

# Foreign Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: FCO response to coronavirus/consular assistance, HC 239

Tuesday 30 June 2020

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Neil Coyle; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 149 - 274

### Witnesses

I: Nigel Adams MP, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Simon Manley, Director General, C-19, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and Jennifer Anderson, Director, Consular Services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nigel Adams, Simon Manley and Jennifer Anderson.

Q149 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and thank you very much, Minister, for making your first appearance before the Committee. Will you briefly introduce yourself and the two officials with you?

**Nigel Adams:** I am Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID. Jennifer Anderson is director of consular services, and Simon Manley is director general for Covid-19.

**Chair:** This is an inquiry into consular services provided by the Foreign Office in the recent emergency. We are trying to draw lessons to be prepared for any future reactions that may be necessary.

Q150 **Chris Bryant:** Let us start with a basic question: do you think all British nationals who wanted to get back have got back?

**Nigel Adams:** We believe we have the vast majority of those who want to get back. We are monitoring the situation right across the network. As you can imagine, it has been quite an unprecedented exercise—wording we use quite a lot. We believe that the vast majority of British nationals and travellers who want to be back are now back through a variety of means—commercial means, our charter flights or other countries' charter flights— but we are monitoring the situation and we stand ready to get back into operation if necessary.

Q151 **Chris Bryant:** Does that mean yes, you think everybody who wants to be back is back, or no, there are people out there who are not back?

**Nigel Adams:** We believe that the vast majority of people who want to be back are back. We had an exercise asking people to register their interest in coming back via particular posts. We believe we have the vast majority back. We are constantly monitoring, and where there are significant numbers, we will look at an area.

Q152 **Chris Bryant:** You are monitoring it, so what is the number of those who are not back yet?

**Nigel Adams:** Jennifer might be able to give you a better handle on numbers, but a good example would be South Africa, where we did the initial charter flights. On the last flight not all the seats were taken up; we flew back with some empty seats, but over time it appeared that a larger number of people wanted to come back.

Q153 **Chris Bryant:** I am sorry to be difficult, but it is a fairly simple question. Is everybody back? You said the vast majority are back and you are monitoring it, which would suggest that you know there is a significant minority who are not back.

**Nigel Adams:** I do not believe there is a significant minority, but Jennifer will hopefully be able to shed some light on numbers.



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**Jennifer Anderson:** I promise you I am not dodging the question. The question we have been asking is: who needs to get back at a specific point in time? There is a very large number of British people overseas at any one point in time. Many of them had to make a very sudden decision about whether they wished to return at that point in time; that has changed over the course of the crisis. In particular, there was the question of whether they had commercial means of getting back.

The numbers fluctuate, primarily because there are still numbers of British people overseas who have a ticket to return at a particular time and believe that ticket is still valid. We have seen a significant failure in the commercial aviation sector over recent months, and the question is: what happens when their tickets are cancelled?

At the moment, in most countries we do not believe there are significant problems in accessing commercial flights, but we are monitoring it constantly. We have retained our repatriation taskforce capability so that, if pockets build up that we believe cannot get back to the UK, we have the capacity to step in, but it is not a static picture.

It is not a question of dodging it. We collate figures every week on what we believe is the number of British nationals. I do not have a total figure, but we ask every post around the world to check whether it believes there are numbers of British nationals who cannot get back.

Q154 **Chris Bryant:** You have numbers every week, so what are the numbers this week?

**Jennifer Anderson:** Our posts are not reporting any countries where they believe we need to step in with a repatriation flight at the moment. They are all saying they believe there is sufficient commercial or other capacity at the moment, but we are still tracking them.

Q155 **Chris Bryant:** That is a different question, if you do not mind my saying so. One question is how many people want to come back and are finding it difficult to do so. Another question, which we will come to in a moment, is where the FCO thinks it needs to intervene.

I am sticking with the first question: how many British nationals are out there who want to come back? I presumed you would say that 100% of those who want to come back are back, but you are not saying that. You are saying you know that there is a number—even a percentage would be good—of people who are not back, but who want to be back.

**Nigel Adams:** What Jennifer is saying is that we are in touch with people who are inquiring principally about commercial flights, but that there are not sufficient numbers we are aware of where a repatriation flight would be necessary. I think you can take it from that that these are very small numbers. The number of calls coming into the contact centre do not appear, from what Jennifer is saying, to be sufficient that we need to be immediately scaling up another repat flight, because commercial flights, as you are probably aware, are beginning to operate.



**Q156 Chris Bryant:** In some places. The Foreign Office has tended to be much more reluctant than other countries, including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal and most other members of the European Union with similar proportions of people travelling round the world regularly, to provide repatriation.

**Nigel Adams:** It is a fair question. The UK had significant numbers of people. We know through our efforts that our initial focus was on ensuring that commercial flights were still operating. When it became obvious that there was no commercial option, we stood up our charter flights. I can tell you that an intense amount of work was undertaken by Ministers and officials to try to keep open air space and airport hubs. I have had personal conversations with chief execs of airlines, as did my fellow Ministers. That was reflected in the fact that over 1.3 million people got back to the UK via commercial routes. There were areas where commercial options were not available, so I think we had significantly higher numbers than some other countries.

**Q157 Chris Bryant:** Do you know that to be true, or do you think that?

**Nigel Adams:** My focus was on ensuring that British nationals and travellers were getting back rather than concentrating on what my counterparts in Germany and France were doing, but we have some numbers for other countries within the EU and I think ours are significantly greater.

**Q158 Chris Bryant:** I have heard that from Ministers several times and I am somewhat sceptical about it, so it would be great to have the figures on which you are basing that.

**Nigel Adams:** I may even have them here, if I can fish them out.

**Q159 Chris Bryant:** The bigger point, surely, is that nearly every Member of Parliament must have been knocking on your door. We all had constituents who were stuck somewhere. Peru springs to mind as one of the areas of Latin America where it felt the UK was very reluctant to put on a charter flight. People were being threatened with fares of £3,000 to £5,000 just to change the date of the flights they already had, and airlines were making it difficult for people, whereas France and Germany seemed to manage to sort this out much more swiftly.

**Nigel Adams:** I will confirm this, but for Germany, for example, I have the figure of 219,000. If you compare that with over 1.3 million UK nationals returning by commercial flights, plus almost 40,000 via charters, that is significant, but I am more than happy to confirm that at some point.

For some countries it was incredibly difficult to organise. You mentioned Peru. That country went into a very strict lockdown with hardly any notice. Control over that lockdown was given to the Peruvian military, so that was a particularly difficult operation. We managed to get a number of flights out of Peru early doors, but there were complications. Peru is not a country I have been to, but I understand that a lot of backpackers,



or young people, go to that part of South America. A lot of them were in hostels that were locked down. That made it virtually impossible for them to get out, travel across the country and catch one of the flights. That was, early on, a very difficult situation. We have got the people out and returned, with further flights for those who were detained because of quarantine and the difficulties of the lockdown, but I think that under very difficult circumstances our post did a pretty good job.

**Q160 Chris Bryant:** My instinct is still that Britain is always more reluctant to repatriate than other countries. We always rely far more on commercial operations, and in this case and potentially in another case in the future, that leaves our citizens vulnerable.

Let me ask a different question. The Government pledged up to £75 million to help to bring UK travellers back home. How much of that has been spent?

**Nigel Adams:** I believe about £40 million. I have those numbers here. The envelope was £75 million, and, so far, the gross spend on that operation is £40.5 million. If we need to stand that up again, hopefully the Treasury will allow it. We have a bit more of that envelope.

**Q161 Chris Bryant:** Was the decision not to use charter flights a financial one?

**Nigel Adams:** Not at all. Our focus early in this crisis was to make sure the commercial routes were kept open. That was successful. Bringing back 1.3 million people was a huge success. The financial consideration was certainly nothing to do with the decision of the Foreign Secretary to stand up the next flight programme.

**Q162 Chris Bryant:** My final question is about the point you referred to. It is one thing to be sitting in an airport hotel waiting to get on an aeroplane, but it is another to be stuck on the top of Machu Picchu hoping to get back to Lima. What processes did you put in place to make that easier for as many people as possible?

**Nigel Adams:** Our posts were involved in communicating as best they could across what was a difficult country in that context. Jennifer was involved in this operation and might be able to shed a bit more light on the physical process and the timeline of what took place in Peru.

**Jennifer Anderson:** We ran 186 charter flights under our dedicated charter flight programme. By comparison, Germany ran about 230, on the figures I have, but it was a very significant number. We ran a series of individual crisis operations in the lead-up to that major repatriation. That started with Wuhan and the last was Peru. Peru was one of the most complex operations, as the Minister said, with the possible exception of India. We went into crisis on 21 March and the first flight was out on 28 March<sup>1</sup>. We then ran five international flights and got individual British nationals on 11 other international flights.

