to be careful.

Joanna Roper: There are other ways of contacting us in times of crisis.

Q195 Nadhim Zahawi: Absolutely. Does the FCO still run the warden networks in some countries?

Mark Simmonds: Yes, it does, and I have seen it for myself. I have met some of the wardens as I have travelled around the areas of the world that I am responsible for. The wardens, of course, are different from honorary consuls; they do not have the same responsibilities as detailed under the Vienna convention, but they are still extremely helpful and many of them are very dedicated and committed British citizens, often in extremely challenging areas. The example that I would give you is the British citizens who are wardens in Kaduna in the northern part of Nigeria.

Q196 Nadhim Zahawi: I think you are absolutely right on that, Minister. And, of course, the IPPR has recommended that the FCO should update and extend the role of voluntary wardens. What criteria are used to decide which countries have a warden network and which do not?

Susan Caldwell: That is the responsibility of the consular regional director, in consultation with his network staff and in consultation with post—local mission.

Q197 Nadhim Zahawi: Does not the decision to end the LOCATE programme make British embassies very reliant on a citizen's having internet access, which has, obviously, no guarantee of working in a crisis, as we have heard?

Mark Simmonds: I think 1% of UK citizens abroad actually registered with LOCATE—there were variances on that across the network. But the example that stands out for me is the tsunami that happened in Japan, where, I think, not one UK citizen who was potentially in the area was located on the LOCATE network, so it had absolutely no relevance to the crisis management that was taking place. As Ms Roper says, there are other ways of contacting UK citizens in a crisis, and with the strategy that has been put in place, in addition to social media and the internet and tweets and other mechanisms, such as the downloading of apps, I think we can provide that information perhaps even faster than we would have been able to before.

Q198 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, one of the most concerning issues we have heard about is that of people who have passed away abroad and how their families are able to cope with such a tragic situation. We have been told from numerous sources that the consular services for British nationals are not adequate in such cases, when it comes to deaths abroad, and have added to the already substantial trauma that British families face. Would you like to respond to some of those concerns?

Mark Simmonds: There may well be instances where, as we said earlier, the level of consular support was not as we would all wish and expect. But I think generally the level of support that is provided to those whose families suffer bereavement abroad is very efficient, effective and very supportive, in terms of putting people in contact with the relevant international funeral directors, to enable repatriation of bodies at the appropriate time; providing support to ensure that British nationals are aware of the process in a particular country that the families have to go through; and providing support to talk to local agencies and local authorities. But often there is a misunderstanding—it goes back to the exchange that Mr Baron and I had earlier. There is sometimes an expectation that the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office will pay, and of course that is not part of the consular service that we will provide. It is a very clear policy.

I also think we are very good at providing—again with particular regard to the NGO communities—signposting to some support mechanisms that can provide support to those families who are suffering bereavement. I give you one example, Mr Rosindell: Brake, which is an excellent NGO that provides support to those who have been involved in road traffic accidents.

Q199 Andrew Rosindell: We have also been told that the memorandum of understanding between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the police and coroners is not being well implemented, and that some families are still not allocated a family liaison officer. What is the FCO doing to ensure that the MOU is implemented by the FCO and all its partners?

Mark Simmonds: I will let Ms Roper fill in the detail, but my understanding is that the MOU is currently being reviewed.

Joanna Roper: That is certainly under way at the moment. If you are talking about people whose loved ones have been taken through murder and manslaughter in particular, the service we are looking at offering those families is also under review. Mr Swire, the Foreign Office Minister, announced that in January. It goes back to the point Mr Baron made earlier about having compassion for people undergoing hugely distressing, emotional and tragic circumstances overseas, and looking at what service we can provide and what support we can offer them.

As we develop and evolve our offer for people, we recognise that this actually might be an area we could be doing more in and, as such, are doing a review of the service we offer the families of those who have been taken by murder and manslaughter overseas. The MOU, which was your question, is being reviewed as part of that. I hope we will be able to report by autumn what we will be able to offer families in these particularly awful circumstances.

Q200 Andrew Rosindell: I think Mr Baron's point about compassion is something we all agree with. You are reviewing how this mechanism works. It is a tragic situation when someone loses a member of their family abroad and they need as much help as they can get. Is your current service fit for purpose to deal with that or, as has been suggested, should a small, central unit be established by the FCO in London to deal only with the specific issue of deaths abroad, and help and support the families concerned? Would you consider that proposal? Would it not be more appropriate than leaving the task to desk officers?

