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Foreign Affairs Committee

Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Foreign Affairs Committee

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Summary

The manner of our withdrawal from Afghanistan was a disaster and a betrayal of our allies that will damage the UK's interests for years to come. This inquiry has identified systemic failures of intelligence, diplomacy, planning and preparation—many of which were due, at least in part, to the Foreign Office, and call into question the coordination that the National Security Council provided.

The UK Government failed adequately to shape or respond to Washington's decision to withdraw, to predict the speed of the Taliban's takeover, or to plan and prepare for the evacuation of our Afghan partners. It might be convenient to blame FCDO officials or military intelligence for these failures, but ministers should have been driving this policy. The fact that the Foreign Office's senior leaders were on holiday when Kabul fell marks a fundamental lack of seriousness, grip or leadership at a time of national emergency. At several key stages in the evacuation there seemed to be no clear line of command within the political leadership of the Government, as decisions were made on the basis of untraceable and unaccountable political interventions.

Most damning for the Foreign Office is the total absence of a plan for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government, despite knowing 18 months before the collapse of Afghanistan that an evacuation might be necessary. The hasty effort to select those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed; and the department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions. The lack of clarity led to confusion and false hope among our Afghan partners who were desperate for rescue. They, and the many civil servants and soldiers working hard on the evacuation, were utterly let down by deep failures of leadership in Government. We are full of praise—in particular—for the personnel on the ground in Afghanistan during Operation Pitting, who implemented a chaotic policy to the best of their ability.

The Foreign Office has not been open about these failings. In the course of the inquiry, it has given us answers that, in our judgement, are at best intentionally evasive, and often deliberately misleading. Those who lead the department should be ashamed that civil servants of great integrity felt compelled to risk their careers to bring to light the appalling mismanagement of the crisis, and the misleading statements to Parliament that followed. We call on the department to undertake a review of its processes for handling internal concerns about policies and, more broadly, to re-commit to transparency and positive engagement with Parliament. We call on the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy to use this report as the basis of a review to revisit how the National Security Council operates in times of crisis.

The crisis required clear decision-making, strong political leadership and tight coordination. We have seen little evidence of this. The decision to run the operation through three departments undermined coordination. This is particularly disturbing at a time when the UK faces significant foreign policy challenges, including in relation to Ukraine.

The failures of the withdrawal and evacuation make it even more important that the UK commits to a serious strategy for its future engagement with Afghanistan. It is

valid to withhold recognition but attempts to isolate the new regime entirely may only worsen the situation for the Afghan people, reduce the UK's influence, and leave a vacuum to be filled by powers such as China. The overriding goal of our policy towards Afghanistan should be to reduce the impact of the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the international withdrawal.

Introduction

1. The international withdrawal from Afghanistan has been a disaster in terms of planning, execution, and consequences for the UK's wider interests.¹ It was a betrayal of our partners in the country and, worst of all, undermined the security of the United Kingdom by encouraging our enemies to act against us. The former head of the armed forces told us that the decision to withdraw was “strategically illiterate and morally bankrupt”,² while the former National Security Adviser has called it “a bad policy, badly implemented. It is an act of strategic self-harm.”³ The decision has damaged the reputation of the UK and its allies, and will affect the Government's ability to achieve its foreign policy goals for years to come.

2. We launched this inquiry in September 2021, following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, to consider the role of the Foreign Office in the lead-up to the withdrawal; during the evacuation effort; and in leading engagement with the new regime in the months since. We identified serious problems with its role in preparing for the withdrawal and managing parts of the evacuation. These point to a systemic failure in terms of strategic planning, policymaking and operational management that is wider than any of the individuals named in this report. We also found a worrying refusal to engage openly with this inquiry, which has damaged our trust in the department.

3. In the course of this inquiry, we held evidence sessions with the Foreign and Defence Secretaries, the Minister responsible for Afghanistan, the the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Permanent Under-Secretary, the National Security Adviser, and other senior civilian and military officials. We also had sessions with military and civil society experts on Afghanistan, the wider region, and US policy. We were honoured to meet in private with a group of Afghans who were evacuated from the country after the fall of Kabul, to hear about their experiences and their views of UK policy. In addition, we surveyed Members of Parliament and their staff to gather information about their role in helping individuals during the evacuation effort, and their interactions with the Government. We received written evidence from two FCDO officials who came forward, with great courage, to speak out about their experiences of working on the evacuation effort from within the department. We also received written evidence from a number of civil society groups and other experts and stakeholders, much of which has not been

1 General Petraeus: “It is very hard to say that this result is anything but heartbreaking, tragic and, in many respects, disastrous.”

Professor Michael Semple: “The withdrawal was not a response to military defeat. Insofar as there was a defeat, it was a defeat brought about by the way in which the withdrawal was conducted.”

Rory Stewart: “This is totally heartbreaking and totally unnecessary, and there was no reason for us to do this. By doing this we've broken Afghanistan in a matter of weeks. [...] I think it's a total betrayal. We were not in active combat operations. On basis of about 2,500 soldiers, we supported the Afghan National Army and kept the Taliban largely confined to the south. The whole thing is a catastrophic failure – responsibility rests primarily with the US, UK and NATO.”

Lord (Kim) Darroch “we have rather passively acquiesced in the foreign policy disaster that is the Afghan withdrawal [...] “It is going to take quite a long time for the West as a whole—because it is a Western failure, a Western disaster, this is not just the UK and the US—to recover from all this, to recover our reputation.”

[Q153, Q169](#)

BBC News, [Rory Stewart: Afghanistan is a betrayal and catastrophic failure](#), 13 August 2021

The Telegraph, [Afghanistan withdrawal ‘disaster’ risks undermining Global Britain project, warns Lord Darroch](#), 23 August 2021

2 [Q212](#) [Lord Richards]

3 The Guardian, [UK has no coherent plan for Afghan refugee crisis, says ex-Whitehall chief](#), 3 September 2021

published due to its sensitive nature. Our specialist advisor, Hameed Hakimi (associate fellow, Chatham House), helped throughout this inquiry. We are grateful to all those who contributed to this inquiry, particularly those who shared painful experiences.

Timeline: Withdrawal and evacuation

2020

- 29 February: Trump Administration signs Doha Agreement, committing to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 2021.⁴
- 8 November: Joe Biden wins US presidential election.
- 29 December: UK Government announces the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) for former locally-employed staff.⁵

2021

- 1 April: UK Government launches ARAP scheme.⁶
- 14 April: President Biden confirms US will withdraw from Afghanistan by 11 September. NATO allies agree to withdraw troops.⁷
- 15 April: FCDO advises UK nationals to consider leaving country.⁸
- 27 April: US State Department orders departure of non-essential staff from Kabul embassy.⁹
- May: UK staff at British Embassy reduced from 115 to 75.¹⁰
- 28 May: Australia closes its Embassy in Kabul.¹¹
- June: Planning begins for full draw-down of British Embassy.¹²
- June 1: UK Government announces it will accelerate ARAP scheme.¹³
- 2 July: The US announces its withdrawal from Bagram Airbase.
- 8 July: The Prime Minister tells the Commons there is “no military path to victory for the Taliban”.

4 [Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America](#), February 29, 2020

5 Ministry of Defence, [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria, offer details and how to apply](#), updated 27 April 2022

6 Ministry of Defence, [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria, offer details and how to apply](#), updated 27 April 2022

7 NATO, [NATO Allies decide to start withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan](#)

8 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022

9 US State Department, [Security Alert U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan \(August 7, 2021\)](#)

10 [Q13](#) [Foreign Secretary]

11 The Hon Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, [Statement on the Australian Embassy in Afghanistan](#), 25 May 2021

12 [Q15](#) [Foreign Secretary]

13 Ministry of Defence, [Plans to bring vulnerable Afghan interpreters to the UK accelerated](#), 1 June 2021

- 28 July: Former British military commanders call on the Government to help more Afghans who supported British troops to come to the UK.
- 2 August: The UK Ambassador to Afghanistan warns that “we are entering a new, dangerous phase of the conflict”.¹⁴
- 6 August: Taliban take Zaranj, the first provincial capital of the offensive.¹⁵
- 6 August: FCDO advises British nationals to leave Afghanistan.¹⁶
- 11 August: Government decides to move British Embassy from Green Zone to Kabul airport and reduce staff from 75 to 20.¹⁷
- 12 August: Taliban take key province of Kandahar.¹⁸
- 13/14 August: FCDO staff are withdrawn from Kabul.¹⁹
- 14 August: UK launches Operation Pitting to evacuate British nationals and eligible Afghans.²⁰
- 15 August: Taliban take Kabul.
- 16/17 August: FCDO considers how to evacuate vulnerable Afghans who were not directly employed by the UK Government.²¹
- 17 August: Replacement FCDO staff arrive in Kabul.²²
- 17 August: The Prime Minister and President Biden discuss the situation in Afghanistan by telephone.²³
- 18 August: UK announces Afghanistan Citizens’ Resettlement Scheme for those “at risk due to the current crisis”.²⁴
- 19 August: Foreign Secretary signs off on scheme to evacuate vulnerable Afghans who were not directly employed by the UK Government.²⁵
- 26 August: UK civilian evacuations end.²⁶
- 28 August: Operation Pitting ends—all UK personnel leave Afghanistan.

14 The Times, [Dominic Raab was warned that Kabul would fall quickly](#), 18 October 2021

15 BBC News, [Afghanistan war: Taliban capture regional capital Zaranj](#), 6 August 2021

16 The Guardian, [Foreign Office tells Britons in Afghanistan to leave immediately](#), 6 August 2021

17 [Qq281–283](#) [Nigel Casey and Permanent Under-Secretary], [Q13](#) [Foreign Secretary]

18 The Guardian, [Kandahar’s fall to the Taliban is a moment of huge significance](#), 14 August 2021

19 [Q61](#) [Foreign Secretary]

20 Royal Air Force, [Operation PITTING - The Moving Story](#), 6 September 2021

21 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022

22 [Q63](#) [Foreign Secretary]

23 [PM call with President Biden](#), 10 Downing Street press release, 17 August 2021

24 Home Office, The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, and The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, [Bespoke resettlement route for Afghan refugees announced](#), 18 August 2021

25 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022

26 [Q421](#) [Nigel Casey]

- 5 October: UK sends delegation to Kabul for talks with the Taliban.²⁷
- 22 December: UN Security Council votes to exempt humanitarian operations from sanctions against the Taliban.²⁸

2022

- 6 January 2022: UK launches Afghanistan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme.²⁹
- 10 February 2022: UK sends delegation to Kabul for talks with the Taliban.³⁰

27 FCDO, [UK officials travel to Afghanistan](#), 5 October 2021

28 UN, [Security Council paves way for aid to reach desperate Afghans](#), 22 December 2021

29 UK Visas and Immigration and Home Office, [Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#), updated 6 January 2022

30 FCDO, [UK officials travel to Afghanistan](#), 10 February 2022

1 Planning for withdrawal

Failure to shape or respond to US withdrawal

4. In February 2020, President Trump announced his decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, which was confirmed by President Biden in April 2021. This would mean a full withdrawal of international troops, as the UK and other NATO partners felt that they had little choice but to follow.³¹ However, the UK Government failed to take seriously the Trump Administration's decision, or the domestic pressures that lay behind it, hoping that the US might decide to stay, or to delay its departure.³² As a consequence, it failed to prepare for the consequences of the withdrawal—in Lord Richards' words, the UK response to the US decision was “slow and poorly planned”.³³ Then-Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab described an “optimism bias” in the FCDO that led it to believe that “the Americans would change their mind,” as well as “wishful thinking” internationally.³⁴ Despite ministers' attempts to pass the buck, it seems that this optimism bias applied not just to officials, but to the political leadership of the department and the Government. As a result, the UK and partners made only limited attempts to shape Washington's decision by convincing it to remain, or to leave enough troops to prevent collapse of the Afghan government.³⁵ The attempts that were made to influence the terms of the withdrawal fell flat—the Government has described efforts in the months before the withdrawal to “try to find a way to stay, persuading the Americans to keep more people” so that the British

31 [Q20](#) [Foreign Secretary], [Q212](#) [Lord Richards]; Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, [Q11](#) [National Security Adviser]; Financial Times, [Nato to expand focus to counter rising China](#), 18 October 2021

32 In January 2021, the House of Lords' International Relations and Defence Committee warned that: “The ongoing presence of UK troops in Afghanistan depends on the deployment decisions of the US. We were disappointed by the lack of analysis of the implications of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided by ministers in their evidence.”

Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, [The UK and Afghanistan](#), 2nd Report of Session 2019–21, 13 January 2021

Lord Richards: “When the then President took the decision 18 months ago, there was, among those who were interested in Afghanistan—it was in the middle of covid, and it got slightly lost in the noise—a belief that this was a bargaining position, and it was not going to actually happen. [...] nobody either took it seriously enough or was prepared to fight hard enough to prevent it from happening.”

[Q19](#) [Foreign Secretary], [Q221](#) [Lord Richards], Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum ([AFG0001](#))

33 Conservative Home, [David Richards: Offer a single point of contact and overhaul the National Security Council. How to help the Afghans we left behind](#), 5 September 2021

34 [Q19](#) [Foreign Secretary]

35 Lord Richards: “The other NATO nations [...] if they are to be believed when they claim that they did not agree with President Biden's decision, could and should have made it very difficult for President Biden to execute that decision, if they had really acted up when he took it. They did not; they went along with it, as far as I understand—not necessarily willingly, but without much push-back or counterargument.”

Laurel Miller: “I have not seen allies and partners clamouring for staying in Afghanistan. Some individual voices have but, as a matter of Government policy, it is not at all evident to me that allies and partners were not ultimately satisfied to see the US take the decision that it did, even if there was hand-wringing about the manner of the withdrawal.”

Rory Stewart “There was no real pushback. Remember, in Cornwall, there did not seem to be any great debate about it. If those leaders were opposed to it, it did not become an issue. I am afraid, even though the indicators were all there, nobody either took it seriously enough or was prepared to fight hard enough to prevent it from happening.”

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy concluded: “It is unclear what steps, if any, the Government took to voice opposition to President Biden's deadline for US and NATO troop departure, either before it was announced or in the weeks that followed”

[Q212](#) [Lord Richards], [Q171](#) [Laurel Miller], [Q221](#) [Rory Stewart]; Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, First Report of Session 2021–22, [The UK's national security machinery](#), HC 231/ HL 68, para 147

Embassy could stay open in Kabul.³⁶ This, and the limited US consultation with the UK about its decision, point to a worrying lack of British influence in Washington.³⁷

Failure to anticipate speed of Taliban takeover

5. On 8 July 2021, the Prime Minister told the House that there was “no military path to victory for the Taliban”.³⁸ Just over five weeks later, the military path delivered them Kabul. This points to serious gaps in the understanding of Afghanistan on the part of the UK and its allies, a failure to appreciate the limitations of that understanding, and ministers’ failure to interrogate or question the advice.³⁹ General Sir Nick Carter, former Chief of the Defence Staff, said that he didn’t believe the Government had ever had “a true understanding of the political dynamics on the ground” in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Various explanations have been put forward for this: a narrow focus on counterterrorism rather than on the Afghan political context;⁴¹ diminishing understanding of the country as the UK reduced its military presence;⁴² and overconfidence about the strength of the Afghan military, as analysts counted troops and equipment, rather than harder-to-measure factors

36 “Even on 10 June, the Americans assured us that we were all going to be working on some form of diplomatic assured presence there. It was only right in part of August, when things were really accelerating the wrong way, that it became clear that it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to do that.”

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Q6 [Deputy National Security Adviser]

The Times reported that senior UK military commanders were not party to key discussions between the US and the Taliban, so were left in the dark about when they could be forced to pull out.

The Times, [Judge Taliban on deeds not words, says Johnson as Tory MPs lambast him](#), 19 August 2021

37 New York Times, [Biden Rattles U.K. With His Afghanistan Policy](#), 18 August 2021

The PM reportedly tried to speak to President Biden as Kabul fell, but waited 36 hours for the President to respond, on 17 August.

The Telegraph, [Joe Biden ‘holds grudges’ and will punish Britain for Afghanistan criticism, allies say](#), 29 August 2021

38 HC Deb, 8 July 2021, [col 1107](#) [Commons Chamber] [Prime Minister]

39 The then-Foreign Secretary suggested that the sacrifices the UK has made in Afghanistan might have affected its perception of the situation.

[Q19](#) [Foreign Secretary]

40 The Independent, [Former military chief Carter: No ‘true understanding’ of politics in Afghanistan](#), 30 December 2021

41 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Q9 [Deputy National Security Adviser]

42 National Security Adviser: “over the last few years—and remember that combat operations stopped in 2014—the ground truth, as our military colleagues would put it, and the fidelity with which we understood the ground truth might have slipped away from us.”

Defence Secretary: “One of the reasons why I thought the game was up was because my recollection of history is that the river always runs fastest at the end, in all of these regimes that collapse. It is the nature of intelligence—people forget this—that your resources start to dry up as a regime collapses, because, funnily enough, half of them have done a runner.”

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Q8 [Deputy National Security Adviser]; [Q493](#) [Defence Secretary]

such as training, motivation, and ability to operate without foreign logistical support.⁴³ The then-Foreign Secretary sought to distance himself from the problem, blaming “military intelligence” for the failure to anticipate the speed of the takeover, and stating that this was “not the Foreign Office’s lead responsibility.”⁴⁴ However, political reporting from the FCDO fed into the Government’s central intelligence assessments. Former International Development Secretary, Rory Stewart, attributed the gaps in understanding of the country to a “rotteness at the heart of the British Foreign Office”:

The Treasury has cut [Foreign Office] staff again and again. [...] we have fewer and fewer people who speak languages very well. There is less and less incentive to spend a long time in a field. The appetite in Whitehall for detailed political reporting diminishes all the time.⁴⁵

6. The FCDO’s response to the withdrawal illustrates its failure to plan for a sufficiently wide range of scenarios. The then-Foreign Secretary told us there were “lots of lessons to be learned from how we were caught out by the speed and the scale of the fall of Kabul”, and said “we will need to look and assess why that was the case.”⁴⁶ The FCDO’s contingency plans “did not anticipate such a rapid collapse”, and worst-case scenario planning should be “more thoroughly developed and tested”, according to the FCDO’s internal review.⁴⁷ However, this review only covers the period April-September 2021—avoiding any

43 Laurel Miller: “I never believed, even when there were many more US and NATO forces in Afghanistan and in contact with Afghan forces, that it was possible for foreign forces to have their finger on the pulse of the will to fight among the Afghan security forces’ rank and file, and what kind of factors would lead to decisions to melt away.”

Rory Stewart: “We did not take seriously enough the fact that US contractors were absolutely essential to keeping those planes flying. We did not take seriously enough the fact that the Afghan national army, in its outposts, found it very difficult to survive without those planes to do the ammunition, the resupply, the medical evacuation. We did not take seriously enough the number of ghost soldiers in the Afghan army; the Afghan army simply was not of the size that we believed it to be.”

APPG on Drones and Modern Conflict: “Prof. Clarke and Mark Goodwin-Hudson, former British Army Officer and head of the NATO Civilian Casualty Investigation and Mitigation Team in Afghanistan in 2016, both identified careerism and a culture of inadequate reporting, driven often by personal career motives, as undermining the UK’s ability to understand the effectiveness of its operations and decision-making. On both sides of the Atlantic, a combination of ignoring evidence-based reporting about the lack of progress and biased self-reporting prevented data-led decision-making.”