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<sup>1</sup> The Foreign Office later confirmed that the first flight out was on 26 March.



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Peru was particularly complicated because, as the Minister said, a number of British backpackers were in remote locations and could return to Lima only by aircraft. They could not have a single aircraft because you need smaller aircraft to get into high-altitude destinations such as Cusco. Therefore, they required a small flight to bring them down into Lima and then an international flight that we chartered. This was the same model all other countries used. We co-operated very closely with a number of other European countries and others that were involved in similar operations.

**Nigel Adams:** Other countries found it as challenging as we did. I know Germany had a flight planned on 23 March and that ended up being cancelled. Getting permission from the Peruvian Government was very difficult. As Jennifer has said, Peru and India were our trickiest challenges in repat flights.

Q163 **Chris Bryant:** Having flown in and out of Cusco a few times, I am not sure it is that difficult.

**Nigel Adams:** It is in the middle of a lockdown.

Q164 **Chris Bryant:** I understand that, but I have been in quite large aeroplanes.

I want to challenge you again on the cost to the taxpayer and whether the decision to delay using charter flights was about saving money. The Permanent Under-Secretary said quite clearly to this Committee that it was about saving the taxpayer money.

**Nigel Adams:** It is absolutely the case that our priority was ensuring that commercial airspace was kept open, and negotiation with airlines. The Peruvian and Wuhan flights were organised before we had been allocated £75 million. We did not hesitate to get people out of Wuhan. The £75 million envelope made available to us was after the Peruvian charter flights were organised. We were obviously planning to have a much bigger operation, and it was only after that that we needed approval for the money to get these charter flights up in the air, but it was nothing to do with any financial constraints.

Q165 **Chair:** To help us understand this, can you compare the number of Brits abroad with the number of Germans, French, Italians or whatever and, therefore, the scale of the challenge you were dealing with?

**Nigel Adams:** I have already mentioned some figures on Germany and France. It is difficult because we are not able to access all their data. It is also worth mentioning that we collaborated with other countries, and quite a few thousand EU nationals and foreign nationals came back on our charter flights; similarly, we came back on some of their flights.

It is tricky to put a number on it, but 1.3 million is a massive number of travellers coming home since the outbreak started, plus almost 40,000 on charter flights. I think there have been 8,000 additional people coming back, for example, via India. We have been using Air India flights.



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We can certainly try to get you those numbers. Whether other Governments will release those figures might be a bit tricky, but we will certainly ask the question. I do not know whether Jennifer has any further knowledge on what our friends and partners were doing.

**Jennifer Anderson:** We have the number of flights. I do not know how many nationals they thought they had overseas, but the commercial flight numbers speak for themselves. As the Minister said, we worked on the assumption that we had 1.3 million Brits temporarily abroad at that time. To give you an example of the scale of the commercial returns, we believe that approximately 100,000 returned from Spain in the first couple of weeks of the crisis; 8,500 returned from Morocco; and up to 50,000 returned from Australia. By far the largest numbers came by commercial flights. Trying to keep those commercial flights open was by far the most efficient way of trying to get people back to the UK.

Q166 **Chair:** Ms Anderson, I presume you had conversations with European colleagues throughout this period.

**Jennifer Anderson:** Throughout.

Q167 **Chair:** Were their numbers similar to, larger than or smaller than the UK's?

**Jennifer Anderson:** I do not know their total numbers. I know that the Germans were operating on the assumption that they had over 200,000 overseas that they were looking to return, and I believe they organised about 230 flights.

Q168 **Chair:** So, their number was, roughly?

**Jennifer Anderson:** I have not asked them for their total numbers. I know that some countries are still trying to bring back substantial numbers of their nationals. To give you an example, this morning I was on one of my weekly telephone calls to my Canadian, New Zealand and Australian counterparts. The Australians are still trying to bring back very large numbers of their citizens. Several countries are still running significant repatriation programmes.

Q169 **Neil Coyle:** Minister, you said that you thought almost everyone was back. I am very grateful for the Government's assistance with my constituents who have been trapped abroad. Many others have made alternative arrangements, but I still have constituents in India, Peru, Algeria, Nigeria, Spain and at least six still in Thailand. I am sure colleagues have just as many. While Ministers represent global Britain, I represent global Bermondsey. Is there a continent on the planet where Brits are still stranded? Given there is £30 million in the budget, what is the plan to bring home those still abroad? Why has that not been done yet, and when can I expect all those constituents to be home?

**Nigel Adams:** My understanding is that flights are continuing to come back from India. There are options available for your constituents to get back from India. We have been co-operating with Air India. More than



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2,700 British nationals have returned on Air India flights. Eighteen thousand people were repatriated from India on our charter flights. Almost half of the whole number of people we repatriated globally were from India, but my understanding is that there are still flights operating. There are a number of flights people can access. Jennifer, do you have any more data on when those are operating and how people can get on to them?

**Jennifer Anderson:** Yes. I did not get the full list. It is worth noting that our programme was directed at British nationals resident in the UK. I am aware of reports of British nationals in Peru who are ordinarily resident in that country. That was not the focus of our programme. The focus was on those who needed to get back to the UK to be safe during the pandemic.

There are flights operating in a number of the countries you mentioned, particularly Thailand, where there have been commercial flights for the entire period. We have also rolled out some additional consular support for those who are unable to get back. I would be very happy to take the details separately of anyone who is experiencing difficulties in Peru, as I understand there are still not flights.

Q170 **Neil Coyle:** Thailand seems to be particularly problematic. To be absolutely clear, you are saying that British nationals who may be making tax contributions to the UK from abroad would not qualify for support under the programme you are detailing.

**Jennifer Anderson:** Our programme is focused on British nationals who are resident in the UK, and we ask for a UK postcode as part of the process of reserving a ticket. That was not rigorously policed, but that was the premise of it. It was about keeping British nationals safe if they did not have an established residence somewhere else. There are millions of British nationals who live overseas permanently.

As for Thailand, my understanding is that there have been commercial flights the entire time. We have provided some support to those who are having difficulty in leaving, but we did not run repatriation flights from Thailand specifically because there were commercial flights throughout the period.

Q171 **Neil Coyle:** Many of those who are still stranded have been asking why the RAF in particular has not been used. Is it possible to give any detail of the discussion you have had with the MOD about using the armed forces to bring Brits home?

**Nigel Adams:** We did use the MOD for a number of flights. I think a couple of hundred people came back on Ministry of Defence flights. We had conversations and it co-operated with us. I do not have a full list of the flights that it helped us with, but there was co-operation. There were obviously conversations, and we are very grateful to the MOD for the assistance it gave.

Q172 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Minister, was the Foreign Office too slow



to advise UK nationals to start returning home?

**Nigel Adams:** The advisory is constantly monitored and changed. There have been about 4,300 changes to the travel advice. I do not believe we were too slow. To give you some idea, over the initial period of the crisis we made 4,300 changes to travel advice related to various countries. I believe that is equivalent to the changes we would normally make to travel advice over a full year. That was over a short period of time. I do not believe we were slow in that regard. It is very complex. We have to take a view in each country, and that was what we did.

Q173 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** But, looking back, do you wish you had acted sooner?

**Nigel Adams:** Given the fact we managed to get as many people back home as we did, that is a particularly difficult question to answer. I think we acted at the time with the information in country that we were receiving. I think the results bear out that analysis. I think we did an extraordinary job. I am not saying it was easy; it was very challenging. It would be silly to claim we got everything right, but we had a huge task and I think we did a pretty good job in delivering on it.

Q174 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Nobody doubts the scale of the challenge. I had to contact you on one case that you did resolve within a few days, and for that I am grateful.

I want to dig a bit further into the advice and how quickly it changed. On 12 March your Department was advising people over the age of 70 with underlying health conditions not to go on cruises. On 17 March, five days later, you were advising people not to travel overseas at all. Six days later, on the day the lockdown was announced, 23 March, you advised people to return from overseas.

What was it you were hearing that caused the advice to change in that way? I am not trying to catch you out; I am trying to understand the process you went through.

**Nigel Adams:** Whenever we look at travel advice, we take information on the ground in country from our posts and diplomats. We also consult health authorities—for example, PHE. Jennifer is very much involved in the travel advisory and can probably give you a bit better read-out on the process, if that would be helpful.

**Jennifer Anderson:** What I can most usefully say is that there was a series of individual country advisories in the run-up to the 17th. As you say, the 17th was six days ahead of the UK lockdown. It was the point at which it had become clear that the global transport networks and borders were shutting down at such magnitude that we felt we needed to issue a global advisory. That was absolutely unprecedented for us, and a number of our counterparts did that in a similar period.

