



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Support for British nationals abroad: The Consular Service

Fifth Report of Session 2014–15



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Summary

The Consular Service of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides vital support to British nationals overseas. It offers a wide range of services, handling anything from lost passports to kidnap, a major crisis evacuation or verification of a document. It is the FCO's public face, and it is central to its reputation at home. It does not always receive the attention it deserves, and we welcome the current Government's decision to make consular services one of the FCO's three top priorities.

Britons undertaking more adventurous travel, large expatriate populations and a series of major overseas crises have tested the Consular Service in recent years. In 2013, the FCO dealt with over 450,000 consular customers, over 17,000 of whom received personal assistance. The Consular Service has responded with a "strategic shift" to provide a more standardised and professional service, with greater clarity on what it can and cannot provide, and a new focus on the most vulnerable. This has resulted in some welcome innovations, such as global call centres to remove the pressure from consular officers and a new crisis centre that can handle multiple concurrent crises. It has also meant a shift to a 'digital first' strategy, which has made the service more accessible to many, but risks leaving some older expatriates behind.

However, the strategic shift to a "smaller and better" consular service has also meant that some services have been limited or withdrawn where they could be provided by other organisations or governments, and standardisation has meant the end of so-called "over-service" as well as under-service. The FCO has consequently put great emphasis on encouraging self-help, managing expectations and explaining the limits of its assistance to British nationals. We found that despite these efforts to explain to the public what the FCO can and cannot do, there was still a significant gap between the high expectations of the public and the reality of what the FCO could provide. Less frequently but more worryingly, we also found that there was, on occasion, a gap between what the public could legitimately expect, and what the FCO currently provided.

The consular network and directorate have undergone substantial change: in staff terms it has more than halved in size, and over 90% of overseas roles are now filled by locally engaged staff. Locally engaged staff are a strength of the FCO and are particularly suited to consular work, which is advantaged by lower turnover and local networks. However, such an imbalance creates management challenges, risks the morale of UK based staff, and also risks creating a senior FCO leadership in the future which has no consular frontline experience at all. The FCO will need fully to address and plan for the consequences of this staffing change, and we recommend that it set a target of 20% of its overseas consular postings to be filled once again by UK-based staff. In addition, the closure of consular posts in Europe has not been matched by the equivalent number of openings elsewhere, nor has it been accompanied by substantial increases in alternative means of consular representation.

In cases of deaths abroad, we received substantial anecdotal evidence to indicate that FCO services to bereaved families are inconsistent and have at times fallen well below the expected standards of the FCO, with repeated failures of communication and compassion. We welcome the FCO's ongoing review of how it provides services in cases of suspicious deaths abroad, and give our support for a proposal for a specialised central unit to provide expert and dependable assistance.

Supporting British nationals who are arrested and detained overseas takes up a substantial amount of consular time, but the service is still judged by the FCO's NGO partners to be uneven and minimalist. There is serious disquiet about the FCO's closure of consulates and withdrawal of routine visits from British nationals imprisoned in EU states, as visits are seen as the main way to provide consular assistance and visible support. We were gravely concerned by allegations that consular officers had failed properly to respond to British nationals who alleged torture in foreign prisons. The newly updated internal guidance for handling torture cases is a big step forward, particularly if accompanied by comprehensive staff training, but we ask the FCO to investigate the allegations we received and report back to us.

We considered the transfer of responsibility for the issue of passports overseas from the FCO to HM Passport Office, which was completed in March 2014. We also considered the cause and impact of the passport delays in summer 2014. We found that service, and particularly waiting time, for overseas nationals had been poorly affected by the transfer, and that the FCO's reputation had been damaged.

We concluded that the FCO has put substantial resources into the improvement and professionalisation of the Consular Service, and that the benefits can already be seen, though it should continue to ensure that any inconsistencies and problems are identified and addressed. The general public often has unrealistic expectations of what the Consular Service can do for it, but we are satisfied that the FCO is rightly focused on the core areas where it has a unique and important role. The Consular Service provides vital help to British nationals in distress, and is a lifeline in times of great need. It can be proud of its work.

