

Written evidence submitted by Matthew Bevington (UK in a Changing Europe) (INR0069)

Matthew Bevington is a public policy and foreign affairs analyst at the UK in a Changing Europe thinktank, based at King's College London. This evidence is informed by ongoing research into the UK representation in Brussels (UKrep, now UKMis) , which has included interviews with a majority of recent UK former permanent representatives to the EU, as well as former deputy permanent representatives and current UKMis officials. The UK in a Changing Europe in an independent, impartial thinktank working on UK-EU relations.

Executive summary

- Any coherent approach to British overseas policy must have the EU and Europe as one of its central considerations.
- Identifying the UK's core interests in the EU must be a priority for the Integrated Review to support a strategic reorientation of the UK Mission to the EU in Brussels and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office post-Brexit.
- The UK cannot assume it has a privileged insight into the EU as a result of its former membership. Many contacts and much experience will quickly become obsolete. A conscious and concerted effort will be required to maintain networks, especially on the part of ministers.
- In order to take a strategic approach to the EU, the UK must have a clear understanding of how the European Union's role in the world is evolving and how it wishes to work with it in future (and the potential for any influence on the shape of that evolution).
- The UK's EU strategy requires a co-ordinated approach on behalf of government, Parliament, the private sector and the third sector.

The priorities for UK foreign-policy strategy

1. As a reconsideration of 'the totality of global opportunities and challenges the UK faces', the [Integrated Review \(IR\)](#) must not lose sight of the importance of the European Union (EU) in this analysis.
2. The IR seeks to establish 'how the whole of government can be structured, equipped and mobilised to meet' such opportunities and challenges. Given a substantial portion of UK diplomatic assets are located in and directed towards the EU, any coherent approach to British overseas policy must have the EU as one of its central considerations.

The relationship of the FCO with other UK government departments in foreign-policy strategy

3. Long-standing trends have disrupted the role of traditional foreign affairs departments globally. The rise of instant communications and leader-level diplomacy

has meant their two historical monopolies (knowledge and relationships) have been undermined. In recent years, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has been partly redefined as an economic and trade support body, but there needs to be a strategic assessment of its wider purpose in pursuing government aims.

4. In terms of the EU, the FCO is likely to play a more prominent role in future as the EU relationship takes on more characteristics of a traditional diplomatic relationship. Nevertheless, the FCO will need to ensure that it has the necessary policy expertise to be able to oversee EU matters effectively.
5. Management of the EU relationship will continue to demand substantial resources in future. The Withdrawal Agreement will necessitate continued thoroughgoing contact with EU counterparts, especially in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol, citizens' rights and any disputes that arise from that agreement and any future relationship agreement.

Resource priorities

6. The FCO is as well resourced as it has been in a decade, irrespective of any merger with the Department for International Development (DfID). Like most externally facing departments, the FCO has seen a significant increase (+38%) in total managed [expenditure](#) in recent years, up from £1.9bn in real terms in 2014/15 to a projected £2.7bn in 2019/20. This is the highest level of funding the department has had in over a decade, even prior to the Coalition government (in [2009/10](#) its real terms total managed expenditure was £2.5bn). The integration of DfID into the FCO would mean an almost fourfold increase in the financial resources managed by the department, to around £13.2bn in real terms based on 2019/20 projections, albeit DfID funding is ring-fenced via the 0.7% commitment to development spending.
7. Staff headcount at the FCO is also now at its highest level in a decade. In March 2020, full-time equivalent (FTE) [employees](#) stood at 6,310 – 12% above the earliest comparable figure from June 2011. They would be joined by 2,540 FTEs from DfID, taking total staff in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to almost 9,000 FTEs. That would make the FCDO the ninth-biggest department by staff numbers, compared to the FCO which is 13th-biggest.
8. Despite this, according to the [Global Diplomacy Index](#) from the Lowi Institute, the UK lags many of its G7 peers in terms of the number of diplomatic posts and its wider diplomatic presence.
9. In recent years, the FCO has redirected some staff towards the EU, partly to support the UK's exit but also to reinforce diplomatic efforts post-Brexit. According to the National Audit Office (NAO), the FCO reoriented [107 staff](#) towards EU exit work. In his evidence to this committee, the outgoing Permanent Secretary of the department, Sir Simon McDonald, [indicated](#) that the FCO had also acquired 107 staff back from the Department for Exiting the EU – a greater number than had initially been seconded.