The advisory on cruises reflects the initial focus—actual threats to life. We were facing a period when there was a series of outbreaks of Covid-19 on cruise ships that had already affected the lives of British nationals and



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was putting many more at high risk, particularly when ports were closing down. That was our priority.

In line with our consular policy, those who were most vulnerable were the elderly who were facing life-threatening situations. As the Minister said, we moved as quickly as we could, reflecting an unprecedented closure of international borders and transport links.

**Q175 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** To what extent was this being co-ordinated across the entire Government? Presumably, the FCO did not just go out on its own and say, "Everybody come home." What were the conversations with other Departments at that point, particularly the Home Office?

**Nigel Adams:** Certainly, the Home Office would have been involved and there were extensive conversations with the Department for Transport. They were key and crucial in helping with airspace.

There was plenty of conversation across Government. I remember discussions being had within Cobra, which obviously has ministerial and official-level representation across all Departments.

**Q176 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did anybody at any point suggest or demand that all those returning should be tested on arrival?

**Nigel Adams:** We did give advice to people who were travelling. If anybody was symptomatic, they were not allowed on a flight. That was absolutely key. If anybody developed symptoms on one of our flights, there was a section of the aeroplane where they were able to be semi-isolated for the duration of the flight. In that regard it was quite helpful when some of the aircraft had upper decks.

**Q177 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did anyone suggest or demand that people should be tested on landing in the United Kingdom?

**Nigel Adams:** I do not recall that.

**Q178 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** When the public inquiry inevitably happens, that will have to be answered, will it not?

**Nigel Adams:** We were very mindful that people were coming home for a particular reason; there was a pandemic. We ensured that anybody who showed any symptoms—for example, if they were coming off a cruise ship, which was particularly high risk; you will remember the issue we had in Japan and South America—was very rigorously triaged, if you like, by health staff as well as our own staff.

**Q179 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can I take it from those answers that the Foreign Office at no point suggested in Cobra or any of the other inter-departmental conversations that people should be tested on arrival in the UK?

**Nigel Adams:** You can take it from me that I certainly was not aware of that, but I was aware we were taking precautions.



**Q180 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did you suggest testing?

**Nigel Adams:** I do not recall that being the case. I certainly asked what we were doing to make sure people were safe before they boarded a flight and ensure nobody was symptomatic. Having those conversations with anybody who boarded sometimes slowed down the boarding procedure. Maybe Jennifer can give a bit more information about how we dealt with the people coming off cruise ships, which was a massive concern to us. I do not know whether that would be helpful.

**Q181 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Before you do that, should we have tested? I had constituents coming into Edinburgh from northern Italy, which was at the epicentre of the European wave, straight off with no testing and no questions.

**Nigel Adams:** When you are trying to get people back, the issue is that people could be asymptomatic. They may very well have been carrying the virus but not showing it.

**Q182 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** That is no reason not to test for it.

**Nigel Adams:** I know, but that could apply to thousands of people boarding a flight. I am not aware of data on people who have come back on these flights. As you say, through an inquiry some information may come forward. There may be people coming back on these flights who went on to develop Covid. There may have been one or two cases. I do not have that information.

**Q183 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I would welcome some thoughts on how this is going to work. We have started to develop air bridges. People are now starting to book holidays, largely from what they read in newspapers. Let's say you book a holiday to Florence and there is a spike while you are on holiday. You may have booked a holiday in France and the same happens in the area of France you are visiting.

You could end up with a similar situation again. How would the FCO deal with that? Is some of the money you have not spent going to be used to bring people back who find themselves in areas where there are spikes? Are you going to advise them not to return? Will they be tested in future if they come back from areas where we know there have been spikes? Talk me through the thinking.

**Nigel Adams:** As Jennifer said, the principle is that we are getting people back. We have got back people who are resident in the UK. There might be many people who live in Italy and fancy coming back at some point. They would not be a priority for any repat flights.

**Q184 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** If I am going on holiday in Italy, I want to know that if something happens when I am abroad—you having told me it is safe to go there because you have changed the FCO travel advice—you have the proper instruments and architecture to get me back, and that when I come back I am going to be tested.



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**Nigel Adams:** Absolutely. Jennifer is one of those in charge of our travel advice. She is best equipped to give you that answer.

Q185 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Please talk me through that.

**Jennifer Anderson:** I will tell you first what travel advice is and is not. Travel advice advises British nationals if there is an unacceptable risk to them overseas. That is quite a high threshold. It is not, "It is a risk." We do not say it is safe; we say it is an unacceptable risk, and it is only an advisory. Someone can ignore our advice; they can go overseas at the moment because British borders are open, and that does happen. That is what our travel advice is.

At certain points in the early stages as it progressed towards being a pandemic we changed specific country travel advice to reflect the emerging risk from Covid-19. We discussed those risks with the chief medical officer and Public Health England. For instance, in the early days there was travel advice from China, northern Italy or specific parts of South Korea where we were saying there was an unacceptable risk. We advised against all but essential travel, and on the basis of the advice of the chief medical officer those who returned were advised to self-isolate for 14 days. That additional piece of advice came from Public Health England. It was not ours; we referenced theirs. Those are the limits of travel advice per se as a policy; it is about your risks in a specific country.

In terms of where we are headed now, if and when we change our travel advice it will be because we believe there is no longer an unacceptable risk. Primarily, that would be Covid-19. There will be other factors we look at as well, but primarily it would be an unacceptable risk, and the starting point is what your risk is in the UK.

If there are outbreaks overseas as and when we have changed our travel advice, we will revise it. We have a process whereby an organisation called NaTHNaC operates on behalf of the British Government to give health advice to British nationals who are travelling overseas. We are working with it to understand what the risks are to British nationals overseas. If that risk changes—if, for instance there is a spike—we will need to change our travel advice based on that.

How we manage the risks around that is a very good question. We do not want to be back in the position we were in March. The primary way of doing that is to work very closely with the travel industry, understanding what its contingency plans are, but also to work with the countries that are the major tourist destinations, understanding what they are doing in their risk mitigation plans. A number of those countries have been very clear about how they will manage outbreaks if there are foreign tourists involved—how they will run their quarantine facilities and health facilities and how they will arrange for individuals to come back to the UK.

Our focus at the moment is understanding what those individual national plans are, particularly for high-volume destinations, and making sure our



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posts are prepared, should there be further spikes, and know that all their contingency planning is in place. That is the focus at the moment.

**Q186 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** As we go forward and changes to travel advice occur, with people starting to move around the world a bit more freely, if British citizens find themselves in a particular country or part of a country where there is a second spike, will the Foreign Office—the Department with the global insight that feeds into the Government—be advising whatever body makes the decision, whether it is the Cabinet, Cobra or whatever, that testing happens when people return from an area where that second spike has occurred?

**Jennifer Anderson:** I do not want to dodge the question, but UK domestic health policy, including inbound policy, is not a matter for the Foreign Office; it is a matter for the Home Office and the DHSC.

**Q187 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** But you are part of that conversation, as the Minister has just outlined to us.

**Jennifer Anderson:** Absolutely, and we are working very closely with the Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care on what that return process will be. We do not wish to do anything in our work that undermines that British public health principle, and at every stage we have worked with the advice of Public Health England at the time.

To come back to your original question, British borders remained opened throughout the whole of the early stages of this pandemic, so British nationals were able to return.

**Q188 Chair:** The question of getting people back is connected with the question of loans. I know that some people sought to borrow from the Foreign Office in order to get back. How many loans were taken out?

**Jennifer Anderson:** As of today, 2,272 have been taken out. Loans are still available for commercial flights.

**Q189 Chair:** What is the highest value of the loans?

**Jennifer Anderson:** It would be the highest<sup>2</sup> available commercial ticket on the day. We did not set a cap on it; we wanted to make sure that individuals could come home.

**Q190 Chair:** We have heard that some people felt they could not afford the terms of those loans and, therefore, did not take them out. What have you done for those citizens who have not used them?

**Nigel Adams:** They were interest free and people had six months to repay them. They were asked to give an undertaking to repay, which in my view are not bad terms for taking out a loan. Obviously, some people did not feel they wanted to take them out.

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<sup>2</sup> The Foreign Office requested a correction to the record and confirmed that the value of the loan corresponded to the cheapest available commercial ticket on the day.



Q191 **Chair:** The difference in some ways is not just the terms of the loan; it is because they are connected to high-cost tickets—they are very often last-minute tickets. What have you been able to do for those who felt that the tickets were not within their bracket?

**Nigel Adams:** There were loans aimed particularly at getting people repatriated, and we also initiated subsistence loans as a separate measure for individuals, couples and families. We were encouraging people to get home. As part of the travel advisory, if there was a flight, we were asking people seriously to consider getting home.