Conclusions and recommendations

Consular strategies

1. We welcome the elevation of consular services as a vital part of the FCO's work that can provide unique assistance to British nationals overseas. (Paragraph 16)

Major organisational changes since 2007

2. The Consular Contact Centres appear to be an efficient and effective innovation by the FCO that allows frontline consular officers to focus on their main work. (Paragraph 19)
3. The FCO has rightly dedicated significant resources to improving and developing IT systems capable of meeting the demands of consular services. (Paragraph 21)
4. Demand for online services will continue to grow, and it is right that the FCO has embraced this approach. However, the FCO's assurances that it continued to support those who could not access digital services via phone and in person were not borne out by the feedback we received. We are concerned that the digital strategy has resulted in a service that is harder for some expatriates to reach without third-party support. This could make vulnerable people even less able to operate independently. The Contact Centres should function as a genuine resource of consular information and support for people who have made the time and effort to call, rather than simply a 'signpost' to the FCO's online services especially when people are not in a position to access these easily. (Paragraph 22)
5. It is of the utmost importance to get the FCO's response right in a crisis. We believe that the FCO has responded to earlier serious problems in its crisis response with energy and the seriousness they deserved, and that lessons have been learned and effectively applied. By their nature, crises are often unpredictable and the FCO will require continuous vigilance to maintain and improve its crisis systems. (Paragraph 25)
6. There appears to have been a shift from attempting to keep track of British nationals abroad in normal circumstances so that they could be contacted if a crisis occurred, which proved difficult, to making it easier for British nationals to contact the FCO at times of crisis. This may be less reassuring for long-term expatriates who enjoyed the comfort of knowing that their embassy knows their number and address, but it is a sensible response to the problems encountered by previous systems. However, we remain concerned about potential over-reliance on internet-based services to distribute information in a crisis, when internet services might not be working, or the internet is deliberately cut off by the Government in question. In its response to this report, the FCO should set out the contingency measures it has in place to mitigate the loss of internet-based communication in a crisis, such as its surge capacity on phone lines. (Paragraph 28)

7. We conclude that there has been a net reduction in the size of the consular network on the ground, which is a concern. The closure of posts in Europe has not been replaced by the equivalent number of openings elsewhere, nor has it been accompanied by substantial increases in alternative means of consular representation, such as honorary consuls. We are concerned that vulnerable British prisoners abroad are reportedly receiving less assistance than before. The FCO should set out in its response how it intends to review allegations that the support it offers to prisoners has deteriorated as a result of the closures. (Paragraph 32)

Honorary Consuls

8. We consider Honorary Consuls to be an important and efficient part of the FCO's consular network, enabling it to extend its reach beyond capital cities. They do important work for British nationals at very low cost to the service. We understand concerns about potential conflicts of interest, and we recommend that the FCO consider recruiting Honorary Consuls on shorter contracts and that the FCO require Honorary Consuls to declare any relevant business interests throughout their tenure, and that the FCO ensure that training and supervision of Honorary Consuls in connection with potential conflicts of interest is standardised. We further recommend that, where the FCO replaces a consular office with an Honorary Consul, it sets out in public the duties it expects the Honorary Consul to perform. (Paragraph 36)

Reduction in documentary and notarial services

9. The FCO's notarial service must take officials' time away from more vulnerable and needy cases, so the FCO's decision to reduce this service wherever other providers are available is a sensible one. The FCO should carefully monitor any implications of the loss of income from this service, as it would not be advisable for the FCO to increase other fees for mandatory documents to make up the shortfall. (Paragraph 39)
10. We agree that there are circumstances in which it is not only compassionate but a most effective use of funds to help a national to return home, and prevent further problems. The FCO is right to review its debt recovery systems, and it should pursue repayment more rigorously in future. In its response to this report, the FCO should set out how it intends to improve its debt recovery systems. (Paragraph 39)

Consular staffing

11. Locally engaged staff are vital members of consular teams and have language skills and knowledge of local issues that are highly valuable in consular work. However, we are concerned that the reduction in UK-based overseas consular work to only 9% of overseas consular posts will have the short-term consequence of making consular work less attractive for younger FCO staff due to the lack of overseas postings, and a longer-term consequence that very few senior Ambassadors or FCO staff in leadership roles will have frontline consular experience. Such a significant change to

