



House of Commons  
Foreign Affairs Committee

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# Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Third Report of Session 2019–21**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 21 July 2020*

## The Foreign Affairs Committee

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## Summary

At moments of acute crisis, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) role in helping Britons abroad becomes paramount. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was one of those moments. With 1.3 million British nationals stranded around the world, the FCO's consular teams had to act.

The FCO had to mobilise to support British nationals in the emerging crisis. This was an extremely difficult task, and many FCO staff and diplomats were required to work around the clock, away from the office and in unusual conditions to help get people home.

However, there were areas where efforts fell short. The Government's repatriation operation was too slow and placed too much reliance on commercial providers. Other countries acted faster and organised more charter flights. The FCO was allocated £75 million to spend on repatriations, but only spent £40 million. While no one would advocate waste, the funds were allocated to rescue British citizens and the amount unspent suggests available lifelines that many needed, were not used.

Whilst a relatively large financial package was developed for those suffering from COVID-19 related financial hardships in the UK, little was done to provide help for those UK citizens stuck abroad. The FCO had emergency loans available, but both take-up and awareness were low. The FCO should have done more to provide financial support to those citizens stranded abroad, and to communicate clearly what help was available to them.

Many UK citizens stuck abroad reported that they were unable to access the information that they needed, whilst others were not treated with the empathy and compassion that they should expect. The FCO must take a serious look at its communications strategy to avoid this happening again in the future.

Though there were notable successes, the FCO was outpaced by events leaving many seeing it as out of touch with the needs of those in difficulty. Too many UK citizens were not provided with the support that they should reasonably expect to receive.

# 1 Introduction

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1. The COVID-19 pandemic left 1.3 million UK citizens stranded around the world, many of whom were in need of urgent consular support.<sup>1</sup> The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), like other departments, had to respond rapidly to the emerging crisis. Its diplomatic and consular capabilities were tested more severely than at any other time of peace. In April, we published our assessment of the FCO's diplomatic response to the crisis.<sup>2</sup> We found that the FCO had not done enough to ensure a clear and transparent response to the pandemic and we recommended that the Government establish a 'G20 for Public Health'.<sup>3</sup> The focus of this report is an evaluation of the FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. We took oral evidence from Ministers and officials over three sessions between March and June. To add to our evidence base, we wanted to hear directly from members of the public who had first-hand experience of using consular services during the pandemic. We conducted a survey calling for personal stories from UK citizens stuck abroad and received over 1,250 responses. We received both positive and negative stories from those who had sought help from consular services. Further details are set out in the appendices to this report.

3. During the peak of the pandemic, the scale of the pressure on our consular services was unprecedented. The situation was made particularly difficult for the FCO by the large numbers of UK citizens who were travelling abroad at the time. We know that many FCO staff went above and beyond to deliver admirable service in extremely difficult circumstances. However, in the course of our inquiry we heard from many members of the public about their disappointing and even distressing experiences of trying to access consular support. This evidence is, by its nature, anecdotal, and is from a self-selecting group of people who had particular experiences that motivated them to respond, so it may not be representative of all experiences. Yet the stories submitted to us are of sufficient number and gravity that they give us significant cause for concern and cannot be dismissed. We are grateful to everyone who gave evidence to this inquiry, and especially those who spoke to us about their experiences.

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1 Q 165

2 Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19](#), HC 239

3 Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19](#), HC 239

## 2 Repatriation

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### Transport

4. When a crisis occurs abroad, the FCO's consular network provides the UK's emergency response for its nationals. The FCO is responsible for the provision of travel advice, support and care; and for organising repatriation if necessary. Accordingly, in response to growing concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic, the FCO advised against all non-essential travel around the world on 17th March.<sup>4</sup> Six days later, on the 23rd March, it issued further advice stating that all UK residents currently travelling abroad should return home.<sup>5</sup> The FCO estimates that, at the time of issuing this advice, 1.3 million UK citizens were travelling abroad.<sup>6</sup> The task of ensuring that all these travellers could return to the UK safely was an unprecedented challenge for the Government.

5. The UK Government made an early decision to rely on commercial flights as the main means of getting UK citizens home, and planned to rely on these commercial routes for 'as long as possible'.<sup>7</sup> On the 30th of March the Government announced that it would provide financial support for special charter flights to bring UK nationals back home.<sup>8</sup> The Government designated £75 million to support those flights.<sup>9</sup> However, it emphasised that these flights would only be available from locations where commercial flights were no longer running.<sup>10</sup> It said that airlines would still bear responsibility for getting passengers home where commercial routes remained an option.<sup>11</sup> When asked about the rationale for this decision, Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, argued that "going commercial relieved a pressure on the British taxpayer" as it was the most cost-effective way to bring travellers back to the UK.<sup>12</sup> However, Nigel Adams MP, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, subsequently told us that this decision had "nothing to do with any financial constraints".<sup>13</sup>

6. Other countries (such as France and Germany) placed more reliance on charter flights early on in the crisis and were therefore able to repatriate their citizens more quickly than the UK.<sup>14</sup> The UK Government ran 186 charter flights to support the 1.3 million British nationals who were travelling abroad. By comparison, the German Government chartered

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4 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Travel Advice against all non-essential travel: Foreign Secretary's statement](#), 17 March 2020, accessed 7th July 2020

5 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary advises all British travellers to return to the UK now](#), 23 March 2020, accessed 6th July 2020

6 Q 165

7 Q 53

8 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 30 March 2020, accessed 9th July 2020

9 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 30 March 2020, accessed 9th July 2020

10 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 30 March 2020, accessed 9th July 2020

11 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 30 March 2020, accessed 9th July 2020

