

International Development Committee

Appointment of the Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact

First Report of Session 2024–25

HC 448

International Development Committee

The International Development Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to scrutinise the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in respect of aid policy, and the expenditure of Official Development Assistance across UK government departments.

Current membership

[Sarah Champion](#) (Labour; Rotherham) (Chair)

[Monica Harding](#) (Liberal Democrat; Esher and Walton)

[Laura Kyrke-Smith](#) (Labour; Aylesbury)

[Noah Law](#) (Labour; St Austell and Newquay)

[Alice Macdonald](#) (Labour; Norwich North)

[Brian Mathew](#) (Liberal Democrat; Melksham and Devizes)

[Gordon McKee](#) (Labour; Glasgow South)

[Rt Hon. David Mundell](#) (Conservative; Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale)

[David Reed](#) (Conservative; Exmouth and Exeter East)

[Sam Rushworth](#) (Labour; Bishop Auckland)

[David Taylor](#) (Labour; Hemel Hempstead)

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

This Report, together with formal minutes relating to the Report, was Ordered by the House of Commons, on 11 December 2024, to be printed. It was published on 16 December 2024 by authority of the House of Commons. © Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2024.

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/indcom and in print by Order of the House.

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the International Development Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA.

The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 1223/1638; the Committee's email address is indcom@parliament.uk. You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using CommonsIDC.

Contents

ICAI and the post of Chief Commissioner	1
The appointment process	1
The candidate	3
Appendix 1: CV of Jillian Popkins	4
Appendix 2: Candidate pre-appointment questionnaire responses	8
Appendix 3: Information about the recruitment campaign	16
Conclusions and recommendations	18
Formal minutes	19
Witness	20

ICAI and the post of Chief Commissioner

1. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) was established in 2011. It is an arm's-length body of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). ICAI's purpose is to scrutinise all UK Official Development Assistance (ODA), which it does by conducting and publishing reviews which assess the effectiveness of ODA spending. ICAI is independent of the Government and reports to Parliament via this Committee.
2. ICAI is led by a full-time Chief Commissioner, who is supported by two part-time Commissioners and a small secretariat of civil servants and external suppliers. All three Commissioners are appointed on non-renewable four-year contracts, with each four-year period referred to as a Commission or Phase. The previous ICAI Commission was extended by a year and ended in July 2024, with the departure of the previous Chief Commissioner, Dr Tamsyn Barton, and the two previous part-time Commissioners, Sir Hugh Bayley and Tarek Rouchdy.
3. **CONCLUSION**
We would like to put on record our thanks to Dr Barton and her fellow Commissioners for their work over the past five years.

The appointment process

4. The recruitment of the new Chief Commissioner has been much delayed. The FCDO launched the original recruitment campaign in October 2022. Delays to the process led to the previous ICAI Commission being extended by three months, from July to September 2023. The recruitment campaign subsequently failed to appoint a candidate and was re-launched in November 2023. The previous ICAI Commission was further extended to the end of June 2024 because of this. The appointment process was then paused following the announcement of the General Election in May 2024. It was resumed by the new Government in July. Following the departure of Dr Barton, ICAI has been led by its two new part-time Commissioners, Liz Ditchburn and Harold Freeman, who took up their roles at the start of July.

5.

CONCLUSION

The delays to this appointment are deeply regrettable, and the FCDO must ensure that lessons are learned so the next ICAI Commission is appointed in a timely manner.

6.

Of the six candidates invited to interview, the recruitment panel deemed three candidates to be appointable. The Minister of State for Development, the Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds MP, informed the Committee in November that she and the Foreign Secretary had selected Jillian Popkins as their preferred candidate for the role. We subsequently arranged for Jillian Popkins to give oral evidence as part of the pre-appointment scrutiny process. Full information regarding the recruitment campaign is given in Appendix 3.

7.

The Chair of the Committee, Sarah Champion MP, was a member of the advisory assessment panel for the recruitment campaign and subsequently recused herself from any proceedings relating to the pre-appointment hearing to avoid any perceived conflict of interest.

The candidate

8. In-line with Liaison Committee guidance on the conduct of pre-appointment hearings,¹ in advance of the hearing we sent Jillian Popkins a questionnaire covering several issues, including her priorities if appointed and her personal background, including whether she had any interests to declare. The candidate's responses to this questionnaire are set out in Appendix 2.
9. We took oral evidence from Jillian Popkins on 11 December 2024. During the hearing, we asked her about:
 - a. The challenges currently facing ICAI;
 - b. Her priorities upon taking up the role of Chief Commissioner;
 - c. How ICAI could increase its impact;
 - d. ICAI's independence from government.