FCO careers should be carefully planned and reviewed, rather than an inadvertent result of a cost-cutting strategy. The FCO should make at least 20% of overseas consular positions available to UK-based staff. This would have cost implications, but it will ensure that valuable consular experience is maintained among the future leadership cadre in the Foreign Office. (Paragraph 47)

Public messaging and managing expectations

12. We agree that the expectations of the general public about what the FCO can do for them are often too high, and welcome the measures taken by the FCO to explain its services more clearly. (Paragraph 49)

Suspicious deaths abroad

13. The FCO's official guidance for families who have suffered a bereavement due to murder or manslaughter is timid and cautious in comparison to its guidance on its other services. It is understandable that support is tailored to each individual case, but the guidance gives the impression of very limited support and no guarantees of assistance. The FCO should update its guidance to be clearer and more generous about what the families can expect to receive. This should include the more extensive commitments that it has agreed internally. (Paragraph 54)

FCO's response to complaints

14. The submissions we received indicated that consular support for families in cases of deaths abroad is inconsistent and, at times, has left them feeling entirely let down. Many of the complaints we received were not focused on extra funding but rather on things that the FCO could and should do better, like consistently returning phone calls, and providing the clear advice set out in its own guidance, as well as responding with compassion and support. (Paragraph 57)
15. We recommend that the FCO review its training and guidance on handling non-suspicious deaths abroad, and engage in a consultation with families to discuss what went wrong, and the measures have been implemented to ensure that it will not happen again. (Paragraph 57)
16. We welcome the FCO's review of its services to families who have been affected by the murder or manslaughter of a relative overseas. The evidence we have received from families with cases throughout the last ten years shows that the review is long overdue. The review should address why repeated failures of communication and compassion have occurred, and should examine whether more staff or more training are required. The FCO should inform the Committee of the conclusions reached by its review and any policy changes or action subsequently undertaken. (Paragraph 59)

Assistance with funds

17. We understand that the FCO cannot commit to fund repatriation, legal fees, translation etc. especially where adequate insurance would have covered costs. The FCO's policy of working with partners who can provide funding where needed is sensible. However, more needs to be done to make the criteria and availability of third party funding more clear and consistent. When families must petition third party organisations for funding, it risks a situation in which the loudest voices will get the most funding, and a very inconsistent provision of help. The FCO provides funds to these bodies, so it is right that the public understand what they can and cannot expect from these organisations. (Paragraph 64)
18. The FCO or its partners should look to implement a mechanism by which they can provide short-term loans to families who want to repatriate the body of a loved one, or travel to attend a court case abroad, as a compassionate response in difficult times. In light of its current poor performance in recouping discretionary loans, the FCO should include more robust recovery mechanisms in this scheme. Although we sympathise with British nationals who are forced to pursue legal cases abroad, due to the length and uncertainty of court cases, FCO loans should not be provided to cover legal fees. (Paragraph 65)

Communication

19. It is not sensible to expect bereaved family members to remember detailed information conveyed by phone. It should be standard practice for consular staff dealing with any kind of death abroad for all calls to family members to be followed by an email or letter re-stating the information provided, for reference. (Paragraph 66)

A new central unit for murder and manslaughter cases

20. The FCO's standards for what it will provide to families coping with deaths abroad are applied inconsistently by consular desk staff and consuls in posts for whom such cases are a small part of their overall jobs. This results in some exemplary experiences and some poor ones for families who are already going through a deeply traumatic time. (Paragraph 69)
21. We find the case for a small central unit on deaths abroad, particularly murder and manslaughter cases, to be persuasive. A central unit providing support for families in the UK would support, rather than undermine, consular work in country, and we recommend that the FCO implement this proposal. (Paragraph 69)

Detention abroad

22. Consular services are immensely important to British prisoners abroad. It is troubling to have such consensus among our witnesses that the quality and type of FCO services available to prisoners vary from post to post. (Paragraph 74)