10. Much of the UK's diplomatic effort is rightly directed towards the EU, and the FCO must deepen its EU expertise, which had dwindled prior to Brexit. The novel choice of two former Treasury officials to head UKRep under David Cameron reflected an absence of senior EU expertise in the FCO and a credible candidate who could take on the role.

Key assets and obstacles for FCO capabilities

11. The UK Mission to the EU (UKMis) is the UK's single most important diplomatic asset globally. It is the largest post, both in terms of diplomats and overall staff numbers. As of February 2020, UKMis had an estimated 160-190 staff – an almost 50% increase on the level in [March 2010](#).¹ Unlike other UK missions, which are staffed predominantly by FCO officials, UKMis includes large numbers of non-diplomatic staff hired from domestic departments. The mission is a unique resource, unlike any other that the UK has worldwide, with a remarkable range of expertise from across Whitehall.
12. However, it will require substantial reform to meet the demands of being a third country. Previously, the activities of the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep, as was) were dictated by the workings of the various Council structures. The absence of this negotiating function creates an opportunity to reorient resources and effort elsewhere. Not least, information gathering and lobbying will be more difficult as a third country and require more investment than previously.
13. There are no readily available blueprints for how UKMis should operate. The UK will not have as integrated a relationship with the EU as the likes of Norway and Switzerland, yet it will be more deeply engaged than the likes of Australia and even Canada. Most probably, UKMis will be unlike (and probably much bigger than) any other third country mission in Brussels, yet not mirroring the functions of a permanent representation either.
14. A crucial part of the UK being effective as a third country is gaining a more comprehensive understanding of its domestic interests and constituencies. This ties in with the UK's ongoing trade agenda. The UK needs a clear view of its offensive and defensive interests in the EU to know precisely how UKMis should focus its effort. Identifying these interests ought to be a central preoccupation of the IR process. Rather than continue a watching brief over the entirety of EU activity, the UK needs to prioritise, especially given much EU policy will only be marginally relevant to the UK in future.
15. Personnel issues in UKMis require particular attention. Given that the EU will now be much less significant in shaping UK domestic policy, the mission may experience hiring difficulties. Where previously a stint in UKRep was an essential career stepping stone, it may now be less so. There may be less appreciation by Whitehall departments of the experience gained working in UKMis. Staff may feel that moving

¹ Data acquired via an FOI. See appendix.

to the mission leads them to fall behind their Whitehall peers in career progression. Plus, there will inevitably be a downgrading of the prestige attached to jobs in UKMis.

16. Another potential diplomatic asset is British staff still employed in the EU institutions, of which there are around [1,000](#). Relations with these individuals have been badly damaged during the Brexit process, partly because of ham-fisted management of these relationships by UKRep since 2017. Systematic efforts to engage with these individuals have not been made since early in the Brexit process. This could, and should, be remedied.
17. The government should also deepen relationships with British (and other) expert networks – whether in higher education, civil society or business – who retain influential contacts in the EU institutions. These individuals and groups may have more leverage, influence and access than the government in future.
18. The UK's existing contacts and experience of how the EU functions will become progressively obsolete. The UK cannot rest on its laurels and assume it has a privileged insight as a result of its EU membership. Much interaction happened previously as an automatic function of membership. Now it will require a conscious and concerted effort on behalf of UK ministers and civil servants to maintain relationships, experience and expertise.
19. With some exceptions, even while the UK was a member state there was an historical failure to cultivate and build wide networks with EU partners at the UK political level. British ministers will need to be willing to travel to Brussels and Strasbourg to maintain and build relationships in future. This is not just important for UK-EU relations but for UK bilateral and other multilateral relationships as well. At EU level, politicians frequently move between institutions, between European and national level, and even between European level and other multilateral forums.
20. There is also an important role for British parliamentarians to play. British politicians are much more likely to get a sympathetic hearing from their EU political family than the UK government. Labour, for instance, [remains](#) a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), which provides an important network for ongoing interactions. Similar efforts would be welcome by all UK political parties.
21. The UK's data driven approach to policymaking will continue to be of value to EU institutions and member states. The European Commission has relatively limited resources – in personnel terms, it is slightly smaller than the Home Office. Therefore, the UK should continue to be active upstream in the legislative process, discussing important files with member states, the Commission and MEPs and providing them with UK analysis and expertise.