Mark Simmonds: Where you are absolutely right, Mr Rosindell is that, as part of this review into the memorandum of understanding and the work that all the respective parties that are signatory to it need to undertake, we shouldn't rule anything out. We should certainly look at whether any central unit would provide a better service than is currently being provided. Having said that, we should not undermine the consular work in country, and the expertise that is developed there specifically by locally employed staff, as well as the important link to the consular experts back in the Foreign Office in London. There is sometimes—I have had individual constituent cases as well—a belief that we should and could interfere in other countries' judicial processes. Of course, we can't and shouldn't do that.

Q201 Andrew Rosindell: As a final, very brief question—I know the Minister will be very keen to answer this—is he completely satisfied that all his consular staff in all the offices are completely aware of the importance of dealing with British subjects who reside in Her Majesty’s territories and dependencies as well as those who live in the United Kingdom? I asked this question when I was in Malaga and I wasn’t 100% sure that every member of staff got it in the sense that they knew, for instance, that if you come from Bermuda, you are equally British as someone who lives on mainland UK. Are you satisfied that your staff understand that?

Mark Simmonds: Yes, I think it is understood. This certainly gives us another opportunity to reiterate the important point that residents of our overseas territories are entitled to consular assistance when they travel abroad but, of course, not in overseas territories, just as British citizens do not access consular services when they are in Britain.

It is not just about providing consular services to overseas territories citizens. We also do a significant amount in terms of working with overseas territories for crisis management, running exercises, supporting disaster management—particularly in our Caribbean overseas territories—and naval assets in the region provide support particularly as it relates to potential hurricanes.

Q202 Andrew Rosindell: Crown dependencies or only overseas territories?

Mark Simmonds: Both.

Q203 Chair: I have a constituent, Diane Ashton, whose son was killed in a full moon party in Thailand about 18 months ago. She had a fair amount of contact from the Foreign Office but it was mainly on the telephone. In contrast, her daughter had her mobile phone stolen and had more formal communication from the Met, through correspondence, than she did over her son being killed on the beach in Thailand. Does that surprise you?

Mark Simmonds: Yes, but it is very difficult, in this forum, to deal with specific cases. I can certainly give you a—

Q204 Chair: It was the communication point rather than the specific case.

Mark Simmonds: I am very happy to go away, look at it and see whether there are any specific lessons that we could learn from the experience of your constituent.

Q205 Ann Clwyd: The only time I have ever personally tried to use the consular services is when I was involved in a traffic accident in Florence many years ago. I went to look for the consul and was told that it was closed because it was the Queen’s birthday. Is there a specific allowance for them to take the day off when it is the Queen’s birthday? It has always intrigued me.

Mark Simmonds: Forgive me for asking—how long ago was that?

Ann Clwyd: A long time.

Mark Simmonds: I think I am right in thinking—I should be corrected by my officials—that we provide a 24/7 service, 365 days a year now.

Q206 Ann Clwyd: Can I ask you about the comments made to us by Prisoners Abroad? It said that the closure of posts has led to a loss of support to vulnerable British prisoners and that we do not compare very well with other countries as a result. What is your policy on giving help to prisoners?

Mark Simmonds: May I first answer that by saying that obviously any British national who is detained abroad is a significant consular priority? We provide support by explaining the process that that British citizen will go through. We often attend, particularly, the initial stages of any trial that might take place and, as Ms Roper said, we provide signposting to legal assistance that may be able to help that British national. Consular support will visit them in prison to provide the necessary support. Where you are right in your assessment is that there are some countries that visit detainees more often, but we look at each case on its individual merits and decide how much support and how regular that support for that individual would be relevant.

Q207 Ann Clwyd: But their specific allegation is that closure of posts has affected the service.

Mark Simmonds: Of which specific post, I would be interested, but certainly we have the largest consular network—230 posts—I think, of any country in the world, but there may be specific examples.

Susan Caldwell: Since May 2010 we have closed 12 European consular or honorary consular offices as part of the reshaping of that consulate network and those are primarily across Europe. We can provide the list of what they are. Some have been replaced by honorary consuls where those consulates were originally present, to ensure that we still have a presence for those who are most vulnerable.

Q208 Ann Clwyd: Prisoners Abroad specifically says that, where prisoners are involved, a closure of posts affects the service that is available.