Lawyers lists and legal information

23. We welcome the FCO's commitment to update and improve its lists of lawyers and prisoner packs, which have been the subject of many complaints to this inquiry. The FCO should also consider ways in which it can co-operate with other European and Western partners who have already produced comprehensive guides to share this information and pool resources. In its response to this report, the FCO should provide a deadline by which it expects to have updated all of these documents and placed them on its website. (Paragraph 79)

Torture allegations and FCO guidance

24. We are deeply concerned about the allegations we have received that the FCO has in some instances not responded adequately to protect and support those who said that they had been the victim of torture or ill-treatment. Any failure to support vulnerable nationals in such circumstances is deplorable. We recommend that the FCO launch an investigation into the allegations that have been raised during this inquiry, including identifying and interviewing staff involved, and that it present us with its findings, which we intend to review. (Paragraph 84)
25. We welcome the new guidance for consular staff on torture and mistreatment, which is a clear step forward. For the new guidance to be effective it should be accompanied by comprehensive training, and the FCO should set out how many staff have been trained on the new guidance so far, and in what countries. The FCO should also keep records of the number of complaints about alleged mistreatment it pursues with authorities abroad, and make these statistics available to the Committee and its NGO partners, in order to better assess the scale of the problem. (Paragraph 86)
26. Publication of the guidance would enable victims and their families to have a more full understanding of what can be expected, but we understand that these are internal guidelines meant for FCO officers' use. We recommend that the FCO produce a separate updated public document setting out what it can and cannot do in these cases, based on its revised internal guidance. (Paragraph 87)

Death penalty

27. There is a difficult balance to be struck when considering government support for death penalty cases. We were moved by the cases we heard. On one hand, such prisoners are among the most vulnerable of British nationals abroad, on the other, funding cases could mean that large amounts of public money go to a very small number of people. We do not recommend that the FCO singles out death penalty cases, many of which take years to reach a final judgment, for an open-ended commitment of funding. The FCO's approach of providing consular support to the family, as well as funding and working with the specialist organisation Reprieve, is the right one. (Paragraph 89)

A “lack of proactivity”

28. The FCO talks about the minimum services it can provide to prisoners, rather than doing the most it can to protect them. This policy does not align with its stated goal of focusing services on the most vulnerable. We recommend that the FCO prioritise fair trials rights training for its consular staff so that they can more intervene proactively, if necessary. (Paragraph 91)
29. Press interest should not affect the FCO’s decision making, but we have repeatedly been informed that media interest generates a more active response from the FCO. If true, this is unacceptable, as decisions about protecting prisoners should be made on the needs of each case, rather than how many people are watching. If the FCO has in fact been working behind closed doors on the national’s behalf, it must improve its communication with the prisoner and their family to make them aware of this. (Paragraph 93)

Passport transfer and crisis 2014

30. We do not question the security and cost efficiency rationale for the move to repatriate passports to the UK and end the process of issuing them abroad. However, it has been unpopular among expatriates, and the FCO has failed to make clear the benefits of the new system or to address its drawbacks. The reduction in the price of passports applications from overseas offers expatriates a chance to share in the benefits of the efficiency savings, and is warmly welcomed. (Paragraph 102)
31. The Government should offer expatriates an express service option, which would attract a premium price, as in the UK, or the possibility of keeping their passport while waiting for a new one to be issued, by submitting a certified copy of the passport instead. (Paragraph 103)

Passport crisis

32. The transfer and subsequent problems in passport processing for overseas nationals has caused reputational damage to the FCO. The speed with which the Passport Service ran into trouble just six weeks after the final transfer of responsibility from the FCO to HM Passport Office strongly suggests that planning was not properly done. The emergency measures were well-implemented, but should not have been necessary. The FCO should request that HM Passport Office reimburse any costs resulting from the increase in Emergency Travel Documents and other measures that the FCO took this summer. (Paragraph 107)

Complaints handling

33. The Committee will continue to monitor consular complaints handling and the FCO should include its customer satisfaction statistics in its annual reports. (Paragraph 110)