[Q175](#) [Laurel Miller], [Q214](#) [Rory Stewart]; All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict (AFG0031)

44 The Independent, [Dominic Raab blames military’s ‘wrong’ intelligence for slow Afghanistan response](#), 31 August 2021

45 [Q214](#) [Rory Stewart]

Lord Richards: “I think it is much wider than the Foreign Office. I would like to know what the National Security Adviser and his team were doing. He is responsible for the execution of agreed strategy—the strategy was corrupted by then. What were the intelligence services, and the MoD’s and armed forces’ intelligence feeds, telling us at the same time? There is no doubt that Rory is right: the Foreign Office has been stripped of much of that capability, but there is more to it than just that. There should have been a compensation, somewhere within Government as a whole, that picked up those facts. Clearly, it failed to do so.”

[Q216](#) [Lord Richards]

James Cowan, of the HALO Trust, told the International Development Committee that Embassy staff: “were not leaving Kabul or travelling around the country. They were very timid about the threat, and as a result they could not really understand the threat or see how quickly things were moving when the Taliban reached Lashkar Gah, Kandahar and Herat. They were in their ivory tower.”

“A strong understanding of Afghanistan and the region is essential to developing and executing policy. Many of the international community’s mistakes in the last decades were driven by a poor understanding of the context and incentives of Afghan leaders.” Harry Leverment, Sarah Hearn OBE, Andrew Kidd OBE, and Laure-Hélène Piron (AFG0027)

46 [Q123](#) [Foreign Secretary]

47 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022

analysis of the response to the Doha Agreement—and did not consider “wider questions on the use of intelligence”.⁴⁸ Moreover, the ultimate responsibility for the policy and its implementation lies with the political leadership of the department and the Government, not the officials.

Failure to plan for evacuation

7. Before Kabul fell, the UK Government did too little to lay the groundwork with countries in the region to secure their help for an evacuation effort. The Foreign Secretary’s only direct engagement on the subject with Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours in the eight months before the takeover was a single call with Pakistan’s foreign minister in April.⁴⁹ In the six weeks before the takeover, he had just one international engagement on the topic, which was with the head of USAID.⁵⁰ He spoke to the British Ambassador in Kabul one-to-one only twice in the first two weeks of August, as the situation deteriorated.⁵¹ A retired British General told us: “Lack of diplomatic engagement with the surrounding countries meant that pathways out of the country post evacuation had not been developed.”⁵² The real work to engage with third countries began in earnest only after the fall of Kabul on 15 August. On 1 September, Dominic Raab said that he and Lord Ahmad had by then spoken to the foreign ministers of all the most relevant third countries⁵³—illustrating the importance of these contacts, and raising the question of why this had not been done in advance.

8. The FCDO failed to prepare adequately to shut down the British Embassy, despite many warnings, including an internal report of 21 July that warned of “rapid Taliban advances”

48 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022
The National Security Adviser said in January: “We recognise the need to engage diplomats and development experts to build an accurate understanding of a country. The UK had, and still has, a strong understanding of events in Afghanistan, independent of the military and counter-terrorism campaigns. The focus of the FCDO’s lessons learned exercise has been on learning from the crisis response.”

National Security Adviser letter to Chair of JCNSS, [The UK’s National Security Machinery and Afghanistan](#), 6 January 2022

49 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Annex C

The Guardian reported that the Foreign Secretary had not spoken to regional ambassadors in London before the weekend of 14/15 August. The Telegraph reported that he had not spoken to the UK ambassadors in Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan by the afternoon of 15 August.

The Guardian, [Dominic Raab ‘refused to be contacted’ in days before Afghanistan fell](#), 19 August 2021

The Telegraph, [Dominic Raab accused of being ‘missing in action’ as he was on holiday when Kabul fell to Taliban](#), 15 August 2021

50 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Annex C

51 [Q356](#) [Ambassador Laurie Bristow]

52 “It appears little was done to engage the surrounding countries so that they were ready to help us extract those left behind in the event [of] regime collapse. This activity should have been started in Feb 2020 once the path to withdrawal was set.”

Dickie Davis ([AFG0035](#))

On 29 August the Times quoted a Minister saying that the FCDO had failed to agree for Afghanistan’s neighbours to provide free passage to those fleeing: “The Foreign Office failed to roll the pitch with these countries for months. The PM wanted third countries involved and Raab did nothing. Boris is exasperated that the Foreign Office has not done what he told them.”

The Times, [Afghanistan blame game erupts as British soldiers fly home](#), 29 August 2022

53 “We have identified the countries most likely to be the port of call or destination for those leaving. There is a whole range of them. Between myself and Lord Ahmad, we have spoken to all of the Foreign Ministers to be clear that they will be, in the right circumstances, allowed through.”

[Q54](#) [Foreign Secretary]

and said “the Embassy may need to close”.⁵⁴ The timeline for the Embassy’s closure had to be cut twice—from five days to two, and then to just nine hours, due to the deteriorating situation.⁵⁵ In the rush, staff failed to remove sensitive documents identifying Afghan job applicants, leaving them to fall into the Taliban’s hands.⁵⁶ The Defence Secretary said this was “not good enough”.⁵⁷ An internal review of the incident concluded that the FCDO cannot be certain that all other physical and electronic documents containing personal data were removed.⁵⁸ The department apparently failed adequately to test and rehearse its closedown plans—the Lessons Learned review states that these plans for posts in conflict areas should be tested to “ensure they can be enacted in compressed time spans”.⁵⁹

9. The Government was also caught by surprise by the scale of the civilian evacuation that was required. There would eventually be three categories of people eligible for evacuation: UK nationals; Afghans who worked for the UK Government; and particularly vulnerable Afghans who had supported UK objectives. A Ministry of Defence-led scheme for those in the second category, Afghans who had worked directly for the UK—the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)—was approved in December 2020, and opened in April 2021.⁶⁰ By then, there was little time left to process applications and to fix problems with the scheme’s design.⁶¹ In addition, the MOD had vastly underestimated the numbers that would be involved.⁶² When Kabul fell, many applicants were still waiting for responses to

54 The FCDO’s principal risk report on Afghanistan of 22 July 2021: “Peace talks have stalled, and US NATO withdrawal is resulting in rapid Taliban advances. This could lead to fall of cities, collapse of security forces, Taliban return to power, mass displacement and significant humanitarian need. The embassy may need to close if security deteriorates.”

[Q12](#) [Chair]

55 [Q359](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

56 The Times, [British embassy left details of Afghan staff for Taliban to find](#), 27 August 2021

57 An MOD source told the Times that the Foreign Office “took a really long time to respond to this as a crisis [...] The evidence suggests they went straight into panic mode, which is why potentially fatal information was left hanging around. There needs to be a culture change.”

The Times, [Failings at the Foreign Office ‘hindered evacuation efforts’](#), 28 August 2021

58 “The review concluded with very high confidence that all physical documents and IT systems containing classified information had been either removed or destroyed prior to the closure. In respect of unclassified documents containing personal data, the review concluded that it almost all will have been removed or destroyed, but we can’t absolutely guarantee that.”

[Qq357–359](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

59 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022

60 ARAP replaced a previous scheme to relocate former staff—the Intimidation Scheme—which was described by the Defence Committee as “useless”. Design work for the ARAP scheme began at the beginning of 2021. [Q476](#) [Admiral Sir Ben Key]; Ministry of Defence, [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria, offer details and how to apply](#), updated 27 April 2022; Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Qq5–6 [Deputy National Security Adviser]; Defence Committee, [Lost in Translation? Afghan Interpreters and Other Locally Employed Civilians](#), Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, para 74

61 It initially excluded all those who had been dismissed from their roles for minor offences, as well as most contractors.

Sulha Alliance, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0015](#))

62 “ARAP’s Equality Impact Assessment (signed Feb 2021) stated that ‘the MoD estimates that between 290 and 829 LES and their families might be relocated’ and that ‘figures are likely to be nearer the lower boundary.’” Some 9,000 people have been relocated under the scheme between April 2021 and March 2022.

Sulha Alliance, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0015](#))

BBC News, [Afghanistan: How many people has the UK resettled?](#), 6 May 2022

applications submitted months before,⁶³ or for their biometrics to be registered.⁶⁴ Others had been rejected under criteria that were inconsistent or too narrow.⁶⁵ A former head of the British Army said that the Government had been “asleep on watch” when it came to protecting Afghans who worked for the UK.⁶⁶

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- 63 “Application processing capability allocated to the ARAP scheme fell well short of what was required. I have seen multiple cases of those who applied in April (when the scheme opened) and May being left behind because their applications had not been processed.”
 Dickie Davis ([AFG0035](#))
 “The UK’s unpredictably short-notice and poorly communicated changes to ARAP eligibility criteria between April and August 2021 meant that some LECs, who had previously been rejected, had to resubmit their applications. In some cases, such as the case study below, the lengthy delay has meant that an applicant, his wife and their four children have now been left behind.”
 Sulha Alliance, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0015](#)); ([AFG0044](#))
 A large group of senior retired military officers and civil servants warned in July: “we are concerned that the Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Programme is not being conducted with the required spirit of generosity and urgency. Too many of our interpreters have unreasonably been rejected”
 Letter to the Times, [Afghan Emergency](#), General Lord Dannatt et al, 28 July 2021
 NB: In February 2022, the Government said that 1,000 individuals with confirmed eligibility for ARAP still remained in Afghanistan.
 Afghanistan: Refugees, Question for Ministry of Defence, [UIN 115842](#), tabled on 1 February 2022
 “We were disappointed about the exclusion from [ARAP] of Afghan aid workers to whom the UK Government had clear lines of moral responsibility, either because they were sub-contracted by the UK Government or employed by aid agencies in receipt of UK aid.”
 International Development Committee, [Afghanistan: UK support for aid workers and the Afghan people](#), Fifth Report of Session 2021–22
- 64 According to General Dickie Davis: “We appear to have had very poor data on locally employed staff, by all government departments, across the campaign. [...] Many other nations appear to have captured and retained much better data, and some biometrically enrolled their staff (Germans and Swedes, I believe) and thus have found it much easier to verify identities and organise their overall extraction efforts, particularly post evacuation. [...] The lack of biometric enrolment of ARAP eligible personnel has caused serious problems.”
 Dickie Davis ([AFG0035](#))
 Lord Richards: “Probably the hardest immediate nut to crack, which is also the most important, is the lack of documentation of those who still need to be evacuated. Many do not have passports and fewer have visas. It appears that we are reluctant to issue letters of authority or electronic visas without biometric enrolment (fingerprints and photos), and without such documents neighbouring countries will not let them pass for they fear ending up with yet more Afghan refugees”
 Conservative Home, [David Richards: Offer a single point of contact and overhaul the National Security Council. How to help the Afghans we left behind](#), 5 September 2021
 Harry Leverment, Sarah Hearn OBE, Andrew Kidd OBE, and Laure-Hélène Piron ([AFG0027](#))
- 65 The Law Society of England and Wales submitted evidence about the challenges facing judges applying to ARAP: “On 25 August 2021, we were informed by a Government department that women judges were eligible under ARAP (and lawyers and prosecutors at risk most likely too). However, on 14 September 2021, we heard that women judges had their ARAP applications rejected and learned that they were now no longer eligible under ARAP but could be under ACRS. This U-turn was very detrimental for all those at risk who applied and those who assisted them.”
 The Law Society of England and Wales ([AFG0043](#))
 The HALO Trust ([AFG0023](#)), Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#)), Anonymous ([AFG0007](#)) para 1.1.5.4.
 Sulha Alliance, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0015](#))
 “Communications from the FCDO Afghan Crisis Response from September onwards were automated, trite and the language was complicated. The first 600+ words were more to absolve guilt than provide practical assistance—how hard they are working, how much Operation PITTING had achieved and how they were pulling every humanitarian and diplomatic lever to safeguard human rights.
 The advice for ARAP applicants to contact colleagues from their unit (email 29 September 2021) was confusing and unrealistic because some Afghan LECs had had to destroy all documents linking them to the UK for safety reasons, and others had documents but the contact details for the units and people they had worked alongside were often hopelessly out-of-date.”
 Sulha Alliance, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0015](#))
- 66 The Independent, [Government ‘asleep on watch’ over protecting Afghans, ex-British Army chief says](#), 29 August 2021

10. The Government entirely failed to plan how it would assist those in the third category: Afghans who had supported the UK mission, without being directly employed—such as journalists, judges, and activists.⁶⁷ A scheme to help these individuals was devised only after Kabul fell, in response to lobbying from MPs and others.⁶⁸ This is in stark contrast to the MOD scheme, which, despite its shortcomings, had at least been designed, planned and put into place over the preceding months.⁶⁹ A British General who served in Afghanistan told the Committee:

we appear to have not thought through our responsibility to those who have worked with us in adopting and promoting [our] values and who now, because of our withdrawal, are at risk [...] Some of these people have got out through the sterling efforts of other countries and NGOs, but this has not been part of a clear UK plan.⁷⁰

Under pressure after Kabul fell, the FCDO initially attempted to widen the criteria for ARAP to include these groups, before deciding to create a separate category for them—the so-called “Special Cases”.⁷¹ Officials scrambled to design the new category, only submitting proposals to the Foreign Secretary on 19 and 21 August—days after the fall of Kabul, and shortly before the evacuation of civilians ended on 26 August. By then, there was little time left to assess and prioritise cases and arrange their evacuation.⁷² A senior FCDO official who worked on the Special Cases team told us that she did not understand

67 The International Development Committee found that “Any contingency plans that the Government had for evacuating aid workers from Afghanistan were neither apparent nor scaled adequately in the face of the rapid fall of Kabul and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.”

International Development Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2021–22, [Afghanistan: UK support for aid workers and the Afghan people](#), HC919

68 Chair: “When did you agree what the conditions were to allow someone to be counted as a special case?” Sir Philip Barton: “That decision was taken as Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban.”

[Q258](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

The Permanent Under-Secretary told the Committee: “On 16/17 August, having been guided that Ministers were minded also to assist some additional Afghan nationals beyond those eligible for ARAP, if and when there was spare capacity on UK military evacuation flights, officials from the FCDO, Home Office and MoD discussed how cohorts for possible evacuation might be identified. Following that discussion, FCDO officials drafted two submissions recommending cohorts for possible evacuation. These submissions were shared in draft with Home Office and MoD officials, and submitted to the Foreign Secretary, and in parallel to the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Defence, on 19 and 21 August.”

FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022

Whistleblower Raphael Marshall told the Committee that an internal investigation found that there had been “insufficient time to design a better process because the LOTR [i.e. Special Cases] scheme was only approved six days before the end of evacuations.”

Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 190

“Ministers met, I think, six times in the course of the crisis in a Cobra format, and I believe it was from one of those early meetings that the decision was taken that we should, in response to the calls coming through from Members of Parliament, NGOs and others, do what we could for people who did not fall into the first two categories [i.e. Special Cases].”

[Q388](#) [Nigel Casey]

69 A source told the Times on 29 August re. Special Cases: “The Foreign Office hasn’t decided the criteria for these people and appears to have no idea how many of them there are”.

The Times, [Afghanistan crisis leaves no way out for Boris Johnson](#), 29 August 2021

70 Dickie Davis ([AFG0035](#))

71 [Q398](#) [Nigel Casey]

72 The Law Society of England and Wales, which had been closely engaged with the Special Cases scheme as it tried to assist Afghan legal professionals, sent its first batch of cases to the Special Cases inbox on 23 August: “As far as we are aware, no one who we referred to the FCDO special cases unit was evacuated with UK Government support.”

The Law Society of England and Wales ([AFG0043](#))

why the policy had not been put in place earlier:

[The Government] could reasonably have been expected to anticipate, to clarify precisely to whom Ministers felt we owed a duty of care, and to prepare in advance a robust process for identifying and prioritising these people. This did not happen, and this manifest failure led to confusion, impossible demands on the crisis team, and compounded human tragedy in Kabul.⁷³

11. The lack of preparation for the withdrawal cannot be explained by intelligence failures alone. Though the speed of the Afghan government's collapse was a surprise, the UK Government's central assessment was that Kabul would fall in the months after withdrawal. The Government has been clear that a rapid collapse of the Afghan government was one of a small range of credible scenarios,⁷⁴ but there was apparently no plan in place to respond to it. The FCDO had many warnings of the deteriorating situation.⁷⁵ As the Defence Secretary said: "lots of people realised it was coming to an end, including the Foreign Office. The judgment was obviously around how fast."⁷⁶

12. The manner of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan was a disaster, a betrayal of our allies, and weakens the trust that helps to keep British people safe. It will affect the UK's international reputation and interests for many years to come. There were systemic failures of intelligence, diplomacy, planning and preparation, which raise questions about machinery of Government, principally the National Security Council:

- **The UK Government failed effectively to shape or respond to Washington's decision to withdraw, despite having had 18 months' notice.**
- **The UK Government failed to predict the speed of the Taliban's takeover. The fact that this came as a surprise to many, including the militants themselves, does not excuse the UK's failures, but rather makes it more urgent to identify where its intelligence gathering, analysis and planning fell short. The failure**

73 Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 16

74 "We had seen the eventual Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as the most likely outcome of the NATO withdrawal. That was our central assessment, but no one, including the Taliban themselves, saw the speed at which it would happen."

Q253 [Permanent Under-Secretary]

Stephen Lovegrove: "it was contemplated that the speed of collapse could be very fast, but that was a very low-level confidence scenario. There were two things in the central scenario: that we would be capable of maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and that the Government of Afghanistan would be operative until probably, at a minimum, the end of this calendar year. Those two things did not come to pass and, at that level, the assessment was wrong, but nobody ever said that the assessment was definitely going to be right. It just happened to be a lower level of probability than we and everybody else thought at the time, including the Taliban."

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Q8 [National Security Adviser]

Ben Wallace: "It was a bit of a shock when Herat fell. Some of these big places had historically been resistant to the Taliban. When they fell, literally without a fight, I think the game was up. I remember back in July arguing that whatever we think, the game is up and we have to do what we can to accelerate whatever we're doing."

As one media report put it in June 2021: "In the past few weeks, the outlook for Afghans who helped the United States in Afghanistan has gone from worrying to critical. As U.S. and NATO troops leave the country with breathtaking speed, the Taliban are attacking districts that had long been in the Afghan government's hands." The Spectator, ["Britain is not a superpower": An interview with Ben Wallace](#), 4 September 2021

75 The Times, [Dominic Raab was warned that Kabul would fall quickly](#), 18 October 2021

76 Q470 [Defence Secretary]

to heed warnings from the Kabul Embassy points to systemic shortcomings in drawing on officials' in-country knowledge. Despite this, the FCDO has sought to avoid responsibility, and the parameters of its internal review have been set to avoid the topic of intelligence altogether.

- The FCDO failed to make the necessary preparations for withdrawal, in terms of laying the groundwork for an evacuation with third countries, considering and planning for which of the UK's in-country partners should be prioritised for evacuation, and putting in place a robust timeline to evacuate the Embassy that could adapt to fast-changing scenarios.

