



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**Flying Home: The FCO's
consular response to
the COVID-19 pandemic:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Third Report**

**Seventh Special Report of Session
2019–21**

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 6 October 2020*

The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Tom Tugendhat MP](#) (*Conservative, Tonbridge and Malling*) (Chair)

[Chris Bryant MP](#) (*Labour, Rhondda*)

[Neil Coyle MP](#) (*Labour, Bermondsey and Old Southwark*)

[Alicia Kearns MP](#) (*Conservative, Rutland and Melton*)

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Glasgow South*)

[Andrew Rosindell MP](#) (*Conservative, Romford*)

[Bob Seely MP](#) (*Conservative, Isle of Wight*)

[Henry Smith MP](#) (*Conservative, Crawley*)

[Royston Smith MP](#) (*Conservative, Southampton, Itchen*)

[Graham Stringer MP](#) (*Labour, Blackley and Broughton*)

[Claudia Webbe MP](#) (*Independent, Leicester East*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2020. This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/copyright.

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are, Lauren Boyer (Clerk), Clare Genis (Committee Operations Manager), James Hockaday (Committee Specialist), Dr Ariella Huff, (Senior Committee Specialist), James Jennion (Committee Specialist), Alice Lynch (Committee Specialist), Antonia McAndrew-Noon (Media and Communications Officer), Emma Makey (Committee Specialist), Chris Shaw (Clerk), Daniela Sindrestean (Committee Operations Officer), Saffron Stewart (Committee Support Apprentice), Nicholas Wade (Senior Committee Specialist) and Joe Williams (Media and Communications Manager)

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6106; the Committee's email address is fac@parliament.uk.

You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsForeign](#).

Seventh Special Report

On 28 July 2020, the Foreign Affairs Committee published its Third Report of Session 2019–21, [Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (HC 643). The Government's response was received on 28 September 2020 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government is grateful for the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) report "*Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic*" on the Government's consular response to the COVID-19 crisis. We welcome the thanks the Rt. Hon. Tom Tugendhat, Chair of the FAC, and the committee, gave to our staff during the evidence session with Minister Adams in June, and recognition that many had been asked to do things that they did not expect to do, in situations that nobody was expecting to be in, to support British people around the world.

This was a crisis response that had no post-war precedent in terms of scale, complexity and duration:

- Between January and April the FCDO launched seven separate crisis operations culminating in the global repatriation charter operation;
- Our charter operation brought over 38,000 people back to the UK, on 186 flights, from 57 different countries and territories;
- Ministry of Defence (MOD) flights helped hundreds more, including from some of the furthest-flung locations;
- More than 19,000 British passengers from 60 cruise ships were successfully disembarked, including 1,500 people on direct or supported charters;
- Staff worked around the clock to keep hubs and transit routes open, and provide consular assistance to those most in need, enabling 1.3 million British nationals to return via commercial routes, of whom we estimate 132,000 were on flights directly assisted by HMG;
- We collaborated with partners to ensure the return of more than 4,000 British travellers on their charter flights, and supported more than 8,000 of their nationals in return;

But these statistics tell only part of the story. Every flight required specific permissions and each brought its own, individual challenges. Some locations were remote e.g. Fiji where we supported British travellers in the aftermath of a cyclone. Others presented acute logistical challenges e.g. organising internal transfers by small boat and small aircraft in the Philippines and providing assistance at every stage of these journeys. And the volume of travellers was huge e.g. from India where 66 HMG flights brought back nearly 18,000 people, each of whom required an individual movement plan and permissions

from the Government of India just to get to the airport. That operation alone required more than 4,000 vehicles, covering over 2.87 million kilometres. Further examples of the extraordinary complexity the operations overcame are set out in our response below.

In parallel the then the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), now the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), also provided extraordinary consular support, giving bespoke support to thousands, from helping them get medication to providing just under 3000 repatriation loans with a total loan value of over £2m, and advice to millions. The scale of that work speaks for itself: by the end of May we had published more than 4,300 travel advice updates, compared to 2,300 in the whole of 2019. Our pages received 51 million hits in the first five months of 2020. And between 16 March and 17 June, the FCDO and our contracted providers handled over 172,000 telephone enquiries, compared to 104,000 in the same period in 2019. That assistance was provided alongside a wide range of unique consular demands, ranging from support for British prisoners in lockdown and seeking furloughs through to disrupted surrogacy arrangements.

This said, the FAC's report provides important feedback to ensure that we continue to improve the support we provide to British nationals around the world at the current time, as well as building future capability.

Since January, and particularly since mid-March, the FCDO has led the Government's consular response, working with other departments and organisations including the Department for Transport (DfT), the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE). Throughout the crisis, we have continually learnt lessons including by substantially expanding our ability to communicate with and support British nationals in times of crisis, developing new repatriation capabilities, introducing new means of financial support, and developing our ability to deliver services remotely.