UK allies

22. More broadly, once the inevitably fractious negotiations between the UK and the EU have passed, it will be important to put effort into rebuilding these relationships on a new footing.
23. Historically, the UK has been lauded for the coherence of its EU policymaking process. Yet it has also been criticised for fixating on tactics rather than strategy. To avoid such mistakes in future, the UK must have a clear understanding of how the EU's role in the world is evolving and how it wishes to work with it in future (and the potential for any influence on the shape of that evolution).
24. Ultimately, the UK's EU strategy requires a co-ordinated approach on behalf of government, Parliament, the private sector and the third sector: the EU must be a resource priority despite pressures to expand the UK's bilateral and global presence, ministers must make a conscious effort to maintain and build relationships, all political parties and senior parliamentarians should be encouraged to bolster EU contacts, efforts should be made with remaining UK staff in the EU institutions, the government should deepen its engagement with expert networks with EU interests, and the government should continue to leverage its analysis and expertise with EU institutions and member states.

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Appendix: Data on UK staff working at UKMis



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09 April 2020

Dear Mr Bevington

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 2020/03116

Thank you for your email of 11.03.20 asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000. You asked:

"Can I ask for the following information on the number of staff employed at the (formerly) UK Permanent Representation to the EU and now the UK Mission to the EU?

If possible, I would like this information on both UK based staff and locally employed staff.

1) *How many staff were employed at the UK Permanent Representation/Mission to the EU from May 2010 to the latest available data?*

2) *What was the demographic breakdown of staff at the UK Permanent Representation/Mission to the EU over this period, including gender, ethnicity, age, educational background and diplomatic rank?"*

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information you requested.

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold some information relevant to your request. The information we can provide is limited to the period 2015-2020 for FCO UK Based and Locally Employed staff numbers only.

We are unable to provide Information prior to 2015 as the recorded figures include staff employed by other government departments and we are unable to separate the information to provide FCO staff only.

Some of the information you have requested relates to small numbers of staff (<5) that share a characteristic which may allow them to be identified. We have therefore withheld this information under s.40 of the Act (Personal Information) as disclosure would contravene one of the data protection principles. In such circumstances Sections 40(2) and 40 (3A)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act apply. In this case, our view is that disclosure would breach the data protection principle that personal data should be processed lawfully, fairly and transparently. It is the fairness aspect of this principle, which, in our view, would be breached by disclosure. In such circumstances, s.40 confers an absolute exemption on disclosure.

There is, therefore, no public interest test to apply.

Response to Question 1.

The information we have been able to provide is in the table below. Please note, the headcount reference date for each year is the 31st March, except for 2020 where the reference date is 29th February.

Year	UK Based Staff	Locally Employed Staff
2020 (year to date)	100-119	60-69
2019	100-119	60-69
2018	80-89	50-59
2017	70-79	40-49
2016	80-89	50-59
2015	80-89	50-59

Response to Question 2.

The diversity information we have been able to provide within the attached digest is recorded as percentages as at 31 March each year.

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Yours sincerely,

Central FOI Unit.



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