10.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on her evidence to us and of our consideration of her questionnaire responses, we are satisfied that Jillian Popkins meets the criteria to fulfil the role of Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. We are pleased to endorse her appointment.

¹ House of Commons Liaison Committee, Third Report of Session 2017–19, [Pre-appointment hearings](#), HC 2307, Annex para 17

Appendix 1: CV of Jillian Popkins

Summary of expertise

30 years of experience in international development, focused on poverty, social justice, human rights and social policy. Executive leadership and representation for the UK government, United Nations and International NGOs.

Extensive experience of senior leadership includes setting the organisational vision and developing strategy, leading the development and implementation of programme, stewardship of contract, grant and innovative finance, managing government and donor relations and commissioning research and evaluations.

Social development specialist with a particular interest in gender equality and social inclusion.

Curriculum Vitae

Dates		Job title
July 2024	October 2024	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Adviser, Solidaridad International Solidaridad is an international civil society organisation working in over 40 countries to foster more sustainable supply chains.
August 2023	June 2024	Interim Deputy Executive Director, Advocacy, Programmes and Safeguarding, UNICEF UK UNICEF UK promotes and protects the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the UK and globally.
November 2022	May 2023	Lead Consultant, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Audit, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)/Social Development Direct
May 2019	July 2022	Director, Policy, Advocacy and Programmes, ActionAid UK ActionAid is an international charity that works with women and girls living in poverty.
March 2014	April 2019	Chief, Social Policy and Reform for Children, UNICEF China
September 2011	March 2014	Country Director, Girl Effect Ethiopia
March 2008	September 2011	Senior Social Development Advisor, DFID
October 2000	February 2008	Social Development Adviser, DFID
October 1998	September 2000	Assistant Social Development Adviser, East Asia Pacific Region, DFID
September 1997	December 1998	Research Assistant
August 1993	August 1995	Volunteer Teacher and Teacher Trainer, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) China

Non-Executive Roles

Dates		Job title
October 2020	Present	Trustee, The Baring Foundation The Baring Foundation is an independent foundation which protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion.
May 2014	March 2023	Trustee, Action on Disability and Development (ADD) International ADD International is a UK-based civil society organisation and an ally of the global disability movement.
2006	2008	DFID Board Member, Ethical Trading Initiative ETI is a leading alliance of companies, trade unions and NGOs that promotes respect for workers' rights around the world.

Education

Dates (Year)	Subject	Institution	Qualification Gained
2000	Social Anthropology (with Mandarin)	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London	MA (Merit)
1997	International Development Studies	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London	MSc (Distinction)
1992	English Language and Literature	Keble College, Oxford University	BA

Publications on International Development

- ‘Boards–blockers or drivers of transformation?’, with Matt Jackson, Alliance Magazine, 2023, (<https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/boards-blockers-or-drivers-of-transformation/>)
- ‘What could cognitive capital mean for China’s children?’, with Douglas Noble, Kathryn Martin, Lisa Qin, Pia Britto, Margo O’Sullivan, Ron Pouwels, Robert W. Scherbier and Rana Flowers, PsyCh Journal, 2017 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/pchj.170>)
- ‘The role of social analysis in development policy and practice in contemporary China: observations from practice’, Berliner China-Hefter, 2005
- ‘Facilitator Training and Innovation in REFLECT: experiences from Nepal’, PLA Notes IIED, Volume 32, 1998
- ‘Strengthening Civil Society? Direct Funding from a Southern Perspective’, with Firoze Manje, 1998

Appendix 2: Candidate pre-appointment questionnaire responses

Motivation

What motivated you to apply for this role, and what specific experiences would you bring to it?

I am motivated by the opportunity to contribute to improving the impact and effectiveness of international development. Over three decades I have built extensive and varied experience in international development, working in the UK, Asia and Africa. Throughout my career, which includes working with governments, international NGOs and UNICEF, I have seen first-hand the power of evidence and evaluation to improve development impact and value of money. At a time when the world is off-track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, independent scrutiny of the effectiveness of all of the UK government's aid is more important than ever, to ensure that ODA is spent effectively for those who need it most and that it delivers value for money for the UK taxpayer. It would be the privilege of a career to lead the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI)'s independent scrutiny of UK aid, support Parliament to hold the government to account and ensure that ICAI's work is communicated effectively to the public.