Conclusion

34. The FCO has made major improvements to its consular service over the last eight years, with sensible and effective innovations such as the call centres, the crisis centre, and the reduction in notarial services. (Paragraph 111)
35. We consider that the organisational changes have been generally well-handled, but further changes, particularly further reductions in staff or consulates, risk damaging morale. (Paragraph 112)
36. British nationals must share the responsibility for their own safety and security abroad. The FCO's public messaging campaigns to improve understanding of its services, and what British nationals can legitimately expect from such services, are a sensible measure. (Paragraph 113)
37. Setting clear core levels of service has undoubtedly brought improvement, and benefits can already be clearly seen, though the FCO should continue to ensure that inconsistencies and problems are identified and addressed. Nonetheless, as the Consular Directorate proceeds in implementing changes, it is important not to dehumanise and minimise the service in the pursuit of professionalisation or excessive cost-cutting. The FCO provides vital services with limited resources when nationals are suffering under difficult circumstances. To many, it is a lifeline and a comfort in times of great need. It should rightly be proud of its work. (Paragraph 114)

1 Our inquiry

1. Parliament last considered consular services in detail in 2006, when the Public Accounts Committee published a report into consular services to British nationals,¹ following a major National Audit Office (NAO) report on consular services in November 2005.² We and our predecessor Committee have since then continued to monitor major changes to consular services in some of our reports on the FCO's performance and finances.³ Like almost all of our fellow MPs, we also have an interest in consular services on behalf of our constituents, and many of us have had contact and worked with the FCO in recent times to raise and help solve specific problems.

2. We issued a call for written submissions in December 2013, and we took oral evidence from former Ambassadors, NGOs, travel representatives and others between January and June 2014, followed by the FCO Minister Mark Simmonds and FCO officials. We visited the FCO's new crisis centre in London in January 2014. In March 2014, we undertook a two-day visit to Malaga, the largest consular centre in Europe and the location of one of the three new global call centres. We were keen to hear from members of the public who had first-hand experience of consular services, and we hosted a web forum in January–February and held a private roundtable meeting with some of those who had submitted evidence or comments on the forum, to discuss their experiences in greater detail.

3. This report does not attempt to comment upon every element of the Consular Service's wide range of work, and there are some laudable developments in FCO consular services that we do not intend to cover in detail, such as its work on rescuing British victims of forced marriage abroad, or the important work it does with victims of kidnapping and hostage-taking, and their families. Based on the evidence received and our own experience in working with the FCO on such cases, we consider these to be admirable and impressive services run in extremely difficult circumstances. However, in the course of the inquiry we heard from many members of the general public who told us of disappointing and even distressing experiences of trying to access particular kinds of consular support when they needed it. This evidence is, by its nature, anecdotal, and we cannot extrapolate or infer wider FCO failure from it. It is also from a self-selecting group of people who had particular experiences that motivated them to respond, so it may not be representative of all experiences of the FCO's services. Yet the stories submitted to us via our web forum, roundtable, and written evidence, are of sufficient number and gravity that they give cause for concern and cannot be dismissed. We explore some of those areas in chapters 4–7.

4. As ever, we thank all of those who have participated in this inquiry. In particular, we thank the many members of the public who have taken time to engage with the inquiry and tell us about their experiences, some of which were clearly painful and distressing to revisit.

1 Committee of Public Accounts, Thirty-ninth Report of Session 2005–06, [Consular services to British nationals](#), HC 813

2 Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Session 2005–2006, [The Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Consular Services to British Nationals](#), HC 594, November 2005

3 See, for example, Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2008–09, [Foreign and Commonwealth Office Annual Report 2007–08](#)

The scale of the response reminded us once more how vital consular services are to British nationals, and how important it is to get them right.

2 The Consular Service

5. The Consular Service is the part of the UK Government to which British nationals turn when they encounter serious problems overseas, from lost passports to kidnapping, arrest, or the death of a loved one. It acts as an emergency service in the event of a crisis abroad and will arrange evacuation for British nationals. It also provides comprehensive travel advice and warnings, as well as more routine documentary and registration services for expatriates. With a broad range of services focused on nationals abroad, it is the main way in which the British public comes into contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and it provides unique and vital services to British nationals overseas.