You can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. The facility was there and people could apply. A number of people decided they did not want to take up the loan. They may have had access to funds through other means—for example, family or other contacts.

Q192 **Chair:** The total number of loans is about 2,500. Are you still issuing those loans? That does suggest there are people still abroad who are looking for assistance in returning.

**Jennifer Anderson:** It is still possible to apply for loans. I cannot tell you how many we have done in the past week or so, but there is an emerging group of individuals who potentially are discovering that flights have been cancelled, as and when airlines cancel their flights.

Q193 **Chair:** Therefore, this is not legacy in that sense; these are new occasions when somebody has just realised that.

**Jennifer Anderson:** If need be, yes.

Q194 **Royston Smith:** Most of these things are predicated on whether people know they are available. What was the FCO's communication strategy during the crisis, and do you think it worked effectively?

**Nigel Adams:** In terms of the loans?

Q195 **Royston Smith:** In terms of the entire communication strategy throughout the crisis. Of course it would include loans and how people would get themselves home, but in general.

**Nigel Adams:** Our policy on communication has always been through the website and travel advice. As I said in answer to Mr Bryant, we had over 4,300 changes to that travel advice in a short period. We expect our posts to amplify that messaging by social media and local messaging.

If you were to ask me whether in certain countries that was as good as we wanted it to be, I would say no. There was a lot of mixed messaging as well, not from the FCO necessarily. There were posts by certain groups that did not necessarily reflect accurate information.

Therefore, in terms of communications, that has to be and will be part of our whole lessons learned approach when that is undertaken. I think you raise a fair point. Communications could have been better in certain



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countries in enabling people to get the right information in a timely fashion.

**Q196 Royston Smith:** Do you think communication improved when the FCO used social media more?

**Nigel Adams:** There were examples of certain posts using social media brilliantly. For example, our high commissioner in New Zealand did a great job, and elsewhere, but social media are not a new phenomenon and have been around for a while. I would have expected our embassies, high commissions and consulates to be familiar with Facebook and Twitter to be able to get the right messaging out.

To be straight up with you, it was not always the case that we embraced social media as well as we could have. However, our website, which is always our primary source of information, drills down per country. Every country has its own page with up-to-date advice on it. That had something like 50 million hits during that period—an extraordinary increase on normal time. People were accessing the correct advice, but perhaps we were not amplifying that advice, as you rightly put it, on social media.

**Q197 Royston Smith:** I think we should all acknowledge the significant work consular staff carried out. It was not easy for anyone. It was probably more difficult to be stranded somewhere than to try to sort that out, but I do not want to cast aspersions on them. We carried out something of a survey and were told that a lot of the communications people had with staff lacked compassion and empathy. When you reflect on this, do you think the FCO needs to improve the training it gives to its officials and diplomats?

**Nigel Adams:** Wherever there is poor communication in a situation like this, all our staff have to understand that they are UK customer service agents. This was a particularly difficult situation for scared travellers: lone travellers, young people and elderly people with medication issues. There should always be empathy with your customer, and where that failed we apologise. That should not be the case. All our consular staff should treat inquiries of this nature with empathy and understanding.

Conversely, you have to understand the pressure that our staff were under, certainly in the early stages, in terms of the numbers. Of course, you will hear from people who have had a less than great experience in initial communication. However, we also had an awfully high number of people who were very thankful and grateful for the way they were treated by our team.

I am very proud overall of how our consular effort operated, but where we slipped up in customer service we should face it, learn lessons and make sure it does not happen again.

**Jennifer Anderson:** We were very conscious that that was some of the early feedback and we wanted to address it as quickly as possible. In the



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UK and globally we tripled our telephone-handling capability. We brought in a lot of contract staff who were trained at great speed to answer calls to make sure we were answering them promptly, because that was one of the early concerns. We also needed to bring them up to the right standards.

We did mystery customer shopping to make sure they were following best practice in terms of advice. We also spoke to all our posts to make sure they were doing the same, particularly if we heard they had put out-of-office messages on their emails, which may not have struck the right tone and reflected the extent to which they were working, or if people were listening very briefly to a “closed” message on a telephone answering tree.

We were very conscious of that. It is not what we want. As the Minister said, our objective is to offer empathetic and supportive consular assistance, and when we fell short of that we sought to address it as quickly as possible.

**Q198 Royston Smith:** We spoke to the Foreign Secretary about this some months ago, before lockdown. One of the questions I had then was about the planning for a pandemic in 2009-10. We had plans in place. We were told by others, not the Foreign Secretary, that politicians come and go and these things get forgotten a bit—although they are still in the civil service, it does not really look like it sometimes. Do you have something like this? We planned for this in the past and then had to put it into practice, but not everything went according to plan.

What lessons have you learned from what happened this time? How would you do it differently, and how would you ensure this is embedded so that, in the event it ever happens again, all the lessons will have been learned from the good you have achieved throughout this and the bad things will not be repeated?

**Jennifer Anderson:** I am very happy to respond to that. I was head of a small post in 2010. I arrived at that post on the back of the 2009 pandemic planning. That was pandemic flu planning, so I arrived at a fridge full of Tamiflu, which was useful at that time but was not going to address what we have just been through.

I will say what we do now but also what we have learned. We have learned a lot because this has been a long crisis. We have already improved it and our focus now is on not losing what we have learned.

We went into it with an all-risks approach to crisis planning, which is that we make sure our posts are capable of managing a whole range of crises. Part of that is just about best practice. Most of them activated those crisis plans at various points during this.

What we learned over the course of this is that, even though we have emergency and crisis telephony capabilities, they are not resilient enough to deal with a crisis of this scale. We have significantly increased that. We



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have increased both our commercial draw-down capability but also our in-house capability. Typically, if we are running a crisis and we need to stand up an extra helpline, we will bring in 15 staff. We had 400 additional staff at the height of this, so it is on a wholly different scale and requires a different commercial arrangement and types of training.

As we have already talked about, we also need to be able to run repatriation operations at great scale. The last big repatriation operation we ran was in Libya in the Arab spring—a total of 1,800 British and foreign nationals. We have just brought back over 46,000 people through our operations, of whom 38,000 were British.

It is about being able to operate at a completely different scale, and that requires different relationships with our commercial suppliers and the ability to run charter flights with a front-ticketing operation where we are not hand-building the manifests, which is extremely time-consuming. We can do that in a small crisis operation. When I say “small”, something like Libya was not small at the time. We did a hand-built manifest for Peru for a total of 1,100 people over five flights, but we cannot do that for something on this scale.

That is what we are doing at the moment and that is why we have not closed down our repatriation capability. We have created a new repatriation taskforce, which, on current plans, will be in operation through to the end of this year. It will then fold those capabilities into our crisis management department and future crisis planning.

**Q199 Royston Smith:** Have you learned any lessons from the way other countries have handled their services? Which countries would you say have performed particularly well during this pandemic?

**Jennifer Anderson:** We have all been learning from one another. At the height of the crisis I or my colleagues were in daily contact with our Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and US counterparts. We were in regular telephone contact with our European counterparts as well, so we were feeding off one another, all asking how it was working and who was doing it best. We were constantly asking ourselves that.

We have all ended up running versions of a similar repatriation programme: it has all been run through commercial means with commercial ticketing. That was essential under international civil aviation law in order to be able to offer tickets for non-scheduled flights and to do it at volume.

For some countries with a single national carrier and, therefore, a slightly different relationship between state and carrier, it was easier in the early days. For instance, that would have been the case for Germany and Lufthansa or France and Air France. On the other hand, that also has real limitations. What we and nearly all of our counterparts did as we went along was run commercial tenders for individual charter operations, and in that way you could get the airline best able to operate in the specific country.



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There is one other thing we have learned. We used to be a very physical operation. I looked back at some of the old reports of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the NAO. We were measuring our crisis operation in the number of desks we had in our crisis centre and how it had increased over time. I think it got up to about 110 desks. We have just had hundreds and hundreds of staff working from home and internationally. We redeployed ambassadors to run specific aspects of the repatriation operation. We have become a much more flexible workforce and organisation than we thought was possible. We have also learned how to run highly complex crisis operations in an entirely virtual way, so we want to maintain that.

**Q200 Neil Coyle:** Linked to this, there was not just an increased demand for consular support but the consulates themselves have been affected by people with the virus, people isolating or shielding and all the rest of it. How badly affected was the consular capacity, and when did the 400 additional staff the director mentioned come on board?

Will there be an ongoing relationship with potential providers to keep them trained on consular roles?

**Jennifer Anderson:** Nearly all our posts around the world were operating under individual national lockdowns and had to operate under the rules relevant to the particular country. In most countries we have good, flexible IT and they were able to operate from home, but it depends on the individual circumstances in that particular country and that particular officer. I would like to commend my staff because they have done it in incredibly difficult circumstances.