Specific experiences that I bring to the role are:

My track record of working in partnerships and advising governments to shape policy and programmes means I have the political acumen to maintain ICAI's independence while advancing shared goals.

I have led evaluations and reviews. As a social development specialist, I have the technical expertise to maintain and deepen the credibility of ICAI's reputation for rigour and foster learning.

I have delivered large and complex programmes successfully, including for the UK government. I have the operational experience to ensure that ICAI's recommendations are timely, relevant and practical enough to embed lessons in practice.

My experience of leading advocacy strategies means that I can represent and position ICAI to engage effectively with diverse stakeholders and audiences.

If appointed are there any specific areas within your new responsibilities where you will need to acquire new skills or knowledge?

This is a demanding, public-facing role, which requires a high level of skill and expertise across many fronts. While I am confident that I will be well supported by the ICAI Secretariat and the Clerks of the IDC Committee to learn about parliamentary procedure, I am also aware that I left DFID 10 years ago. There will be gaps in my knowledge of aspects of how government works and areas where I need to brush up or hone my skills. This could include, for example, interacting with Ministers, with all ODA spending departments and with other partners such as the National Audit Office.

I expect that there will be a professional stretch in this role. This is part of my motivation for applying.

How were you recruited? Were you encouraged to apply, and if so, by whom?

I was recruited through an open competition. I was encouraged to apply in conversation with the recruitment agency, Gatenby Sanderson.

Personal background

Do you currently or potentially have any business, financial or other non-pecuniary interests or commitments, that might give rise to the perception or a conflict of interest if you are appointed? How do you intend to resolve any potential conflicts of interest if you are appointed?

I am aware of ICAI's conflict of interest policy and the Framework Agreement between ICAI and FCDO.

Since October 2024 I have been an employee of First Turn Development Consultants, where I am also a Director. My spouse is also an employee and Director. The company provides advisory services in international development, including contracts funded by FCDO. If I am appointed, I will resign as an employee and I will cease to be a Director.

I am a Trustee for The Baring Foundation, which has a partnership with the FCDO called 'Equal, Safe and Free'.

In my previous roles as a Director for ActionAid UK and as a Trustee for Action on Disability and Development (ADD) International, I have been accountable for the delivery of ODA programmes. My work leading an equity and inclusion audit of DEFRA's ODA portfolio was conducted as a sub-contractor for Social Development Direct, a UK government supplier.

If I am appointed, any potential conflicts of interest will be assessed and managed in line with ICAI's policy and the related Framework Agreement.

If appointed, what professional or voluntary work commitments will you continue to undertake, or do you intend to take on, alongside your new role?

I am currently a Trustee for The Baring Foundation. This is a voluntary role.

Have you ever held any post or undertaken any activity that might cast doubt on your political impartiality? If so, how will you demonstrate your political impartiality in the role if appointed?

I have never held a post or undertaken any activity that might cast doubt on my political impartiality.

Do you intend to serve your full term of office?

Yes.

ICAI

If appointed, what will be your main priorities on taking up the role?

- Defining success. This means setting ambition for a 4th Commission which is forward-facing, building on the achievements of previous Commissions, so that learning shapes future policies and systems. I would like ICAI to develop an overarching 4-year framework. This would allow ICAI to report the aggregate impact of its work at the end of the 4th Commission. The synthesis report which summarised ICAI's findings between 2019–2023 pointed in this direction.
- Launching the 4th Commission. ICAI has done the groundwork by preparing for two reviews, contracting the external supplier and conducting a consultation to inform a new annual work plan. I want to get the pipeline up and running so that ICAI can provide the timely, relevant and high-quality evidence and analysis needed for scrutiny and learning.
- Developing effective working relationships with key stakeholders. Establishing trust and confidence in my leadership of ICAI will be key to further building ICAI's status and authority as an independent expert voice, providing constructive, evidence-based challenges and practical recommendations.
- Reviewing operational excellence. During my induction, I will invite a range of perspectives on what ICAI can do more of, do better or do differently. Questions on my mind include, for example: identifying how learnings from the 3rd Commission can strengthen ICAI's theory of change and contribute to refreshing ICAI's Framework Agreement

(which expires in June 2025) so that it remains fit for purpose; evolving how ICAI hears from the people who are directly affected by UK aid; minimising delays in scrutiny; and catalysing innovation on how to engage ICAI's audiences. I'd expect all the Commissioners, the Head of the Secretariat and his team to work together to identify improvements.

