



Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

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Dear Alicia,

CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN: FCDO LESSONS LEARNED

1. I wrote to the Committee on 9 March last year sharing the headline lessons of the FCDO's internal 'Lessons Learned' review from the Afghanistan crisis. The FCDO's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee reviewed progress in November 2022 and the FCDO Management Board then reviewed progress at its first meeting of 2023. I promised to update the Committee after these reviews. This letter sets out how the FCDO has monitored implementation, an update on progress against the eleven themes and next steps.

Monitoring implementation

2. Key lessons from the Afghanistan response were incorporated into our response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I appointed a Board level SRO and we then set up an Afghanistan Lessons Learned Secretariat in June 2022. The Secretariat governs and co-ordinates actions and ensures momentum is maintained. It has produced an integrated work plan with implementation leads across 12 Directorates within the Department and monitors delivery against the baseline status for each recommendation.

Progress and next steps

3. The lessons identified fell under eleven broad categories. I have set out below a summary of progress made and next steps in each of these areas:

i. Preparedness

The FCDO has invested in further development of contingency planning as part of our preparedness work. As you and some of the Committee members saw when you visited the FCDO Crisis Response Centre on 23 November

2022, that expanded contingency planning capability enabled the development of detailed consular and crisis management plans ahead of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This included UK command and control arrangements which drew on Afghanistan Lessons Learned; rapid mobilisation of nearly 1000 staff into core response roles and mechanisms to manage a large increase in requests for assistance and correspondence. Overseas, our contingency plans enabled the establishment of a British Embassy Office in Lviv; rapid and secure evacuation of the British Embassy in Kyiv; a network of reception centres in neighbouring countries and faster and more targeted use of our Rapid Deployment Teams. At each stage, we worked closely with the MOD and other government departments.

More broadly, the FCDO's Crisis Management Department (CMD) offer a scalable offer of support for posts and geographic teams based on impact and proximity of risk. Every post worldwide is required to maintain an up-to-date Crisis Management Plan setting out how they would respond to a crisis to ensure high levels of preparedness. We are using a new Geographic Risk Report to improve the department's foresight and contingency planning for major crises or international political events that affect UK interests. The FCDO Executive Committee that I chair holds quarterly prioritisation and agility discussions, which aim to support allocation of resource based on risk.

ii. Platform operations

FCDO HR launched new Drawdown Guidance in August 2022 to ensure staff have clarity on support and provisions when returning from post. I have tasked Geographic Directors to ensure up-to-date post evacuation plans are in place for conflict posts and will incorporate a check for this into the annual Management Assurance Process.

iii. Leadership and capability

We have audited and refreshed the Learning and Development offer for all staff involved in responding to crises and conducted an extensive review of training, with a particular focus on leadership capacity. A full crisis response training programme continues to be delivered to increase overall levels of crisis management capability and preparedness, with a number of additional sessions and offers introduced to meet demand across the FCDO. This includes a substantially expanded training offer for potential "Gold" leaders. All training materials are under continuous review and we have launched an updated Crisis Management Leadership Course targeting senior leaders deploying overseas. We have issued new guidance for working with Ministers and Private Offices to help establish clear and efficient ways of working during a period where we are managing a crisis.

iv. FCDO working with cross-Whitehall partners

I shared the review with partners across Government and continue to include key partners in crisis response exercises to enhance cross HMG capability. Operations with the centre were clearer during Russia/Ukraine crisis management, with new sub committees and official level structures established. The FCDO held a COBR table-top exercise in December 2021 with the then Foreign Secretary to identify gaps and incentivise joint contingency planning.

v. Eligible persons and evacuation pathway

We have conducted a review of end-to-end evacuation systems, capabilities, policies and processes, producing a draft evacuation doctrine which will go out for cross-government consultation this quarter. We agreed a framework for approaching eligibility with Ministers last year and are working to establish a cross Government policy working group to agree how eligibility mechanisms will work in practice and to agree public communications. We are also working with MOD on where and how we can improve data on evacuation chains. We are launching a new training module on Travel Advice for UK departments and posts and updating FCDO internal guidance to ensure information on procedure and risk ownership is clear.