6. Consular services are provided by a Directorate within the FCO. This Directorate consists of a network of more than 620 consular officers in embassies and consulates around the world, 49 (full time equivalent) call centre staff in three new global call centres, and a large consular team in London with over 200 staff. The activities of consular staff are governed by international agreements, including the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, or bilateral consular conventions. These ensure that consular officers accredited to a particular country enjoy certain privileges and immunities, such as right of access to visit detainees, which other organisations do not.

7. Yet consular work does not always get the attention it deserves. When the Foreign Secretary made a speech on consular services in 2012, he was the first Foreign Secretary to have done so.⁴ The current Government elevated consular services to become one of the FCO's three main priorities in 2010–15, and the Department has instituted a succession of change strategies since 2007. In the light of the substantial changes that this key service was undergoing, we decided to examine the way in which the FCO was providing its consular services.

Facing high demand and new challenges

8. British nationals now travel and live abroad in large numbers. We make over 57 million individual trips overseas every year, and over 5 million British-born nationals live abroad. This naturally leads to large numbers of people encountering trouble abroad: approximately 6,000 British nationals are arrested abroad each year, and at any one time there are more than 3,250 British nationals in foreign prisons. Over 100 Britons die abroad each week.⁵

9. In 2012, the then Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, said that the high number of travellers and expatriates resulted in “an immense demand for our services”, adding that an average of 37,000 people contacted the FCO each week.⁶ Not all of those

4 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

5 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 4

6 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

calls require significant consular help; the table below gives a sense of the number of people who have required serious consular assistance in each of the last five years.

FCO table of consular assistance cases

Overview of total worldwide figures of Consular assistance over the last five years

	Total Consular assistance cases	Drug Arrests	Arrests (Including drug arrests)	Deaths ¹	Hospitalisations	Rapes	Sexual Assaults	Other Assistance ²	Lost and stolen passports/Emergency travel documents
2009/10	19,839	994	6,439	5,930	3,689	132	140	3,509	27,272
2010/11	19,228	799	5,700	5,972	3,752	115	163	3,526	25,969
2011/12	19,874	816	6,015	6,237	3,739	127	154	3,707	28,659
2012/13	19,244	669	5,435	6,193	3,599	138	172	3,602	28,783
2013/14	17,517	708	5,418	4,110	3,157	106	152	4,488	31,134

¹ We no longer record death notifications (where we have had no other involvement) as consular cases. This has affected the number of cases recorded in 2013/14

² "Other assistance" includes a number of additional attributes compared to the British Behaviour Abroad 2013 Report, which accounts for the size of the increase in this column in 2013/14

Source: *British Behaviour Abroad 2014*⁷

10. British nationals are also visiting and living in more distant countries with very different institutions and services. According to the FCO, destinations in southern Europe and North America (Spain, France and the USA) remain the most popular for UK travellers and continue to drive the greatest volume of consular assistance calls; but the FCO told us that "many of our most challenging cases come from outside those countries, including places like Thailand, the UAE and South America."⁸ Nevertheless, we note that the data shows that there is no clear upward trend in the number of consular assistance cases over the last five years.

11. Changing demographics in the UK and more frequent cross-border relationships has also meant the growth of new challenges, such as abduction of children by a parent abroad, or forced marriage of British nationals while in other countries. In 2012, the FCO assisted in 356 child abduction cases, and led the rescue overseas of 205 victims of forced marriage.⁹ The FCO has responded by setting up dedicated teams to tackle these issues. The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), a joint FCO and Home Office unit that was set up in 2005, operates in the UK and overseas to support and protect British nationals at risk of forced marriage, including (in extreme circumstances) by conducting rescues of victims held against their will overseas. In 2012, it gave advice, support or assistance in almost 1500 cases of possible forced marriage.¹⁰ The FCO also funds NGOs to provide assistance, giving £150,000 in 2013/14 to NGOs carrying out domestic projects tackling forced marriage, in addition to £25,000 to Southall Black Sisters, which provides a repatriation service to victims of forced marriage who have received consular assistance.¹¹

7 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [British Behaviour Abroad Report 2014](#), July 2014, p.1

8 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 27

9 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

10 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) paras 93–98

11 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 29](#))