Taken together, all of these add up to my overriding priority which would be to set the 4th Commission up for success.

What criteria should the Committee use to judge ICAI's performance over your term of office?

At the end of my term, I would expect ICAI to be judged on the unique value it adds as one part of the scrutiny architecture. Criteria would include whether review themes are salient and well aligned with government strategies, the extent to which the 4th Commission has planned and delivered its work independently and to a high standard and whether ICAI has mobilised all its resources effectively to contribute to future policies and international development systems. ICAI has recently completed a 'scene setting exercise' which will form a baseline for the 4th Commission.

As noted above, I would want to review ICAI's theory of change and KPIs. Annual performance is currently measured using criteria which flow from the theory of change. Criteria include the proportion of ICAI recommendations that are accepted by the government, the proportion of recommendations actioned by the government and changes in policy or practice as a result of ICAI reviews. ICAI also reports on the extent to which it communicates findings and recommendations effectively to stakeholders and the public, as well as media and social media coverage, and monitors budget controls. In my view, the current criteria are sound but risk under-reporting the strategic nature of ICAI's remit. It may be helpful to balance an emphasis on compliance with recommendations by government departments, as important as this remains, with criteria that incentivise ambition and capture how departments embed learning.

I note that in recent years ICAI has commissioned an independent assessment of its impact annually, to which the IDC has provided valuable contributions. I would seek to build on this work.

How will you ensure your personal independence and the institutional independence of ICAI from the Government?

I am committed to maintaining high levels of personal integrity in my conduct, following the Nolan Principles. I am aware of ICAI's policy on conflict of interest and the related requirements of the Framework Agreement with FCDO. My career in international development inevitably means I have a network of personal professional relationships and connections to the UK aid programme. This may give rise to possible or perceived conflict of interest on occasion. I will support the Head of the Secretariat to identify and take action where conflict of interest might arise.

To maintain institutional independence, I will ensure transparent and inclusive ways of working while exercising independent decision-making. This means considering diverse perspectives as well as the government's objectives when setting ICAI's work plan, ensuring that evaluation processes are free from interference, reporting to Parliament and publishing ICAI's work. I have conducted reviews and led projects under review, giving me the experience to anticipate when risks to independence might arise. I have the diplomatic skills to ensure that difficult issues are addressed in a timely, constructive and candid manner.

ICAI's remit includes communicating with diverse audiences. I oversaw UNICEF UK's political activity and impartiality and national advocacy campaigns, positioning UNICEF to speak with an independent voice on child rights. I will bring this experience to uphold trust in ICAI's independent, authoritative and measured tone of voice.

Operational independence from the FCDO matters for credibility. It will be important to ensure that ICAI has enough resources, institutional flexibility and authority to conduct reviews with all ODA spending departments. I have experience in using government systems to deliver shared objectives through a project which was independent of and accountable to its sponsoring department from my leadership of Girl Effect Ethiopia.

How do you assess the public profile and reputation of ICAI?

The public profile and reputation of ICAI sit in the context of attitudes to aid in the UK. Data from the Development Engagement Lab (September 2024) shows that support for aid has declined overall

and over time, with trust in the UK government's ability to make a difference relatively low at 37%. Only 17% of people surveyed thought that UK development aid is 'effective' or 'very effective'.

ICAI's remit includes providing assurance to UK taxpayers that aid is well spent, so the 'gap' between what people think about the effectiveness of UK aid and ICAI's evidence of the positive effectiveness of aid is of note. This may be because technical evidence struggles to 'cut through' due to its complexity and in a polarised political context. There may be value in considering innovative ways for ICAI to communicate its evidence to increase reach and access for wider audiences than it currently engages.

ICAI's recent public consultation gathered feedback from the development community, government officials, Parliament and the interested members of the public which suggests that this audience is very familiar with ICAI. 71% reported that they had read the reports and 43% said that they had used ICAI's reviews in their work. This consultation was not designed to measure ICAI's reputation, but it did generate positive feedback on ICAI's importance and the value of its scrutiny.

The commissioners will continue to play an important role in representing ICAI, ensuring that its mandate is well understood, raising its profile and building its reputation.