12 Q 61

13 Q 161

14 Q 62

over 260 flights during the crisis, to support around 260,000 citizens.<sup>15</sup> The Permanent Under-Secretary acknowledged that the UK repatriation operation had “taken longer than was ideal, and longer than in some other countries”.<sup>16</sup> He told us that:

Speed is something that absolutely is in question, and you can legitimately say that we could have been quicker, but given the numbers that have successfully come back by commercial means, which would have been extremely expensive to put on charter flights, I think that this is a defensible choice.<sup>17</sup>

As of 30th June 2020, the FCO had spent £40.5 million of the £75 million that had been allocated to support charter flights.<sup>18</sup> It believes that this has allowed the ‘vast majority’ of UK citizens to return home.<sup>19</sup> The Minister told us that “if we need to stand that [fund] up again, hopefully the Treasury will allow it. We have a bit more of that envelope”.<sup>20</sup>

7. A significant number of those who responded to our survey criticised the Government’s decision to rely on commercial providers, arguing that it was unrealistic to expect travellers to take commercial flights. We were told that in many countries there were very few commercial flights available and that tickets were extremely expensive. Many of our survey respondents had spent large amounts of money on commercial flights which were then cancelled at short notice. Respondents were often given credit for future flights (rather than a refund) which meant that many did not have the funds to purchase new tickets. One person told us that the FCO “seem completely out of touch [as] flights priced at many thousands of dollars [aren’t] a realistic option for people stuck in Australia with diminishing funds”.<sup>21</sup>

8. A significant number of survey respondents had found getting to airports extremely difficult. Many of those who responded were stuck in countries where all domestic travel had been banned. Those who were in remote locations or who were far away from a country’s main transport hub often couldn’t access the domestic flights or transport that would allow them to board a commercial flight home. This seemed to be a particular issue in New Zealand and the Philippines. One respondent told us that:

Just because commercial flights are operating from the Philippines it doesn’t mean people can leave here. Many people are stuck.<sup>22</sup>

Another said that:

Nothing has been mentioned about how we can reliably fly to another state without the risk of being stranded in the event of more cancellations.<sup>23</sup>

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15 Correspondence from Minister of State Nigel Adams MP, [regarding FCO consular response to COVID-19](#), 16th July 2020.

16 Q 61

17 Q 62

18 Q 160

19 Q 160

20 Q 151

21 Survey response, UK citizen in Australia

22 Survey response, UK citizen in the Philippines

23 Survey response, UK citizen in Australia

9. The scope of the Government's repatriation efforts was also limited to British nationals who were ordinarily resident in the UK.<sup>24</sup> This meant that British nationals who live overseas permanently did not qualify for the support available.<sup>25</sup> Those applying for seats on repatriation flights were asked for the postcode of their UK address as part of the process of reserving a ticket. The FCO told us that this process was not "rigorously policed",<sup>26</sup> but that the programme "was about keeping British nationals safe if they did not have an established residence somewhere else".<sup>27</sup>

10. **We recognise the hard work of many FCO staff and diplomats who worked around the clock and did an excellent job helping UK citizens get home. However, some posts performed more effectively than others and there are areas where efforts fell short.**

11. **The FCO was given £75 million to help UK citizens return home. However, only £40 million of this was spent. While no one would advocate waste, these funds were allocated to rescue British citizens and the amount unspent suggests that the lifelines that many needed were available but not used. We were given no explanation as to why the remaining £35 million wasn't used to provide a better service for those UK citizens stranded abroad. *We recommend that the Government ensures remaining funds are kept aside should a second wave of COVID-19 infections see more UK citizens stuck abroad. The FCO should also consider allocating some of its remaining funds to help those British nationals who permanently reside overseas but who need to return to the UK due to the COVID-19 pandemic.***

12. **The Government placed too much reliance on commercial carriers at the start of the crisis. We were surprised that the Permanent Under-Secretary and the Minister gave different explanations for their Department's decision to rely upon commercial flights. This decision was clearly made with cost saving in mind.**

13. **Whilst reliance on the commercial system may have been the most cost effective and convenient way to help the majority of travellers return to the UK, for some people this was not a practical solution. This included travellers who were vulnerable, those in the 'high risk' category and those who were travelling in countries with strict lockdown rules and thus were unable to access the commercial flights available. By running a small number of chartered repatriation flights in parallel to the commercial options the FCO could have successfully brought home the travellers in the most vulnerable situations.**

14. **The FCO advised UK citizens to make use of commercial flights, but they did not do enough to help people access those flights. *The Government needs to offer support that factors in the reality that for many, just because commercial flights are running, it doesn't necessarily mean that those flights are accessible. The FCO should do more to provide advice to those staying in remote areas, and to provide options to enable those people to travel to the airport. In future periods of crisis, the FCO should ensure that Gov.uk's travel advice pages include advice on: safe local transport routes, local lockdown rules and airport accommodation. The FCO should also set out a plan to make this advice available and easily accessible for those without internet access.***

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24 Q 170

25 Q 170

26 Q 170

27 Q 170



## Loans

15. Many of those stuck abroad spoke about the spiralling costs of accommodation, food and other essentials. Some of those who responded to our survey were running out of essential medication, whilst others were struggling to access basic supplies. The Foreign Secretary expressed sympathy for those who were running out of money while abroad but said that “given the scale” the Foreign Office could not provide a direct subsidy or grant to individuals.<sup>28</sup> He said that, *in extremis*, the FCO would offer temporary loans to facilitate people getting back home. This was in line with existing FCO policy on emergency loans for repatriation.<sup>29</sup> The Foreign Office reaffirmed its offer of an emergency loan as a last resort when it announced the special charter flights on 30 March 2020.<sup>30</sup> Many of those who responded to our survey were not aware that these loans were available. We were told that (as of the 30th June) 2,272 loans had been given out.<sup>31</sup> This figure seems low, considering that 1.3 million UK citizens were estimated to be travelling abroad at the start of the crisis.<sup>32</sup>