13. Once the US decision was announced in February 2020, the UK Government should have immediately taken steps to develop a clear and coherent policy on who it would prioritise for evacuation; to gather and securely store information on eligible locally-employed staff, including biometric data; and to build contacts with neighbouring countries to facilitate any evacuation. It did none of these adequately. Though the UK Government saw a rapid collapse in Afghanistan as a plausible scenario, the FCDO failed properly to prepare for it. As the situation deteriorated, the Foreign Secretary should have taken the lead on contact with third countries, making intensive efforts to put in place evacuation routes. Instead, he delegated meetings to junior ministers, only stepping into action once Kabul had fallen. It is unacceptable that Afghans who supported the UK mission were put at risk by the failure to secure sensitive documents held by the British Embassy. This points to serious problems with the FCDO's ability to process and act on intelligence about the deteriorating situation, and to put its evacuation procedures into action. Embassy staff—who faced personal risk in a high-pressure situation—should have been supported through clear, timely and realistic procedures for closing the Embassy that were capable of being put into action within hours, as became necessary. The department's apparent failure adequately to test Embassy close-down plans is a derogation of its basic responsibility to staff.

14. Most damning for the FCDO is the total absence of a plan—developed in conjunction with the Home Office—for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government. The Government was never going to be able to evacuate all—or even many—of these people. But it failed to deliver the bare minimum that we owed them: a well-considered plan for who would be prioritised for extraction, and clear communications to those seeking help. The lack of clarity led to confusion and false hope, hindering individuals from making the best decision for themselves based on a realistic understanding of their situation. The UK has a responsibility to those who it encouraged and funded to take on high-profile roles that place them at risk from the Taliban, but the FCDO did not consider whether or how to evacuate these individuals until after the fall of Kabul in mid-August. This is a serious failure.

15. Managing a complex evacuation requires Government departments to work together seamlessly, including the FCDO, MOD, intelligence agencies, Home Office and Cabinet Office. The National Security Council is “the main forum for collective discussion of the government's objectives for national security”. It failed to adequately coordinate cross-Government planning and preparation for the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

16. When engaging in fragile environments, the Government should keep better records—securely held—on locally-employed staff to ensure that any evacuation can be carried out more effectively. It should devise a policy, based on clear and fair principles, about the assistance that will be offered to local partners in the event of a security deterioration, and report to us when it has done so. In its response to this report, the FCDO should explain why its Lessons Learned review only covers the period from April 2021 onwards, and why it does not cover intelligence matters. We ask the Government to share with this Committee the results of its internal investigation into the failure to destroy sensitive documents at the Kabul Embassy. The FCDO should review its procedures for evacuating embassies and destroying sensitive documents and data, and report back to the Committee on the steps it will take to avoid a similar failure happening again.

2 The evacuation

17. The Taliban took Kabul on 15 August. Over the next 13 days, the UK Government evacuated some 15,000 people from Afghanistan in “Operation Pitting”.⁷⁷ This was a remarkable achievement, delivered under extremely difficult circumstances by hard-working officials and military personnel. However, in broader terms the evacuation—once it began—suffered from serious and avoidable failings, many of them the responsibility of the FCDO.

Table 1: Categories of those evacuated

Category	Definition	Number called forward during Op Pitting	Number evacuated during Op Pitting	Lead dept	
UK nationals	Those holding UK passports	n/a	Approx. 8,300 (Principals and dependents)	FCDO	
ARAP	Afghans who worked for the UK Government	c.1,500 were called forward but not evacuated ⁷⁸	Approx. 5,000 Principals: <891 ⁷⁹ Dependents: c.4,000 ⁸⁰	MOD	
			Principals employed by:		
			MOD		495
			FCDO		242
			British Council		43
Other	111				

77 Operation Pitting ran 14–28 August; Royal Air Force, [Operation PITTING - The Moving Story](#), 6 September 2021

78 [Q413](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

79 Note that 891 is the figure for the whole of August, so the number evacuated in Operation Pitting will likely be smaller.

Afghanistan: Refugees, Question for Ministry of Defence, [UIN 98304](#), tabled on 5 January 2022

80 Afghanistan: Refugees, Question for Ministry of Defence, [UIN 93704](#), tabled on 15 December 2021

Category	Definition	Number called forward during Op Pitting	Number evacuated during Op Pitting	Lead dept	
Special Cases	Particularly vulnerable Afghans who had supported UK objectives	1,190 Principals: 295 Dependents: 895 ⁸¹	483 (principals and dependents)	FCDO	
			Category		
			Journalists		287 (71 principals, 216 dependents)
			Women's rights activists		65 (11 principals, 54 dependents)
			Senior government and law enforcement officials		62 (12 principals, 50 dependents)
			Chevening scholars		58 (22 principals, 36 dependents)
			Extremely vulnerable individuals		37 (8 principals, 29 dependents)
			ARAP family member		11
			Double-counted under ARAP		-37

Lack of leadership in London

18. When the Taliban took Kabul, the Prime Minister, the then-Foreign Secretary, the Minister responsible for Afghanistan, and the FCDO's top civil servant, Sir Philip Barton, were all on leave. All returned that day, except Sir Philip, who returned on 26 August—the day civilian evacuations ended.⁸² Both the Foreign Secretary and Sir Philip told us that they regretted not coming back sooner,⁸³ and Sir Philip admitted that his absence had had an impact on officials working on the crisis.⁸⁴ Rory Stewart said that these absences reflected a systemic problem in the UK Government: a “lack of seriousness, responsibility and grip around the issue of Afghanistan”, which “would not happen, I am afraid, in the American system.”⁸⁵

81 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022

82 Sir Philip began his holiday on 9 August. [Q368](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]
The top civil servants at the MOD and Home Office were also reportedly on holiday as of 20 August. The Times, [Whitehall chiefs on holiday despite Afghan debacle](#), 20 August 2021

83 [Q286](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary], [Q32](#) [Foreign Secretary]

84 [Q353](#), [Q372](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

85 [Q230](#) [Rory Stewart]

Lack of presence in Kabul

19. The evacuation effort was complicated by the departure of all FCDO officials from Kabul, apart from the Ambassador, on 13/14 August.⁸⁶ This left MOD personnel processing large numbers of complex cases without the help of consular staff, until a replacement team of FCDO staff arrived on 17 August.⁸⁷ The FCDO's Lessons Learned review found that the department's Rapid Deployment Teams had "faced challenges in deploying" partly due to the impact of covid-19 on the numbers receiving training.⁸⁸ A Minister told *The Times* that the FCDO's decision to withdraw diplomatic staff cost the evacuation effort "several days", with between 800 and 1,000 fewer people evacuated as a result.⁸⁹ The Defence Secretary appeared to confirm this when he told us:

it was certainly the case that, for probably about 48 hours, when there was really no one on the ground from consular services who was able to process them, we were not able to process as much as possible. We are not talking thousands, but we certainly had a gap. That was about a 48-hour gap. My civil servants stayed for the duration and did the best they could at that time.⁹⁰

20. The absence of the FCDO's top leadership—both ministerial and official—when Kabul fell is a grave indictment of the attitudes of the Government, representing a failure of leadership across the board in the Foreign Office. In particular, the fact that the department's top civil servant did not return until the civilian evacuation was over, while staff across the department struggled to implement a poorly-planned evacuation process under intense pressure, is difficult to understand and impossible to excuse. While it is essential for those at all levels in Government to take leave, this must be tempered at the most senior level by the need to exercise leadership in a crisis. Despite expressions of regret from the then-Foreign Secretary and Permanent Under-Secretary, there was no discussion of this point in the department's Lessons Learned

86 The Times reported that the Ambassador was also intended to leave, before a last-minute change of plan: "late on Saturday last week [14 August 2021] when the British ambassador, Sir Laurie Bristow, was planning to leave Afghanistan with his staff. [...] The decision for embassy staff to leave was originally made in a meeting that included the deputy national security adviser, David Quarrey, that morning. By the evening the calculation had changed. A senior Foreign Office mandarin phoned Bristow and ordered him to stay."
The Times, [The £2 trillion Afghani shambles](#), 22 August 2021

87 The Foreign Secretary told us there was a four-day gap between removing FCDO staff and sending in replacements.

[Q63](#) [Foreign Secretary]

The Times, [Whitehall chiefs on holiday despite Afghan debacle](#), 20 August 2021

88 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022, para 8vi

89 The Times quoted the source as saying: "Boris is exasperated that the Foreign Office has not done what he told them. They took their people out and that cost us several days. I suspect we could have taken out 800 to 1,000 more people if they had not done that."

The Times, [Afghanistan crisis leaves no way out for Boris Johnson](#), 29 August 2021

90 [Q465](#) [Defence Secretary]

There appears to be a discrepancy between the accounts of the Foreign and Defence Secretaries on this point. Dominic Raab suggested that MOD civilian personnel left Kabul at the same time as FCDO personnel: "The decision to take the lion's share, frankly, of our crisis response team on the ground—the civilian element—to Dubai was based on a military assessment of risk. Indeed, civilian personnel from the MOD left on the same flight." However, Ben Wallace told us: "my civil servants stayed for the duration". Media reports appear to back Wallace's account: "MoD officials, some soldiers and other civil servants were on Monday [16 August] helping frantic efforts to process claims from up to 4,000 Afghans thought to be eligible for resettlement in the UK amid chaotic scenes at Kabul's international airport."

[Q63](#) [Foreign Secretary]

The Guardian, [Row erupts in cabinet over evacuation of UK diplomats from Kabul](#), 16 August 2021

review. In addition to the absence of the FCDO leadership in London, there was a gap on the ground in Kabul: the Government withdrew all FCDO consular staff from Kabul as the evacuation operation began and there was a 48-hour wait before their replacements arrived. This mismanagement and under-resourcing of the evacuation effort in a crucial period likely cost hundreds of people their chance to leave the country, and as a result likely cost lives.

“Chaotic and arbitrary”: The FCDO’s role in the evacuation

21. As the Government mounted its response to the crisis, many officials, military personnel and others worked extremely hard under conditions of intense pressure, some also facing significant personal risk. Unfortunately, their work was undermined by systemic failures. We received evidence from two FCDO officials who worked on the Special Cases team, who have risked their careers to bring to light the facts on how this crisis was managed. Both describe the confusion and chaos around this scheme, and in the FCDO’s crisis response more broadly. Their separate accounts are highly credible. They are consistent with one another; with the experiences of many MPs seeking help from the FCDO on behalf of their constituents—both Members of this Committee, and those who answered our survey;⁹¹ and with many pieces of evidence and other information we gathered as part of this inquiry.⁹²

22. There was chaos within the Foreign Office as thousands of emails and phone calls flooded in from people seeking help.⁹³ The existence of the three separate channels for evacuation—administered by three departments—added to the confusion. Many applicants submitted their cases to each one, and the information was further duplicated

91 We sent a survey to the offices of all MPs, asking about their experiences of helping individuals during the evacuation effort, and their interactions with the Government in this regard. For more details, see Annex. For

92 example, former Afghan MP Shukria Barakzai described a series of confused and inconsistent communications with the FCDO, before she finally made it on to an evacuation flight. “The [FCDO] official, who gave his name as James, asked her whether she and her husband were UK passport holders, even though the FCDO had been sent copies of their Afghan passports on Monday. When Ms Barakzai explained that they were Afghan citizens, the official said he would consult with colleagues and call back. But night fell and the call did not come.”

BBC News, [Afghanistan: Shukria Barakzai’s whispered voice notes and dramatic escape](#), 28 August 2021 Shaharзад Akbar described the slow response to the Human Rights Commission’s request to evacuate its staff—individuals at serious risk due to their high-profile human rights work: “we had 392 staff, and we consider that a majority of them, if not all of them, are high risk, because of their human rights work. The UK initially gave permission for six of our female staff who are high risk and had very public profiles, but by the time we got the response from the UK we had already evacuated four of those women to other countries. The UK took in two of our colleagues, and then we sent them an updated list of six colleagues. We have not heard back, despite repeated follow-up. At least in my field with my colleagues there are smaller countries in Europe that have done better.”

[Q196](#) [Shaharзад Akbar]

Women for Women: “Five of our colleagues and their families were evacuated, but the process was incredibly difficult. Conflicting correspondence via email and phone between the FCDO and our colleagues meant that people were waiting outside Kabul Airport for over 24 hours as they tried to pass through Taliban Checkpoints and make it to the Baron Hotel. My family and I had this experience before we were able to join the military aircraft that eventually brought us into Birmingham International airport via Dubai.”

Women for Women International ([AFG0045](#))

Rory Stewart described an “awful” situation for British soldiers at the gates of Kabul airport: “There was complete confusion about whether what they were saying was, “We’re only going to take people who are British citizens and have worked directly for the British embassy and the military”, or whether we were also going to try to call forward human rights activists, female judges, Afghan Ministers, and—goodness knows—eventually somebody who was running a dog rescue operation in Afghanistan.”

[Q229](#) [Rory Stewart]

The FCDO received over 40,000 phone calls during the crisis response period.

[Foreign Secretary letter to Chair](#), 27 October 2021

by MPs and others trying to help them.⁹⁴ The FCDO's Lessons Learned review flags up the lack of clarity about the different schemes, and which Government department should be contacted by those seeking help.⁹⁵ There were at least six crisis email inboxes in use in the FCDO alone, and emails were repeatedly forwarded between them, facing long delays at each stage.⁹⁶ One whistleblower told us that there was no standardised FCDO process for handling this correspondence, no system to track what had been done with any emails, and no process to identify duplicates, while the very existence of some inboxes was forgotten about entirely between shifts.⁹⁷ There was poor cooperation with the MOD, which was responsible for the operational side of the evacuation.⁹⁸ Many emails from desperate people simply went unanswered, or even unread.⁹⁹

23. One whistleblower, a senior FCDO official, told us that she had “never in my career seen anything within the civil service so badly managed.”¹⁰⁰ There was no induction for new staff on the team, no clear tasking, no system for recording decisions or actions, and no system for handovers between shifts.¹⁰¹ The team was severely understaffed, and the rostering system was ineffective.¹⁰² The department's Lessons Learned review conceded that “the necessary resource was not consistently delivered at the volume or for the duration needed” resulting in “staffing gaps in some teams”.¹⁰³ This repeats some of the

94 Many responses to our survey of MPs spoke of their confusion between the different schemes and the sense that they were duplicating cases that had already been received, and that cases were being passed repeatedly between departments. Some suggested a single department should have been placed in charge of requests to evacuate Afghan nationals. As one—representative—answer put it, the system for responding to cases they raised was: “Hurried and not joined up. My cases were individuals who had worked for NATO and the UK Govt—it was not clear under what scheme they would fit, or why they weren't receiving assistance. I certainly caused duplication by reporting them to every channel as a result. I can understand the need to get anything put together asap given the situation, but the signposting could and should have been better.”

95 “A lack of clarity among MPs and members of the public about which Government department should be contacted regarding different routes to qualification for evacuation and resettlement in the UK, about the limits on our ability to offer evacuation to Afghan nationals, and on the best route to contact the FCDO, combined with technical and policy challenges with existing FCDO response mechanisms, led to systems being extremely stretched.”

FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022, para 8x

96 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 20, Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 43

97 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) 21–23

The Defence Secretary told us that “the communication amongst us and within the bureaucracy was huge. You had an awful lot of sifting out of duplication.” [Q478](#)

Several MPs offices that responded to our survey questioned whether there was in fact any system for responding to the cases they raised.

98 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 139–146

The Law Society of England and Wales told us: “we are also concerned about an apparent lack of coordination (not only within the FCDO, but between the FCDO and other government departments). It seems like there has not been adequate coordination between the four relevant departments (MoD overseeing ARAP, FCDO overseeing evacuation efforts, Home Office overseeing ACRS and immigration, and MoJ providing advice on the above).”

The Law Society of England and Wales ([AFG0043](#))

99 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 46

One group helping Afghans seeking evacuation told us: “During the most dangerous phases of Operation Pitting, during the last days of extraction, the FCDO ‘went to ground’ and was unresponsive. Emails were unresponded to, calls were not taken, and when someone was reached, it was not clear who, in fact, was in charge. [...] Nor are we sure what happened to the information provided to the FCDO. We have heard through credible sources that the information has been deleted or otherwise lost by the department.” ([AFG0051](#))

100 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 43

101 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 43, Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 46–49

102 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 44–45, Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 94–109

This was evident to MPs sending in cases. One response to our survey stated “It is clear that officials were doing all they can but completely under-resourced and overwhelmed by the volume of enquiries.”

103 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022, para 8vii

problems we identified in the department's response to the pandemic.¹⁰⁴ According to the whistleblowers, the situation was so dire that team members resorted to asking for help from their personal contacts elsewhere in the department.¹⁰⁵ Attempts to bring in reinforcements were hampered by technical problems, such as an inability to share files with former Department for International Development (DFID) staff,¹⁰⁶ or to give security clearance to soldiers.¹⁰⁷ A junior official with two years' work experience was the only person monitoring the Special Cases inbox on the afternoon of 21 August, as hundreds of emails poured in.¹⁰⁸ This was the height of the evacuation effort, which would end days later, and the last chance for many Afghan judges, journalists and human rights defenders seeking help from the British Government.

24. The team working on Special Cases, designed at speed by the FCDO after the fall of Kabul, lacked clarity about the criteria they were using to prioritise cases, and the goals of the policy they were implementing.¹⁰⁹ The whistleblowers describe an arbitrary and chaotic approach to prioritising requests for help, based on "who happened to open or forward which random email".¹¹⁰ The criteria for selecting those to evacuate from many thousands of emails—vulnerability, support for UK objectives, and sensitivity of the

104 Our report on the department's response to the pandemic found that: "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."

[Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic](#), 28 July 2020

105 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 45, Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 98
Raphael Marshall: "At midnight on Monday 23 August, I asked for help from my Fast Stream WhatsApp chat to transcribe passport details from photos of passports to allow cases to be sent to the Home Office for security checks. This is because passports had not consistently been transcribed and included in the list by the teams processing the email."

106 Nearly two years after the merger began, staff who previously belonged to the FCO and DFID still apparently have incompatible IT systems that make it difficult or impossible to collaborate on documents, arrange meetings, or access shared email inboxes. This hampered the response to the Afghanistan crisis, according to both whistleblowers, and is now hampering the response to the Ukraine crisis, according to a recent report in the Guardian. The FCDO's Lessons Learned review states that: "The roll-out of a single FCDO IT platform in 2022 will further improve the FCDO's crisis response and information sharing."

Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 55, 63; Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 44
FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022; The Guardian, [Foreign Office IT issues hampering UK's response to Ukraine crisis, say insiders](#), 19 February 2022

107 "Although I believe the soldiers held some form of MOD security clearance, this was not recognised by FCDO security. As such, they had to be escorted around the Foreign Office by FCDO staff to guard against potential espionage. This wasted considerable time in a context where staffing was extremely constrained."

Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 74

108 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 91

109 "While I worked within it, the Special Cases team did not receive any communication or instruction regarding the policy objective of our work. [...] I believe the efforts of myself and many others in the FCDO crisis response would have been more efficient and more effective if there had been some clarity of purpose: if we had known what it was that we were fundamentally trying to achieve."

Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 17, 40–41

"I believe the Foreign Secretary had approved a submission including a list of categories of people to be evacuated (intelligence officers, journalists, judges, etc). However I believe the Foreign Secretary's instructions did not address the key question of how to prioritise among the categories. This was an important omission because the number of applicants in these categories considerably exceeded available evacuation slots. These categories were not provided to the staff processing the emails, we only received the criteria. It is not clear what the relationship between the categories and the criteria was intended to be."

Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 35

110 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 14, 18; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 19–90

case¹¹¹—were “so broad as to be largely meaningless”.¹¹² We received evidence that other Western governments were clear about who to prioritise for evacuation, speeding up the decision-making process.¹¹³ The lack of clarity was a direct result of the failure to plan in advance.¹¹⁴ As the Defence Secretary told us: “We suddenly had thousands of people applying to schemes that had either not been designed or had been designed only in April [...] You cannot design an immigration scheme on the hoof.”¹¹⁵ In internal FCDO emails dated 25 August, a senior official commented:

I shall not pretend to absolute bureaucratic perfection in a scheme first conceived a week ago, in crisis conditions.¹¹⁶

25. Civil servants implementing this scheme lacked clear direction from ministers. Two submissions went to the Foreign Secretary, on 19 and 21 August, proposing categories of those who could be evacuated under the scheme.¹¹⁷ Civil servants were responsible for prioritising individuals who fell within these categories.¹¹⁸ The Permanent Under-Secretary told us that the first submission was underpinned by lists of named individuals.¹¹⁹ We received evidence that this was not the case for the second submission, which proposes evacuating 1,000 Afghans across five categories—some very broad, such as “NGOs and implementing partners”, and “extremely vulnerable individuals”.¹²⁰ One whistleblower told us, with regard to this second submission:

I was informed by a colleague in a position to know on Sunday 22 August that the Foreign Secretary believed that he had already approved a list of people to be called up for evacuation under the LOTR scheme. However this list did not yet exist and we were in the process of creating it.¹²¹

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- 111 The Permanent Under-Secretary described the criteria for this category as: “contribution to UK objectives; vulnerability; and, in very rare cases, sensitive information or knowledge that individuals held.”
[Q403](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]
- 112 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 14; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0038](#)) para 26–29
Raphael Marshall: “We could only evacuate a very small proportion of those who met the criteria of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘support for UK objectives’. There was no guidance on how to prioritise among the majority of the applicants who met at least these first two criteria. What was the relative prioritisation between an Afghan judge, an Afghan National Army (ANA) commando, a human rights activist, or a former base guard?”
- 113 One group helping Afghans seeking evacuation told us: “In many cases Western governments were also clear as to who to prioritise—i.e., senior female human rights defenders or those who had provided direct support to the relevant government, which made it easier to coordinate with the governments and to ensure quick decision-making.” (AFG0051)
- 114 “Public reports of those who were in fact evacuated by HMG show no clear priority system in place. Getting young female footballers out of Afghanistan whilst female police officers, soldiers, judges and HR activists remain in hiding with direct death threats made no sense. These ‘at risk’ individuals could have been identified much earlier if Defence Intelligence assets had been deployed in the UK to create lists early on in the summer. Our understanding is that that did not happen.”- (AFG0051)
- 115 [Q466](#), [Q476](#) [Defence Secretary]
- 116 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO)([AFG0052](#)) [FCDO internal emails]
- 117 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q3
- 118 “We were asked by the Foreign Secretary for advice on which categories of people should be prioritised. [...] The way that the process worked was that he decided which categories should be prioritised. We were then tasked with prioritising individuals, within those categories, according to a set of criteria, which had been agreed by Ministers.”
[Q389](#) [Nigel Casey]
- 119 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q3
- 120 Evidence seen by Committee Chair
- 121 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0052](#)) para 156

26. Compounding the problems of the scheme’s design, those implementing it generally had little knowledge of Afghanistan on which to base their decisions about who to prioritise.¹²² Attempts by outside stakeholders to offer expertise were often unsuccessful.¹²³ One whistleblower rejected the Permanent Under-Secretary’s claim that the process had drawn on knowledge of Afghanistan from across Government as “fantasy”, stating that the criteria were “impossible to evaluate with the information we had in the timeframes that were necessary”.¹²⁴ As the other whistleblower put it:

I believe no member of the Afghan Special Cases team had studied Afghanistan, worked on Afghanistan previously, or had a detailed knowledge of Afghanistan. [...] Members of the Afghan Special Cases team usually heard of an Afghan organisation for the first time when they were asked to decide whether its staff should be evacuated. [...] There was no access to additional information about organisations or individuals beyond what could be found on Google. There was no ability to process applications in any language other than English.¹²⁵

The responsibility for making life-and-death decisions on this arbitrary basis, without support or oversight, took a toll on their mental health.¹²⁶ Senior officials saw only the list of cases prioritised by their team, not the vast majority that had been rejected, meaning that effective review of decisions was impossible¹²⁷—contrary to claims made by the FCDO to this inquiry.¹²⁸

27. The UK has a clear responsibility to Afghans who took on high-profile roles, based on our encouragement, that place them at risk under the new regime.¹²⁹ There is evidence

122 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0038) para 110–116

123 For example, the APPG on Global LGBT+ Rights repeatedly attempted to ensure that the FCDO engaged with NGOs who had lists of LGBT+ individuals in need of evacuation. They were promised a contact point in the crisis centre, but this was not delivered, and their requests for information on the process for handling requests for evacuation by these individuals went unanswered: “by the time the FCDO entered into dialogue with NGOs, Operation Pitting was effectively beginning to wind down and NGOs were told that in reality all UK flights were now at capacity and there was a very small chance any LGBT+ individuals would be able to be evacuated”. Crispin Blunt MP (Chair at All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT+ Rights) (AFG0017) Another group helping Afghans seeking evacuation told us: Another organisation told us: “FCDO and HMG seeming on the one hand to not accept advice from outside experts but on the other hand to be overly reliant on civilian support for core operational execution that HMG itself was best placed to deliver. [...] Of all of the Western governments we and others worked with during Operation Pitting, the FCDO’s sheer lack of communication with friendly volunteers and organisations was seen as a startling contrast to the approach of other Western governments [...] the Danish government, the German government, the French government and the Canadian government showed more responsiveness to external support, more coordination of the process of extracting vulnerable Afghans, and more practical responses to fast changing conditions.” (AFG0051)

124 Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 15

125 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0052) paras 110–111, 115

126 Josie Stewart (AFG0054) paras 6–7; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0038) para 58, 112, 231

127 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO); (AFG0052) para 57; Qq406–409 [Nigel Casey]

128 Qq404–405 [Permanent Under-Secretary and Nigel Casey]

FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q4, 16

129 “The UK must do everything in its power to protect Afghan women, including human rights defenders and civil society actors, who face grave threats from the IEA for advancing the rights of the Afghan people. Many of these women and their organisations were funded by the UK government and other international donors and encouraged to take visible leadership roles. The UK now has a moral responsibility to protect them” Anonymous (AFG0007) para 1.1.5.4.

Human Rights Watch (AFG0032)

that these categories of people have been targeted by the Taliban since the takeover.¹³⁰ As well as our moral obligation, we also have a strategic interest in protecting these people.¹³¹ As a group of British former senior civil servants put it:

Our Afghan colleagues have told us that, when they started working for the UK Government in Kabul or Helmand, either as direct employees or as grantees/contractors/partners, they knew they were taking some risks. But they never imagined that the Taliban would take over the entire country and that the UK would abandon them in such a fashion. [...] The Afghanistan resettlement and evacuation schemes' shortcomings, and the continued lack of assistance for thousands left behind, will make future UK missions in fragile or conflict-affected state[s] much more difficult.¹³²

As part of this inquiry, the Committee met with Afghans who had been evacuated from Kabul after the Taliban takeover. Many spoke of their shock and hurt at the decision to withdraw international forces, and their perception that the UK and others did not challenge the US's decision.

28. The Government has done too little to help Afghans eligible for evacuation since the end of Operation Pitting.¹³³ Many have received only occasional generic emails, not personalised to their case, with conflicting advice about whether to attempt the dangerous border crossing.¹³⁴ The FCDO's Lessons Learned review states that "resource was unavailable earlier to plan for this post-evacuation phase" of helping those left behind to leave via third countries.¹³⁵ The details of the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)—effectively a continuation of the Special Cases scheme, for the particularly vulnerable, and those who assisted UK efforts without being directly employed, were

130 [Qq207–208](#) [Shukria Barakzai, Shaharзад Akbar]

Our witnesses highlighted the danger faced by judges, prosecutors, security forces personnel, members of parliament, and others.

131 Professor Michael Semple told us that "many hundreds" of Afghans are asking: "Why did I co-operate with these people in all the things that we are doing, whereas now, ultimately, I am left to try to survive under the very people we were operating against?". Kori Schake criticised the "incompetence and cruelty" of policy towards the West's allies in Afghanistan: "It is genuinely disgraceful what we are doing, and it will make it much harder the next time we need help from people to accomplish what we are trying to do in the world."

[Q188, Q248](#)

132 Laure-Helene Piron (Director at The Policy Practice), Sarah Hearn, Andrew Kidd, and Harry Leverment, written evidence submitted to Defence Committee ([AFG0009](#))

133 One retired General told us: "there was little, or no planning done for how to support and extract those left behind".

Dickie Davis ([AFG0035](#))

134 According to the Law Society of England and Wales, there was a "lack of direct engagement by FCDO with Afghans at risk. In addition to the lack of possibility to apply to ACRS or self-refer, there seems to be little direct engagement by UK Government with this group of people at risk. Apart from a general phone number on the Government website, they are largely cut off from communications with the UK Government and UK embassies, until they receive a place under ACRS." A former Chief of Defence Staff has also criticised the Government's communication with those left behind, calling for a webpage with information in English, Dari and Pashtu. In response to our survey, many MPs' offices commented on the poor quality of advice for their constituents shared by the Government, including conflicting instructions.

The Law Society of England and Wales ([AFG0043](#))

Conservative Home, [David Richards: Offer a single point of contact and overhaul the National Security Council. How to help the Afghans we left behind](#), 5 September 2021

As one MPs' office said, in response to our survey: "It is completely unclear what is being done and where the cases are actually being processed or even whether they are being processed. [...] Conflicting advice is being sent out and I haven't felt confident enough in any of the scant information we have received to update the applicants other than to advise [of] changes to published official advice."

135 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022, para 8xi

only released in January 2022—some five months after it was initially announced.¹³⁶ The Government failed to set realistic expectations around the help it was offering Afghans, announcing in August: “Those who have been forced to flee their home or face threats of persecution from the Taliban will be offered a route to set up home in the UK permanently.”¹³⁷ The FCDO told stakeholders in September that there would be an application process for the scheme, before retracting this months later.¹³⁸ There is confusion among many stakeholders about the details of this programme, with no clear route for those at risk to seek relocation.¹³⁹

Focus on domestic fallout

29. The FCDO’s approach appears to have been guided more by domestic politics than by its duty to our Afghan partners, or by the UK’s wider interests.¹⁴⁰ Decisions about which Special Cases to evacuate were apparently based in large part on managing criticism from MPs. The FCDO told us that the Special Cases scheme was designed to help those “likely to be of particular vulnerability as a result of the Taliban takeover—those on whose behalf MPs had made representations”.¹⁴¹ According to one whistleblower, a week into the evacuation “primarily or exclusively cases put forward by MPs appear to have been entered into this spreadsheet at the expense of other cases”.¹⁴² As a result, those who made it onto UK evacuation flights as Special Cases may not have been the most vulnerable or those who had made the greatest contribution to UK objectives, but those who had the best contacts in the UK. According to the whistleblowers, in late August the Special Cases team was instructed to focus solely on opening emails from MPs:

This was purely in order to enable the Foreign Secretary to say that all emails from MPs had been read, and to issue a generic response. I do not

136 UK Visas and Immigration and Home Office, [Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#), updated 6 January 2022

The delay has caused “increased trauma and exposure for those who are most at risk of persecution”.

Anonymous (AFG0007) 1.1.5.5.

The Law Society of England and Wales told the Committee: “Spreading the target of 20,000 to be admitted over a period of three years seems to defeat the urgency and purpose of the scheme, since most of those at risk would already have been killed by the Taliban (as we are seeing is happening now). We did not anticipate that the scheme would not even have opened 4 months after the fall of Kabul.”

The Law Society of England and Wales (AFG0043)

In response to our survey, some MPs’ offices spoke of their frustration at being asked to refer constituents to the ACRS, which was not open at the time (November)—and, as it later transpired, does not accept applications.

137 Home Office, The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, and The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, [Bespoke resettlement route for Afghan refugees announced](#), 18 August 2021

138 The Law Society of England and Wales (AFG0043)

The Prime Minister stated in September: “We will be making sure that there is a process by which people can apply”. The FCDO suggested to us in December that there would be an application process for ACRS: “In that respect, the ACRS has already begun. What has not yet opened are applications under the second and third pathways of the scheme.”

[Q423](#) [Nigel Casey]; HC Deb, 6 September 2021, [col 36](#) [Commons Chamber] [Prime Minister]

139 For example: Conservative friends of Hazaras (CfoH) (AFG0039), (AFG0053)

140 “I feel a strong sense of moral injury for having been part of something so badly managed, and so focused on managing reputational risk and political fallout rather than the actual crisis and associated human tragedy.” Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 7

141 [Q399](#) [Nigel Casey]

The National Security Adviser said: “the LOTR list was the edge cases that did not fall under ARAP and had for the most part been brought forward because they had found their way to the attention of parliamentarians and other groups, which had then put them into the system.” [Q650](#)

142 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0052) para 48

believe that anything was actually done with any of the information in these emails at that time. The only urgent requirement was to manage the political fallout and to appear to MPs as if something was being done.¹⁴³

This channelling of resources into opening MPs' emails was apparently little more than a public relations exercise. Despite the Foreign Secretary's promise to reply to these emails by 6 September, having "read and assessed" them,¹⁴⁴ MPs received only a generic letter setting out how to apply to ARAP, and promising that ACRS would open "soon".¹⁴⁵ Many MPs are yet to receive any substantive response to the Special Cases they documented and submitted to the Government.

Communication with MPs

30. Lacking responses from the UK Government, with hopes unduly raised by the lack of clarity on its evacuation schemes, many people in the UK seeking help for relatives in Afghanistan turned to their MPs. In November 2021 we sent a survey to all MPs' offices about their experiences of the evacuation effort, and received 47 responses. Despite being encouraged by the Government to take on cases, gathering information and supporting documents, the MPs and their staff who answered our survey often received no response at all.¹⁴⁶ Responses they did receive were slow to arrive and generic, with unreliable or conflicting advice for those seeking help. In the absence of an effective process for raising cases or reliable information to pass on, MPs' staff, who are often highly experienced at helping vulnerable people to navigate the UK system, were left feeling helpless, unable to give any assistance to grieving and terrified people seeking their help. They used words such as "distressing", "traumatic" and "hopeless" to describe their experience (see Annex for more details). When asked for their assessment of the Government's system for responding to cases, 34 responses were negative or strongly negative (13 of them using the word "poor", and four questioning whether there was in fact a system at all), while seven were neutral and two were positive.¹⁴⁷ The details of the Special Cases category were poorly communicated to MPs' offices, leaving staff and MPs confused about what it was and whether it was in fact in operation.¹⁴⁸

31. The effort to evacuate UK and Afghan nationals after the fall of Kabul represented a heroic effort by the individuals involved, with many—both inside and outside Government—working under enormous pressure to save lives. We commend the

143 Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 26; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0052) para 82 When we put this to the Permanent Under-Secretary, he stated that, after the Special Cases list closed on 25 August, staff continued to open e-mails "to see if any of them contained new cases of particularly high priority, in case, against expectation, the situation improved and there were opportunities to assist them." FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q10

144 Q131 [Foreign Secretary]

145 Lord Ahmad, Dear Colleague letter, 5 September 2021

146 "The system has been shambolic. We were encouraged for weeks to take on cases and pass information to either the Home Office, MOD or Foreign Office. However, despite spending a significant amount of time gathering as much information and supporting documents as possible, in order to help the Government assess people's risk levels, we haven't received back a single substantive response. [...] I appreciate that the speed in which the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated took the Government by surprise. However not enough resource was allocated to the issue once the scale of the problem became clear, and constituency offices were hung out to dry."

147 Four did not respond to this question

148 One member of staff in an MPs' office sent us a summary of all communications from the Government on this topic, highlighting the contradictory messaging and lack of guidance on what the category covered. (AFG0057)

bravery of the military and civilian personnel on the ground in Afghanistan during the evacuation, and the hard work and dedication of those coordinating it from elsewhere, including many dedicated civil servants in London. We regret that their sacrifices were undermined by deep failures of leadership in the system they were working within.

32. However, on the strategic and humanitarian level the evacuation fell disastrously short. Shortcomings in ARAP, the scheme to evacuate Afghans who had worked directly for the UK Government, left many waiting for a response until it was too late. A total failure to plan how to help Afghans at risk due to their work to promote British values without working directly for the Government—the “Special Cases”—left many in danger. Some will have not taken other options, as they remained with false hope of a rescue that would never come. The Foreign Office wasted time by exploring the options for such a scheme only after the Taliban takeover. The hasty effort to draw up a list of those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed. In the absence of criteria that allowed for meaningful prioritisation of cases, the scheme seemingly relied on MPs’ interventions as its primary measure of the vulnerability of those seeking extraction. Given MPs’ responsibility to represent constituents, not to triage needs, this was never going to be a reliable way to deliver the right outcome—but only to attempt to silence criticism. The department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions, such as rostering an adequate number of staff to key teams, despite the fact that this Committee raised similar issues around the FCDO’s response to the pandemic. Underlying operational problems—such as a failure to integrate FCO and DFID IT systems—further undermined the effort. Junior staff were left unsupported to deliver a poorly designed policy, making life-and-death decisions with little support or guidance, at a cost to their mental health. While a degree of chaos is to be expected in a crisis, the mismanagement of this category of evacuations was inexcusable. The chaos and lack of preparation was not the sole responsibility of the department. A lack of seriousness, application and coordination at a political level across Government fatally undermined the task in hand. In short, ministers failed to provide adequate leadership at a time of international crisis. This betrayal of our allies is not only morally wrong, but has undermined the credibility of the UK with serious consequences for our interests around the world, damaging trust, encouraging challenge, and making it less likely that people in fragile states will be willing to engage with UK missions in future.

33. The evacuation required clear decision-making, strong political leadership and tight coordination. We have seen little evidence of this. To the contrary, decision-making was so unclear that even senior officials such as the National Security Adviser could not be certain how key decisions were authorised. It is clearly unacceptable that neither ministers nor civil servants have been able to articulate the operational chain of command involved in conducting a major evacuation. The political leadership on offer vacillated so much that no clear priorities were set for who should be evacuated and in what order, giving many thousands of vulnerable people, to whom we owed a debt, a hope that could never be met. Although ministers claimed that they worked closely together, the decision to run the operation through three departments undermined coordination. This is particularly disturbing at a time when the UK faces significant foreign policy challenges, including in relation to Ukraine, Russia, the Balkan states, Yemen, and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Unity of purpose, clarity and coordination require serious intent and consistent political leadership.