What risks do you think ICAI will face over your term of office? How do you intend to manage them?

Many of the risks that ICAI may face over the 4th commission are perennial and require regular monitoring. I am aware that ICAI already has systems in place to keep its risks under review. On-going risks include (but are not limited to) risks to independence and impartiality (both genuine and perceived), to the pace and quality of delivery, the risk that ICAI fails to adapt while remaining strategic and focused in a challenging and uncertain context and the risk that ICAI is not, or is not believed to be, adding value to government scrutiny or is duplicating other forms of scrutiny.

The transition between Commissions, like any change process, brings contingent risks, such as a break in scrutiny or loss of focus or a negative impact on staff motivation and performance. With a new government in place, alignment of policy reviews and ICAI's planning processes present risks and opportunities. In particular, the review considering how to maximise the benefits of the FCDO's joint integrated development diplomacy model in the UK's development

will be important. The recommendations may include changes to ICAI, and this creates a risk that scrutiny or independence is reduced as any changes are implemented, notwithstanding benefits from possible recommendations.

How will you seek to maintain a constructive working relationship between ICAI and this Committee?

The shared objective of providing scrutiny to improve aid impact and value for money is the basis for constructive, collaborative working. The process of consulting on and agreeing to the rolling work plan ensures that ICAI's work is aligned with the IDC's enquiries, while also remaining independent. ICAI will continue to provide independent reports to support the IDC in questioning government departments on aid policy and spending. These will remain timely, robust, compelling and accessible.

My understanding is that the ICAI Secretariat and the IDC Clerks work together to make sure that communication is smooth. I would expect to have regular meetings with the IDC Chair, providing a regular forum to anticipate and address any issues arising. This could include keeping the health of the working relationship between ICAI and the Committee under review, so that it remains resilient and respectful when, as it will inevitably sometimes be, under pressure.

I will end by noting that the Committee is uniquely expert and experienced in international development. If appointed, I would very much look forward to a robust and informed debate at regular evidence sessions and strive to contribute to a relationship that will support ICAI's ambition to perform its role to the highest standards.

Appendix 3: Information about the recruitment campaign

Campaign Launch date	28 November 2023
Campaign Closing Date	15 January 2024
Reason for any changes in timetable to that originally published	<p>The initial timeline was delayed marginally, interviews took place in April 24, when they were originally tabled to end in March 24. This delay was due to the availability of panel members to attend interviews.</p> <p>The appointment process was then subsequently paused on 22 May 24, prior to the election (as per pre-election guidance). Ministers agreed to resume the process in July 2024. This created a delay to the process.</p>
Advertising strategy	<p>The use of an Executive Search Agency, GatenbySanderson, was approved by the Cabinet Office and Former Minister Mitchell. Following a previous failed recruitment campaign, the search agency was utilised to assist in identifying a wider pool of quality candidates.</p>

Advisory Assessment Panel	<p>Panel Chair: Christian Rogg - Development and Open Societies Director, FCDO</p> <p>SIPM: Libby Watkins</p> <p>Other Members: Sarah Champion MP (Chair of International Development Committee)</p> <p>Ekpe Attah (Head of ICAI Secretariat)</p>
Number of applicants	39
Number of candidates invited to interview	6
Number of candidates found appointable	3

Table 1: Diversity data Table A: Sex

	Percent Male	Percent Female
Applicants	58	42
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	As per ONS guidance on statistical disclosure control this information cannot be shared	

Table 2: Table B: Ethnicity

	Percent White	Percent Ethnic Minority
Applicants	72	28
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	As per ONS guidance on statistical disclosure control this information cannot be shared	

Table 3: Table C: Disability

	Disabled	Non-disabled
Applicants	As per ONS guidance on statistical disclosure control this information cannot be shared	
Shortlist (applicants invited for interview)	As per ONS guidance on statistical disclosure control this information cannot be shared	

Formal minutes

Wednesday 11 December 2024

Members present:

Rt Hon David Mundell, in the Chair

Monica Harding

Laura Kyrke-Smith

Alice Macdonald

Brian Mathew

David Reed

Sam Rushworth

Appointment of the Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact

Draft Report (Appointment of the Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 10 read and agreed to.

Papers were appended to the Report as Appendices 1 to 3.

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).

Adjournement

Adjourned till Tuesday 17 December at 1.00 p.m.

Witness

The following witness gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 11 December 2024

Jillian Popkins, HM Government's preferred candidate for Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact