



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

Tom Tugendhat, MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
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Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
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3 February 2021

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your letter of 14 January setting out a number of questions on the consular functions of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and on the progress made to date in improving communications with British nationals during a crisis as detailed in the FCDO response to the FAC report "*Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic.*"

The FCDO's consular response to Covid-19 was the largest and most complex consular and crisis response ever mounted by the FCDO, involving thousands of staff in the UK and across our diplomatic network. Although we formally exited 'crisis mode' in mid-June 2020, the FCDO has continued to deliver key elements of that consular response. They include providing over the phone and online guidance to British nationals seeking to travel, financial assistance to those who have had difficulty returning to the UK and individual consular support to British nationals and their families who have been affected negatively by the ongoing lockdowns, travel restrictions and border closures around the world. We continue to track closely international air links, working closely with DfT, airlines and our posts to ensure that routes remain open or that alternative routes are identified, even where we advise against all but essential travel. We remain committed to implementing key lessons learned, including embedding new repatriation and evacuation processes, crisis planning and improving our crisis communications.

What standards of service should UK citizens abroad expect to receive from British embassies, high commissions and consulates, and how are these publicised?

As your letter rightly notes, FCDO staff work tirelessly to support British nationals overseas. In 2019, the FCDO provided personalised consular support to over 22,000 British nationals, advice to a further 415,000 British nationals via our Consular Contact Centres and issued almost 30,000 emergency travel documents. That service has continued throughout the pandemic. In addition to mounting the largest consular crisis response in the history of the then FCO, we provided longer-term assistance in over 14,000 welfare cases, almost 3000 detentions, over 3000 deaths and more than 2600 hospitalisations. We provided personalised consular support to more than 27,000 British nationals, making 2020 the highest year for new cases in the last 5 years. That personal support ranged from supporting those who have lost their passports, been

victims of crimes or had accidents while in another country, through to complicated, long-running consular cases such as people detained overseas.

What we can and cannot do is set out clearly in: [Support for British nationals Abroad: A Guide](#) which is available on GOV.UK and was updated earlier this month. The FCDO's commitment to providing British nationals with a high quality service, and what we expect in return, is set out in our Consular Charter. We are delivering on that commitment; in the 12 months to January 2021, the FCDO received sixteen compliments for every one complaint, compared with fifteen compliments to every one complaint during the previous year.

What obligations or responsibilities do you believe that the FCDO has towards UK citizens abroad?

Consular assistance is the FCDO's most important public service. Through our global network, our consular staff endeavour to give appropriate and tailored support to British nationals overseas, and their families in the UK, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. By "tailored support", we mean that we provide assistance that responds to the individual's specific situation and that we do more for those who are vulnerable and therefore need more help. I, along with my Ministers and officials, work tirelessly and tenaciously to support individuals and their families. This can include lobbying for consular access, working with other Governments to prevent or reduce future incidents, or consideration of what options may be available where jurisdictions are not complying with internationally recognised legal standards, so it is safer for British nationals to travel abroad.

Last April, the FCDO developed an expressions of interest form on gov.uk which allowed British nationals across 20 countries to register their details and to express an interest in securing a flight home. The FCDO told us that it intended to develop this registration system further for future use. Can you provide us with an update on progress? By what date do you expect this system to be fully operational?

In April 2020, the FCDO developed the "express an interest in a flight" service on GOV.UK. This allows the FCDO to create a tailored form for each potential repatriation effort or country and understand potential interest. For British nationals, the service allows those who need to travel home urgently to register relevant details and inform the FCDO of their needs. The form has been further refined and, if required, can now be published within three hours to support a consular evacuation or special charter flight operation.

What progress has been made on the FCDO's promise to explore "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"?

We have significantly increased the information available on our travel advice pages and Living In Guide, particularly regarding Covid-19 risks, border control measures, travel restrictions and other in-country public health measures. That information is available online and is the basis for the advice provided over the telephone 24 hours a day through our Consular Contact centres. Our travel advice team is now three times the size it was prior to the pandemic. Our travel advice pages were updated 8,310 times in 2020 and received 111.29 million unique page views. This compares to 2,288 updates and 43.67 million unique page views in 2019. We pay particular attention to new border measures and travel restrictions, including noting when indirect routes are required. We have begun to include information on local Covid-19 vaccination requirements and intend to

publish information on the options available to British nationals who are resident overseas as and when that becomes available.

It is worth noting that as of the time of writing we advise against all but essential travel to 164 of the 222 countries and territories for which we offer advice. We aim to ensure that British nationals are aware of the risks they are taking when they choose to travel notwithstanding that advice. We have adjusted our public communications accordingly with regular warnings about the risks of sudden changes in border and health measures during the pandemic.

Subject to funding and feasibility, the FCDO remains keen to offer British people the opportunity to request more granular information (an example being [Transition Checker on GOV.UK](#)) and updates when travelling and living abroad, including by text message for those who do not have access to the internet.

How does the FCDO plan to provide UK citizens with early warning in crisis situations? What progress has been made on the FCDO's ambition to send "push" messages directly to British nationals travelling abroad?

We are currently evaluating two options for "push messages". First, in the event of a significant emergency, we are exploring the feasibility of mobile companies sending text alerts to UK-registered SIM cards in a particular country. Second, we are looking at the option of 'subscribing' to emergency alerts via GOV.UK. This work includes assessing which channels (email, SMS, etc.) would be the most effective for emergency messaging and how far British people are willing to subscribe to receive alerts. We are refining and testing a prototype for this system with a group of British nationals to agree the requirements for a live service. We will take a decision in April regarding whether to develop this system further, subject to funding and feasibility.