Nowzad

34. The arbitrary and chaotic nature of Foreign Office’s role in the evacuation process is illustrated by the case of Nowzad. The Kabul-based animal charity launched an understandable campaign to evacuate its Afghan staff and its animals, attracting intense media interest. Its staff were not prioritised for evacuation.¹⁴⁹ Despite this, on 25 August—the day when the Government ceased to call people forward for evacuation,¹⁵⁰ and after the Special Cases team had removed many vulnerable individuals from the lists due to lack of capacity¹⁵¹—FCDO officials saw that the Defence Secretary had tweeted, in the early hours of the morning, that Nowzad staff had been cleared for evacuation.¹⁵² This was a total overriding of the FCDO’s prioritisation system that had happened in no other case. It was irresponsible and risked “policy making by Twitter”. Officials sought “rapid confirmation” from the National Security Adviser, Sir Stephen Lovegrove. He agreed to “urgently” seek “clear guidance from No. 10”,¹⁵³ then phoned shortly afterwards to confirm that they should call the group forward.¹⁵⁴ Many senior FCDO officials believed that the decision came directly from the Prime Minister.¹⁵⁵

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- 149 As one senior FCDO official put it in an internal email sent at the time, if an animal charity been put forward by his team before the Nowzad decision, he “would not have considered vets working for an animal charity ‘extremely vulnerable’.” Indeed, Nowzad reopened its Kabul clinic in February 2022. Another official told us: “[T]he reason we were confused is that Nowzad staff had not been prioritised for LOTR before we saw the Defence Secretary’s tweet. Clearly something had happened and we needed to check out what that was”. Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 30; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0038) para 208; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0052) [FCDO internal emails]; Devon Live, [Pen Farthing’s Nowzad animal rescue clinic reopens in Kabul](#), 9 February 2022; [Q596](#) [Nigel Casey]
- 150 Permanent Under-Secretary: “Until 25 August, a Special Cases Correspondence Team sought to consider all emails received [...] From 25 August, it was clear that US negotiations with the Taliban to extend the evacuation had been unsuccessful, and that the evacuation would therefore end very shortly, meaning that it was no longer likely to be possible to call additional people forward under the LOTR provision.” FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q10
- 151 “My colleagues and I eliminated thousands of Afghan friends of the UK at risk of murder from the evacuation lists. We were instructed to do this due to lack of capacity to process people at the airport. On Wednesday 25 August, many people referred by Secretaries of State were rejected due to limited capacity.” Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0038) para 211
- 152 “Now that Pen Farthing’s staff have been cleared to come forward under LOTR I have authorised MOD to facilitate their processing alongside all other eligible personnel at [Kabul Airport]. At that stage, if he arrives with his animals we will seek a slot for his plane.” [Defence Secretary tweet](#), 25 August 2021
- 153 Subject: “URGENT: Pen Farthing & dogs – DEFSEC COMMENTS?”, Date: 25 August; Nigel Casey wrote: “You also raised this with Stephen Lovegrove, Home Office and MOD just now – explaining the issue and asking Stephen to seek clear guidance for us from No 10 asap on what they would like us to do. Stephen agrees to pursue this urgently”.; The Deputy PPS to the Foreign Secretary wrote: “I have just spoken to the FS about this. [...] no Nowzad staff have been called forward [...] The FS is seeking a steer from No10 on whether to call them forward now.” FCDO internal emails published by [UK Editor of BBC Newsnight](#), see: Daily Mail, [MORE emails emerge linking Boris Johnson and No10 to ‘Pen’ Farthing animal rescue](#), 28 January 2022
- 154 [Q532](#)
- 155 Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) (AFG0052) [FCDO internal emails]; Josie Stewart (AFG0054) para 31

35. We tried to trace the source of the decision to overrule the FCDO's prioritisation process. The Prime Minister denied any role in the decision,¹⁵⁶ as did the Defence Secretary.¹⁵⁷ A senior FCDO official told us that they assumed the National Security Adviser had given the instruction "on the authority of somebody in power who could make that direction."¹⁵⁸ However, when we asked the National Security Adviser (NSA) whom he had consulted, he said he did not remember. When we pressed him, he said that he would only have checked with his own team that this group was "technically eligible" for evacuation.¹⁵⁹ It is clearly nonsensical to suggest that the FCDO would have consulted the NSA—one of the most senior civil servants in the UK, reporting directly to the Prime Minister—to check whether Nowzad staff were eligible under a process that the department designed and managed itself.¹⁶⁰ The group were technically eligible in that they fell within the broad categories approved by the Foreign Secretary, like many thousands of Afghans, but had not been prioritised.¹⁶¹ In consulting the NSA, officials were seeking political cover for implementing a decision that went against their advice. At the very least this suggests a total communication failure between the FCDO and the NSA and provides further evidence of the chaotic and arbitrary decision-making that characterised the evacuation. It is axiomatic that officials should have clear policy parameters within which to operate, with a direct line of accountability and a clear chain of command. Several things militated against this in this situation, not least the fact that the policy was unaccountably being drawn up in three different departments. The fact that nobody can state who made the decision that Nowzad staff should be evacuated suggests at best that the political leadership was chaotic and at worst that senior figures are not telling the truth.

36. Nowzad's British founder left Kabul with the animals on 28 August as the only passenger on a 230-seat private aircraft, after his staff were unable to enter the airport.¹⁶² The Government said that the flight did not constitute the prioritisation of animals over people, because civilian evacuations had finished by then. However, it absorbed significant

156 A No 10 spokesperson said: "The prime minister had no role in authorising individual evacuations from Afghanistan during Op Pitting, including Nowzad staff and animals. At no point did the prime minister instruct staff to take any particular course of action on Nowzad."

The Independent, [Boris Johnson personally authorised evacuation of Pen Farthing's dogs from Afghanistan, email shows](#), 27 January 2022

The PM's spokesman said: "It's not uncommon in Whitehall for a decision to be interpreted or portrayed as coming directly from the prime minister, even when that's not the case, and it's our understanding that's what happened in this instance."

BBC News, [Foreign Office boss admits error over Afghan animal evacuation](#), 28 January 2022

157 "I did not sign off the staff. [...] Who approved them specifically? Was it through that process? I did not sit there and sign them off. I do not know."

[Q500](#) [Defence Secretary]

158 [Q562](#) [Nigel Casey]

159 The NSA and the Permanent Under-Secretary have both said that Nowzad were on the lists of "cohorts" for potential evacuation that were signed by the Foreign Secretary on 19 and 21 August. However, the Committee Chair has seen these submissions, and neither names Nowzad, only "NGO and implementing partners" as a category.

[Q649](#) [National Security Adviser]

160 The NSA also suggested that PJHQ might have been behind the decision to call forward Nowzad staff, stating "the actual operational decision to call forward people on those lists would have been made by operational commanders, most likely in PJHQ". This is not an accurate description of the process—and clearly does not apply to the Nowzad case, as the group were called forward by the FCDO.

[Q667](#) [National Security Adviser]

161 Lord Ahmad said that it had been possible to evacuate "only a few Afghan staff of NGOs" as Special Cases. International Development Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2021–22, [Afghanistan: UK support for aid workers and the Afghan people](#), HC 919

162 Nowzad charity ([AFG0047](#))

time and resources of both civilian and military personnel—the FCDO told us that “it took up far more official time than it deserved to”.¹⁶³ Permissions for the charter had to be “sought and supported” by the MOD,¹⁶⁴ and UK air staff in NATO’s Combined Air Operations Centres facilitated the landing slot.¹⁶⁵ US troops helped to load the animals on to the plane;¹⁶⁶ and UK soldiers provided assistance to make sure the flight left.¹⁶⁷ According to Admiral Ben Key, who oversaw Operation Pitting, on the day that the Nowzad evacuation was authorised:

PJHQ [Permanent Joint Headquarters] was organising the largest European evacuation of Kabul. We were in command of the only carrier strike group at sea in the Western Pacific Ocean on that day. We were also overseeing the battle group that was operating in very difficult conditions in Mali. The majority of my time on that day had been dominated by managing the narrative and outcomes of Nowzad.¹⁶⁸

37. The failure to plan for the Special Cases evacuations, or to put in place a fair and robust prioritisation system, left the process open to arbitrary political interventions. This is illustrated by the case of the Nowzad animal charity. Amid intense media attention, its staff were called for evacuation at the last minute, despite not meeting the FCDO’s prioritisation criteria, after a mysterious intervention from elsewhere in Government. Multiple senior officials believed that the Prime Minister played a role in this decision. We have yet to be offered a plausible alternative explanation for how it came about. Meanwhile, the charity’s founder was allowed to use a charter flight to rescue his animals, absorbing significant Government resources in the midst of the biggest military airlift in decades. We make no criticism of the organisation, its staff, or those who campaigned on its behalf: they were open about their case and objectives, which were in keeping with their stated priorities. The same cannot be said for the Government. The episode highlights deep problems with Government decision-making. First, that it allowed its resources to be absorbed by media campaigns, rather than focusing on the humanitarian and strategic implications of the crisis. Second, that it made important policy decisions through informal, unaccountable means, which were later impossible to trace. Our concern is not so much with the fact that there was an intervention to overrule the FCDO’s prioritisation process, which was itself deeply flawed, but with the fact that the department has been unable to trace the source of this intervention, and that, as a result, no one can be held accountable and the decision-making process cannot be properly scrutinised.

Lack of transparency

38. We asked the Foreign Office for an explanation of the Nowzad case on many occasions; we repeatedly received answers that appeared calculated to mislead or to evade our questions and that were contradicted when new facts came into the public domain (see table below). The Permanent Under-Secretary initially told us that Nowzad staff had been included in the original list of potential evacuees and simply called forward when

163 [Q576](#) [Nigel Casey]

164 [Q345](#) [Nigel Casey]

165 [Q500](#) [Admiral Sir Ben Key]

166 Nowzad charity ([AFG0047](#))

167 [Q337](#) [Nigel Casey]

168 [Q501](#) [Admiral Sir Ben Key]

space became available, and that the Defence Secretary made his public statement once this had taken place.¹⁶⁹ After this account was revealed to be false by the evidence of the two whistleblowers, he eventually admitted that—far from the routine process he had described—the last-minute intervention from the Defence Secretary had triggered urgent discussions involving top FCDO officials, the Foreign Secretary and the National Security Adviser. No other Special Cases evacuation involved this type of consultation.¹⁷⁰ In December, we asked the Permanent Under-Secretary and the PM’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan six times whether there had been “a ministerial instruction or a political instruction to help these people [...] received by you or the Foreign Office”. They evaded the question each time,¹⁷¹ and were unable to find emails on the subject that were subsequently published by the Committee.¹⁷² After revelations from whistleblowers, the FCDO was forced to concede that there had been an instruction from outside the department.¹⁷³ It has been unable to account for the discrepancies, or the disappearance of the email evidence.

169 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q31

170 [Q593](#), [Q595](#)

171 [Qq425–432](#) [Nigel Casey and Permanent Under-Secretary]

172 [Qq545–553](#) [Nigel Casey]; Mr Raphael Marshall (Desk Officer (formerly) at FCDO) ([AFG0052](#)) [FCDO internal emails]

173 [Q532](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

Permanent Under-Secretary's claims on Nowzad	Counter-evidence
<p>That he had no reason to believe No.10 supported the evacuation of Nowzad staff:</p> <p>Q: Do you, Sir Philip, have any reason to believe that there was support for this decision in No. 10, or from the Prime Minister?</p> <p>A: "I am not aware of that, beyond speculation in the public domain."¹⁷⁴</p>	<p>The FCDO later said that senior officials had consulted the National Security Adviser on the case. He agreed to seek clear guidance "from No. 10 asap".¹⁷⁵ The FCDO assumed his instruction to proceed "was given on the authority of somebody in power".¹⁷⁶</p>
<p>That Nowzad staff were on a list of potential evacuees, and were called forward when space became available:</p> <p>"Nowzad staff were included by officials in the potential cohorts to be considered for evacuation if space became available [...] As space became available they were called forward."¹⁷⁷</p>	<p>The FCDO later said that Nowzad staff were not simply called forward when space became available, but only following a last-minute intervention from the Defence Secretary, and consultation with the NSA and Foreign Secretary.¹⁷⁸</p>
<p>That Nowzad staff were called forward for evacuation before the Defence Secretary's statement:</p> <p>"Once Nowzad staff had been called forward for evacuation, the Defence Secretary made a public statement that, if Pen Farthing brought the animals in Nowzad's care to the airport, MoD would seek a landing slot for the charter flight".¹⁷⁹</p>	<p>The FCDO later said that Nowzad staff were called forward on the basis of the Defence Secretary's statement, rather than the other way around.¹⁸⁰</p>

174 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q33

175 Subject: "URGENT: Pen Farthing & dogs – DEFSEC COMMENTS?", Date: 25 August
Nigel Casey wrote: "You also raised this with Stephen Lovegrove, Home Office and MOD just now – explaining the issue and asking Stephen to seek clear guidance for us from No 10 asap on what they would like us to do. Stephen agrees to pursue this urgently".

FCDO internal emails published by [UK Editor of BBC Newsnight](#), see: Daily Mail, [MORE emails emerge linking Boris Johnson and No10 to 'Pen' Farthing animal rescue](#), 28 January 2022

176 [Q562](#) [Nigel Casey]

177 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q 31

178 [Q532](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

179 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q31

180 [Q532](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

<p>That there was no decision from outside the FCDO to evacuate Nowzad staff:</p> <p>Q: So there was a ministerial decision, a political decision, to aid and support—yes? And that may not have come to you directly, but it came to somebody and got passed down to you.</p> <p>A: “It is important to be clear: the decision-making was around facilitation of the flight. Clearly, the airport and our presence there was being run by the military.”¹⁸¹</p>	<p>The FCDO later said that there was a decision from outside the FCDO to evacuate Nowzad’s staff.¹⁸²</p>
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39. The Nowzad case is part of a wider problem with transparency and accountability in the FCDO. Officials and ministers have also avoided our questions on other issues raised in this inquiry, including the dates of the then-Foreign Secretary’s holiday in August, and the circumstances of the decision for the UK’s Ambassador to remain in Kabul when other Embassy staff left.¹⁸³ On occasion, officials appeared frustrated about the time taken up by responding to this inquiry.¹⁸⁴ Despite the manifest problems with its role in the withdrawal, the department has been reluctant to admit to any shortcomings. When we asked the then-Foreign Secretary what his department could have done better, he struggled to name a single area, except for regret that he had not returned from holiday sooner.¹⁸⁵ The Foreign Office has sought to blame other departments for issues, claiming that delays in answering Special Cases emails were the Home Office’s responsibility.¹⁸⁶ The department’s leadership has appeared to be more focused on defending themselves from criticism than on identifying and resolving issues. The Lessons Learned review does not acknowledge the scale of the problems with its response, or the fact that many were rooted

181 [Q431](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

182 [Q532](#) [Permanent Under-Secretary]

183 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, para Q22; [Qq305–312](#) (Permanent Under-Secretary); [Q315](#) (Nigel Casey); [Qq61–62](#) (Foreign Secretary)

184 “You sent us a letter to follow up that session on 15 December. It posed, I think, 38 questions, many of which required a significant amount of time to research and check.”
 “You had the former Foreign Secretary giving oral evidence in September; we gave two hours-worth of oral evidence in December; and Lord Ahmad gave oral evidence, although it was truncated. In between, I have lost count of the number of letters we have written, all with multiple detailed questions in them. If you look at the transcript of our session in December—I was re-reading it before I came in—it is pretty exhaustive. [...] I am sorry, again, that we could not get to the bottom of it further—it would have saved us a lot of bother—but we are where we are, and we have told you everything we can at this point.”

[Q543](#), [Q647](#) [Nigel Casey]

185 [Q112](#) [Foreign Secretary]

186 The Independent, [Government will answer unread emails about trapped Afghans ‘within days’, says Dominic Raab](#), 31 August 2021

After reports on delays in the FCDO’s processing of emails seeking help, the then-Foreign Secretary stated: “The two email accounts people are taking about are the ARAP cases led by the MoD, not by the FCDO, and also the Special Cases which ultimately was the Home Office responsibility.” The latter statement is accurate only in the sense that all immigration decisions are ultimately Home Office responsibility. The FCDO proposed and devised the Special Cases category and managed the compilation and prioritisation of its cases—except Nowzad. There was some joint working, with sign-off of the scheme from the Home Office and MOD, and the Home Office carried out security checks when this was complete. FCDO officials told Committee staff by email that Special Cases was an “arrangement by which, during the evacuation, FCDO Ministers, in consultation with Home Office and MoD Ministers, decided which cohorts of other especially vulnerable Afghans should be prioritised for military evacuation as and when flight capacity permitted”.

in sheer mismanagement rather than in the scale of the crisis. The summary of findings opens with the statement: “The FCDO was not unprepared for this crisis”¹⁸⁷—suggesting a failure to face the reality of the situation.¹⁸⁸ The second whistleblower decided to speak out because, months later, she had seen “no evidence” that the FCDO was taking seriously the failures in policy and management raised by the previous whistleblower.¹⁸⁹

40. Due to the lack of transparency, it has taken brave individuals willing to blow the whistle—at great personal cost—for the Committee to gather the necessary information. We give our sincere thanks to those who have come forward to help us to uncover the facts about these events. We know of others who share their concerns and have not felt able to express their views publicly. The degree of unhappiness among FCDO officials points not only to the policy failures around the withdrawal, but to the absence of an adequate process for officials to express concerns about policy without fearing damage to their careers.

41. **The FCDO has repeatedly given us answers that, in our judgement, are at best intentionally evasive, and often deliberately misleading. On Nowzad, they only admitted that the case had been in any way unusual when faced with the evidence of whistleblowers. At best, the Permanent Under-Secretary displayed a worrying lack of knowledge of the department he leads, and a determination to avoid unearthing the facts that would allow him to answer our questions. Far from the routine process he initially described to us, this case involved an unknown decision-maker in Government completely overruling the FCDO’s system for prioritising individuals for evacuation, triggering urgent last-minute consultations with some of the most senior people in Government, in discussions with no notes taken or decisions recorded. It seems unlikely that the Permanent Under-Secretary would not have been aware of this at the time, particularly given the high sensitivity and media interest in this topic. It seems still less likely that he would not have become aware of it later, when preparing to answer our questions on the matter.**

42. **Without the intervention of whistleblowers, we would not be aware that this intervention had taken place at all, despite asking many questions on the topic. Parliament can only perform its role of holding Government to account if it can be confident that it is receiving honest answers to its questions. The relationship between the Committee and department relies on a degree of candour and rigour, and this appears to have been sadly missing, with the integrity of the department’s senior leaders called into question. Officials should not be expected to engage—nor be complicit—in obscuring the facts in order to shield others from political accountability. Under the leadership of a Foreign Secretary who took up her post after these events, the FCDO has had the opportunity to make a fresh start and re-commit to transparency and positive engagement with Parliament. On this issue, it has so far failed to do so. We look forward to this being rectified. Those who lead the Foreign Office should be ashamed that two civil servants of great integrity and clear ability felt compelled to risk their**

187 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary to Chair, [Afghanistan crisis: FCDO Lessons Learned](#), 9 March 2022

188 Meanwhile, the National Security Adviser said that the evacuation did not “in any way” undershoot the Government’s original ambitions. Both in our sessions and more broadly, the Government has again and again answered questions by repeating that it evacuated 15,000 people, rather than engaging with the issue at hand or the shortcomings of this operation.

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Oral evidence: Work of the National Security Adviser](#), 20 October 2021, Q1 [National Security Adviser]

189 Josie Stewart ([AFG0054](#)) para 11

careers to bring to light the appalling mismanagement of the Afghan crisis, and the misleading statements to Parliament that followed. *The department should carry out a review of its internal processes for officials to register concerns about policies, and report its conclusions back to this Committee. It should study the testimony provided to this Committee by both whistleblowers and determine how it will address the problems they raise.*

43. The FCDO failed to take the basic administrative step of recording its decisions. It is fundamental to any bureaucracy to know precisely what decisions have been made, by whom, with what authority, and when. This would be a serious failure at any time, but during the withdrawal from Afghanistan may have led to the loss of life. It is the responsibility of the Permanent Under-Secretary to ensure that this system operates effectively. The Committee has lost confidence in the Permanent Under-Secretary, who should consider his position.

