



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

8 October 2020

THE PRIME MINISTER

Dear Sir Bernard,

During my appearance before the Liaison Committee on 16 September, I said that I would write following-up on points raised by Catherine McKinnell (Q32), Sir Robert Neil (Q112), Tom Tugendhat (Q125), Sarah Champion (Qs 138 and 142). Catherine McKinnell and Sarah Champion have subsequently written to me with more detail about their questions. I will respond separately to the issues you have raised in your letter of 29 September.

1. Government response to the Petitions Committee's First Report on maternity and parental leave (Q32)

I understand how difficult these unprecedented times are for expectant and new parents and that the experience of becoming a mother or father may not have been what some new parents had expected.

We carefully considered the recommendations made by the Petition Select Committee about the impact of the pandemic on parents. We believe that for the vast majority of parents, the current arrangements have been sufficiently generous to cater for the variety of circumstances that new parents have found themselves in as a result of the pandemic. Overall, our parental leave and pay system is generous and flexible. We offer more than three times the EU minimum requirement for Maternity Leave which requires Member States to give pregnant women and new mothers access to 14 weeks of paid leave (the UK provides 39 weeks of paid leave). With the relaxation of social distancing rules since lockdown, there are also now more opportunities for many new parents to spend their Maternity, Paternity, Adoption Leave and Shared Parental Leave in some of the ways they had envisaged before the pandemic.

We have enabled employers to furlough parents who were unable to work due to the closure of schools, nurseries and childcare services. This included individuals due to return to work at the end of their statutory parental leave. In addition, although the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is now closed to new joiners, we have made an exception for employees on statutory parental leave at the time the Scheme was restricted. We have legislated to ensure expectant mothers starting their Maternity Leave are not financially disadvantaged, as a result of being furloughed in the period that determines eligibility for Statutory Maternity Pay and the amount of pay that the mother will receive. The same principle applies to new fathers and adopters, and the legislation that we brought into force makes corresponding changes to other statutory parental pay schemes.

2. Continued updates on negotiations for businesses (Q112)

UK Ministers and officials engage with business regularly. At the end of the year we will be outside the single market and the customs union, whatever the outcome of negotiations, and intensive planning is underway to help ensure that businesses and citizens are ready to take advantage of the opportunities and changes that will bring. Businesses will need to prepare for life outside both at the end of 2020, and many have already done so.

3. Use of the word genocide in respect of the Uyghur Muslims (Q125)

We are deeply concerned about the human rights violations taking place in Xinjiang. As I made clear to the Committee, the term genocide has a specific definition in international law. It is the long-standing policy of the British Government that any judgment as to whether war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide have occurred is a matter for judicial decision.

However, we have been clear that we believe there are egregious human rights violations targeting Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, China. We regularly raise our concerns directly with Chinese authorities. The Foreign Secretary did so with his counterpart Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi most recently in July. We are the only country to have led a joint statement at the UN on this issue. Most recently, at the Human Rights Council in June, we read out a statement on behalf of 28 countries. We also led a joint statement at the UN Third Committee in October 2019.

In addition, we have funded research that has drawn attention to Uyghur forced labour in international supply chains and we have urged UK businesses to conduct due diligence to ensure they are not contributing to abuses. We will continue to play a leading role in holding China to account for its gross human rights violations in Xinjiang.

4. International Development Act 2002 (Q138)

Our commitment to spending 0.7 per cent of national income on development assistance is enshrined in law, and we continue to report spending on Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the OECD's Development Assistance Committee. Alongside its primary purposes of poverty reduction, gender equality and meeting 0.7 per cent, the legislation that Ms Champion cites also allows Ministers to take into account other political and economic considerations, including those with significant UK-facing benefits. We will continue to look at how this money can be spent most effectively in our national interest, including through the Integrated Review.

5. Funding a specific Rwandan girls' project (Q142)

I have been clear that there is one step that would improve countless lives – and make the world an infinitely better place – and that is to make sure that around the world all girls go to school. Allowing girls into school is both profoundly right in itself and the single most powerful spur to development and progress globally.

The drop in GNI caused by the economic impact of Covid-19, and meeting the new demands for action that this pandemic has created, meant that a tough decision was made not to go ahead with the life-skills programme, Investing in Adolescent Girls Rwanda, which had not yet started.

We have protected schools and education spending both in Rwanda and across the world. This is expected to total over £500 million globally this financial year, and approximately £13.6 million in Rwanda.

Our flagship education programme Learning for All in Rwanda aims to improve learning outcomes and equitable access to primary and secondary education. It has trained 25,000 primary teachers to support girls in the classroom and has supported female teachers into leadership roles in schools across the country.

We are also supporting women and girls in Rwanda through our lifesaving social protection assistance, providing pregnant women and young children with nutritional support to reduce infant mortality and make childbirth safer.

6. Disability Inclusion

In her letter, Ms Champion also raised international development and disability inclusion.

I am proud that this country remains a global leader on disability inclusion, having hosted the Global Disability Summit in 2018. Ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities in economic and social progress in low and middle-income countries remains a core commitment of this Government.

We want a world where all people with disabilities, in all stages of their lives, are engaged, empowered and able to exercise and enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others. We are committed to supporting a long-term movement for change on this neglected issue.

The disability research programme led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) is central to this commitment. The overall lifetime programme value of this programme (£7 million) has not been cut; but in light of the economic impact of Covid-19, hard choices across the aid budget have had to be made for this year including the budget available to LSHTM.

In managing the ODA review, we sought to protect our focus on poverty reduction for the 'bottom billion', as well as tackling climate change and reversing biodiversity loss, championing girls' education, UK leadership in the global response to Covid-19, and campaigning on issues such as media freedom and freedom of religious belief.

I know that FCDO staff are working closely with LSHTM, and all of our partners, to seek the most responsible way forward in light of extraordinary circumstances.

7. Support for the Armed Forces charity sector during the pandemic (Q148)

I would like to thank our Armed Forces for all they have done during the pandemic. From supporting distribution and delivery of PPE, to personnel supporting hospitals, their contribution has been outstanding.

The Office for Veterans' Affairs is working in partnership with Government Departments and better coordinating charity sector functions in order to deliver on our life-long duty to those who have selflessly served our country. We recently announced £6 million of new funding for 100 military charities across the UK to support serving personnel, veterans and their families during the coronavirus pandemic.

We will continue to work with the charity sector to ensure that our service men and women and veterans receive the support that they require. We are committed to ensuring that the Armed Forces community continues to have access to the world-leading recovery systems they need and deserve.

My office has passed on Mr Ellwood's request for a meeting between him, the Armed Forces charities and the Chancellor. The Chancellor's office will be in contact with Mr Ellwood in due course.

Two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The top signature is a cursive 'Z' followed by a series of loops. The bottom signature is a cursive 'A' followed by a large circular flourish and a long horizontal stroke.