Based on our experience and a wide range of feedback, we are now examining how to improve further our capacity to plan for, and respond to, crises on this scale in the future. That includes being ready to respond to demand for consular services that may arise over the next year as the pandemic evolves. We have set up a Repatriation Taskforce until the end of 2020 to monitor the global situation and run more charters if needed, and we are building a strong long-term capability to move people in an emergency. We are also looking in particular at our remote capabilities, consular staffing, crisis contingency planning, communications, travel advice function, and information management and telephony systems.

Scale of the Response

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

The FAC report rightly highlights the significant challenges that COVID-19 presented and we are grateful that it acknowledges the efforts of staff around the world, noting that "*many went above and beyond to deliver admirable service in extremely difficult circumstances*" and "*worked around the clock and did an excellent job helping UK citizens get home*".

The scale of our response was huge. As noted above, the charter operation alone brought over 38,000 people back to the UK, on 186 flights, from 57 different countries and territories. MOD flights helped hundreds more get home from the furthest-flung locations. And more than 19,000 British passengers from 60 cruise ships were successfully disembarked, including 1,500 people on direct or supported charters, with the assistance of a dedicated consular 'cruise ships' team.

Teams in country also worked around the clock to keep hubs and transit routes open, allowing British nationals to access flights. Since January we estimate that this enabled over 1.3 million people to return to the UK via commercial routes. Beyond HMG's work with governments and airlines to keep commercial flights running, we estimate that over 132,000 of these returned on commercial flights that were directly assisted by HMG, most frequently our consular staff.

As such, the Government does not believe the report fully represents how much we did, or how quickly. Our response included early repatriation flights from China in January and February, work with cruise companies to bring back passengers in February and March, and responding to the crisis in Peru at the same time as others countries. These operations brought back several thousand British nationals.

Moreover the report does not sufficiently recognise the central importance of keeping commercial airlines flying and routes open. As noted above, this allowed 1.3 million people to return to the UK. Attempting this mostly through charters or by charters alone would have required the Government to organise thousands of flights. Instead we worked at pace with airlines to bring people back. This was the most efficient and effective approach: it was faster, and allowed us to focus charters on those gaps that needed government intervention. It also reflected our assessment that undercutting commercial airlines threatened routes, exacerbating the problems faced by British nationals around the world.

An example of the success of the Government's actions is that, by 30 March, the Foreign Secretary had already spoken to over 20 of his counterparts to support the work and the FCDO had helped hundreds of thousands of British nationals to return including: 150,000 from Spain, 5,000 from Cyprus and 8,500 from Morocco.

While the report notes the nature and scale of the challenge faced earlier this year, it does not fully recognise the uncertain situation in which British diplomatic missions were operating. Measures ranging from a total shut down of domestic transport through to closure of international air space were introduced in many countries, often with little notice. As noted above, the former meant that, in some countries, to repatriate any British traveller required complex ground operations before a flight was even available, while the latter was made even more difficult to manage by the varied shut down of the international transport network.

Our response required redeploying thousands of FCDO and other UK government staff in the UK and overseas, while developing wholly new ways of working, mainly from home, to deliver a new approach to consular support and repatriations at pace. Those staff did extraordinary things. Two examples are:

- China (Wuhan): staff who were trapped by the lockdown set up a muster point outside the airport and conducted checks for more than 8 hours to support British travellers, despite limited knowledge about potential risks.

- India: a group of 42 students and teachers from an international school, stranded in the Western Ghats region, negotiated a tough 8-hour journey across state borders to meet an FCDO staff member, who had driven 36 hours and 2,000km from Chennai to Kerala to meet the group and hand-deliver an emergency travel document to allow them to fly.

But the FCDO recognises the scale of concern from British nationals overseas set out in the FAC report, particularly in the second half of March and early April. The points raised in the report are consistent with feedback that the FCDO received over the same period from MPs and directly from affected British people and their families. We sought to respond to concerns and ensure those British nationals who were temporarily overseas and wished to return to the UK were able to do so. A specific crisis operation for Peru was launched on 21 March, with the larger charter flight operation commencing on 30 March and running through to the most recent flight on 12 June.

We agree that it is vital that we learn lessons from the entire operation and improve our response to any future situations. The FCDO has reviewed its performance and operating model as a whole, with a dedicated Repatriation Taskforce working alongside reinforced consular and crisis management teams in the FCDO's Consular Directorate. We are reviewing the repatriation model that the FCDO developed, working with a third-party travel management company, to make it faster and more efficient, as well as offer a better customer service (e.g. improving booking portals and communication of flight details). We are also reviewing other models of how to repatriate people through lessons learned exercises with international partners including the French, Germans, Irish, US, Canada and others—building on the daily calls officials conducted with many during the crisis period itself, and which included co-ordination with EU partners. It is clear that many worked in similar ways to the UK (e.g. with commercial carriers) including the French and Germans who were also able to draw on airlines in which they held a large government stakes.