16. A significant number of those who responded to our survey had not been able to access FCO loans, despite being in financial difficulty. The FCO had often advised survey respondents to rely on family and friends or to try crowdfunding, rather than offering loans. One respondent told us that:

Upon ringing up and explaining that I was running out of funds and accommodation due to a lack of money caused by cancelled flights, their response was simply ‘Try to borrow money from your relatives’, and no financial loan or support of any kind could be offered despite media and FCO reports to the contrary.<sup>33</sup>

The Foreign Office told us that this advice was historical and based on the ‘last resort’ loans that the FCO had offered prior to the crisis.<sup>34</sup> We were told that the Foreign Office had previously collated a list of different ways in which individuals could access funding short of asking for a loan and that this advice included crowdfunding as an option.<sup>35</sup> This pre-existing list was repurposed as advice for those seeking loans as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>36</sup> The FCO told us that the crowdfunding advice has since been removed.<sup>37</sup> However, a number of our survey respondents received this crowdfunding advice before its removal. We received a significant number of complaints about this advice.

17. Some other respondents had been offered loans to pay for tickets but did not take them as they felt that they could not afford to keep up with repayments. One respondent told us that:

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28 HC Deb, 24 March 2020, 232 [Commons Chamber]

29 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Financial assistance abroad](#), 22 May 2020, accessed 9 June 2020 d

30 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 30 March 2020, accessed 9th July 2020

31 Q 188

32 Q 165

33 Survey response, UK citizen in Australia

34 Q 210

35 Q 210

36 Q 210

37 Q 210

I understand that emergency loans are available but at the end of the day we will still have to pay off a massive debt... what about the people who simply cannot afford the commercial flights home and cannot risk taking an emergency loan out.<sup>38</sup>

The FCO loans were interest free and repayable within six months.<sup>39</sup> However, given the economic uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic, many respondents were extremely worried about committing to pay back their loans within this timeframe. These worries were heightened for some respondents by the FCO's inflexible stance, with some travellers being told that, if their loan wasn't paid back within six months then their details would be passed to debt collectors. When asked about this the Minister of State told us that these were "not bad terms for taking out a loan"<sup>40</sup> and that "you can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink".<sup>41</sup> The Minister did however acknowledge that the Government may have to offer extensions to enable people to pay back their loans.<sup>42</sup>

**18. Whilst a relatively large financial package was developed for those suffering from COVID-19 related financial hardship in the UK, little was done to provide help for those UK citizens stuck abroad. The FCO had emergency loans available, but both take up and awareness were low. The FCO also made clear that it was only willing to offer these loans as a last resort, preferring to advise people to borrow from friends and family and, early on in the crisis, asking people to crowdfund their way home. Whilst the crowdfunding advice was eventually removed from the FCO's website, we are disappointed that the FCO ever considered this acceptable advice to give to a British Citizen seeking help. *We recommend that the Foreign Office commits to removing its advice on Crowdfunding from all future guidance on loans. It should also proactively publicise that emergency loans are available in times of crisis.***

**19. Given the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people may need to seek extensions to the FCO's travel loans. The FCO has advised that there may be some flexibility in repayment timetables for those genuinely committed to repaying, but this fact has not been adequately communicated to the public. While loans must of course be repaid, it is undesirable that people were deterred from taking out loans by the FCO's warnings that their details would be passed to debt collectors after six months. People needed to be made aware that more flexibility was available. *We recommend that the FCO commits to offering loan extensions where people are in genuine financial difficulty. The FCO should also make it clear that, in current circumstances, there may be some flexibility afforded to those who are genuinely struggling to repay.***

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38 Survey Response, UK citizen in Australia

39 Q 190

40 Q 190

41 Q 191

42 Q 211

### 3 Communication

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20. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressure on the FCO's communications network. We were told that FCO call centres usually receive an average of 1,000 calls a day,<sup>43</sup> whereas at the height of the crisis they received 14,000 calls.<sup>44</sup> This vast increase in call volumes resulted in long wait times for callers and left many UK citizens unable to access the help and advice they needed. It is therefore no surprise that the most common complaint from respondents to our survey was levelled at the quality and quantity of the FCO's communications. Forty percent of those surveyed told us that they had been unable to get in contact with an embassy, consulate or high commission. Of those who had managed to contact an embassy, fifty-nine percent said that they had found it difficult or very difficult to do so.

21. The Foreign Secretary acknowledged that it had been too difficult for some travellers to contact the FCO and said that the department needed to "rapidly reduce" the time it takes to answer calls.<sup>45</sup> The Foreign Office had to do much work to scale up call centre operations and had not previously undertaken crisis planning for an event of this scale.<sup>46</sup> The Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Simon McDonald, acknowledged that there had been "real problems" with communications early in the crisis.<sup>47</sup> He told us that:

At the beginning our call centres, in particular, were not as we would have wished them to be ... Many calls were not getting through and so people could be hanging on the phone for a long time ... It took us a couple of weeks to get it right.<sup>48</sup>

However, the FCO says that its service improved over the course of the pandemic.<sup>49</sup> It says that it successfully tripled the capacity of its call centres by enlisting a commercial partner and redeploying staff.<sup>50</sup> Four hundred extra call handlers were brought in at the height of the crisis.<sup>51</sup> Since the 30th March the pickup rate for all calls has been ninety-eight percent or better.<sup>52</sup>