During the COVID-19 pandemic automated answerphone messages told travellers around the world that our embassies and consulates were closed. In order to avoid this happening again in the future, the FCDO told us that it would have a 'pre-agreed' process for answerphone messages in place by the end of October 2020. Is this process now in place? If not, by what date do you expect this work to have been completed?

As the FAC is aware, callers to British Embassies and Consulates can reach our Consular Contact Centre at any time of the day or night 365 days a year by first dialling the number of their nearest Embassy or consulate and after the initial auto-attendant message, selecting the option for "Consular Services". Our Embassy and Consulate telephone systems have a "Day Mode" and "Night Mode" with different auto-attendant messages for when they are open and closed. The systems are set up to switch automatically to Night Mode at the end of a working day, but require a human intervention to switch into Day Mode at the start of a working day. This was designed to prevent a system automatically enabling Day Mode when the Embassy or Consulate may be closed, for example, due to a local public holiday. During the pandemic, this system – which has served well for 10 years – did not work because while many Embassies or Consulates were open, staff were working remotely, and no one was available manually to enable the Day Mode. The result was that callers to the Embassy or Consulate received the Night Mode message stating the Embassy or Consulate was closed, even though it was open with people working from home. For security reasons it is not possible to allow remote switching between Day and Night Modes.

We have adopted a three-pronged approach to resolve this problem. First, our telephony team is working with all Embassies and Consulates to equip them with remote "teleworker kits" and training to enable their local receptionist to remotely re-record their auto-attendant messages. That means if staff in an Embassy or Consulate cannot

access the building, the Night Mode message can also inform callers that consular services remain available even though the Embassy or Consulate is closed.

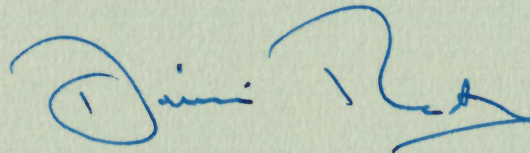
Second, last October we agreed with our commercial supplier a quicker process which will enable remote re-recording of Night Mode messages should Embassies or Consulates not be able to do so. This new arrangement will allow us to make changes more quickly. It should be noted, however, that as each Embassy or Consulate's message is unique, it needs to be re-recorded individually and requires bespoke set up, our commercial provider estimates that it could take up to five days to change over 200 Embassy or Consulate messages around our global network.

Third, we are providing our Consular Contact Centre with the ability to re-record remotely Embassy and Consulate auto-attendant messages. We will be testing this functionality with Embassies and Consulates in the EU by the end of January. We intend to extend it to the rest of the world by the end of February.

In addition to these three steps, we are exploring how we can expand the use of the new cloud-based contact telephony software for our Consular Contact Centre which was approved by the FCDO's Executive Committee in April 2020 as part of our initial Covid-19 response and which we now hope to have on line by July 2021. It is subject to further discussion and commercial agreement. Nonetheless, we understand that this new software for the Consular Contact Centre can be used to manage the separate telephone auto-attendants in most of our Embassies and Consulates. We would begin this development after July 2021 and, if technically possible, it will improve the speed at which we can update Day and Night Mode messages and ensure the appropriate messages are played at the right times. It may also allow us to ensure greater consistency in messaging across all of our Embassies and Consulates.

I hope the above answers your questions and reassures you the FCDO is constantly working hard to improve our consular services, and has made good progress in implementing the lessons identified from our COVID-19 response last year.

Yes check.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dominic Raab', with a stylized flourish at the end.

THE RT HON DOMINIC RAAB MP



Foreign Affairs Committee

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From the Chair
Tom Tugendhat MP

Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
King Charles Street
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United Kingdom

14th January 2021

Dear Foreign Secretary

The Consular Service of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office provides vital support to British nationals overseas. It is the FCDO's public face, and it is central to its reputation at home. In times of crisis, it is vital that the FCDO are able to communicate rapidly with British citizens abroad.

FCDO staff and diplomats work hard to provide these services and there are numerous stories of FCDO staff members working tirelessly, and under immense pressure, to help Britons abroad. However, our recent report *'Flying Home': The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic* found that the FCDO had suffered from real communication problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, and argued that the FCDO must take "a serious look at its communications strategy to avoid this happening again in the future". In response to our report, the Government noted that it had put several strategies in place to improve both standards of service and communication. In order to help us assess how this work is progressing, we would be grateful if you could provide answers to the following questions:

- What standards of service should UK citizens abroad expect to receive from British embassies, high commissions and consulates, and how are these publicised?
- What obligations or responsibilities do you believe that the FCDO has towards UK citizens abroad?
- Last April, the FCDO developed an expressions of interest form on gov.uk which allowed British nationals across 20 countries to register their details and to express an interest in securing a flight home. The FCDO told us that it intended to develop this registration system further for future use. Can you provide us with an update on progress? By what date do you expect this system to be fully operational?
- What progress has been made on the FCDO's promise to explore "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"?
- How does the FCDO plan to provide UK citizens with early warning in crisis situations? What progress has been made on the FCDO's ambition to send "push" messages directly to British nationals travelling abroad?
- During the COVID-19 pandemic automated answerphone messages told travellers around the world that our embassies and consulates were closed. In order to avoid this happening again in the future, the FCDO told us that it would have a 'pre-agreed' process for answerphone messages in place by the end of October 2020. Is this process now in place? If not, by what date do you expect this work to have been completed?

I would appreciate an early response to this letter, which I intend to place in the public domain.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Tom Tugendhat'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Tom' and the surname 'Tugendhat' clearly distinguishable.

TOM TUGENDHAT MP