In parallel we are working to support individual posts, including through specific lessons learned reviews, ensuring crisis management and crisis communications training is up to date (including through new remote-modules) and learning from others. We have conducted nearly 50 lessons learned exercises with posts in our network and will adapt and add content to our crisis training materials to reflect them. We have also created a remote and more frequent version of our well-regarded crisis leadership course. This is compulsory for all Heads and Deputy Heads of Mission. It prepares senior staff to deal with the challenges of managing a crisis response, including communication with the public and the media and how to support staff and maintain resilience.

Repatriation

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

stuck abroad. The FCO should also consider allocating some of its remaining funds to help those British nationals who permanently reside overseas but who need to return to the UK due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Paragraph 2 recommendation section) (Ref. paragraph 11 main report)

The £75 million was a maximum limit, not a target. We do not accept the suggestion that unspent funds meant those in need did not receive the repatriation support that they needed. The scale of the initial challenge could never have been met exclusively by HMG charters. We spent against our funding limit where needed—to keep HMG charter flights affordable, in particular where there were fewer British travellers and where there was a need for connecting flights or significant ground transport. To date, we have spent just over £40 million gross and around £15.5 million net (final invoices are being collated). A further £4.3 million, drawn from FCO Administration and the cross-HMG Conflict Stability and Security Fund, was spent in support of the earlier repatriations from Wuhan, Peru, and cruise ships.

If we need to spend on further repatriation flights to support British travellers, we will look to find the funds within the department and, if appropriate, apply to the HM Treasury Reserve, and draw down further funding up to the maximum of £75 million.

We asked passengers to pay a reasonable share of the overall cost of their flight, just as they would do with a commercial flight. This was a policy followed by all of our partners and peers, including Germany, France, the US and Canada.

Flight charges varied, depending on the length of the flight. The policy evolved during the early stages of the operation. During the final phase of the operation ceilings were set at: up to £400 for flights of less than 6 hours; up to £600 for flights between 6 and 10 hours; and up to £800 for flight over 10 hours in duration. International counterparts who ran charters, including the French and German governments, adopted a similar policy; some of which were more than the UK e.g. €1,000 for long haul flights. Some other countries charged substantially more for flights or asked passengers to sign blank Undertakings to Repay and only subsequently set the price.

Our policy meant that we subsidised flights where it was necessary, for example where there were fewer British travellers and planes were therefore less likely to be full, even where we were able to make spare seats available to support international partners, and operations were particularly complex.

The FCDO also worked with an experienced travel operator, Corporate Travel Management (CTM), to keep costs for travellers down, running competitive tenders and managing efficient delivery of charter flights.

Further charters will be considered in line with our existing policy as set out in our published guide on support for British nationals and relevant factors, for example where there are significant numbers of British travellers, or particularly vulnerable British nationals, stranded in a location where there were no commercial options for return. We have not supported the repatriation of British nationals who live permanently overseas, where they have the infrastructure and networks to support themselves, unless they are acutely vulnerable and there are planned repatriation flights that can accommodate them.

In that situation, as is our long-standing practice, we are able to provide loans to British nationals living overseas to return to the UK if they have run out of all other options and need to leave.

Consular assistance for all British nationals, including long-term overseas residents, continues to be at the forefront of the FCDO's work overseas. Our dedicated staff across the network continue to provide consular assistance in a wide range of circumstances. Full details of our support is available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/914039/FCO_BritsAbroad_A4web_020920.pdf.

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

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

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

We ran charter flights where there were no commercial flights available or other ways to bring home British travellers. But, as noted above, while charters were the most prominent element of our response, it would not have been possible to return all British nationals travelling overseas at the start of the crisis unless we had worked to keep commercial routes open.

The decision to work with airlines reflected:

- The fact that demand far exceeded our delivery capacity: repatriating the 1.3 million British nationals who have returned since the beginning of the crisis would have required over 4000 charter flights. A dual approach allowed us to organise charter flights where they were most needed;

- Our assessment that if the Government undercut commercial airlines, commercial traffic risked stopping—exacerbating the problems faced by British nationals around the world; and
- The dynamic situation in which a number of airlines and air-links were able to restart as a result of FCDO lobbying;

To aid this the Foreign Secretary made over 60 calls to counterparts across the globe to lobby for continued air-links. Other ministers did likewise. The Government also made a sustained effort to organise commercial flights, get permissions where required, lobby for airlines to put on more flights, keep prices down and ensure they provided timely refunds.