22. When survey respondents did manage to get in touch with the FCO, they often found that the advice they received was outdated or unhelpful. One respondent told us that:

We sought advice from consular services at every stage of booking return travel, and at every turn the advice was either misinformed or outdated. This included transit windows, conditions of transit, routes available and airports that are open. As a result, we were unable to complete our return travel plans before the lockdown, and we remain stuck.<sup>53</sup>

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43 Q 59

44 Q 202

45 Oral Evidence taken on the 19th March 2020, [HC 253](#), Q6

46 Q 213

47 Q 52

48 Q 52

49 Q 59

50 Q 52

51 Q 198

52 Q 52

53 Survey response, UK citizen in New Zealand

Another told us that they received “more information from the British news outlets than from the embassy”.<sup>54</sup>

23. The FCO told us that there had been a concerted effort to disseminate “accurate information as quickly as possible to as large a number of people as possible”.<sup>55</sup> The crisis instigated a shift away from communicating via individual telephone calls and towards conducting more communication via social media.<sup>56</sup> The Permanent Under-Secretary felt that this shift had been successful.<sup>57</sup> He did, however, acknowledge that the FCO's social media channels needed to be more widely publicised in the future.<sup>58</sup>

24. As a result of this strategy, travellers were often told to follow social media or to look at the Government's website for updates and so were not given any bespoke advice or information. There was a feeling amongst respondents that this generic information was unhelpful, many respondents felt that they had unique difficulties in getting back to the UK and unique problems which needed to be better addressed (such as medical problems, difficulty travelling from remote locations and a lack of funds). Many respondents said that the only information they received was the details of the commercial flights available and that this was often unhelpful if they couldn't travel to the airport to access these flights or couldn't afford to pay for these flights. The Permanent Under-Secretary acknowledged that the FCO needed to re-examine the balance between centralisation and tailoring of its advice.<sup>59</sup>

25. Some survey respondents also felt that there was a lack of information on what would happen when they returned to the UK. Those based in Scotland were particularly concerned about how they were going to get home: most flights were going to Heathrow and it wasn't made clear whether passengers could easily travel onwards. One respondent told us that:

We can find no information as to what will happen to us on arrival back in Scotland, we both live in Argyll but are having to fly to Edinburgh. How do we reach home from there? We can't ask friends to collect us as most are near or over 70. Can we hire a car? Are we to be put into quarantine? ... We are very concerned and cannot find any information.<sup>60</sup>

26. Many of those who responded to our survey had joined informal WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook groups to gather and share information. We were told that these groups often proved more informative than official channels. However, embassies seemed reluctant to engage with these groups. For example, one respondent told us that:

[The] Embassy refused to engage with the groups of citizens who were finding each other on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, despite this being a ready-made pathway to get information to several hundred people at once.<sup>61</sup>

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54 Survey response, UK citizen in Peru

55 Q 58

56 Q 53

57 Q 53

58 Q 53

59 Q 58

60 Survey respondent, UK citizen in New Zealand

61 Survey respondent, UK citizen in Peru

27. A large number of survey respondents felt that there was a lack of compassion and understanding from FCO and embassy staff. One respondent told us that the lack of empathy, information and support, left them “feeling alienated and left to die”.<sup>62</sup> Whilst another told us that:

There was a complete lack of empathy, and the prevailing mentality was one of “computer says no”. If it didn’t fit with whatever the brief in front of them said, they didn’t seem able to comprehend [the issues] in front of them.<sup>63</sup>

When asked about these comments FCO officials told us that all consular staff receive training in handling distressed customers and that “[the] 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”.<sup>64</sup> In order to do this, the department implemented mystery customer shopping to make sure that staff were following best practice.<sup>65</sup> It said that it also:

Spoke to all their posts [about this]... 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.<sup>66</sup>

28. Many UK citizens stuck abroad were under the impression that embassies had closed, and that consular staff were uncontactable.<sup>67</sup> However, the FCO said that this was not the case and that consular teams were simply working from home.<sup>68</sup> We were told that this misunderstanding occurred because of an automated answerphone message<sup>69</sup>. Jennifer Anderson, Director of Consular Services at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, told us that:

In many countries around the world when they [UK citizens] 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.<sup>70</sup>

The FCO told us that it has now initiated a project to try to change that system and enable answerphone messaging to be controlled centrally.<sup>71</sup>

**29. There were real communication problems, particularly early on in the crisis—many people’s calls were not answered and many were left waiting on the phone for long periods of time. The FCO successfully scaled up their operation during the crisis, but this was a slow process which left many unable to access help when they needed it the most. Whilst this was an unprecedented challenge, the FCO was too slow to react. For future reference, the department needs to be more agile to respond rapidly to emerging crises. We recommend that the FCO develops contingency plans to ensure it can scale up its response more quickly should a situation like this occur again in the**

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62 Survey respondent, UK citizen in Pakistan

63 Survey respondent, UK citizen in Jordan

64 Q 197

65 Q 197

66 Q 202

67 Q 202

68 Q 202

69 Q 202

70 Q 202

71 Q 202

*future. Products such as WhatsApp Business offer the ability to communicate at speed and at scale with a self-selecting audience. The FCO should be exploring alternatives to the current offer.*

30. The FCO may have been able to communicate more effectively and proactively had it established a logging system to record the location and contact details of UK citizens abroad. This could have proved particularly helpful for those without access to the internet. The FCO's LOCATE database was discontinued due to disuse in 2013, but the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased the public's willingness to share this kind of information during times of crisis. *The FCO should look into the feasibility of establishing a logging system to help identify UK citizens abroad in times of crisis.*

31. The move to using social media for mass communications was partially successful. However, accessing online information was particularly difficult for elderly people and those with certain disabilities. The FCO placed too much reliance on this generic advice and this approach disadvantaged those with medical conditions and those stuck in remote areas, as they were unable to access advice tailored to their current circumstances. Many people were not treated with the empathy and compassion that they should rightly expect. It's disappointing that the FCO fell so short of expectations in this area. *Whilst we welcome the shift to communicating general messages via social media, this should not be at the expense of offering bespoke communication and advice, often this kind of information is vital.*

32. The failure of the FCO to provide clear advice on what would happen on arrival to the UK caused many travellers a great deal of unnecessary anxiety. *The FCO should give clear advice on the situation on the ground in the UK, this would go a long way to alleviate the worries of travellers returning to the UK.*

33. Automated answerphone messages told travellers around the world that our embassies and consulates were closed. It is extraordinary that the FCO had no control over the answerphone messages of its own embassies. This oversight prevented many from accessing the advice and support that they needed. *The FCO should make it an immediate priority to ensure that these answerphone messages can be controlled centrally.*

34. We know that many FCO staff went above and beyond to deliver admirable service in extremely difficult circumstances. However, there were areas where efforts fell short. By not adapting quickly to changing circumstances the FCO appeared out of touch with the needs of the general public. Too many UK citizens were not provided with the support that they should reasonably expect to receive.

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Repatriation

1. We recognise the hard work of many FCO staff and diplomats who worked around the clock and did an excellent job helping UK citizens get home. However, some posts performed more effectively than others and there are areas where efforts fell short. (Paragraph 10)
2. The FCO was given £75 million to help UK citizens return home. However, only £40 million of this was spent. While no one would advocate waste, these funds were allocated to rescue British citizens and the amount unspent suggests that the lifelines that many needed were available but not used. We were given no explanation as to why the remaining £35 million wasn't used to provide a better service for those UK citizens stranded abroad. *We recommend that the Government ensures remaining funds are kept aside should a second wave of COVID-19 infections see more UK citizens stuck abroad. The FCO should also consider allocating some of its remaining funds to help those British nationals who permanently reside overseas but who need to return to the UK due to the COVID-19 pandemic.* (Paragraph 11)
3. The Government placed too much reliance on commercial carriers at the start of the crisis. We were surprised that the Permanent Under-Secretary and the Minister gave different explanations for their Department's decision to rely upon commercial flights. This decision was clearly made with cost saving in mind. (Paragraph 12)
4. Whilst reliance on the commercial system may have been the most cost effective and convenient way to help the majority of travellers return to the UK, for some people this was not a practical solution. This included travellers who were vulnerable, those in the 'high risk' category and those who were travelling in countries with strict lockdown rules and thus were unable to access the commercial flights available. By running a small number of chartered repatriation flights in parallel to the commercial options the FCO could have successfully brought home the travellers in the most vulnerable situations. (Paragraph 13)
5. The FCO advised UK citizens to make use of commercial flights, but they did not do enough to help people access those flights. *The Government needs to offer support that factors in the reality that for many, just because commercial flights are running, it doesn't necessarily mean that those flights are accessible. The FCO should do more to provide advice to those staying in remote areas, and to provide options to enable those people to travel to the airport. The Government needs to offer support that factors in the reality that for many, just because commercial flights are running, it doesn't necessarily mean that those flights are accessible. The FCO should do more to provide advice to those staying in remote areas, and to provide options to enable those people to travel to the airport. In future periods of crisis, the FCO should ensure that Gov. uk's travel advice pages include advice on: safe local transport routes, local lockdown rules and airport accommodation. The FCO should also set out a plan to make this advice available and easily accessible for those without internet access.* (Paragraph 14)

6. Whilst a relatively large financial package was developed for those suffering from COVID-19 related financial hardship in the UK, little was done to provide help for those UK citizens stuck abroad. The FCO had emergency loans available, but both take up and awareness were low. The FCO also made clear that it was only willing to offer these loans as a last resort, preferring to advise people to borrow from friends and family and, early on in the crisis, asking people to crowdfund their way home. Whilst the crowdfunding advice was eventually removed from the FCO's website, we are disappointed that the FCO ever considered this acceptable advice to give to a British Citizen seeking help. *We recommend that the Foreign Office commits to removing its advice on Crowdfunding from all future guidance on loans. It should also proactively publicise that emergency loans are available in times of crisis.* (Paragraph 18)
7. Given the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people may need to seek extensions to the FCO's travel loans. The FCO has advised that there may be some flexibility in repayment timetables for those genuinely committed to repaying, but this fact has not been adequately communicated to the public. While loans must of course be repaid, it is undesirable that people were deterred from taking out loans by the FCO's warnings that their details would be passed to debt collectors after six months. People needed to be made aware that more flexibility was available. *We recommend that the FCO commits to offering loan extensions where people are in genuine financial difficulty. The FCO should also make it clear that, in current circumstances, there may be some flexibility afforded to those who are genuinely struggling to repay.* (Paragraph 19)

## Communication

8. There were real communication problems, particularly early on in the crisis—many people's calls were not answered and many were left waiting on the phone for long periods of time. The FCO successfully scaled up their operation during the crisis, but this was a slow process which left many unable to access help when they needed it the most. Whilst this was an unprecedented challenge, the FCO was too slow to react. For future reference, the department needs to be more agile to respond rapidly to emerging crises. *We recommend that the FCO develops contingency plans to ensure it can scale up its response more quickly should a situation like this occur again in the future. Products such as WhatsApp Business offer the ability to communicate at speed and at scale with a self-selecting audience. The FCO should be exploring alternatives to the current offer.* (Paragraph 29)
9. The FCO may have been able to communicate more effectively and proactively had it established a logging system to record the location and contact details of UK citizens abroad. This could have proved particularly helpful for those without access to the internet. The FCO's LOCATE database was discontinued due to disuse in 2013, but the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased the public's willingness to share this kind of information during times of crisis. *The FCO should look into the feasibility of establishing a logging system to help identify UK citizens abroad in times of crisis.* (Paragraph 30)