3 The future relationship with Afghanistan

Dealing with the Taliban

44. The UK Government has said that the Taliban regime cannot gain international acceptance without demonstrating progress in three areas: respect for human rights, action against terrorism, and safe passage for those who wish to leave the country.¹⁹⁰ It has called on other countries to withhold recognition,¹⁹¹ and so far, the Taliban has not been formally recognised as the legitimate government by any state.¹⁹² In January, the EU became the first Western power to re-establish a presence in Kabul, but stated that this was not a recognition of the regime.¹⁹³ The UK has said that it will re-open its Embassy—currently operating from Doha—when security allows, also stressing that this would not constitute recognition.¹⁹⁴ Despite this position, the UK has led the way among Western countries in engaging with the Taliban, as the first to openly meet with the group after the takeover.¹⁹⁵ The Government has sent representatives to Kabul on two occasions, and has taken “any opportunity that presents itself to sit down with” the Taliban elsewhere, particularly in Doha.¹⁹⁶ Engagement has been at official level only—ministers have had no contact since the group gained power.¹⁹⁷ The Prime Minister has committed to dialogue,

- 190 “On whether we should recognise the Taliban, we have a long-standing policy of recognising states, not Governments, and the PM has been clear that if the Taliban want international acceptance, they must abide by international norms.”
 HC Deb, 9 February 2022, [col 951](#) [Commons Chamber] [Minister Vicky Ford]
 Foreign Secretary: “The reality is we will not be recognising the Taliban any time in the foreseeable future but I think there is an important scope for engagement and dialogue.”
 Evening Standard, [Dominic Raab: UK will not recognise Taliban for ‘foreseeable future’](#), 2 September 2021
 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q5 [Nigel Casey]
- 191 Prime Minister: “We are clear and we have agreed that it would be a mistake for any country to recognise any new regime in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally.”
 The Times, [Judge Taliban on deeds not words, says Johnson as Tory MPs lambast him](#), 19 August 2021
- 192 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q3 [Nigel Casey]
- 193 Reuters, [European Union re-establishes physical presence in Afghanistan - spokesman](#), 21 January 2022
- 194 “Obviously the situation is now significantly changed and many critical security and life support measures (access to regular international flights in and out, the presence of NATO troops, friendly Afghan Government security forces ensuring security and free movement within the Kabul international zone, access to international standard emergency medical facilities) are no longer available. [...] Having a diplomatic presence in Kabul would not of itself constitute recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate Government of Afghanistan. Other states have maintained a diplomatic presence in Kabul while withholding such recognition.”
 FCDO Permanent Under-Secretary letter to Chair, [Follow up to 7 December Foreign Affairs Committee on UK policy towards Afghanistan](#), 17 January 2022, Q30
- 195 “[W]e were the most forward-leaning of any country from the western side or indeed any key partner in the UN. We were first on the ground in Kabul to show that we would continue to look to support for advances made by the Taliban on delivering the UN requirements and conditions that were set.”
 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q7 [Lord Ahmad]
 Note that others reportedly met the Taliban privately: CNN, [CIA director met with Taliban leader in Kabul on Monday amid evacuation efforts](#), 24 August 2021
- 196 “We have met them in third capitals. I met acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi in Oslo at the end of January, and we have seen them in Geneva. [...] We will take any opportunity that presents itself to sit down with them and to pick up on the core issues”
 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q5 [Nigel Casey]
- 197 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q5 [Lord Ahmad]

stating that there is “no point” in the UK “standing on the sidelines”.¹⁹⁸

45. Even in the absence of formal recognition, it is essential to engage with the new regime, not least to ensure delivery of humanitarian aid.¹⁹⁹ Lord Richards told us that the question of recognition was “a distraction”, arguing “we have got to take a risk [...] to work with them, to lead them into being the sort of country that we have relations with”.²⁰⁰ Isolation could be counterproductive, strengthening hardliners within the Taliban,²⁰¹ while pushing the group closer to governments that may not share the UK’s interests.²⁰² Most Western embassies remain closed, but states such as China, Iran and Russia still have a diplomatic presence in Kabul, and have accredited Taliban-selected ambassadors to their countries.²⁰³ As the HALO Trust warned:

The void left by NATO will be filled by China, Russia, Iran and others who don’t share UK values. Ignoring Afghanistan will have regional security, economic and strategic repercussions.²⁰⁴

46. So far, UK engagement has been bilateral, though it has been working to influence other countries’ approach to the regime.²⁰⁵ The composition of delegations to meet with the group should be carefully considered. After receiving criticism for undermining its

198 “They may not speak for all Afghans—far from it—but they are some kind of authority in Kabul, even if a very imperfect authority. The UK must try to engage, for the sake of the people you are talking about, if we are to get aid through.”

Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence from the Prime Minister](#), HC 835, Wednesday 17 November 2021, Q113

199 According to International Rescue Committee: “There is no alternative to engaging with the Taliban to ensure the continued delivery of principled humanitarian assistance.”

Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0021](#))

The International Development Committee concluded: “We recognise the necessity of having to work with the Taliban. We endorse the Government’s policy of developing a pragmatic working relationship with the Taliban to enable humanitarian aid to reach the people of Afghanistan.”

International Development Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2021–22, [Afghanistan: UK support for aid workers and the Afghan people](#), HC 919

200 [Q234](#) [Lord Richards]

General Sir Nick Carter: “I also think it’s important that we engage because we might be able to encourage them to govern in a different way.”

The Independent, [Former military chief Carter: No ‘true understanding’ of politics in Afghanistan](#), 30 December 2021

201 “Policies of confrontation or isolation will have the effect of strengthening the hardliners within the Taliban, whilst increasing their dependence on neighbouring states.”

Drugs and (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))

202 Lord Richards: “we will lose any opportunity to influence the Afghan Government of the future, which will be an opportunity seized by our competitors in the region. Russia, China and Iran [...] they will seize this opportunity. Why are we giving it away to them when, for want of a little bit of engagement and action, we could wrest back the initiative”. [Q234](#) [Lord Richards]

“The withdrawal of USA and UK from Afghanistan runs the risk of creating a vacuum which both China and/or Russia may seek to exploit by seeking a favourable position of influence with the Taliban. The Taliban will be desperate to secure foreign aid from whatever source possible to avert a humanitarian disaster and to avoid a financial collapse that could provoke civil war or undermining of their new government. If this is not forthcoming from the West they are likely to turn to such other countries. This could be inimical to the geo-political interests of the UK and the Western world in general”.

Afghanistan and Central Asian Association ([AFG0029](#))

Harry Leverment, Sarah Hearn OBE, Andrew Kidd OBE, and Laure-Hélène Piron ([AFG0027](#))

203 VOA News, [Russia Latest Country to Establish Diplomatic Ties With Taliban](#), 9 April 2022

204 The HALO Trust ([AFG0023](#))

205 Minister Vicky Ford: “we are also doing a huge amount of international work, including encouraging Muslim majority countries to play a full role in seeking to influence the Taliban. For example, the Foreign Secretary visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Indonesia in October and November and met the gulf Foreign Ministers again in December to discuss that and other issues.”

HC Deb, 9 February 2022, [col 947](#) [Commons Chamber] [Minister Vicky Ford]

message on women's rights by sending an all-male delegation to its first meeting with the new regime,²⁰⁶ the Government included a female delegate in a later meeting.²⁰⁷ UK engagement with the Taliban should also be accompanied by engagement with Afghan civil society.²⁰⁸ The Government has taken steps to consult Afghans in the UK, but there is less evidence of it talking to those on the ground.²⁰⁹ Civil society organisations still active in Afghanistan need both funding and vocal support from outside, where appropriate. As Professor Michael Semple put it, "you need to spread your bets".²¹⁰ Shaharзад Akbar of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission called on the UK not to ignore the civilian resistance:

Every single day there are demonstrations; women are going on to the streets. [...] If there is no international support, locally it will be impossible for the Taliban to listen to their messages.

47. So far, the Taliban's early claims that they would bring about a more moderate, inclusive regime have been false,²¹¹ with changes largely limited to their communications

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- 206 "We keep seeing the UK sending male-only delegations to meet with the Taliban, which does not really send the right message. Women should be front and centre in the sense that women should be consulted and we should make sure that assistance arrives to women."
[Q209](#) [Shaharзад Akbar]
"In the midst of this grave crisis for women and girls, the UK should not be sending all-male foreign delegations to meet with the Taliban as the UK appears to have done in October 2021. Efforts to find "common ground" with the Taliban should be undertaken by women-led delegations."
Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#)) para 26
- 207 FCDO, [UK officials travel to Afghanistan](#), 10 February 2022
- 208 This should include experts and activists not currently linked to any particular organisation
- 209 Lord Ahmad "has also met senior Afghan women in this country to help shape the policy and the programme by making sure we hear their feedback. Our policies and programmes are also being informed by Afghan leaders, including Shukria Barakzai, Fawzia Koofi and Hasina Safi. That includes supporting local agencies on the ground, especially those focused on women and girls."
HC Deb, 9 February 2022, [col 947](#) [Commons Chamber] [Minister Vicky Ford]
"We are also working directly with Afghans who are now here in the United Kingdom. I have convened several one-to-one meetings but also round tables in this respect. [...] The message there is clear: for them to inform us of the messages they are getting from key agencies still working on the ground to ensure that they are getting the kind of support they need. Linked to that is looking ahead as well."
International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q1 [Lord Ahmad]
- 210 "One of the differences, perhaps, with the prospects this time is that the Taliban may not have changed over the past 20 years but the Afghan population has. There is a significant prospect for civic resistance against the Taliban. Anybody trying to engage with the Taliban should also be engaging with the other forces in Afghan society. You need to spread your bets."
[Q177](#) [Professor Michael Semple]
- 211 "There were hopes, which may now be seen as misplaced, that this was going to be a kinder, gentler Taliban. At least their spokesman initially seemed to present that it would be a much happier place for women, girls and minorities than it was during the Taliban regime of the late 1990s".
[Q166](#) [General Petraeus]

strategy.²¹² In power, the group has appointed those facing terrorism sanctions to high office,²¹³ excluding women and opposition groups; severely curtailed the rights of women and girls;²¹⁴ and carried out targeted attacks and killings.²¹⁵ Though the Taliban have stated their wish for legitimacy and international recognition,²¹⁶ the FCDO said there is “limited evidence” that they are responding to international pressure on human rights or counterterrorism.²¹⁷ An abrupt public u-turn on the decision to allow girls’ secondary schools to reopen in March—in a sign of hardliners gaining the upper hand—was particularly disappointing, as was the order for women to cover their faces in public.²¹⁸ This was a setback for international efforts to engage with the group, and illustrates the absence of straightforward or linear mechanisms to influence its behaviour.²¹⁹ The World Bank responded by freezing its funding for projects in Afghanistan.²²⁰ However, cutting

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- 212 “We do not see a change in terms of their actions. I do feel like they have a more sophisticated communication strategy, but, beyond that, if people listened to Afghans, especially Afghan women, from the beginning of the peace process, there was a consistent call that the Taliban should be held to their actions, not to their words.”
[Q200](#) [Shaharзад Akbar]
 Shukria Barakzai told us that the Taliban had changed little since their previous regime: “Their mindset, their behaviour and their beliefs are exactly the same.”
[Q198](#) [Shukria Barakzai]
 “[T]he Taliban is embracing social media grasping the opportunity to control its public image nationally and internationally with Taliban officials posting regularly on Twitter in Dari, Pashto, Arabic and English”
 BBC World Service ([AFG0024](#))
 “Since coming back to power, they have in their official pronouncements used language about inclusion, ruling for the whole of Afghanistan, reconciliation, education, the role of women, and dealing with terrorism. should not be taken as firm political commitments, but rather as a form of signalling which show that the Taliban are aware of international sensibilities and have some capacity and willingness to engage in diplomacy.”
 Drugs and (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))
- 213 “Siraj Haqqani was brought in as Interior Minister—somebody who is directly responsible for the operation of suicide bomb networks and for attacks on UK, US and Afghan civilians in large scale, and personally ordering and celebrating them. [...] They did not need to appoint him Interior Minister. In Afghanistan, there is always a good way of retaining your influence by putting a proxy forward, but they deliberately chose the most provocative appointments. Go to people like Taj Mir, who was, until 14 August, directly a suicide bomber trainer. These are people who have refined the use of suicide bombing and exported the technology around the world. He is now inserted at deputy level at the national intelligence service.”
[Q183](#) [Professor Michael Semple]
- 214 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#)), Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#))
- 215 Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#)), All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#)), Internews Europe ([AFG0036](#)), [Q196](#) [Shukria Barakzai], [Q208](#) [Shaharзад Akbar]
- 216 [Q177](#) [Professor Michael Semple]
 AFP, [Taliban closer to international recognition, says foreign minister](#), 3 February 2022
- 217 [Lord Ahmad letter to Chair](#), 28 February 2022
 “I do not pretend that it has moved on many of the core issues. Very limited movement on counterterrorism. It will repeat the mantra of living up to Doha, but we have not seen much substantive action.”
 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q5 [Nigel Casey]
- 218 The Guardian, [Taliban order all Afghan women to cover their faces in public](#), 7 May 2022
- 219 New York Times, [Taliban Renege on Promise to Open Afghan Girls’ Schools](#), 3 March 2022
 “In response to repeated international engagement on the issue, the Taliban have said that all girls will be able to return to secondary school on 21 March, the point that secondary schools return after Persian New Year. We have underlined the importance of delivering on this pledge to the Taliban, and doing so in a way which the international community is able to monitor.”
[Lord Ahmad letter to Chair](#), 28 February 2022
- 220 The Independent, [World Bank freezes \\$600m funding for Afghanistan over Taliban U-turn on girls’ education](#), 30 March 2022

aid and engagement will do little to help girls in the country.²²¹ We have also received evidence warning of the risk of mass atrocities being committed against minority groups in the country, whether by the regime or other actors.²²² A monitoring mechanism could help to deter such crimes; assist in targeting UK aid; and, where necessary, gather evidence to document abuses and support future prosecutions.²²³

48. The Taliban takeover is a tragedy for Afghanistan, marking the single biggest reversal in the rights of women and girls in a generation. We welcome the Government’s pragmatic engagement with the Taliban at official level: it is valid to withhold recognition, but attempts to isolate the new regime entirely may only worsen the situation for the Afghan people, reduce the UK’s influence, and leave a vacuum to be filled by powers such as China. The Government should re-establish a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan as soon as it is safe to do so. It should coordinate its engagement with its partners to ensure that the international community delivers clear, consistent messages to the Taliban as far as possible, and should support international efforts to track and monitor commitments made by the Taliban, and hold the regime accountable for its actions. It should commit, and press other countries to commit, not to send male-only delegations to meet with the regime.

49. It is important for the UK’s engagement with the Taliban to come alongside extensive and targeted outreach to Afghan civil society, particularly those active on the ground. It should consult these groups on its policies towards Afghanistan and support them where possible through funding and other forms of engagement. This is important to protect the country’s civil society ecosystem, preventing the destruction of the progress it has made in recent decades; to ensure that their views are taken into account in the design of UK policy; and to show the Taliban that the world is watching its actions. In its response to this report, the Government should set out the steps it is taking to engage with Afghan civil society. In the longer term, we recommend that the Foreign Office should continue to invest in expertise on Afghanistan—drawing on that held by former DFID personnel—in order to inform its policy and ensure that we are ready when there is a change to re-engage with the country on a more profound level. This should include meaningful engagement with members of the British Afghan diaspora. The FCDO should also establish an atrocity and human rights abuse monitoring mechanism for Afghanistan.

221 As IRC put it: “the chilling effect the decision on girls’ education is having on international engagement [...] is only working to ensure all Afghans, but particularly women and girls, pay twice for the Taliban’s actions.” Another group told us: “[W]hile the reversal by the de facto authorities to allow girls to return to schools above grade six should be universally condemned, donors should not walk away from the full spectrum of support children in Afghanistan require.”

Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0055](#)); Anonymous ([AFG0056](#))

222 Protection Approaches, Stonewall ([AFG0041](#)), Gillian McKay (PhD Candidate at University of Leeds) ([AFG0025](#))

223 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#)), Protection Approaches, Stonewall ([AFG0041](#))

Aid

50. Afghanistan is facing the worst humanitarian crisis on earth, with 23 million people at risk of starvation,²²⁴ triggered by the international withdrawal.²²⁵ To avoid supporting or legitimising the new regime, the UK and other donors cut off all development aid.²²⁶ Previously, much of this support for the delivery of basic services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure went through the Afghan government—including to pay salaries of government employees—making up 75 percent of all public spending.²²⁷ The Government has said there is “no way” it would give money to the Taliban.²²⁸ The UK and others continue to send emergency humanitarian aid to meet the most urgent needs, delivered through the UN and other organisations in order to bypass the Taliban regime.²²⁹ Existing sanctions on members of the Taliban have damaged the economy and hindered the delivery even of humanitarian aid, while the US and other governments have frozen the Afghan government’s assets overseas. Without foreign currency, the country will face problems importing vital goods and services.

51. The consequences of these measures have been dire for ordinary people while the Taliban leadership—including those on the sanctions lists—remain largely unaffected. The country’s banking system is paralysed by a lack of liquidity, leaving businesses and

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- 224 The Independent, [‘Hell on earth’: Warnings that humanitarian crisis about to engulf Afghanistan](#), 10 November 2021
 “[O]ne in two children under five are facing acute malnutrition and will be at risk of death if immediate action is not taken. Frankly and starkly put, 95% of the population in Afghanistan is not getting enough food.”
 International Relations and Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan](#), 16 March 2022, Q1 [Lord Ahmad]
- 225 There is “a pressing humanitarian need to look after millions of people who are in the predicament they are in because of our decisions. We seem to forget that; the Americans seem to forget it. This wasn’t going to happen. By allowing the Taliban to succeed in Afghanistan, we have created this humanitarian situation. At the moment, I am very worried that we are not owning up to our responsibility to help resolve it.”
[Q234](#) [Lord Richards]
 “The NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan has brought millions of Afghan civilians to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe. This humanitarian crisis is now matched by a looming economic crisis. The UK must develop a forward-looking strategy immediately.”
 The HALO Trust ([AFG0023](#))
 “The dramatic changes in Afghanistan’s political, social, and economic circumstances since the withdrawal of foreign forces, fall of the Afghan government and takeover by the Taliban have accelerated the humanitarian crisis that was affecting half of Afghans prior to August. At this point, humanitarian support to save lives and protect livelihoods from further erosion is essential.”
 World Food Programme ([AFG0005](#)) para 6
 “Afghanistan’s slide towards catastrophe is primarily driven by the policies of the international community, rather than conflict or natural disaster.”
[IRC, Six months on from change in power, IRC warns starvation could kill more Afghans than last twenty years of war as 97 per cent of population faces poverty](#), 15 February 2022
- 226 [Lord Ahmad letter to Chair](#), 28 February 2022
- 227 [IRC, David Miliband’s Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Afghanistan](#), 9 February 2022
- 228 [Q108](#) [Foreign Secretary]
 Lord Ahmad: “there will be no support given to through Government channels, because the Government are not a Government we recognise, but there are agencies still working on the ground.”
 International Development Committee, [Oral evidence: The Philosophy and Culture of Aid](#), HC 101, 7 September 2021, Q167
- 229 “Faced with wide-ranging needs, European officials announced a “humanitarian plus” strategy to keep supporting essential programs under the rubric of humanitarianism, though these activities previously depended on development budgets. They did not define “plus”, however: could education be considered “humanitarian?” What about other ministries where salaries had been donor-funded?”
 International Crisis Group, [Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Catastrophe](#), 6 December 2021

ordinary people unable to pay for goods, or access their savings.²³⁰ Many Afghan civil society groups are facing closure²³¹—one group told us that more NGOs are shutting down due to international sanctions than due to the Taliban’s policies.²³² There are difficult trade-offs to be made: whether to prioritise stabilisation over political freedoms; and whether addressing short-term needs risks consolidating the regime’s control.²³³ Lord Richards told us that the UK had a responsibility to “look after millions of people who are in the predicament they are in because of our decisions”.²³⁴ Rory Stewart warned that the UK and its partners were “threatening to starve Afghans in the completely unrealistic belief that it will somehow give us leverage over the Taliban”, and that part of the motivation was “bitterness and embarrassment about the August evacuation”.²³⁵

52. After the Taliban takeover, the Government announced a doubling in aid to Afghanistan to £286 million in 2021/2, and has pledged to match this in 2022/3.²³⁶ However, this still leaves aid spending below its level in 2019/20, when the country’s needs were less.²³⁷ The UK reduced aid by almost half the following year, to £155m,²³⁸ affecting vital projects such as the clearance of landmines.²³⁹ We received evidence calling for the UK to deliver funding directly to organisations working on the frontline,²⁴⁰ and to support efforts to pay salaries of some public sector workers via the World Bank or UN.²⁴¹ Some UN agencies have removed female staff from their operations,²⁴² but we received many pieces of evidence emphasising the importance of female humanitarian workers in

230 EMERGENCY ([AFG0037](#)) para 19

“faced with challenges such as the liquidity crisis, we are unable to operate effectively as we lack safe and sustainable payment channels needed to run critical operations across Afghanistan” Christian Aid ([AFG0018](#))

231 Christian Aid ([AFG0018](#))

232 ([AFG0049](#))

233 Drugs & (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))

Rory Stewart: “Some of the money that you give—we have to be honest—will be paid in tax to the Afghan Government [...] Unless we want the country to collapse, we need to allow that to happen.”