As part of this, on 30 March, the Foreign Secretary and Transport Secretary signed a Memorandum of Understanding with 14 airlines to keep routes open and to fly hundreds of thousands of British nationals back home. Senior FCDO officials, along with officials from DfT and CAA, were in regular contact with domestic and international airlines, setting up a dedicated cross-government team to manage these relationships. Heads of Missions from across the FCDO's overseas network supported this through discussions with senior representatives from key international airlines.

Examples of where this approach helped include:

- Encouraging coordination between Air New Zealand and British Airways to keep a route open from New Zealand that resulted in the return of over 1,500 passengers after 21 April, with an affordable long-haul ticket price;
- Successful lobbying of Qatar Airways, Etihad and Emirates to reopen routes from Australia to the UK;
- Lobbying of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and Qatar to extend commercial flights from Pakistan, including at reduced cost;
- Work with Ethiopian Airlines to maintain African routes;
- Work with Cathay Pacific to help open routes from across the wider Asia Pacific region via Hong Kong; and
- Work with international partners to keep Doha Airport open, allowing more than 59,000 British travellers to transit through Qatar in March and April.

In some limited instances the FCDO did run some charter flights when commercial flights were available e.g. from New Zealand and Pakistan. This was based on a range of local factors including the number of vulnerable British travellers and the reliability of commercial options.

For New Zealand, the Foreign Secretary agreed to run HMG-facilitated charters alongside existing commercial flights in order to bring home a large number of vulnerable British travellers who were unable to wait for the return of commercial flights.

For Pakistan we ran 21 charter flights from three cities. Prior to this, a number of passengers faced complications where their flights were cancelled and then relisted at a far higher price by the airline. Running charters encouraged PIA to maintain its commercial operations,

providing more stable and competitive fares. But it also illustrated the drawbacks in running charter flights where commercial options were available. PIA reduced the cost of their fares to make them more affordable, in some cases offering cheaper flights than those of our charters, leading to cancellations and empty seats on our flights and an increased number of refund requests—a problem also faced by other comparator countries. This challenged our ability to assess future demand and diverted our resources from helping those in need elsewhere in the world.

British travellers were able to apply for an emergency loan when they had exhausted other funding options. This loan could cover essential costs including the cheapest one-way ticket to the UK as well as food and accommodation until the flight departed. Anyone who took out an emergency loan or received their ticket on the basis of an undertaking to repay (UTR) was able to pay back the money once they got home. Loans are due to be repaid six months after the individual has returned home. Flexible repayment schemes are available to enable them to do that. All loans are interest free.

6. The FCO advised UK citizens to make use of commercial flights, but they did not do enough to help people access those flights. *The Government needs to offer support that factors in the reality that for many, just because commercial flights are running, it doesn't necessarily mean that those flights are accessible. The FCO should do more to provide advice to those staying in remote areas, and to provide options to enable those people to travel to the airport. In future periods of crisis, the FCO should ensure that gov.uk's travel advice pages include advice on: safe local transport routes, local lockdown rules and airport accommodation. The FCO should also set out a plan to make this advice available and easily accessible for those without internet access.* (Paragraph 5 recommendation section) (Ref. paragraph 14 main report)

The Government was acutely conscious of the difficulties facing British travellers in a range of countries and we recognise that many found getting to airports extremely difficult.

Across the world many British travellers were not near international airports and the situation on the ground made organising charters particularly challenging, as domestic travel was curtailed and/or curfews put in place. HMG staff overseas worked day and night, supported by Ministerial lobbying, to secure the necessary permissions and arrange the logistics to help thousands of them access flights.

As well as arranging charters to a range of destinations within countries, for example eleven hubs in India, HMG organised internal travel to help stranded British travellers connect with international flights. Some examples include:

- India: the FCDO secured permission and arranged individual travel to ensure that over 18,000 people could reach their charter flights despite the world's largest and strictest lockdown. Every passenger required an individual movement plan and permissions from the Government of India before they could travel to the airport. The operation required more than 4,000 vehicles, covering over 2.87 million kilometres.
- Argentina: the FCDO organised two flights back to the UK. As all domestic flights, buses and trains were suspended, the Embassy had to arrange eight special buses to pick up people from 31 cities and towns throughout the country, which is the eighth largest in the world. In total, the buses travelled over 7,000 miles.

Staff did as much as they could to support individual travellers, for example persuading the Argentine Gendarmerie to rescue one traveller from a wetland swamp, and transport him for several hours to meet our bus on a main road.

- The Philippines: a nation of over 7,000 islands, saw domestic flights suspended and police checkpoints set up to prevent domestic travel between cities and islands. As a result of Embassy lobbying, the Philippine government issued guidelines that allowed tourists to travel if their intention was to exit the country. Once in place, the Embassy worked closely with the national flag carrier, Philippine Airlines, to organise two repatriation flights from Manila and eight sweeper flights from the islands. Due to the highly localised system of governance in the Philippines, the Embassy provided assistance at every stage of the journey, liaising with governors, mayors, the Department of Tourism, police and the coastguard. After securing the necessary permissions the Embassy facilitated domestic travel—including seven charter ferries, two cargo boats, a speedboat, 20 minibuses and four coaches, in addition to four charter bus routes to move people on the mainland to Manila.
- Nepal: 109 British nationals were stuck in isolated parts of Nepal when the coronavirus crisis broke out. Soldiers, embassy staff and locally employed drivers, travelled more than 4,000 miles through the Himalayas to 13 different districts, negotiating river crossings and landslides, to reach the tourists scattered across dozens of mountainous towns, villages and national parks—prior to getting them on flights home.

In addition to this work, the FCDO helped British travellers with serious domestic travel challenges in countries where we were not running charter flights. Examples include:

- New Zealand: domestic travel was initially banned as the country went into lockdown on 25 March, making it impossible for travellers to reach international airports. The High Commission lobbied the New Zealand government, with international partners, to reopen domestic travel and allow travellers to reach international flights. It also liaised closely with Air New Zealand to encourage increased domestic flight connections once domestic travel restrictions were lifted. The High Commission provided detailed updates on domestic transport provision, the relevant rules, and options available—including specific advice on, for example, shuttle companies which could provide transport to airports.
- Saudi Arabia: despite inter-provincial travel being banned, the Embassy in Riyadh secured exceptional permission from the Saudi government to run a number of coach routes across the country, picking up hundreds of British nationals from pre-arranged points to meet special commercial repatriation flights departing from Riyadh and Jeddah.
- Morocco: the Embassy supported the transport of British nationals from hotels to airports and from one town to another, since flights were largely only possible out of Marrakesh and Agadir.
- The Philippines: since repatriation flights ended, the Embassy has issued over 780 letters to allow those returning via commercial routes to pass through checkpoints.

The FCDO worked to ensure that our travel advice on gov.uk was constantly up to date and remained an authoritative source of trusted and relevant information throughout the pandemic, including on domestic travel within countries. As noted above, by the end of May we had published more than 4,300 updates, compared to 2,300 in the whole of 2019. We regularly published relevant detailed information including on international borders, transport links, repatriation flights and advice on how to stay safe while waiting to return to the UK. Our pages received 51 million hits in the first five months of 2020, and in many countries we supplemented our travel advice with social media updates, pointing to local information and responding to questions from British nationals.

While the travel advice we publish will always include as much information as we are able to gather, it will not always be possible for the FCDO to produce detailed and tailored advice for specific locations such as individual towns and villages. This is particularly true in fast-moving situations and in countries where British nationals are spread across a large geographical area. What we aim to do is provide our best objective view of risks and options available, and help equip travellers by helping them access available support, relevant guidance issued by local authorities, and other sources of information in the locality.

Information on travel arrangements were communicated through a range of channels, including through social media, direct email, WhatsApp, phone calls and through the CTM booking process, depending on what was effective in country. For example in Peru, we paid for Facebook adverts targeted at British nationals in Cusco and Arequipa to give them clear and urgent information about how to join a repatriation flight the next day.

We recognise that travellers do not always have access the internet, which is why our advice is available 24/7 and usually at the cost of a local phone call. As a result of the pandemic and rapidly changing international travel, significantly more people wanted to get in contact with the FCDO than normal. In March, call volumes increased from an average weekly volume of approx. 7,000 calls to a peak of over 47,500. Our single day peak on 16 March was 14,852. Demand far outstripped capacity. Responding to all calls quickly at the height of the crisis was a challenge and we know callers struggled to get through to us. As noted above, between 16 March and 17 June, the FCDO and our contracted providers handled over 172,000 telephone enquiries, compared to 104,000 in the same period in 2019.

Communications were adapted when travellers were in particularly remote locations. Embassies made sure that communications to those in such locations had longer lead in times, to allow more time to arrange travel to airports. Guidance was also provided on how to obtain documents required for passing through checkpoints when necessary, to ensure swift travel.

We welcome the FAC's recognition that the FCDO successfully scaled up its telephony operation to answer 98% of calls by the end of March. The FCDO has now restructured its call handling capacity and is already working on resolving many of the recommendations to ensure we can respond rapidly in future, including considering additional means of communication with British nationals overseas and enabling enquiry handlers to log in from anywhere in the world through their laptops to facilitate remote handling of calls.

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

British nationals who are overseas and wish to return to the UK, but cannot afford travel costs and have no other options for getting funds to return home, may apply for an emergency loan from the government as a last resort. This was not a new policy, but our processes were updated during the pandemic to be as streamlined and simple as possible. From 5 May, the FCDO offered a new loan to help BNs who were unable to return to the UK due to travel restrictions. This loan was provided to cover essential living costs such as food and accommodation while they waited to return.

The availability of the repatriation loans was widely publicised on gov.uk with details on how to obtain a loan provided on the FCDO Travel Advice pages, promoted on social media and in some cases through some paid-for marketing in countries. The communication of subsistence loans, agreed with HM Treasury, required careful handling to ensure we were able to provide the loan to those most vulnerable but to also ensure this loan was not abused, that it did not incentivise people to remain overseas, it did not pose an opportunity for fraudulent applications, and did not overwhelm call centres. For these reasons, we did not make a specific media announcement, but did make it clear on travel advice, and through consular teams.

From the launch of subsistence loans until the end of July we received 1,556 applications, of which 204 were approved. The low approval rate was due to a high number of ineligible applications, including from those who were not British nationals normally resident in the UK or who were seeking to remain overseas despite commercial travel options being available, and potentially fraudulent applications.

We agree with the FAC regarding crowdfunding. The reference to crowdfunding has been removed from both our internal guidance and public guides. We no longer advise British nationals to seek funding for repatriation through this process. This was confirmed at the FAC evidence session on 30 June 2020 by Jennifer Anderson, Director Consular Services.

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

that the FCO commits to offering loan extensions where people are in genuine financial difficulty. The FCO should also make it clear that, in current circumstances, there may be some flexibility afforded to those who are genuinely struggling to repay. (Paragraph 19)

British nationals who are overseas and wish to return to the UK, but cannot afford travel costs and have no other options for getting funds to return home, may apply for an emergency repatriation loan from the government as a last resort. From 5 May the FCDO offered a new subsistence loan to help British nationals who were unable to return to the UK due to travel restrictions. This loan was provided to cover essential living costs such as food and accommodation.

Those eligible for a loan must sign an Undertaking to Repay (UTR) in which they agree to repay the loan within six months. Loan recipients are unable to renew their passport until they repay the loan in full. If loan recipients do not repay the loan or agree a repayment plan with the FCDO within six months, their passport may be cancelled, and their details passed to Indesser, a cross government debt management service.

The FCDO will always work to agree flexible repayment plans tailored to individual circumstances and this is set out in our public guidance as well as in the documentation, which is issued with all undertaking to repay forms. In the first instance, we will work with an individual to establish what they can afford to pay through a repayment plan. The FCDO takes a case by case approach to debt repayment and understands the difficult circumstances some of customers find themselves in on return to the UK. Our staff will also, where appropriate, put individuals in touch with the National Debt line or other debt advice charities. If an individual is actively trying to repay their debt—i.e. a repayment plan is in place, irrespective of the monthly amount being repaid—we can extend the debt repayment period beyond six months. The FCDO will not cancel the passports or pass the debt to Indesser of those actively seeking to repay their loan. All loans are interest free.

Communication

9. There were real communication problems, particularly early on in the crisis—many people's calls were not answered and many were left waiting on the phone for long periods of time. The FCO successfully scaled up their operation during the crisis, but this was a slow process which left many unable to access help when they needed it the most. Whilst this was an unprecedented challenge, the FCO was too slow to react. For future reference, the department needs to be more agile to respond rapidly to emerging crises. We recommend that the FCO develops contingency plans to ensure it can scale up its response more quickly should a situation like this occur again in the future. Products such as WhatsApp Business offer the ability to communicate at speed and at scale with a self-selecting audience. The FCO should be exploring alternatives to the current offer. (Paragraph 29)

As the report notes, we substantially expanded our telephony and communications capabilities over the course of the crisis. We are committed to maintaining and improving the resilience and flexibility of our communications systems and particularly our surge capacity.

Specifically, we have increased the full time staffing in our global contact centres to ensure greater resilience for surges in demand. We are also training a cadre of staff in the UK and

in our posts abroad in other roles who will be able to handle enquiries remotely in a crisis situation to augment our full-time contact handlers. This will provide interim support until we can bring online a greater number of outsourced call handlers, which will take at least five working days.

We have also extended the channels by which British nationals can contact us at any time of day or night. For example, during the COVID-19 response we started providing written answers 24/7 through a dedicated webform on gov.uk and on the FCDO's central social media channels ensuring that BNs were actively signposted to clear, supportive and practical advice on gov.uk.

In light of the COVID-19 response we are reviewing further how we can reach British national and how they can reach us as easily as possible, including testing web chat as well as our existing channels of phone and sending messages by email and through social media.

We are also exploring how we can send "push" messages directly when required, when British Nationals are travelling abroad at scale. The ambition is that these messages will be sent via the channel and tool that the individual prefers e.g. email, text messaging, or social media. The final applications used are subject to an ongoing review. WhatsApp Business is one such option. We have reviewed our proactive communications effort during the pandemic response. Our objective was to share appropriate public information to British nationals who wanted to return to the UK or remain abroad during the coronavirus pandemic. We ran six campaigns in 32 countries across 56 markets (a market here defined as a distinct audience targeted with bespoke messaging), using social media, TV adverts and partners to share messaging and ensure it reached our target audiences. From 18 March to 7 June marketing activity drove 13.7% of all Unique Pages Views (UPVs) to the main COVID-19 Travel Advice page on gov.uk. This figure is likely to be two-thirds higher when accounting for individuals who opted out of UPV tracking via cookie consent. For comparison, gov.uk emails only drove 6.2%. Adverts on social media, from 18 March to 29 May, generated at least 373,000 UPVs to gov.uk and free BBC World advertising, from 10 April to 7 June, generated at least 30,400 UPOVs. 92 partners supported the campaign, and partnership activity, from 17 March to 5 June, generated 180,000 UPVs to the main COVID-19 gov.uk page.

None of this replaced, or was intended to replace, the consular support offered to individuals by our Consular Customer Contact Centres or consular officers across our global network. We have also reviewed communications for future repatriations operations and developed clear plans to follow if required.

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

As discussed with the FAC during previous inquiries, the LOCATE system was discontinued in 2013 since only 1% of BNs were registered on the database, and it failed to provide an accurate picture of numbers of British nationals in crisis-affected countries. Information was out of date, and it was ineffective as a crisis response tool. The FAC agreed (in their November 2014 Report) that the move away from trying to keep track of British people abroad was a sensible response to the problems encountered with previous registration systems. We have reviewed LOCATE in light of the COVID-19 crisis and are confident that it would not have provided the functionality required to support the repatriation programme.

During the COVID-19 response, we relied on three main mechanisms to record the location and contact details for British nationals.

First, many Embassies and High Commissions sought expressions of interest in repatriation flights and travel updates by email, subsequently using that information to provide details and prioritise vulnerable passengers.

Second, the FCDO worked with our travel management company CTM to develop online portals where passengers could register for flight tickets in countries where we were running charters, which also offered an SMS service to those requiring help in making their booking. The information that was requested from passengers during the booking process included information about a person's specific location and contact information.

Third, in April we developed and implemented an expressions of interest form on gov.uk which allowed BNs across 20 countries, including Pakistan, to register relevant details and express an interest in a flight home.

We agree with the FAC that the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased the public's willingness to share information proactively during times of crisis, for example about their location and personal circumstances, when there is a service which HMG is offering, or might offer in future.

As a result of this experience we are developing this registration application further so that it is always ready for those countries where we might need British nationals to express an interest in a flight. We are also exploring how British nationals can request more granular information and updates when travelling and living abroad, including by text message for those who do not have access to the internet.

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

At early stages in the crisis the situation in many countries was confused and uncertain. It therefore took longer than we would have liked to be able to provide specific guidance on when and how to return to the UK, and on the availability of local services.

We do not agree that social media was used at the expense of other forms of support and advice, including individually tailored support. On the contrary, social media has been used as an additional tool that has increased our capacity to provide such support.

We have shared general messages about travel safety on social media since 2009. We share all significant changes to travel advice and proactively push messages on specific issues relevant to our audience (e.g. snow sport safety, festival safety), as well as using social media for campaign activity. British nationals overseas and in the UK can now contact us on social media, either in a comment or through direct/private messaging. All enquiries are replied to individually and escalated to Consular officers in London and across our global network where appropriate. This does not replace any other option available to British people, which includes phone calls (usually at local rates wherever the individual is located) and a dedicated webform on gov.uk. Our aim is to enable British nationals to contact us easily and quickly wherever they are. The contact options we have reflect this.

In depth analysis of the channels used to reach those seeking repatriation flights showed that organic search and direct emails far outstripped click through to Travel Advice via social media channels. Analysis also showed that family and friends in the UK were often a particularly effective way to reach British nationals in certain countries. In some countries, certain social media platforms had more reach than others (for example Twitter in Colombia). This in-depth analysis meant that communication plans for each country were bespoke to each country. We are examining how we can increase the relevance and uptake of Travel Advice alerts in the future.

We agree that all consular customers should be treated with empathy and respect. This is why front line consular officers undertake extensive training to ensure they respond to customers in an empathetic and compassionate manner. The core consular training course has a strong focus on engaging customers, with opportunities to practice the handling of complex and often challenging cases with actors. This is followed by niche training on specific case areas. We are proud that frontline consular staff receive a significant amount of positive feedback from their customers, praising the care, kindness and comprehensive support they receive. But we also strive to improve: our dedicated Customer Insight Team produces deep dive research on specific areas of consular work to ensure we are responding to need and feedback; and our complaints team seeks to respond thoroughly and compassionately to any customers who are dissatisfied.

Many British nationals were worried about underlying medical conditions and access to medicines. In the majority of instances local assistance and equivalent medication was available from local doctors and pharmacies. All our travel advice pages contain advice on how to access local medical services. In many places our consular staff provided tailored support to help BNs receive the medication they needed, for example by contacting local police, arranging for local authorities to deliver medicines or by visiting pharmacies and medical centres themselves to identify where the required medications could be found and how they could be delivered. For example, in Goa, at the height of lockdown, movement outside of homes was very restricted and our staff organised for the local police to check on a medically vulnerable individual and identify a local neighbour who they could go

to for future support. In Punjab, our staff recorded details for all British nationals who were running out of medication and forwarded their details, with their consent, to the Government appointed Health Officer, and as a result they were able to get medicines delivered to them.

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

The FCDO is responsible for communicating necessary information about foreign travel, but we learnt from feedback early in the crisis that we needed to do more to support other government departments give information about what to expect on arrival in the UK. We heard that many had concerns about the information they received about health entry requirements and the situation in the UK, and we acted quickly to address these.

We worked closely with other government departments, partners and devolved administrations to ensure that we were clearly signposting to all relevant information on returning to the UK. Gov.uk content was constantly updated in line with relevant changes, and essential information was included in customer emails from CTM. We also worked closely with CTM to ensure that there was a clear process on flight forms explaining the situation and next steps that travellers needed to follow.

Since then, new statutory obligations have been introduced which now require the travel industry and airlines to provide appropriate information to passengers regarding current public health rules and the situation on arrival to the UK.

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

We agree that this is a priority and we are taking action accordingly. There are over 200 automated caller greeting answerphones (auto-attendants) deployed globally at FCDO posts with separate night and day mode messages. The day mode message provides the caller with a number of options depending on the nature of their call, including 'consular assistance' for a British national in an emergency situation abroad. In this case the caller is transferred to the Consular Customer Contact Centres. The night mode message says that the post is closed and provides the hours of opening. However, the consular option is still available and callers can still access consular assistance.

The unprecedented nature of COVID-19 and the speed of its spread resulted in posts having to work remotely. This resulted in the auto-attendants at many posts remaining in night mode and no one physically at the post to change this to the day mode. When a situation arises that requires the auto-attendant greetings to be changed and/or changed between night and day mode, it is normally the responsibility of the individual post to manage this. However the number of overseas FCDO staff that were working remotely

out of necessity, self-isolating or both, meant that there was not a consistent method for overseas staff to manage this. However, consular assistance was still available to callers via the call tree, even though the message stated that posts were closed.

Making the changes centrally to the answerphone messages required the intervention of the FCDO voice supplier to record a new message for each post and to change the auto-attendant from night to day mode where necessary. Engaging the supplier in this activity required a commercial agreement and took time to implement which slowed the response. To mitigate this in any future emergency situation, FCDO is creating a 'pre-agreed' process or 'call-off arrangement' with the supplier enabling a much swifter response. We expect this will be in place by the end of October 2020.

The FCDO is also actively investigating a 'cloud based' telephony solution that would provide greater central management of the switchboard messages. However, there are technical limitations to this solutions as the service is not available in every country that the FCDO operates in and routing calls globally to an answerphone service 'in the cloud' and then to a contact centre will result in call degradation for callers in some countries.

Speed of the Response

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

Other countries (such as France and Germany) placed more reliance on charter flights early on in the crisis and were therefore able to repatriate their citizens more quickly than the UK. The UK Government ran 186 charter flights to support the 1.3 million British nationals who were travelling abroad. By comparison, the German Government chartered over 260 flights during the crisis, to support around 260,000 citizens. The Permanent Under-Secretary acknowledged that the UK repatriation operation had "taken longer than was ideal, and longer than in some other countries". He told us that:

- a) *Speed is something that absolutely is in question, and you can legitimately say that we could have been quicker, but given the numbers that have successfully come back by commercial means, which would have been extremely expensive to put on charter flights, I think that this is a defensible choice. (Paragraph 6)*

Our repatriation efforts were tailored to requirements and the comparatively higher numbers of British travellers that needed to return to the UK. The report rightly notes that the Government should consider responding faster in future however it does not fully represent how much the Government did do, and how quickly.

As noted above, the report does not acknowledge that the FCDO ran repatriation flights from China in January and February, worked with cruise companies to bring back passengers in February and March, and was responding to the crisis in Peru at the same time as others, such as Germany. These operations brought back several thousand British nationals.

Moreover it does not sufficiently recognise the central importance of keeping commercial airlines flying and routes open. As noted above, attempting to do this mostly through charters or by charters alone would have required the Government to organise thousands of flights. Instead we worked at pace with airlines to bring people back.