10. The move to using social media for mass communications was partially successful. However, accessing online information was particularly difficult for elderly people and those with certain disabilities. The FCO placed too much reliance on this generic advice and this approach disadvantaged those with medical conditions and those stuck in remote areas, as they were unable to access advice tailored to their current circumstances. Many people were not treated with the empathy and compassion that they should rightly expect. It's disappointing that the FCO fell so short of expectations in this area. *Whilst we welcome the shift to communicating general messages via social media, this should not be at the expense of offering bespoke communication and advice, often this kind of information is vital.* (Paragraph 31)
11. The failure of the FCO to provide clear advice on what would happen on arrival to the UK caused many travellers a great deal of unnecessary anxiety. *The FCO should give clear advice on the situation on the ground in the UK, this would go a long way to alleviate the worries of travellers returning to the UK.* (Paragraph 32)
12. Automated answerphone messages told travellers around the world that our embassies and consulates were closed. It is extraordinary that the FCO had no control over the answerphone messages of its own embassies. This oversight prevented many from accessing the advice and support that they needed. *The FCO should make it an immediate priority to ensure that these answerphone messages can be controlled centrally.* (Paragraph 33)
13. We know that many FCO staff went above and beyond to deliver admirable service in extremely difficult circumstances. However, there were areas where efforts fell short. By not adapting quickly to changing circumstances the FCO appeared out of touch with the needs of the general public. Too many UK citizens were not provided with the support that they should reasonably expect to receive. (Paragraph 34)

## Appendix 1: Testimonials from survey respondents

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We have included a series of quotes from those who responded to our survey. We acknowledge that the responses are from a self-selecting group of people who had particular experiences that motivated them to respond and so may not be representative of all experiences.

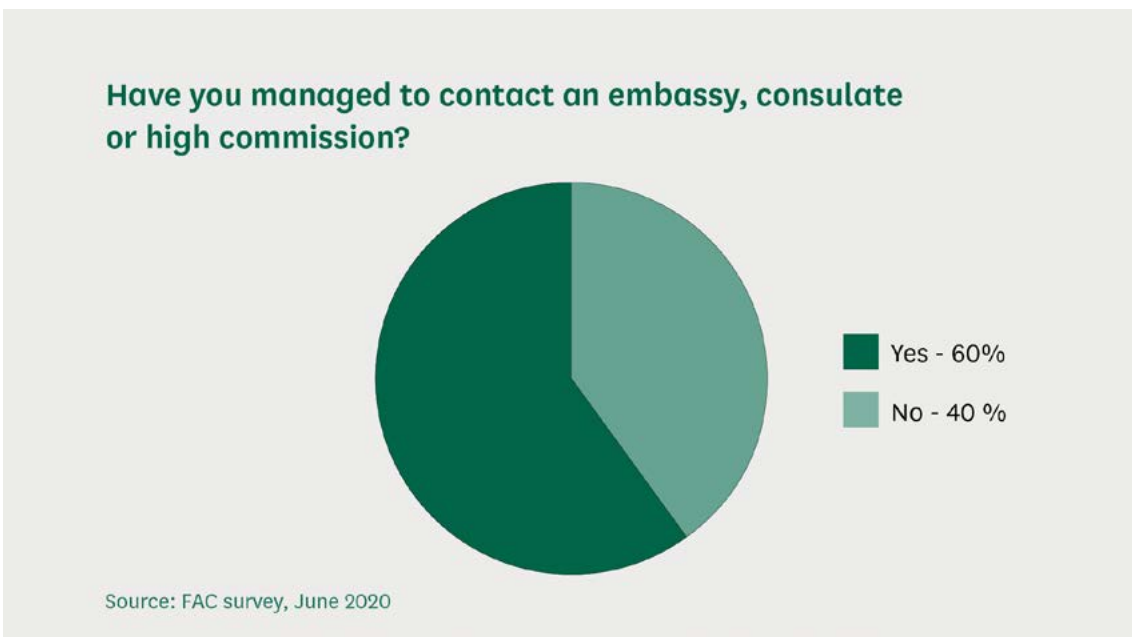
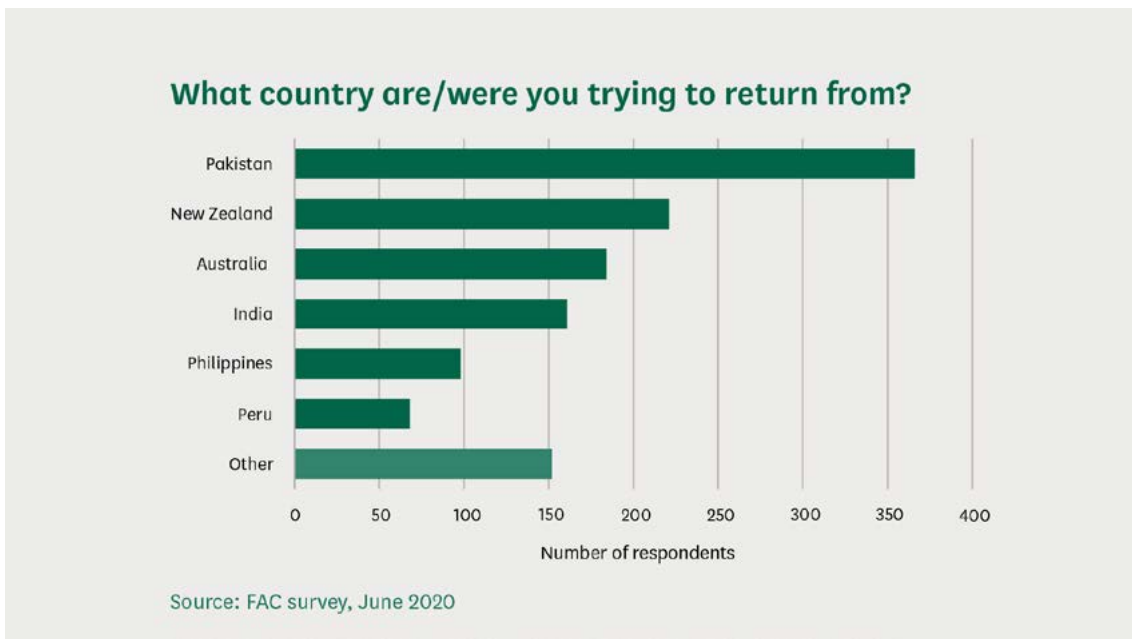
- “There is no feeling, we are just a number”. – *UK citizen in India*
- “[I lived in] frustration, anger, fear and uncertainty ... for days. I didn't feel that I meant or worth anything [to] my government. No one was even interested to talk to me or us stranded people”. – *UK citizen in Peru*
- “I feel let down, abandoned and totally uncared for by every single person I've spoken to in the last two weeks. I've been made to feel like being trapped here is my own fault, despite booking three flights home that all cancelled without refunds”. – *UK citizen in Australia*
- “We were left with no support, no communication, no assistance whatsoever. We were abandoned with no one to turn to. At some point, I even googled ‘what does an embassy do?’ because I couldn't believe the absolute lack of reaction during a crisis like that. This experience has been extremely disturbing, and I no longer feel part of this country or society. Truly disgraceful”. – *UK citizen in Peru*
- “For the first time as a traveller I feel genuinely scared and helpless”. – *UK citizen in Australia*
- “No help whatsoever was ever forthcoming from the British High Commission who completely ignored me”. – *UK citizen in Pakistan*
- “[N]early 10 days after returning to the UK I still don't feel fully recovered from the experience. The lack of support, information, communications and clear updates on the situation caused my mental health to suffer significantly. I am still having nightmares of being stuck in my hotel room and planes leaving without me. I am normally a very calm, sensible, rational and practical person but [two] weeks alone in a hotel room with such poor information put me on the verge of a breakdown. This could have been avoided through better organization, communication and some compassion”. – *UK citizen returned from Peru*
- “Feels like the only way I might get back home is if I drive for 8 days through multiple countries. That might still be faster than a response from the local high commission”. – *UK citizen in Pakistan*
- “I emailed FCO and they got back to me straight away and arranged for my flight a couple of days later. Couldn't have been more straight forward”. – *UK citizen in Peru*
- “[The] British Embassy did everything in their ability to ensure that problems were solved”. – *UK citizen in Madagascar*