Structure and financing

12. The Consular Service network is unique in that it is entirely fee-funded and does not derive any financing from taxation. There is a Treasury requirement to set fees at a level that enables income to match costs. In 2012-13, its network cost £87.2 million to run. The Consular Service's income is largely derived from a levy on the passport fee of around £15 on every adult passport, which accounts for two thirds of its income. The rest of the funding comes from services that the FCO charges for, including Emergency Travel Documents (ETDs) and documentary services. We asked Mark Simmonds MP, Minister, if this was effectively a 'cap' on spending. He said:

The day-to-day consular service provision is entirely funded in the way I described. There are, of course, examples where there may be a crisis and where we have to pull in staff from across the Foreign and Commonwealth Office broader family and liaise with other Government Departments. In that case, we have an agreement with the Treasury that those additional top-up costs will be provided, with the Treasury's agreement, by structures outside the normal funding for the consulate finance.¹²

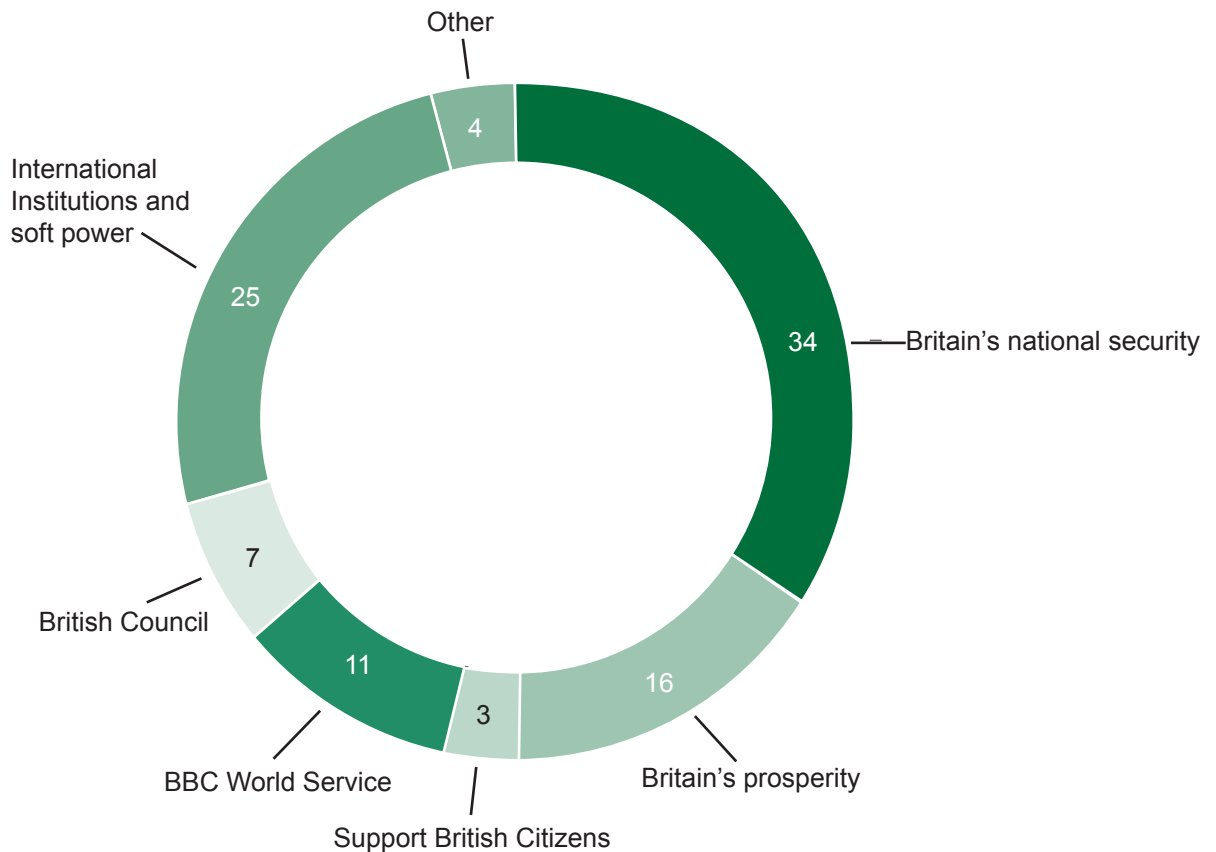
Limited resources

13. Consular work is a relatively small part of the FCO's expenditure. The chart below shows that consular work ('Support British Citizens') accounts for just 3% of all FCO spending in 2013-14, less than a fifth of its spending on supporting Britain's prosperity.¹³