234 [Q234](#) [Lord Richards]

235 [Q234](#) [Rory Stewart]

Laurel Miller told the Committee: “The aid that Europe, the US and other traditional donors could provide is marginal leverage over the Taliban at best. They are not showing that they are susceptible to that form of leverage. Humanitarian assistance is not being and should not be used as leverage.” However, she noted that there were “extremely significant” political obstacles to providing the kinds of assistance that were provided to the previous Afghan Government.

Mr Cowan said he believed his charity was no longer getting UK funding partly because there was “confusion and uncertainty in the minds of British policy makers as to whether they should be trying to punish the Taliban, or save the people of Afghanistan”.

The Telegraph, [UK is ‘punishing the people of Afghanistan’ as well as Taliban, charity chief warns](#), 18 January 2022

236 FCDO, [UK pledges £286 million of lifesaving aid for Afghanistan](#), 30 March 2022

237 House of Commons Library, [Afghanistan: Development, UK aid, and the future](#), 3 September 2021; 2019/20 - £290m; Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#)); The HALO Trust ([AFG0023](#))

238 House of Commons Library, [Afghanistan: Development, UK aid, and the future](#), 3 September 2021

239 The HALO Trust “currently employs around 3,000 people in Afghanistan, giving livelihoods to many young men who were formerly fighters for either the Taliban or other groups. The British government paid for 1,000 of these de-miners until all funding was halted due to cuts in 2019.”

The Telegraph, [UK is ‘punishing the people of Afghanistan’ as well as Taliban, charity chief warns](#), 18 January 2022

240 Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0021](#)), Peace Direct ([AFG0009](#))

241 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#))

242 Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0021](#))

ensuring that aid reaches women and girls.²⁴³

53. However, humanitarian aid alone only addresses the symptoms of the crisis.²⁴⁴ Without a functioning economy, humanitarian aid cannot be delivered in large quantities.²⁴⁵ The delivery of aid at scale relies on a network of other conditions, including supply of food and fuel, basic services like electricity and telecoms, and functioning medical facilities.²⁴⁶ There is also a risk that creation of long-term parallel aid delivery structures could stifle the gains of the past 20 years in building the country's institutions and human capital. We received evidence calling for measures to address the economic crisis through international agreement on benchmarks for the release of frozen Afghan assets overseas, and international technical assistance to rebuild the capacity of the central bank to manage the economy,²⁴⁷ as well as to enable the Taliban to take over the apparatus of the state, rather than destroying it.²⁴⁸ Creating conditions for Afghanistan's skilled workers to re-enter these institutions would both help to address the risk of collapse, and to lessen "brain drain" that further damages the country.

54. Averting economic collapse is important for the UK's wider interests, beyond the horror of the humanitarian impact. Hardship will further encourage the growth of extremism and boost the drug trade, as well as forcing large numbers to cross the country's borders. A total collapse of the state would create ungoverned spaces could that push extremist groups to merge with criminal activities and could leave powers such as China

243 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#)), Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) ([AFG0014](#)), Anonymous ([AFG0007](#)), World Food Programme ([AFG0005](#))

"The role of women in the humanitarian sector in Afghanistan is critical. A principled and needs-based response must include services for women and girls -- and therefore robust female staff presence in all areas and in all aspects of the response. Without female staff, humanitarians cannot deliver programs at scale for women and girls, particularly health and protection services for victims of violence. Collective commitment to the role of women in the humanitarian response is critical to support access negotiations and ensuring the delivery of principled assistance that reaches those most in need."

Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0021](#))

244 "Humanitarian assistance is only a mitigating measure. It is a bandage kind of measure. It is not going to reverse the trend of greater impoverishment of Afghanistan and the economic problems that Afghanistan is facing, which have both political and practical dimensions. You do not need me to tell you that, for western donors, the political obstacles to providing the kinds of assistance that were provided to the last Government—which, it has to be said, did not prevent the kind of fragility that we are now seeing materialise—are extremely significant, in addition to the practical ones of trying to work with a not fully formed, not fully competent Taliban regime."

[Q180](#) [Laurel Miller]

Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0055](#))

245 "Dealing with the liquidity crisis and preventing the banking sector from collapse is critical to the humanitarian response and to stemming humanitarian needs."

World Food Programme ([AFG0005](#)), ([AFG0028](#))

"Liquidity – in the context of sanctions and frozen assets – remains a major hurdle to humanitarian scale-up to meet this rising need. Due to the current liquidity crisis, and particularly the absence of a functioning central financial system, NGOs are forced to rely on more expensive mechanisms, reducing the funds available for the direct response, and face challenges in getting money into and around the country at scale."

([AFG0056](#))

246 EMERGENCY ([AFG0037](#))

247 Denisa Delić (Advocacy Director at International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0055](#))

IRC, [Afghans forced to extreme measures to survive unprecedented economic freefall](#); IRC calls for bold commitments at tomorrow's pledging conference, 30 March 2020

248 "[T]he Taliban should be convinced and enabled to take over rather than replace and destroy the administrative apparatus of the former state, and retain its specialists, trained bureaucrats, or engineers. The Taliban had initially announced this was their intention. In some cases like the Ministry of Finance, they retained key bureaucrats, given the need to administer revenue flows, taxes, and budgets. But there is emerging that not only political positions are being filled with Taliban fighters or mullahs but also more technical positions."

Drugs and (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))

to buy out Afghan companies and infrastructure.²⁴⁹ As one research group put it, “the biggest danger to Afghanistan and its people is a political vacuum and fragmentation”.²⁵⁰ Kori Schake told us:

We have to be very careful that we do not fail to imagine that Afghanistan could be worse than it already is, and that we do not make policy choices that penalise Afghans for our unwillingness to see our policies through.²⁵¹

55. The UK’s engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades ties us to the country. The overriding goal of our policy towards Afghanistan should be to reduce the impact of the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the international withdrawal. Humanitarian aid is vital, but will not be enough to avert catastrophe if the economy remains paralysed. A functioning economy is needed for delivery of aid at any scale, and for ordinary Afghans to support themselves. The current liquidity crisis is, in large part, created by the international community’s measures against the Taliban.

56. The UK should try to mitigate the impact of the Taliban regime by thinking creatively about the provision of aid. For example, online classes accessible from home and alternative measures to help the most vulnerable Afghan citizens should be considered. These should include working with partners, including the US, to consider how to release the Afghan reserves, and support efforts to deliver technical assistance to the central bank. We agree with our colleagues on the International Development Committee that the UK Government has been too slow to find ways to unblock the Afghan banking system. Regional partners, such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan, will also be key in rebuilding the economy. The UK should aim to resume bilateral development funding to Afghanistan when feasible, working in concert with partners, and drawing on the examples of delivering aid to countries where the government faces sanctions, or lacks legitimacy, such as Myanmar, Yemen and Syria. Now is not the moment to restore this funding, but withholding assistance indefinitely will not serve anyone’s interests.

57. The halving of UK aid to Afghanistan in 2020/1 is an example of the harm done by aid cuts that were designed to reduce spending at speed, rather than considering wider UK strategic interests. These cuts, made at a time when Afghanistan was facing the withdrawal of international troops, speak to a disconnect between the UK’s development aid and its wider goals—something the merged FCDO was founded to overcome. The Government should commit to greater assistance to Afghanistan within the current three-year spending review period. Its forthcoming International Development Strategy should set out principles for delivering aid in hostile states where the UK’s strategic interests are so deeply engaged, drawing on the Government’s wider country expertise to devise an aid strategy integrated with wider goals. The UK should place Afghan women at the heart of its policy towards the country, ensuring that they are consulted, and that aid reaches those in the country. The Government and partners should make a unified clear commitment to supporting and allowing female aid workers to operate in the country.

249 Harry Leverment, Sarah Hearn OBE, Andrew Kidd OBE, and Laure-Hélène Piron (AFG0027)

250 Drugs and (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))

251 [Q238](#) [Kori Schake]

Security and the region

58. The international withdrawal has worsened the threat from extremism in Afghanistan. Without a presence on the ground, or a supportive partner, the UK is now operating in a “severely suboptimal environment” for counterterrorism activities, with much-reduced intelligence.²⁵² The Taliban do not appear to be living up to their commitments under the Doha Agreement to tackle terrorism: a UN monitoring team found “no recent signs that the Taliban had taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country.”²⁵³ Professor Michael Semple, former Deputy to the EU’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, told us that the withdrawal had been the “biggest proliferation event on small arms since the Cold War”.²⁵⁴ Lord Richards warned that without a strategy to counter this threat, there could be another 9/11. The US has said that it will continue remote counterterrorism strikes in the country.²⁵⁵ However, the August 2021 strike aimed at ISIS-K which President Biden referred to as an example of this policy was later revealed to have killed 10 civilians, most of them children, leading the US military to apologise for a “tragic mistake”.²⁵⁶ Such errors not only have grave humanitarian implications, but further damage Western interests in the country, not least by strengthening the appeal of extremist groups. There are more encouraging signs on counternarcotics, after the regime unexpectedly announced a ban on poppy cultivation.²⁵⁷

59. The UK and its allies share significant interests in Afghanistan with China, Pakistan and others in the region. As General Petraeus told us, these include averting humanitarian catastrophe, tackling the illegal drug trade, countering extremism, and supporting the Central Asian states that border Afghanistan. According to the Foreign Office, “Russia and China are, if anything, more exposed to terrorism and instability than NATO Allies.”²⁵⁸ These countries have an interest in an inclusive government in Afghanistan, if only in the interest of stability.²⁵⁹ Coordinating actions with China and other stakeholders, as far as possible, will help to achieve these goals.²⁶⁰

60. The chaos and failures of the withdrawal and evacuation make it even more important—and morally imperative—that the UK commits to a serious strategy leading to future engagement with Afghanistan, in cooperation with allies and regional states.

252 “We are in a different world. We are not on the ground. We do not have a partner force like the Afghan army. We know that, wherever we do counterterrorism in the world, without those two things we are in a severely suboptimal environment. That is why we are developing and have developed some capabilities to make up for a bit of it, but it is never as good as a partner force and a supportive nation on the ground.”
Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#), HC 699, 26 October 2021, Q86 [Defence Secretary]

253 [Lord Ahmad letter to Chair](#), 28 February 2022, Q8

254 [Q188](#) [Professor Michael Semple]

255 White House, [Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan](#), 31 August 2021
Reprieve ([AFG0046](#))

256 Reuters, [U.S. says Kabul drone strike killed 10 civilians, including children, in ‘tragic mistake’](#), 18 September 2021
All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#)), Reprieve ([AFG0046](#))

257 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, [The Taliban’s poppy ban redux](#), 13 April 2022

258 FCDO ([AFG0012](#))

259 “The countries that have somewhat more leverage over them, such as Pakistan, Qatar and China, would like to see a more broad-based, inclusive Government because they know that the current, more monopolistic form of rule [is unsustainable]”
[Q179](#) [Professor Michael Semple]

260 “The more there is unity within the international community, particularly including those countries you have mentioned, and western Governments as to the messages that are delivered to the Taliban, the more prospect there is of, at least at the margins, shaping their behaviour.”
[Q189](#) [Laurel Miller]

The withdrawal and the Taliban takeover have serious implications for British security and wider interests. It has heightened the terror threat and lessened our ability to identify and tackle these issues. In particular, remote counterterrorism operations run the risk of further damaging our interests in the country by causing civilian casualties. Along with traditional partners, such as the EU, the UK shares significant interests with countries in the region, such as China, in terms of regional stability, security, and avoiding state collapse. *The UK should combine diplomacy, aid and trade in a concerted and strategic approach to future policy towards Afghanistan. This will mean patient committed engagement with the regime and with its domestic critics; investment in a substantial package of humanitarian and—eventually—development aid for the country; targeted support to rebuild the economy; and coordinated messaging towards the regime with both partner and antagonist governments.*

Annex: Survey of MPs

Selected quotes from our survey of MPs:

- “[T]he process made available to raise cases, such as it was, was totally unfit [for] purpose and seemed to be put together at the last minute with no forward planning prior to the sudden military withdrawal. This led to my staff feeling like the onus was on them to assist at risk individuals whilst they had no support or mechanisms to facilitate this help. They were in effect sending details (including addresses and contact information) into the digital ether at the Home Office and FCDO with no confidence or reassurance that anything would happen to assist the individuals and families in question.”
- “[T]he factor that affected staff most of all was the Government’s lack of strategy or response—staff expended a lot of time and effort on Afghanistan cases but, ultimately, were not able to ensure that a single person was evacuated from Afghanistan. With no response or guidance from Government, staff took calls from highly distressed constituents on a daily basis.”
- “The Government’s lack of responses and support was unhelpful. The distressing emails, and video footage, I received almost daily from people in Afghanistan was harrowing. This will live with me for the rest of time and the impact of not being able to yet help these people has been heartbreaking.”
- “The volume of cases significantly exceeded what we could reasonably support. Staff felt helpless with a complete information void from the FCDO and the Home Office.”
- Commentary from a staff member on the guidance issued by the Government to MPs’ offices:²⁶¹
 - 16 August—from Home Office: “There was no mention of ARAP/MoD. The impression given, therefore, was that ARAP cases (since they involved non-British nationals) should be submitted to HO (rather than MoD).”
 - 17 August—from Foreign Secretary: “The creation of the afghanspecialcases@fcdo.gov.uk email address by the FCDO also created confusion—why were FCDO interposing themselves in a situation involving non-British nationals?”
 - 18 August—from Government Whips Admin Unit: “[T]here was no acknowledgement of the existence of the Special Cases category for non-British nationals that the Foreign Secretary had notified to MPs’ offices in his DC. This reinforced our confusion as to why FCDO were apparently straying into HO territory”.
 - 21 August—from the FCDO’s Parliamentary Private Secretary: “The email did not mention the afghanspecialcases@fcdo.gov.uk email address or the Special Cases category at all, thereby suggesting to us that it might have been withdrawn from use.”

- 23 August—from the Home Office: “This letter strongly reinforced our perception that the FCDO Special Cases route had been withdrawn”.
- 24 August—from the FCDO’s Parliamentary Private Secretary: “This letter resurrected the idea that the afghanspecialcases@fcdo.gov.uk email address remained in operation”
- 24 August—from Government Whips Admin Unit: “This was the first communication we received which demonstrated that HO recognised FCDO were operating a Special Cases category/inbox for some non-British nationals. This letter was, therefore, a contradiction of the update issued to MPs less than 24 hours earlier by HO which had advised that urgent cases relating to non-British nationals should be submitted to it.”
- 25 August—from the FCDO’s Parliamentary Private Secretary: “There was no mention (from the PPS to FCDO ministers!) of the FCDO Special Cases category/inbox. Instead, the direction she gave was for us to submit cases for non-British nationals to HO. [...] We were back once more to the position of thinking that the FCDO Special Cases category/inbox was a red herring.”