## Appendix 2: Summary of survey responses

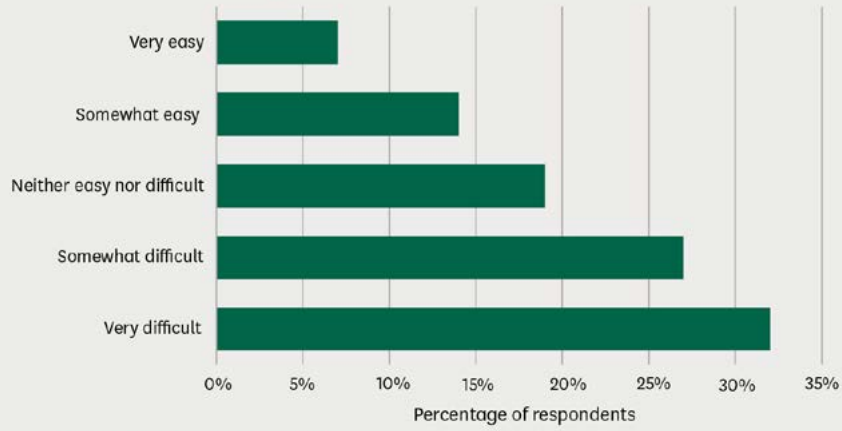
We have included a summary of the results of our survey. The responses were from a self-selecting group of people who had particular experiences that motivated them to respond and so may not be representative of all experiences. This should not be seen as representative of the excellent work done by many missions overseas but as snapshot of those areas where the FCO could improve its help to Britons abroad.

### Survey Statistics

We asked a series of questions to those who responded to our survey, below is a list of those questions and a statistical breakdown of the responses.