The figure I gave for the additional staff we brought on board was for additional call handlers, and that included commercial capabilities. We brought in significant numbers of extra staff. I have a call staff in London of about 170. We went up to 340 call staff on consular, and in addition we had well over 500 staff working on our repatriation programme in the UK. We had many hundreds of staff in some of our big posts devoted to the programme around the world—for instance, in places like India.

I think it would be fair to say—my director general might wish to comment further on this—that at this point in time it was the FCO's No. 1 objective, and we reallocated as many staff as needed. We also used commercial partners when we needed them and had staff joining us from other Government Departments when we felt we did not have sufficient resource. Does that answer your question?

**Q201 Neil Coyle:** Yes. It might be good to have some data—I appreciate you may not have it immediately to hand—about how many consular staff were taken off duty by the virus and when the 400 additional staff came on board. Please provide that in writing, if need be.

For future-proofing the communications strategy, how will you try to take into the account the time lag between the extraordinary pace of development of both the virus and different Government reactions? I



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refer to things like consular hours of opening and different flights where Brits stranded abroad were finding it very difficult to access up-to-date information.

**Nigel Adams:** People were able to access services 24/7. About 560 people were working on the effort—those were staff mainly in London—to ensure we had a 24/7 operation. A further 340 staff in the wider UK consular operation were deployed.

One difficulty in some of the communication Mr Smith referred to earlier that is worth flagging up is that there was a bit of misinformation about some of our posts being closed. People were under the impression that we had scarpers from a particular country. That was not the case. We were operating under the rules of whichever country it was, meaning we could not physically get our staff into our embassies or posts. Therefore, that team was working from home. That is probably worth clearing up. There was a bit of misinformation regarding that. I think there were only two or three countries where we physically had to close consulates. They might have been in China. Jennifer might be able to clarify that.

Q202 **Neil Coyle:** Minister, that is simply not the experience of individual constituents. Peru was a case in point. Constituents were told at a certain point that the consulate was closed. My question was really about trying to prevent this in a future crisis. I am not trying to go into any individual case scenario here.

**Jennifer Anderson:** I think many people got the impression we were closed because in many countries around the world when they rang our embassy or consulate the opening message would have been, “This embassy is closed.” That is an automated system. We were not able to override it. We have initiated a new project to try to change that system and enable ourselves to control that messaging centrally, but at the moment that is the technology we have to work with. If you had stayed on the line there would have been a number to press, which would have directed you immediately to our customer contact centres.

As the Minister said, our customer contact centres operated 24/7, but they did not have sufficient capacity for the peak 13 days of the crisis, so not everybody got through on those lines. The intent was that they were operating 24/7, as was the repatriation operation. If flights had to be conducted out of hours, the posts would have supported them out of hours.

**Nigel Adams:** Mr Coyle, it is certainly a lesson learned in terms of the telephony system FCO currently operates. There is much more flexible technology available now that enables us to control the messaging in a proactive and reactive way. We are in the process of reviewing a telephony solution right across the network for the very reason that we have found ourselves unable to change messaging quickly enough, albeit if people had stayed on the line they would ultimately have got an answer.



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To give some sort of scale, I think that one day we peaked at about 14,000 calls into the network, which is an off-the-scale number, but by bringing in external contractors and training them up at pace we reached a situation where we were handling 99% of calls within an acceptable time limit. Colleagues and MPs will know how difficult it was in the early days to get through to the MP hotline and obtaining that information. We reacted to that and got it fixed. We are reviewing the whole telephony operation and hopefully we will have some solution to that fairly soon.

**Q203 Neil Coyle:** How does the communication strategy take into account the costs to the individual of trying to access information from consular staff? Mobile data packages are not necessarily a cheap option. Long call waiting times, while they might be deemed acceptable in FCO terms, could be incredibly expensive for individuals. In particular, I am thinking about those who are told to find medication information and issues like that online, despite language or cost barriers, despite contacting consulates to try to get access to medication in the countries they found themselves trapped in for longer than expected.

**Jennifer Anderson:** We do not consider long telephone waiting times acceptable. That was one of our main concerns. As the Minister said, once we brought in the additional support we got it down to calls being answered within four seconds. By the beginning of April calls were answered within four seconds.

Our strategy in recent years has been to make consular services available 24/7 to those who want them remotely, which helped us in this crisis because it is not premised on face-to-face assistance. The telephone assistance we have available 24/7 is always there for the cost of a local telephone call, which is either the cost of a local in-country call or the cost of a call in the UK. You are right that, should somebody need to access information on gov.uk, that would require online access.

We are very aware that access to medicines was a key concern for individuals in particular countries. We kept up to date our information on how to access pharmacy and medical services. Part of the huge number of travel advice updates we issued was to make sure individuals had access to the latest information on how to access pharmaceutical services in lockdown in a particular country, as well as help to get back to the UK. If an individual had serious difficulties, some of our consular staff did help them in a local context to understand how to get prescriptions filled.

**Q204 Neil Coyle:** To be clear, no one should have been told to use Google to find a nearby pharmacy to provide them with medication, having sought help from consular staff due to language or other barriers.

**Jennifer Anderson:** If they were told that, I agree it was suboptimal and it should not have been the case. We do not keep a list of local pharmacies. There is usually advice on where to access local pharmacies. They can always ring our consulates, but obviously they were under intense pressure, but I am certainly aware of consular staff who helped individuals in countries such as India access pharmaceuticals.



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Q205 **Neil Coyle:** Minister, do you mind the director referring to you as “suboptimal”, given that your letter to me of 18 June tells my constituents to use Google to find nearby pharmacies and ask if they will deliver?

**Nigel Adams:** Obviously, I cannot answer for every bit of advice that an individual member of consulate staff provides.

Q206 **Neil Coyle:** This was from you to me on 18 June.

**Nigel Adams:** I am sure the director was not referring to me as “suboptimal”. We will have a discussion about that following this session, Mr Coyle.

**Neil Coyle:** It is your letter. You are saying, “If your constituents require medicine, they should use Google.” I do not think that is an acceptable response, Minister. Your director has just referred to it as “suboptimal”, and I agree with her.

**Chair:** I will leave the Minister and Ms Anderson to have a discussion about that later.

Q207 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think it is only fair that Ms Anderson wants to come back. I will give some of my time to her.

**Jennifer Anderson:** I will need to check. It is always country specific. There are places where that would be acceptable advice, but we would need to check.

**Chair:** I think we will allow you to deal with that privately.

Q208 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I would like to turn to Simon after I ask about the loans. Was there ever a reluctance to get into giving out large numbers of loans, particularly at the start of the wave? I will tell you the reason I ask, Minister. My office got through to the MP hotline regarding two constituents stranded in Australia on the day that the Foreign Secretary—I do not have the date in my head—stood at the Dispatch Box and said that loans would be made available. These two constituents did not have access to enough money to get commercial flights back. When one of my staff asked one of the MP hotline operators about loans, it was made quite clear that was not the option they wanted to pursue. Instead, they were advised to tell my constituents to try crowdfunding their way back.

**Nigel Adams:** We launched the loans in phases. We set up a pilot to ensure that it was going to be efficient. You would have to remind me of the date when you had this call. We launched pilots in four countries on 5 May. We increased that to 40 countries by 14-15 May, and ultimately globally by 20 May to cover all countries. We were able to do that in-house as well. I could look into the specific communication.

Q209 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Would you give out advice on crowdfunding through consulates?

**Jennifer Anderson:** I could add a bit more to this.



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**Nigel Adams:** I say that at the risk of a letter being whipped out by Mr McDonald saying that was the advice.

Q210 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I do not have a letter.

**Jennifer Anderson:** This is what I am familiar with. Historically, we have provided loans for those unable to get back to the UK, but it was done as an absolute last resort. We would have a list of different ways in which individuals could access funding, short of asking for one of our loans. That was prior to this crisis, at which point we were doing about 250 loans a year, specifically for flights at that stage. Crowdfunding was one of the options listed on our website. We had a list of different ways you might seek to raise funds. We included crowdfunding on our website at the very beginning of the launch of the loan. I had it removed so it did not remain there, but that was the case at the very beginning.

Q211 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Minister, you described the terms of the loans earlier in response to Mr Bryant as being very good. They were to be paid back in six months and they were interest free. If you are a family of six in Pakistan and have spent seven grand to get yourselves back, and maybe a couple of your furloughed workers are being made redundant, those terms do not mean anything. Where people find themselves in real financial difficulty as a result of the pandemic, can they get extensions?

**Nigel Adams:** If people are committed to paying the loan back, of course we will consider that situation. The answer to your question is yes. If they are committed to a repayment plan, we will consider extending that.