Susan Caldwell: The closure of a post should not affect the standard of service that we deliver to a prisoner.

Mark Simmonds: Certainly, if there is a specific example, I will take it away and look at it very closely.

Q209 Ann Clwyd: You have touched on this point in answers: with reference to detention and deaths abroad, we have been told that the FCO sometimes tells families that it will not challenge authorities in another state about their cases because it would damage the UK's diplomatic relations. How do you make the judgment between individual cases and overall UK interests?

Mark Simmonds: I do not think that those two things are incompatible. As I said a moment ago, I do not think we should be interfering in other countries' judicial processes, but we need to provide the relevant consular support to that individual who has been detained and signpost them to access the necessary legal advice to ensure that they get a free trial in the country they happen to be detained in. That is exactly what we do.

Q210 Ann Clwyd: UK nationals sometimes allege torture in detention. How are your staff trained to deal with such allegations?

Mark Simmonds: The first, obvious point I would make is that we take all allegations of mistreatment and torture extremely seriously. In each instance, when we are asked by the British national concerned, we request a full, transparent, independent investigation into these matters. We also work with NGOs who have particular expertise in this field, Reprieve and Redress, and we have recently strengthened the processes for handling mistreatment and torture cases of British nationals reported overseas. We also focus on the three particular priority countries where there have been high numbers of reports, with some more serious than others. So we take a strategic approach that depends on the specifics of each individual case.

Q211 Ann Clwyd: It is very important, because consular officials may be the only ones who have access to prisoners in certain circumstances. That is why I do not quite understand how you choose your countries and why you keep out of some places. Prisoners Abroad says that it would expect you to be involved with some countries with which you are not. A Nuffield Foundation report compared the UK's record of visiting prisoners with that of the USA, Australia, the Netherlands and Germany, and found the UK to be "more reserving of direct contact with detainees than other countries". None of the other states had a policy of not visiting prisoners in certain countries.

Mark Simmonds: With regard to your comments about torture and mistreatment, wherever that is reported to us, with the permission of the detainee, we will raise it with the relevant authorities and sometimes at ministerial level with those Governments to try to ensure that we get a free, transparent investigation, and do all that we can to ensure that there is no repeat.

Q212 Sandra Osborne: In relation to the complaints procedure, I understand that the parliamentary ombudsman did a review recently, the key findings of which were that there was: a failure overall to be open and accountable through a defensive approach to complaint handling; a failure to recognise the impact of the handling on the individual concerned; and a failure to handle a data protection request properly. How do you respond to allegations of a culture of closing ranks among FCO staff at embassies and consulates when complaints are made about consular services?

Mark Simmonds: I do not share that view at all. In fact, from my experience, precisely the opposite is true. There is an atmosphere of openness and enthusiasm to learn lessons when things do not go perhaps as we would all wish, and a real determination not just to expedite complaints and provide responses to complainants in a timely manner, but to learn the lessons from those complaints, particularly those that came out of the 2013 ombudsman case, which reviewed a particular instance in handling processes and culture. As I mentioned earlier, a number of strategies have been put in place to address those concerns: simplifying the processes for customers; improving guidance for staff; improving senior oversight; centralising complaints recording, so that there can be greater and more accurate analysis; being more empathetic to customers; and analysing data better so that we can better understand why people are complaining and what we can do about it.

Q213 Sandra Osborne: I understand the complaints procedure is under review at the moment. Is that right?

Joanna Roper: A review took place, as the Minister said, after the report from the ombudsman. As the Minister has set out, we have put in place a series of measures to try and improve the complaints process, including bringing it into London so that we can have oversight of where the complaints are being made; the foundation of those complaints; and whether we can analyse where there are more systemic complaints or themes. This is a work in progress. As the Minister says, we are trying very hard to be open and receptive to comments and complaints, both positive and negative.

Q214 Sandra Osborne: With fewer consular jobs available to UK-based consular staff, the senior staff of the future are presumably unlikely to have had overseas consular experience. Have you thought about how this will affect the culture of the SCO? Are you developing parallel career routes in which staff are either diplomat or consular, but will not have experience in both?