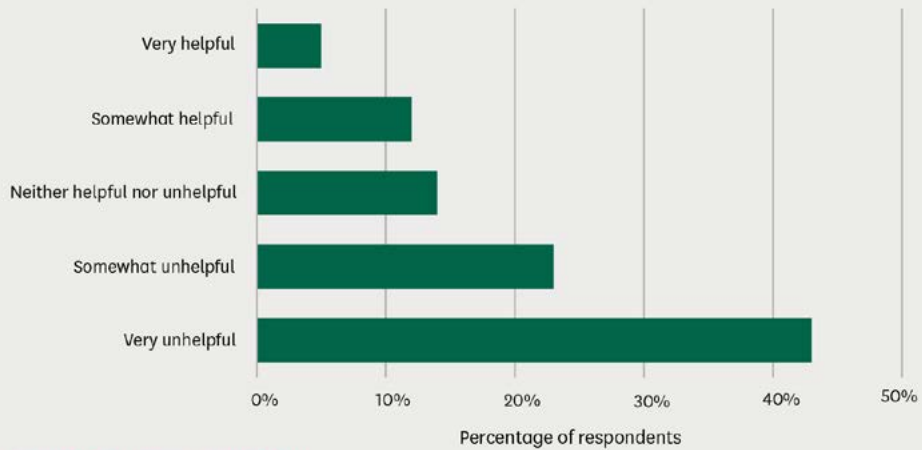


### How easy was it to get in touch with the embassy, consulate or high commission?



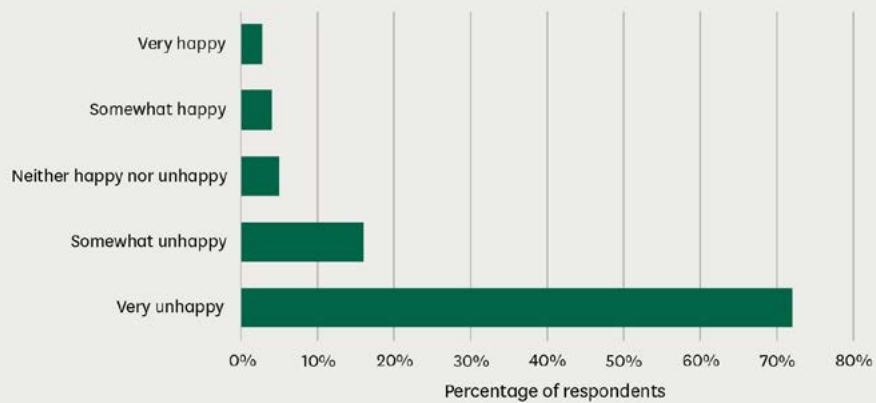
Source: FAC survey, June 2020

### How helpful was the advice that you received?



Source: FAC survey, June 2020

### Are you happy with the level of support that you've received from the UK Government?



Source: FAC survey, June 2020

## Survey Themes

The following sections outline the common themes mentioned by those who responded to our survey.

### *Communication*

The most common complaint from respondents to our survey was that there had been poor communication from the FCO and British Embassies. Several respondents said that they were unable to get through to the FCO on the phone, whilst others had spent hours on hold before they were put through to someone. We received reports of UK citizens ringing numbers over fifty times in order to talk to someone who ultimately couldn't give answers or advice. Many told us that this was particularly problematic given the cost of phone calls.

### *Quality of Information*

Many respondents also complained about the quality of the information that they had received. Some of those who had managed to contact the FCO or a British Embassy told us that they were not given any useful advice or information. Many were simply told to follow social media or to look at the Government website for updates.

There was a feeling amongst respondents that generic information was unhelpful and that bespoke responses were needed in some circumstances. Many respondents felt that they had unique difficulties in getting back to the UK and unique problems which needed to be better addressed (such as medical problems, difficulty travelling from remote locations and a lack of funds). We were also told that a lot of the information given out by embassies was both outdated and limited. Many respondents also felt that they had received a lack of information about what would happen once they got back to the UK.

### *The repatriation operation*

Many of those who responded felt that other countries had been much faster and more efficient when repatriating their citizens. Many felt that the Government had placed too much reliance on commercial flights and many wanted the Government to arrange more charter flights.

Many respondents said that getting to airports has been extremely difficult. Those who were in remote locations or who were far away from a country's main transport hub often couldn't access the domestic flights or transport that would allow them to board a commercial flight home. This seemed to be a particular issue in New Zealand and the Philippines.

Many respondents have also said that they can't afford the commercial flights on offer. They told us that there were only a small number of flights available and that these were extremely expensive. Many respondents had spent large amounts of money on commercial flights which were subsequently cancelled. Respondents were often given credit for future flights (rather than a refund) which meant that they were unable to purchase new tickets.

### ***Loans***

Some respondents had been offered loans to pay for tickets, however most of those who mentioned this also said that they could not afford to take these loans. Some of those who responded were running out of essential medication, whilst others were struggling to access basic supplies.

### ***Positive Feedback***

Some respondents had positive dealings with the FCO and/or British embassies. 26 respondents (2% of those who answered the survey) said that they were very happy with both the support and advice that they had received from the Government. Some praised specific consulates and embassies and noted the hard work of embassy staff.

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 21 July 2020**

Members present:

Tom Tugendhat, in the Chair

Chris Bryant	Graham Stringer
Neil Coyle	Claudia Webbe
Royston Smith	

Draft Report (*Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 34 read and agreed to.

Papers were appended to the Report as Appendices 1 to 2.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned till Tuesday 1 September at 2.00pm]

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Tuesday 17 March 2020

**Professor David R Harper CBE**, Senior Consulting Fellow, Global Health Programme, Chatham House

[Q1–50](#)

### Tuesday 21 April 2020

**Sir Simon McDonald**, Permanent Under Secretary and Head of the Diplomatic Service, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; **Menna Rawlings**, Director-General Economic and Global Issues, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; **Andrew Sanderson**, Finance Director, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q51–148](#)

### Tuesday 30 June 2020

**Nigel Adams MP**, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; **Simon Manley**, Director General, COVID-19, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; **Jennifer Anderson**, Director, Consular Services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q149–274](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

- 1 Professor Anthony Costello and UCL colleagues ([FRC0001](#))



## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2019–21

First Report	Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 239 (HC 449)
Second Report	Merging success: Bringing together the FCO and DFID	HC 525
First Special Report	A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2019	HC 116
Second Special Report	"Media freedom is under attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty: Government Response to the Committee's Twenty-First Report of Session 2017–19	HC 269
Third Special Report	Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 449