Q212 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Presumably, you will have to do quite a bit of that given the impact the whole thing is having on people's incomes.

**Nigel Adams:** Yes.

Q213 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Perhaps I may ask Simon a question. I want to return to the last session we had with the PUS. I know the FCO has been planning for pandemics and stuff. Going back to Royston Smith's question, mention was made of planning going back to 2009-10. Has the Foreign Office ever war-gamed a situation like this in a proper digital way?

**Simon Manley:** On a crisis of this scale?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes—a global pandemic.

**Simon Manley:** I have been doing this job only since March, but I do not remember us ever having war games on this scale.

Q214 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Do you think it should in future?

**Simon Manley:** Yes. In terms of our crisis planning we have seen it, so we now know we have to be prepared to deal with pandemics on this scale.



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There is a broader piece here about looking at what has happened, how this pandemic arose, learning the lessons from it, including those for the global health system, and ensuring all of us in government are prepared to deal with pandemics on this scale in the future.

**Q215 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Your position as director general of the Covid-19 directorate is presumably a new one.

**Simon Manley:** Yes, it is.

**Q216 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** How long do you think it will stay there for?

**Simon Manley:** I do not know. The post was created back in March. Initially, two of us were doing it on a shift system, and now I am the sole DG. The directorate has been recently formed out of what was previously a taskforce arrangement. We are in place for the foreseeable future. We have a merger going on with DFID, so the exact structures and personnel that we will have in place will be a fruit of that merger process.

**Q217 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Are you involved in the work to start opening up international travel?

**Simon Manley:** Yes. Both Jennifer and I are working with colleagues across Government on those issues.

**Q218 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Going back to the questions I asked Jennifer earlier, I am sure it is not easy to get agreements on where UK citizens can travel to, but what do you do if you have changed the advice and a whole bunch of UK citizens go somewhere and there is a second spike? Is your role entirely to come up with a framework that works properly—everything from people going there, being there and coming back—if there is a second spike in the country they are visiting?

**Simon Manley:** My task generally is to try to assure at official level co-ordination and coherence of our Foreign Office contribution to that cross-government, cross-public sector effort. As Jennifer said, we are very conscious that, as we look at travel advice and shift the global travel advisory for some countries and territories overseas and review the border regulations, it is important we recognise that, even in a country where perhaps we conclude there is no longer an unacceptable risk to British travellers, which is the criterion we apply to recommend against all but essential travel, that does not mean travel to that country is suddenly risk free.

**Q219 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Of course. Travel around this country is not risk free.

**Simon Manley:** Exactly. We have to do this in a responsible manner. We have to look at those risks and, as far as we can, identify what those risks are for the British traveller so that the individual or family can work to mitigate those risks, if there are places they should be avoiding and there are simple steps they can take. A lot of those simple steps we know well; it is about washing hands, personal hygiene and the rest of it.



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**Q220 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** My next question might be for you or the Minister, so I am happy for either of you to answer. Going back to when all of this started, there was a European Union-led project on the procurement of PPE. Was the decision to opt out of that a political decision, or not?

**Nigel Adams:** Absolutely not. I think the PUS made that clear in his letter to the Chair.

**Q221 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** He made it amazingly unclear, and that is why I am asking again.

**Nigel Adams:** We have been clear there has been no political decision taken on whether we should take part in these procurement schemes. I believe we have expressed an interest in participating in two of them with regard to medicines. I do not think any of these schemes have been formally launched yet. I am unsure about how developed the EU procurement scheme on ventilators is, but I think the PUS did make his comments clear in that regard.

**Q222 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** His follow-up letter was the opposite of what he told the Committee at the time, if you remember. I do not want to dwell on that because he is leaving and I do not want to be cruel.

To go back slightly and ask about air bridges, how exactly are you negotiating those? What are the thresholds we are setting for people coming into the United Kingdom? I know the FCO is telling people about Italy. I forget the phrase you use about risk. What is it that we are specifying for travellers from different countries to come here?

**Nigel Adams:** This is a cross-government operation being led by the Department for Transport, and there is a border issue with the Home Office. We are responsible for travel advice in that regard. Those are very much separate decisions. I understand that later this week there will be an announcement on where agreements have been made. I understand there will be classifications—green, amber and red—depending on the risk assessment, including the prevalence of the virus in each country. If there is an outbreak in any of these areas, we certainly would not hesitate to put on the handbrake.

**Q223 Chris Bryant:** Lots of British nationals who are booking their holidays in France, Spain or wherever in the world are concerned about the quarantine when they return. As I understand it, a quarantine system normally means that it is not you who decides where you put yourself; the state makes that decision from the moment you step off an aeroplane, but we are saying to people, “You should get on public transport to go home,” presumably the tube or train or whatever. Is that right?

**Nigel Adams:** We are asking people to self-isolate when they get to their destination. There may very well be people who arrive and do not provide an address, or are visiting for other reasons. My understanding—Simon



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may be able to correct me—is that there will be some facility in place in that regard. I do not know whether that is still the situation.

**Simon Manley:** The key point is self-isolation.

**Chris Bryant:** It is not quarantine at all.

**Simon Manley:** They are not quarantine facilities as there are in some other countries.

Q224 **Chris Bryant:** It just seems bizarre to bother once you have sent them home on public transport. You cannot police it. What is the next date this is being assessed?

**Nigel Adams:** There are conversations going on constantly. We are looking at potential travel corridors and bridges.

**Neil Coyle:** Mr Manley is indicating that he knows a date.

**Simon Manley:** No. I think that in the written ministerial statement the Transport Secretary made yesterday he indicated we are going through a process this week and hope to make an announcement in the course of this week about whether there is a group of countries or territories where we think the level of risk is now such that we can end the requirement for self-isolation by passengers arriving from those destinations.

Q225 **Chris Bryant:** Including UK nationals returning, obviously?

**Simon Manley:** Correct.

Q226 **Chris Bryant:** I want to ask about the Channel Islands. I declare an interest. My father lives in Alderney. What discussions have we had with the Channel Islands about islanders being able to come to the UK, and vice versa?

**Nigel Adams:** We can find out for you, if Simon does not know. The Channel Islands are not my remit.

Q227 **Chris Bryant:** They cannot come knocking at your door if they are self-isolating.

**Nigel Adams:** We can certainly come back to you. I note your particular interest in the Channel Islands.

Q228 **Graham Stringer:** It is on a completely different subject: the merger of DFID with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Why merge them now? Why not wait until the integrated review?

**Nigel Adams:** I think that the Prime Minister answered that question. When he made his statement, he said that the pandemic had demonstrated the importance of international engagement. That has already played a fundamental role in the way in which we operate internationally. He also reiterated that the merger will be able to bring together our international effort and to maximise all our influence around the world.



**Q229 Graham Stringer:** Personally, I do not see how departmental structures affect our role in the world. What matters is clarity of policy objectives and the effectiveness of implementing those objectives. Are there going to be changes in the policy objectives? If so, what are they? Where do you see the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies within the Departments that are going to be improved?

**Nigel Adams:** Let us be under no illusion—we are fully focused on stopping the spread of the coronavirus and saving lives. That is across both Departments. We will continue to drive the response to the pandemic internationally, whether that be by funding vaccine development, which has been our policy from the start of this, or by supporting the global recovery.

It is worth mentioning that, as Mr Stringer is probably aware, since February all Ministers currently have been Ministers in both Departments. We wear two hats. The brilliant work that DFID does globally will continue in the merged Department. I am anticipating no change in policy direction whatsoever.

**Q230 Graham Stringer:** If you do not mind my saying so, Minister, that answer is inadequate. How does relabelling officials in one or both Departments help the fight against Covid?

**Nigel Adams:** Both Departments have been involved in the fight against Covid separately, as two separate Departments. There is DFID's work on a vaccine and the amount of money that we have been putting into that area. In the Foreign Office, we have been involved in a huge effort to procure equipment. We currently have over 20 billion pieces of PPE on order, many of which were sourced through the efforts of Foreign Office posts. I think that it makes sense to merge those teams, to make sure that we are co-ordinated. As the Prime Minister said in his statement, the fact that we have had this pandemic makes the case for the merger stronger. The work will continue. There will be closer integration between the two Departments.

**Q231 Graham Stringer:** The Departments have different policy objectives. Are those going to change?

**Nigel Adams:** That is not my understanding at all. I do not anticipate that being the case in terms of the policy objectives and the great development work that DFID does. As you will know, we are still committed to the 0.7% commitment for our development support. I do not anticipate that changing in any way whatsoever. In fact, it is written in law.

**Q232 Graham Stringer:** DFID is not without its critics, from left and right. For instance, War on Want criticises it heavily for spending gallons of money with consultants. The *Daily Mail* and the right criticise it for spending money in countries like China and India, which have nuclear weapons and space programmes. Are you saying that none of that is going to change?