Conclusions and recommendations

Planning for withdrawal

1. The manner of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan was a disaster, a betrayal of our allies, and weakens the trust that helps to keep British people safe. It will affect the UK's international reputation and interests for many years to come. There were systemic failures of intelligence, diplomacy, planning and preparation, which raise questions about machinery of Government, principally the National Security Council:
 - The UK Government failed effectively to shape or respond to Washington's decision to withdraw, despite having had 18 months' notice.
 - The UK Government failed to predict the speed of the Taliban's takeover. The fact that this came as a surprise to many, including the militants themselves, does not excuse the UK's failures, but rather makes it more urgent to identify where its intelligence gathering, analysis and planning fell short. The failure to heed warnings from the Kabul Embassy points to systemic shortcomings in drawing on officials' in-country knowledge. Despite this, the FCDO has sought to avoid responsibility, and the parameters of its internal review have been set to avoid the topic of intelligence altogether.
 - The FCDO failed to make the necessary preparations for withdrawal, in terms of laying the groundwork for an evacuation with third countries, considering and planning for which of the UK's in-country partners should be prioritised for evacuation, and putting in place a robust timeline to evacuate the Embassy that could adapt to fast-changing scenarios. (Paragraph 12)
2. Once the US decision was announced in February 2020, the UK Government should have immediately taken steps to develop a clear and coherent policy on who it would prioritise for evacuation; to gather and securely store information on eligible locally-employed staff, including biometric data; and to build contacts with neighbouring countries to facilitate any evacuation. It did none of these adequately. Though the UK Government saw a rapid collapse in Afghanistan as a plausible scenario, the FCDO failed properly to prepare for it. As the situation deteriorated, the Foreign Secretary should have taken the lead on contact with third countries, making intensive efforts to put in place evacuation routes. Instead, he delegated meetings to junior ministers, only stepping into action once Kabul had fallen. It is unacceptable that Afghans who supported the UK mission were put at risk by the failure to secure sensitive documents held by the British Embassy. This points to serious problems with the FCDO's ability to process and act on intelligence about the deteriorating situation, and to put its evacuation procedures into action. Embassy staff—who faced personal risk in a high-pressure situation—should have been supported through clear, timely and realistic procedures for closing the Embassy that were capable of being put into action within hours, as became necessary. The department's apparent failure adequately to test Embassy close-down plans is a derogation of its basic responsibility to staff. (Paragraph 13)

3. Most damning for the FCDO is the total absence of a plan—developed in conjunction with the Home Office—for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government. The Government was never going to be able to evacuate all—or even many—of these people. But it failed to deliver the bare minimum that we owed them: a well-considered plan for who would be prioritised for extraction, and clear communications to those seeking help. The lack of clarity led to confusion and false hope, hindering individuals from making the best decision for themselves based on a realistic understanding of their situation. The UK has a responsibility to those who it encouraged and funded to take on high-profile roles that place them at risk from the Taliban, but the FCDO did not consider whether or how to evacuate these individuals until after the fall of Kabul in mid-August. This is a serious failure. (Paragraph 14)
4. Managing a complex evacuation requires Government departments to work together seamlessly, including the FCDO, MOD, intelligence agencies, Home Office and Cabinet Office. The National Security Council is “the main forum for collective discussion of the government’s objectives for national security”. It failed to adequately coordinate cross-Government planning and preparation for the withdrawal from Afghanistan. (Paragraph 15)
5. *When engaging in fragile environments, the Government should keep better records—securely held—on locally-employed staff to ensure that any evacuation can be carried out more effectively. It should devise a policy, based on clear and fair principles, about the assistance that will be offered to local partners in the event of a security deterioration, and report to us when it has done so. In its response to this report, the FCDO should explain why its Lessons Learned review only covers the period from April 2021 onwards, and why it does not cover intelligence matters. We ask the Government to share with this Committee the results of its internal investigation into the failure to destroy sensitive documents at the Kabul Embassy. The FCDO should review its procedures for evacuating embassies and destroying sensitive documents and data, and report back to the Committee on the steps it will take to avoid a similar failure happening again.* (Paragraph 16)

The evacuation

6. The absence of the FCDO’s top leadership—both ministerial and official—when Kabul fell is a grave indictment of the attitudes of the Government, representing a failure of leadership across the board in the Foreign Office. In particular, the fact that the department’s top civil servant did not return until the civilian evacuation was over, while staff across the department struggled to implement a poorly-planned evacuation process under intense pressure, is difficult to understand and impossible to excuse. While it is essential for those at all levels in Government to take leave, this must be tempered at the most senior level by the need to exercise leadership in a crisis. Despite expressions of regret from the then-Foreign Secretary and Permanent Under-Secretary, there was no discussion of this point in the department’s Lessons Learned review. In addition to the absence of the FCDO leadership in London, there was a gap on the ground in Kabul: the Government withdrew all FCDO consular staff from Kabul as the evacuation operation began and there was a 48-hour wait

before their replacements arrived. This mismanagement and under-resourcing of the evacuation effort in a crucial period likely cost hundreds of people their chance to leave the country, and as a result likely cost lives. (Paragraph 20)

7. The effort to evacuate UK and Afghan nationals after the fall of Kabul represented a heroic effort by the individuals involved, with many—both inside and outside Government—working under enormous pressure to save lives. We commend the bravery of the military and civilian personnel on the ground in Afghanistan during the evacuation, and the hard work and dedication of those coordinating it from elsewhere, including many dedicated civil servants in London. We regret that their sacrifices were undermined by deep failures of leadership in the system they were working within. (Paragraph 31)
8. However, on the strategic and humanitarian level the evacuation fell disastrously short. Shortcomings in ARAP, the scheme to evacuate Afghans who had worked directly for the UK Government, left many waiting for a response until it was too late. A total failure to plan how to help Afghans at risk due to their work to promote British values without working directly for the Government—the “Special Cases”—left many in danger. Some will have not taken other options, as they remained with false hope of a rescue that would never come. The Foreign Office wasted time by exploring the options for such a scheme only after the Taliban takeover. The hasty effort to draw up a list of those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed. In the absence of criteria that allowed for meaningful prioritisation of cases, the scheme seemingly relied on MPs’ interventions as its primary measure of the vulnerability of those seeking extraction. Given MPs’ responsibility to represent constituents, not to triage needs, this was never going to be a reliable way to deliver the right outcome—but only to attempt to silence criticism. The department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions, such as rostering an adequate number of staff to key teams, despite the fact that this Committee raised similar issues around the FCDO’s response to the pandemic. Underlying operational problems—such as a failure to integrate FCO and DFID IT systems—further undermined the effort. Junior staff were left unsupported to deliver a poorly designed policy, making life-and-death decisions with little support or guidance, at a cost to their mental health. While a degree of chaos is to be expected in a crisis, the mismanagement of this category of evacuations was inexcusable. The chaos and lack of preparation was not the sole responsibility of the department. A lack of seriousness, application and coordination at a political level across Government fatally undermined the task in hand. In short, ministers failed to provide adequate leadership at a time of international crisis. This betrayal of our allies is not only morally wrong, but has undermined the credibility of the UK with serious consequences for our interests around the world, damaging trust, encouraging challenge, and making it less likely that people in fragile states will be willing to engage with UK missions in future. (Paragraph 32)
9. The evacuation required clear decision-making, strong political leadership and tight coordination. We have seen little evidence of this. To the contrary, decision-making was so unclear that even senior officials such as the National Security Adviser could not be certain how key decisions were authorised. It is clearly unacceptable that neither ministers nor civil servants have been able to articulate the operational chain

of command involved in conducting a major evacuation. The political leadership on offer vacillated so much that no clear priorities were set for who should be evacuated and in what order, giving many thousands of vulnerable people, to whom we owed a debt, a hope that could never be met. Although ministers claimed that they worked closely together, the decision to run the operation through three departments undermined coordination. This is particularly disturbing at a time when the UK faces significant foreign policy challenges, including in relation to Ukraine, Russia, the Balkan states, Yemen, and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Unity of purpose, clarity and coordination require serious intent and consistent political leadership. (Paragraph 33)

10. The failure to plan for the Special Cases evacuations, or to put in place a fair and robust prioritisation system, left the process open to arbitrary political interventions. This is illustrated by the case of the Nowzad animal charity. Amid intense media attention, its staff were called for evacuation at the last minute, despite not meeting the FCDO's prioritisation criteria, after a mysterious intervention from elsewhere in Government. Multiple senior officials believed that the Prime Minister played a role in this decision. We have yet to be offered a plausible alternative explanation for how it came about. Meanwhile, the charity's founder was allowed to use a charter flight to rescue his animals, absorbing significant Government resources in the midst of the biggest military airlift in decades. We make no criticism of the organisation, its staff, or those who campaigned on its behalf: they were open about their case and objectives, which were in keeping with their stated priorities. The same cannot be said for the Government. The episode highlights deep problems with Government decision-making. First, that it allowed its resources to be absorbed by media campaigns, rather than focusing on the humanitarian and strategic implications of the crisis. Second, that it made important policy decisions through informal, unaccountable means, which were later impossible to trace. Our concern is not so much with the fact that there was an intervention to overrule the FCDO's prioritisation process, which was itself deeply flawed, but with the fact that the department has been unable to trace the source of this intervention, and that, as a result, no one can be held accountable and the decision-making process cannot be properly scrutinised. (Paragraph 37)
11. The FCDO has repeatedly given us answers that, in our judgement, are at best intentionally evasive, and often deliberately misleading. On Nowzad, they only admitted that the case had been in any way unusual when faced with the evidence of whistleblowers. At best, the Permanent Under-Secretary displayed a worrying lack of knowledge of the department he leads, and a determination to avoid unearthing the facts that would allow him to answer our questions. Far from the routine process he initially described to us, this case involved an unknown decision-maker in Government completely overruling the FCDO's system for prioritising individuals for evacuation, triggering urgent last-minute consultations with some of the most senior people in Government, in discussions with no notes taken or decisions recorded. It seems unlikely that the Permanent Under-Secretary would not have been aware of this at the time, particularly given the high sensitivity and media interest in this topic. It seems still less likely that he would not have become aware of it later, when preparing to answer our questions on the matter. (Paragraph 41)

12. Without the intervention of whistleblowers, we would not be aware that this intervention had taken place at all, despite asking many questions on the topic. Parliament can only perform its role of holding Government to account if it can be confident that it is receiving honest answers to its questions. The relationship between the Committee and department relies on a degree of candour and rigour, and this appears to have been sadly missing, with the integrity of the department's senior leaders called into question. Officials should not be expected to engage—nor be complicit—in obscuring the facts in order to shield others from political accountability. Under the leadership of a Foreign Secretary who took up her post after these events, the FCDO has had the opportunity to make a fresh start and re-commit to transparency and positive engagement with Parliament. On this issue, it has so far failed to do so. We look forward to this being rectified. Those who lead the Foreign Office should be ashamed that two civil servants of great integrity and clear ability felt compelled to risk their careers to bring to light the appalling mismanagement of the Afghan crisis, and the misleading statements to Parliament that followed. *The department should carry out a review of its internal processes for officials to register concerns about policies, and report its conclusions back to this Committee. It should study the testimony provided to this Committee by both whistleblowers and determine how it will address the problems they raise.* (Paragraph 42)
13. The FCDO failed to take the basic administrative step of recording its decisions. It is fundamental to any bureaucracy to know precisely what decisions have been made, by whom, with what authority, and when. This would be a serious failure at any time, but during the withdrawal from Afghanistan may have led to the loss of life. It is the responsibility of the Permanent Under-Secretary to ensure that this system operates effectively. The Committee has lost confidence in the Permanent Under-Secretary, who should consider his position. (Paragraph 43)

The future relationship with Afghanistan

14. The Taliban takeover is a tragedy for Afghanistan, marking the single biggest reversal in the rights of women and girls in a generation. We welcome the Government's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban at official level: it is valid to withhold recognition, but attempts to isolate the new regime entirely may only worsen the situation for the Afghan people, reduce the UK's influence, and leave a vacuum to be filled by powers such as China. The Government should re-establish a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan as soon as it is safe to do so. It should coordinate its engagement with its partners to ensure that the international community delivers clear, consistent messages to the Taliban as far as possible, and should support international efforts to track and monitor commitments made by the Taliban, and hold the regime accountable for its actions. It should commit, and press other countries to commit, not to send male-only delegations to meet with the regime. (Paragraph 48)
15. *It is important for the UK's engagement with the Taliban to come alongside extensive and targeted outreach to Afghan civil society, particularly those active on the ground. It should consult these groups on its policies towards Afghanistan and support them where possible through funding and other forms of engagement. This is important to*

protect the country's civil society ecosystem, preventing the destruction of the progress it has made in recent decades; to ensure that their views are taken into account in the design of UK policy; and to show the Taliban that the world is watching its actions. In its response to this report, the Government should set out the steps it is taking to engage with Afghan civil society. In the longer term, we recommend that the Foreign Office should continue to invest in expertise on Afghanistan—drawing on that held by former DFID personnel—in order to inform its policy and ensure that we are ready when there is a change to re-engage with the country on a more profound level. This should include meaningful engagement with members of the British Afghan diaspora. The FCDO should also establish an atrocity and human rights abuse monitoring mechanism for Afghanistan. (Paragraph 49)

16. The UK's engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades ties us to the country. The overriding goal of our policy towards Afghanistan should be to reduce the impact of the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the international withdrawal. Humanitarian aid is vital, but will not be enough to avert catastrophe if the economy remains paralysed. A functioning economy is needed for delivery of aid at any scale, and for ordinary Afghans to support themselves. The current liquidity crisis is, in large part, created by the international community's measures against the Taliban. (Paragraph 55)
17. *The UK should try to mitigate the impact of the Taliban regime by thinking creatively about the provision of aid. For example, online classes accessible from home and alternative measures to help the most vulnerable Afghan citizens should be considered. These should include working with partners, including the US, to consider how to release the Afghan reserves, and support efforts to deliver technical assistance to the central bank. We agree with our colleagues on the International Development Committee that the UK Government has been too slow to find ways to unblock the Afghan banking system. Regional partners, such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan, will also be key in rebuilding the economy. The UK should aim to resume bilateral development funding to Afghanistan when feasible, working in concert with partners, and drawing on the examples of delivering aid to countries where the government faces sanctions, or lacks legitimacy, such as Myanmar, Yemen and Syria. Now is not the moment to restore this funding, but withholding assistance indefinitely will not serve anyone's interests. (Paragraph 56)*
18. The halving of UK aid to Afghanistan in 2020/1 is an example of the harm done by aid cuts that were designed to reduce spending at speed, rather than considering wider UK strategic interests. These cuts, made at a time when Afghanistan was facing the withdrawal of international troops, speak to a disconnect between the UK's development aid and its wider goals—something the merged FCDO was founded to overcome. *The Government should commit to greater assistance to Afghanistan within the current three-year spending review period. Its forthcoming International Development Strategy should set out principles for delivering aid in hostile states where the UK's strategic interests are so deeply engaged, drawing on the Government's wider country expertise to devise an aid strategy integrated with wider goals. The UK should place Afghan women at the heart of its policy towards the country, ensuring that they are consulted, and that aid reaches those in the country. The Government and partners should make a unified clear commitment to supporting and allowing*

female aid workers to operate in the country. (Paragraph 57)

19. The chaos and failures of the withdrawal and evacuation make it even more important—and morally imperative—that the UK commits to a serious strategy leading to future engagement with Afghanistan, in cooperation with allies and regional states. The withdrawal and the Taliban takeover have serious implications for British security and wider interests. It has heightened the terror threat and lessened our ability to identify and tackle these issues. In particular, remote counterterrorism operations run the risk of further damaging our interests in the country by causing civilian casualties. Along with traditional partners, such as the EU, the UK shares significant interests with countries in the region, such as China, in terms of regional stability, security, and avoiding state collapse. *The UK should combine diplomacy, aid and trade in a concerted and strategic approach to future policy towards Afghanistan. This will mean patient committed engagement with the regime and with its domestic critics; investment in a substantial package of humanitarian and—eventually—development aid for the country; targeted support to rebuild the economy; and coordinated messaging towards the regime with both partner and antagonist governments.* (Paragraph 60)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 17 May 2022

Members present

Tom Tugendhat, in the Chair

Chris Bryant

Liam Byrne

Stewart Malcolm McDonald

Henry Smith

Royston Smith

Graham Stringer

Draft Report (*Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 60 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First 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 24 May at 2.00 pm]

Witnesses

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

Wednesday 1 September 2021

Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP [Q1–151](#)

Tuesday 19 October 2021

General David Petraeus (ret.), Commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan (2010–11) [Q152–167](#)

Laurel Miller, Deputy/Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (2013–2017), US State Department; **Professor Michael Semple**, Deputy to the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan (2004–08) [Q168–191](#)

Shaharзад Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission; **Shukria Barakzai**, Former Afghan MP [Q192–210](#)

Tuesday 23 November 2021

Rt Hon Rory Stewart, Former Secretary of State for International Development; **The Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL**, Former Chief of the Defence Staff [Q211–236](#)

Rudra Chaudhuri, Director, Carnegie India; **Kori Schake**, Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute [Q237–250](#)

Tuesday 7 December 2021

Sir Philip Barton KCMG OBE, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; **Nigel Casey MVO**, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; **Sir Laurie Bristow KCMG**, Former British Ambassador to Afghanistan [Q251–459](#)

Tuesday 25 January 2022

Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Ministry of Defence; **Admiral Sir Ben Key KCB CBE**, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, Ministry of Defence [Q460–508](#)

The Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State (Minister for South and Central Asia, United Nations and the Commonwealth), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; **Nigel Casey MVO**, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [Q509–523](#)

Monday 21 March 2022

Sir Philip Barton KCMG OBE, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; **Nigel Casey MVO**, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [Q524–628](#)

Monday 25 April 2022

Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office

[Q649-732](#)

Published written evidence

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

AFG numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Afghanistan and Central Asian Association ([AFG0029](#))
- 2 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict ([AFG0031](#))
- 3 Anonymised ([AFG0007](#))
- 4 Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) ([AFG0014](#))
- 5 BBC World Service ([AFG0024](#))
- 6 Bowen-Jones, David (Managing Director, TV Production Partnership Ltd) ([AFG0022](#))
- 7 Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum ([AFG0001](#))
- 8 Christian Aid ([AFG0018](#))
- 9 Conservative friends of Hazaras (CfoH) ([AFG0039](#))
- 10 D'Alessandra, Federica; Ross Gildea; and Emily Jones ([AFG0015](#))
- 11 Davis, Dickie ([AFG0035](#))
- 12 Delić, Denisa (Advocacy Director, International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0055](#))
- 13 Delić, Denisa (Advocacy Director, International Rescue Committee) ([AFG0021](#))
- 14 Drugs and (dis)order Research Project ([AFG0008](#))
- 15 EMERGENCY ([AFG0037](#))
- 16 FCDO ([AFG0012](#))
- 17 Hazara Committee in UK ([AFG0040](#))
- 18 Human Rights Watch ([AFG0032](#))
- 19 Internews Europe ([AFG0036](#))
- 20 Judges, Association of Women (Legal Adviser to the Lord Chief Justice) ([AFG0042](#))
- 21 Landman, Professor Todd (Professor of Political Science, University of Nottingham); Dr Edward Burke (Associate Professor, University of Nottingham); Professor Rory Cormac (Professor of International Relations, University of Nottingham); Dr Louise Kettle (Assistant Professor, University of Nottingham); Dr Jason Klocek (Assistant Professor, University of Nottingham); Professor Andrew Mumford (Professor of War Studies, University of Nottingham); Professor Bettina Renz (Professor of International Security, University of Nottingham); Dr Carole Spary (Associate Professor, University of Nottingham); Dr Jonathan Sullivan (Associate Professor, University of Nottingham); and Professor Nigel White (Professor of Public International Law, University of Nottingham) ([AFG0003](#))
- 22 MP, Crispin Blunt (Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT+ Rights) ([AFG0017](#))
- 23 Marshall, Mr Raphael (Desk Officer (formerly)) at FCDO ([AFG0038](#))
- 24 Marshall, Mr Raphael (Desk Officer (formerly)) at FCDO ([AFG0052](#))
- 25 Marshall, Mr Raphael ((Desk Officer (formerly)) at FCDO ([AFG0050](#))
- 26 McKay, Gillian (PhD Candidate, University of Leeds) ([AFG0025](#))
- 27 Nowzad charity ([AFG0047](#))

- 28 Peace Direct ([AFG0009](#))
- 29 Protection Approaches; and Stonewall ([AFG0041](#))
- 30 Reprieve ([AFG0046](#))
- 31 Stewart, Josie ([AFG0054](#))
- 32 The HALO Trust ([AFG0023](#))
- 33 The Law Society of England and Wales ([AFG0043](#))
- 34 The Rights Lab, University of Nottingham ([AFG0004](#))
- 35 Women for Women International ([AFG0045](#))
- 36 World Food Programme ([AFG0005](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	In the room: the UK's role in multilateral diplomacy	HC 199
2nd	Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond	HC 198
3rd	Sovereignty for sale: the FCDO's role in protecting strategic British assets	HC 197
4th	The UK Government's Response to the Myanmar Crisis	HC 203
5th	Global Health, Global Britain	HC 200
6th	Sovereignty for sale: follow-up to the acquisition of Newport Wafer Fab	HC 1245
7th	Lagos calling: Nigeria and the Integrated Review	HC 202
1st Special	A climate for ambition: Diplomatic preparations for COP26: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2019–21	HC 440
2nd Special	Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2021–22: In the room: the UK's role in multilateral diplomacy	HC 618
3rd Special	Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report: The UK Government's Response to the Myanmar Crisis	HC 718
4th Special	Government response to the Committee's Third Report: Sovereignty for sale: the FCDO's role in protecting strategic British assets	HC 807
5th Special	Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 840
6th Special	Global Health, Global Britain: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 955
7th Special	Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report: Sovereignty for sale: follow-up to the acquisition of Newport Wafer Fab	HC 1273