Mark Simmonds: Ms Roper will answer on the detail, but certainly from the experiences that I have had, locally employed consular staff who are active in post, from Addis Ababa to Hong Kong, to New York and Washington and southern Spain, bring additional, for example, language skills that can be a significant positive contribution to the consular service that we provide, particularly in the call centres. In addition, just because somebody is a locally employed member of staff does not necessarily mean that they are not a British national. Indeed, some of the staff we employ around the world in our consular teams are husbands and wives of British citizens who have other jobs in that locality. The picture is not quite as simple as that, but they add a significant positive dimension to our consular teams.

Q215 Sandra Osborne: It was more the career opportunities for UK-based staff that I was asking about.

Joanna Roper: Can I complement what the Minister has said? You asked whether we were looking at having a separate cadre and a more political diplomatic service. Go back a long time and that is more where we were. These days we are looking much more at our diplomatic staff in whatever grade, rank or role being able to have at their disposal a range of skills, experience and expertise as they move up the career ladder. What that means in practice is—I think very firmly—that people can be moving into, for example, the consular work and getting experience.

We have people who have gone through, for example, fast track or more political work coming in. They do a stint in consular, because they want the experience of leading big teams, of public service delivery, which is a big piece of what we do, and understanding what it means, when you go into more senior roles, to help people—British nationals—overseas. If you look at some of our more senior roles these days, people will have had more experience and exposure to consular-type roles even if they have not played a consular role themselves, and I think that that can only be to the good. We complement that by offering our staff a really good well-recognised training and development package, whether for consular practitioners—those people who are out in post doing work, and here in London—or as part of our diplomatic academy, which you might have heard about. Actually, consular is a faculty

within that academy. It sits very firmly within the whole development package that we are offering not only to practitioners but to people who work with consular and certainly our senior leadership of the future. That is what I think we need to be offering all of our future members of staff.

Sandra Osborne: Thank you.

Chair: Minister, we have had evidence that honorary consuls represent good value and are a valued part of the system. Obviously, they are part time and have outside interests. How do we ensure that there is not a conflict between their work as an honorary consul and their private interests? Indeed, is it possible? For that matter, is it desirable that there should be a wall between the two?

Mark Simmonds: All the honorary consuls I have met are cognisant of the need to avoid any perception of conflict, and they do an excellent job. They are interviewed by post and have security checks by the FCO before taking up their role. They also have annual reviews with their line managers. Clearly, the point you raised is part of the discussion that takes place. If any allegations of conflicts of interest were to arise, those issues would be thoroughly investigated by the post that is responsible for the honorary consul.

Q216 Chair: Do you think they represent good value?

Mark Simmonds: I do.

Q217 Chair: And has their work load increased or diminished over the years? Are we using them more and more?

Mark Simmonds: It is difficult to generalise. There are honorary consuls who have found themselves in places where there has been an uptick in activity, so they are busier than they originally envisaged they would be, and there are those for whom the time involved is as they thought it would be. I think they are very good value for money. Certainly, those whom I have met provide an excellent professional, albeit part time, service on behalf of the United Kingdom.

Q218 Chair: Their stipend has been frozen for the past nine years. Is there a reason for that?

Mark Simmonds: Pass.

Q219 Chair: Is there any assistance coming on that? Could you drop me a line about that policy?

Mark Simmonds: We will write to you, Mr Chairman.

Q220 Chair: Mr Simmonds, that completes our questions. Is there any point you want to make by way of a closing statement? If there is one thing that comes through this, it is the question that was raised by John Baron early on about the expectations of the public versus the ability of the Foreign Office to provide a good service. There is no point raising expectations if you cannot deliver on them. The challenge we see is about how you manage that expectation.

Mark Simmonds: I will make three points in conclusion, if I may. First, the consular work is at the heart of everything we do at the Foreign Office. As I mentioned, it is one of the three priorities. However, we are constantly looking at ways in which we can provide support for British nationals when they are abroad, through both the consular teams and the partner organisations, and we are looking at both innovative ways of doing so and more traditional mechanisms. We managed to succeed in getting our information to 45 million people last year, so there are significant successes in the consular directorate. There is, in addition, important training for staff to ensure that they have the requisite skills. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure that British nationals, before they travel abroad and while they are abroad, are aware of what the consular teams can do and what they cannot do.

I am very pleased that you are having this inquiry into the excellent work of the consular directorate.

Chair: It seemed to us rather timely, as there is great change going on and a determination to improve the service. We hope we can provide constructive criticism as you do so. I thank all three of you very much indeed.