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**Nigel Adams:** What I cannot tell you right here and now is that the policy objectives are changing. As far as I understand it, that is not the intention. We will continue with our work. Right now, we are focused on the coronavirus pandemic across both Departments. I can certainly come back to you on those specific programmes if you wish, Mr Stringer.

Q233 **Graham Stringer:** I am beginning to struggle to find where the benefits or potential disbenefits of this merger are. I have great respect for you, Minister, as you know, but it sounds to me like you are struggling to explain a prime ministerial statement without any real hard facts.

**Nigel Adams:** The Prime Minister made very clear that it will enable us to demonstrate the importance of our international engagement and of Britain playing a leading role. It does make sense. Clearly, both Departments are very outward facing globally, and there is a lot of common sense in bringing the two Departments together. They were originally together, until 1997. I think that all our national efforts, including our aid budget and expertise, are best served being used to safeguard our interests and values overseas. We certainly want to continue to make sure that the UK is seen globally as a force for good.

Q234 **Graham Stringer:** Can you give me an example of another Government Department where different sections of the same Department have different policy objectives?

**Nigel Adams:** Not off the top of my head right now, Mr Stringer. I am quite happy to follow up with you.

Q235 **Graham Stringer:** It is a bit painful, Minister. I cannot find a single justification for the merger or the statement of any particular benefit or threat of a disbenefit that is not just an abstract noun. I give up, Chair.

**Chair:** You have finished then, Mr Stringer.

**Nigel Adams:** The merger has been welcomed. I understand that Mr Stringer does not welcome the merger, but we saw earlier today—

**Graham Stringer:** I absolutely welcome it. I am just interested in the Government's justification for it and would like some harder facts to enable me to support it.

**Chair:** If we are not going to pursue questions on that, we will move on. Thank you very much, Mr Stringer. Mr McDonald, you wanted to come in on something here.

Q236 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes. Why did the Prime Minister cite the Australian example in his statement to Parliament?

**Nigel Adams:** A number of international partners and friends have a similar arrangement with their aid and their diplomatic, outward-looking Departments being operated together. That is probably why the Prime Minister cited those particular examples.

Q237 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Presumably he thinks it is worth



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emulating.

**Nigel Adams:** I cannot second-guess the Prime Minister, but I assume so.

Q238 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** When we had the former Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, before this Committee, he said, "What I would not do is to take DFID into the FCO. Australia did that; we used to have AusAID, and that was merged into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and I think that was a mistake." Don't you think that this should be slowed down a bit, given that a former Foreign Minister who is from the very country and oversaw the very Department that the Prime Minister prayed in aid as an example in the Chamber said that it would be a mistake? Do you think that there need to be some more conversations before you press ahead? I know that, as you say, some people welcome the merger. However, in the NGOs and others in the aid sector, the only voice that I can find welcoming it is the HALO Trust. If I were to list all the ones that do not welcome it, we would be here until about half-past 7 tonight.

**Nigel Adams:** It is a slightly unfair question. You are asking me to comment on the views and the response of a former Australian Minister.

Q239 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You are a Minister in the Departments. Presumably, you pay attention to evidence that the Committee receives.

**Nigel Adams:** I just go back to the fact that the Prime Minister laid out his reasons for the merger. We are already operating as a ministerial team across two Departments. I cannot really comment on the comments of a former Foreign Minister.

Q240 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** When a former member of the Australian Government—not just any member, but the Minister responsible for that cluster of what would be three Departments—says that the example that is being prayed in aid by the UK Government was a mistake and that for the UK to do it would be a mistake, wouldn't it be worth finding out why he thinks that if you are going to pray in aid that example to Parliament?

**Nigel Adams:** I am sure that, as we work towards the finalisation of the merger process, experiences from all countries that operate a similar model will be taken into consideration. I imagine that we will be learning those lessons. We still have until September before it is formalised. I am sure that beyond September there will be a lot more integration and a lot more work done.

Q241 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So you want it done by September.

**Nigel Adams:** The Prime Minister has committed—and the Foreign Secretary echoed this today in the Chamber—that the merger will be formalised by 1 September. Of course, integration will continue after that date. It is unlikely to be the case that everything will be as it will be by 1 September, but the merger will be complete.

Q242 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Whom did the Government and the Prime



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Minister consult on this? When he gave his statement, he said that there was a long period of consultation. With whom? Where can we read the results?

**Nigel Adams:** That would have been cross-government. I do not know whether Simon is aware of exactly who was involved in those consultations.

Q243 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Hang on. You are a Minister in the Department, and you do not know.

**Nigel Adams:** I cannot tell you exactly who was spoken to in the discussions. I know that these conversations were had right across Government. I cannot give you a full list, I cannot give you dates and I cannot give you—

Q244 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Conversations are different from consultations. He said that there was a long period of consultation. When did that start, when did it finish, who was consulted and where are the published results of that consultation?

**Nigel Adams:** We will find out for you, Mr McDonald.

Q245 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** How do you not know that? You are a Foreign Office Minister. I like you, Nigel—I really do—but how do you not know that?

**Nigel Adams:** I do not have that data to hand, Mr McDonald. I am more than happy to get it.

Q246 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did you see that statement, which was a statement on your Department, before he came to the House to give it?

**Nigel Adams:** I did not see it before he came to the House.

Q247 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So when he said the words, “There has been a long, extensive consultation,” you must have known that that was not true—beyond just conversations. We all have conversations. That is not a consultation.

**Nigel Adams:** I saw the statement at roughly the same time as you did.

Q248 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can we get information on who was consulted, when it started, when it finished and what the results of the consultation were?

**Nigel Adams:** I will certainly make that request, Mr McDonald, as I said a minute ago.

Q249 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Okay. This decision has been taken. It was meant to be part of the integrated review, which was put on hold, understandably and quite correctly. I understand that it is now back in the workstream. However, why have you announced this decision, claiming that there has been a consultation when there has not been one—I will be amazed to see what the Department comes back with—and



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before you have even concluded this integrated review, which was meant to be, as far as foreign policy, aid policy and security policy are concerned, the great masterpiece of the first year of the Boris Johnson Government following the election? This is all being made up as you go along.

**Nigel Adams:** The objectives of the new Department will be shaped by the outcome of the integrated review. We understand that that will be concluded later this year. However, I am more than happy to try to get the information that you are seeking.

Q250 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So you think that the objectives will change from what they are now.

**Nigel Adams:** My understanding is that they will be shaped by the review.

Q251 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So why would you not wait until the integrated review had completed?

**Nigel Adams:** The Prime Minister and the Government are committed to our having a unified British foreign policy. We want to maximise our influence around the world. The pandemic has been an example of why we need to get on with that work. We need to accelerate the merger. Of course, any results—

Q252 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Why does the pandemic show that the merger has to be accelerated? I do not understand that at all.

**Nigel Adams:** I think that the situation we are in has been a good example of why we need to integrate. We have a date of September to achieve that. The objectives going forward will be shaped, of course, by the integrated review.

Q253 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Where did the September date come from?

**Nigel Adams:** I do not know when the date of September was decided upon.

Q254 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Do you know why it was decided?

**Nigel Adams:** No, I do not.

Q255 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** He talks about a consultation that, let us be honest, has not happened. It did not take place. I do not think that the Department will be able to produce any of the things I have asked for. We have an integrated review going ahead, starting from now, that has already decided what is going to happen. I am in the Opposition, but I want you to get this right. It is in everybody's interest that you get it right. However, as far I can see, this just feeds into the fear that I—and many in your own party—have that this is really just a cuts exercise. That is what it will end up being. There is no real strategic thinking going on. Decisions are being made on the hoof and are being rushed. All of that makes for bad policy making.



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**Nigel Adams:** It is not a cuts exercise. There will be no compulsory redundancies. Obviously, roles and responsibilities will change. Our national income commitment of 0.7% spending on aid remains. It is enshrined in law. We cannot change that without changing the law, and there is no intention of doing that. I disagree that this is an exercise that is being driven by cuts.

Q256 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We have this super-Department. Will people who have come into it from DFID always be seen as the lower side? Will we start to see DFID members of staff becoming ambassadors, for example? What will the training programme for staff members be? What will the development programme look like to ensure that aid is not seen as the poor wee brother of diplomacy?

**Nigel Adams:** Not at all. It would certainly be a shock to my ministerial colleagues if for one moment this merger were to result in DFID being seen as some sort of junior partner. The spending power at DFID is several times larger than that of the Foreign Office, so I do not think that that is the case at all. Of course, there will be a lot of integration. A lot of support will be given to staff of both Departments. There will certainly be some new roles, where people will be moved from their current work. Support will be given to those individuals in that process, of course.