vi. Deployments

Following a full review of surge cadres, we investigated a number of recommendations including, for example, to increase senior staff involvement in Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs). Recommendations of this review are currently being prioritised for implementation. Further RDT training is scheduled which will increase the RDT pool, and RDT members will receive SAFE+ (Security Awareness in Fragile Environments) training. We have procured additional RDT equipment and work is ongoing to explore options for new personal tracking IT/software. These steps will help to increase preparedness of RDTs to respond to future crises. A clear process has been established when deploying staff which is shared with partners across Government to ensure ways of working with deployment teams from other departments are clear.

vii. Resourcing and welfare

The FCDO is developing a programme of work to adapt the Department's systems, processes, policies and culture to respond rapidly to new requirements. This includes continuing to explore mechanisms to deliver the right skills to the right places at the right time, including via private sector capacity where appropriate.

Crisis Management and HR colleagues working on rostering will be able to utilise a further level of staff data from HERA (our new resource management system for finance and HR) in the first quarter of 2023, supporting them to identify and deploy the right people with relevant skills and experience. Additional functionality from HERA will become available over the course of this year.

The FCDO established a Home Welfare Team in April 2022 to ensure the right systems are in place to support staff welfare ahead of, during and after working on crisis and surge responses. It provides a range of services and support to staff, including during Russia/Ukraine and Operation London Bridge, as well as during business as usual. The Home Welfare Team will launch four strands of welfare materials for staff later this year.

viii. External stakeholder engagement

We have created a Parliamentary Checklist for Gold/Silver leaders, which gives details of parliamentary tasks likely to be necessary in a crisis response situation, and engagement options. During the early months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we planned for and delivered regular in person and virtual briefings for parliamentarians and a daily update newsletter to share key information. Work is also ongoing to refresh communications guidance in crisis response training.

ix. Information management

Digital colleagues have undertaken a discovery phase to explore the challenges lying at the heart of areas identified in the Lessons Learned, and created a roadmap setting out initial recommendations. We have set up three separate taskforces to take this work forward on information management, data management and skills and agile resourcing.

The Office for the Data Protection Officer have increased their training on personal data and data protection and are presenting on all our key security courses.

x. Public enquiries (previously Correspondence)

We are introducing technology on our case management system to enable larger volumes of correspondence to be handled more efficiently. This is expected to go live in spring 2023. During the first months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we planned for and delivered replies to written public enquiries within 72 hours, rather than the usual 20 days. We have also developed new parliamentary guidance for crisis response which draws on a prototype model developed in our response to the Ukraine crisis and reflects

improvements following the Afghanistan response. Improvements include a dedicated parliamentary team in the response structure.

The digital discovery work mentioned in (ix) above identified that more can be done to integrate our customer contact approach across all points of entry for public enquiries. We have therefore set up a change project team to explore an integrated and improved approach which can scale in a crisis. This is a large-scale project and it is expected that successful delivery of a new system would take 1-2 years. Interim improvements based on the work already conducted will be delivered sooner to improve our approach, for example using agile digital technologies.

xi. Transition through and out of a crisis response

A focus on greater contingency planning for specific overseas risks is helping the FCDO to ensure greater preparedness for potential responses. This was evidenced in the good use of prior consular contingency planning in our response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Crisis Management colleagues have developed further doctrine to support this. Wider work is ongoing on how the FCDO can be more agile in responding to disruptions which need other types of response – whether in resourcing new demands, or redefining our priorities in response to global political events.

Next steps

4. Where delivery is not yet complete, implementation leads and taskforces continue to drive forward the recommendations in line with detailed and prioritised implementation plans. The FCDO's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee will review further progress against the recommendations in the summer.
5. The Afghanistan Lessons Learned work has highlighted the need for the FCDO to have an overarching assurance process for managing lessons learned as a permanent function. We are establishing a continual improvement team who will take over the management of the Afghanistan Lessons Learned recommendations alongside others from future reviews. This team will provide the appropriate governance to ensure outstanding issues continue to be progressed. It will aim to focus on commonalities across lessons learned, build a holistic view of implementation progress and make recommendations for prioritisation.

Conclusion

6. I am pleased with the progress made and grateful to FCDO colleagues who have worked hard to implement changes and improvements across the

organisation, while continuing to respond to other concurrent challenges. Our response to the Russia/Ukraine crisis successfully incorporated many of these learnings and, while there remains more to be done, I am confident that the progress made so far is equipping the department to respond effectively to international crises in future.

Yours sincerely,

Philip Barton

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