Q257 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Lastly, I have a very general question. Why is it that none of the former Secretaries of State for DFID, in either party, seems to support this? Why were people like Andrew Mitchell not consulted, for example?

**Nigel Adams:** You would probably have to bring Mr Mitchell to the Committee to ask him that question.

Q258 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am asking why your Department did not consult people like him. Why didn't it consult people like Rory Stewart or Mr Miliband, albeit that he is in New York at the moment?

**Nigel Adams:** If Government took decisions on the basis of consulting all previous Ministers in various Departments, you would probably not get anything done.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** No, but you want to hear ideas. You do not just want yes-men. You want to hear from people who have done the job. I always like to hear from people I might not agree with. It makes for better decision making. It just strikes me that this decision has been taken on the hoof, as a bit of a distraction. All the nonsense about the pandemic showing the need to speed it up is waffle. You have had no consultation, while pretending that there has been a consultation, and are having an integrated review that now will not be worth the paper it is written on, as far as I can see. It is squandered. I wanted the Government to get this right, but I do not think that they will. It is a statement rather than a question.

Q259 **Chair:** We will move on. May I ask a couple of factual questions about this merger? Will there be a separate development agency within the



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Foreign Office?

**Nigel Adams:** I will come back to you on that. I am not aware of its being a separate operation.

Q260 **Chair:** Do we know whether there will be a separate accounting officer?

**Nigel Adams:** I am not sure, but we can find out about that. I do not know whether Simon is aware of that.

**Simon Manley:** That is one of the issues that need to be sorted out through the review.

Q261 **Chair:** Okay. We can come back to that. There is clearly also a merger of cultures that needs to be looked at. Forgive me, but my experience when I worked in the Department—admittedly, as an add-on from the MOD—was that the Foreign Office was much more centralised and that the MOD and DFID were much more in-country-led. How do you view balancing those different ways of conducting foreign affairs?

**Nigel Adams:** Of course, you have distinct responsibilities across the two Departments. I do not see that changing. Our development work will certainly continue to be country-led. As you say, that is for a very good reason. A large part of what the FCO does, through our consular services, is country-led, but we need to operate and react to whatever situation is required.

**Chair:** There is an ethos discussion that will need to be held. Many of us would welcome the opportunity to feed into that, having had the great advantage over the last few years of—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** It is eight weeks away, but you cannot tell us whether there is going to be a separate accounting officer.

Q262 **Chair:** I am going to stop you, Mr McDonald. We would urge a response on that as soon as possible.

**Nigel Adams:** We can certainly write to you, Chair.

Q263 **Chair:** Clearly, that will have a very clear effect on the way in which this merged Department works.

**Nigel Adams:** Yes.

Q264 **Chair:** The conversation on ethos, too, is a question about not just how the Department runs, but how the new PUS is selected. Clearly, whomsoever you select as the new PUS will have an enormous influence on the way in which this merger happens. I know that the board for the new PUS is now sitting. There are various people on it—some from DFID, some from the Treasury and some from various other Departments. This Committee would welcome the opportunity to talk to members of that board and to help shape that discussion, because that is a hugely important decision about the way in which the British people are going to be represented and British money is going to be spent over, some of us hope, a rather long time.



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**Nigel Adams:** Certainly.

Q265 **Chair:** I would be very grateful if you encouraged members of the board to come here as soon as possible.

**Nigel Adams:** I think that that has been heard loud and clear.

Q266 **Chair:** Thank you. May I go on to something else—your departmental responsibility as Minister for Asia? I realise that this is a separate issue and that you were not warned about it. However, given that today is the day when the National People’s Congress has imposed the security law on Hong Kong, I want to ask you very briefly whether Hong Kong is still a separate jurisdiction to China.

**Nigel Adams:** As you know, we are supposed to operate under the “one country, two systems” model. We are very concerned about the announcements, on which we have had a bit of notice, over recent weeks. I have raised the issue with the ambassador. The Foreign Secretary has had direct conversations with his counterpart. I do not want to say too much about our response, but I understand that the Foreign Secretary will be making a statement imminently.

Q267 **Chair:** I believe that the statement is tomorrow. Presumably that will address this point.

**Nigel Adams:** Yes.

Q268 **Chair:** I will not push you too far on that, but may I raise the very obvious question? Do we believe that the actions of the Hong Kong Administration now lie along the same axis as the strategic priorities of the UK Government?

**Nigel Adams:** As I said, we are particularly concerned by what we have learned with these new laws. It is probably much better if I keep my counsel and you wait for the Foreign Secretary.

Q269 **Chair:** Okay.

I am going down a particular line. I will now ask another question that you may not be able to answer, but Mr Manley’s and Ms Anderson’s experience in the Foreign Office may help here. In recent years, many different diplomats have been offered SUPL—supplementary unpaid leave. Am I right in saying that it is not guaranteed that any diplomat can get SUPL? They have to ask for it and it has to be granted. Am I correct in that? Mr Manley, you are nodding.

**Simon Manley:** Yes, I believe so. I have never requested it myself, so I am—

Q270 **Chair:** No, but you have been in the Department long enough. I understand that SUPL is granted only if what the individual is trying to do lies alongside the strategic priorities of the United Kingdom. They would not be offered SUPL to do something that was against the interests of the United Kingdom. They might resign from the Department to go and do



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something, but they could not be on unpaid leave to do something that was against the strategic priorities of the United Kingdom Government. Is that correct?

**Simon Manley:** I am not a specialist on our HR, I am afraid.

Q271 **Chair:** That is actually from your website, so I am going to assume that it is correct.

The reason that I raise this is that a diplomat by the name of Jolyon Welsh, who used to be at the United Nations, was formerly deputy high commissioner in Australia and has held various other posts in our Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is now on SUPL<sup>3</sup>, working for a company called Consulum and doing the public relations for the Government of Hong Kong. This strikes me as extremely concerning, given that this particular contract for public relations was issued only in recent weeks and, therefore, by an Administration of Hong Kong that the Minister, with ministerial caution, did not say had strategic priorities that lay along those of the United Kingdom.

It seems to me that it is possible and, indeed, likely that someone who is only on unpaid leave—and, therefore, still under terms with the Foreign Office—is working against the interests of Her Majesty's Government, against the interests of the British people, against the interests of democracy, against the interests of the rule of law and, therefore, against the interests of the Foreign Office itself.

I would be very grateful if you looked into this as a matter of extreme urgency and assured me that no envoy, or even no person attached to the Foreign Office, is conducting business while on unpaid leave that is against the interests of the British people.

**Nigel Adams:** It would alarm me enormously if we had members of staff working against our interests. I was not aware of this individual. I will take that away as soon as we have finished this session and get a reply to you.

Q272 **Chair:** It came to my attention this morning. I am very grateful for your speedy response. Thank you very much.

If there are no other points from members of the Committee before we thank you enormously for your time, may I add one personal note? It is quite clear that over the last six months members of the diplomatic team have been asked to do things that, frankly, they did not expect to do, in situations that nobody was expecting. You have heard criticism from us this afternoon, and you will have heard criticism from many people over the last six months. However, may I say thank you? The criticism, compared with the success, has been massively disproportionate, by which I mean that the success has been huge and the criticism has been moderate. Frankly, members of the Foreign Office in consular teams around the world have pulled a blinder. Personally, I am enormously grateful.

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<sup>3</sup> The Foreign Office later clarified that Jolyon Welsh is not currently an FCO employee.



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I know that some countries did better than others and some teams did better than others. We will keep pressing, I hope, to learn the lessons from the good ones and to make sure that they are applied universally, but I say a huge thank you from this Committee to the teams, who have done brilliantly for the UK and for British people around the world.

**Nigel Adams:** That will mean an awful lot to our consular teams globally. They have worked in incredibly difficult conditions, largely from home, with their families and under the same lockdown pressures as everybody else. They have been able to pull the operation together and to continue to provide support to the massive number of British nationals and travellers who were abroad. We should be proud of them. Mr Chairman, your words are a great testament to the work that Jennifer and her team and everybody across the network have done over the last few months, and continue to do.

Q273 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Unusually, I note my personal thanks to you. You have been taking an enormous number of calls from colleagues, including Mr McDonald. I apologise for that.

**Nigel Adams:** Mr McDonald was a regular caller—

Q274 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think that I called only once, actually.

**Nigel Adams:** My weekly calls were a great pleasure to do and were cross-party. It is worth mentioning that I had regular weekly calls with the shadow Foreign Secretary and the devolved Assemblies. Those were very constructive, whether they were on repatriations, on PPE or on Gavi and vaccine research. I extend my thanks for the co-operative way in which that was handled.

**Chair:** Thank you very much.