12 Q143

13 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Annual Report and Accounts 2013-14](#), July 2014, p.21

FCO spend by foreign policy priority 2013-14



One of the FCO's 2012–13 priorities is “delivering a smaller and better consular service by managing resources more effectively to meet our customers’ needs”.¹⁴ The Consular Directorate told us that it had experienced pressure on resources along with the wider public sector, and said “We will have to do more with less, which means clear prioritisation and more flexibility in where (and when) we put our resources.”¹⁵ However, when we asked the Minister whether the reforms were about saving money or providing better service, he argued that it was the latter: “It is what I call a realigned, more focused service: one that is focusing on the most vulnerable.”¹⁶

14 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (CON 19) para 1

15 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (CON 19) para 30

16 Q141

3 Reforms to the Consular Service

14. Since a widely-criticised response to the Asian tsunami in 2004, and reports by the National Audit Office (NAO) and Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in 2005 and 2006, the FCO has put a lot of work at a management level into how best to run the Consular Service and to meet the multiple demands on it. This has resulted in what the FCO terms a “strategic shift” in consular work and how it is done.

Consular strategies

15. As part of the strategic shift, since 2007, the FCO has published three consecutive multi-year strategies for transforming and improving consular services. The 2007–10 strategy focused on creating consistent standards and professionalising the service, following criticism in the NAO and PAC reports of an inconsistent and variable service between posts. There was some emphasis on ending both under- and over-delivery, to achieve greater consistency and fairer expectations, stating “if we regularly offer help beyond our publicly-stated framework we should not be surprised that we are asked to deliver such help again and again, placing extra pressure on our resources”.¹⁷ The 2010–13 strategy focused on providing what customers needed via better information management and continued professionalisation, as well as implementing some major organisational changes, such as the transfer of passport responsibility and embedding new technology. The 2013–16 strategy raises ambitions still further, aiming to be “the best consular service in the world” by 2016. It describes a more flexible service focused on identifying and helping the most vulnerable, including more assistance “for customers who need it most, the customers who are most at risk because of who they are, or where they are.”¹⁸ The Committee suggests the FCO examine what comparable countries provide in terms of key consular services and also aim to adopt best practice.

17 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Consular Services strategy 2007–10*, p.20

18 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Consular Strategy: Consular Excellence](#), 2013–16, p.6

2013-2016 Consular Strategy: Consular Excellence

SUMMARY OF AIMS AND PRIORITIES

- *Improving services*: more assistance for those who need it; assistance that customers want; offering specialised services through partners; removing bureaucracy; streamlining notarial services; more local awareness raising activity.
- *Delivery of services*: more services online; more ways for customers to contact the FCO; a global network of call centres; faster and more professional responses; closer aligned fees and services; online payments for services.
- *Crisis response*: encourage travellers to use caution; better use of social media; improved FCO IT system to provide a reliable database.
- *Passport handover* : repatriate all overseas passport provision to HM Passport Office in the UK
- *Assessing progress*: develop mechanisms for obtaining regular direct feedback from customers; engage with special interest groups.

16. Taken together, the strategies show the FCO having gone from a service that was often high-quality but inconsistent and unclear, to a more defined but clear set of standard services that are provided transparently at all posts, and is now moving toward additional help focused on the most vulnerable. It also aims to deliver services in a more flexible way, including through the use of better technology and increased use of partner organisations. **We welcome the elevation of consular services as a vital part of the FCO's work that can provide unique assistance to British nationals overseas.**

Major organisational changes since 2007

Creation of consolidated call centres

17. Between June 2013 and March 2014, the FCO moved to a model in which all phone calls to local consular posts during their office hours are routed to one of three 'Consular Contact Centres' (CCC) based in Malaga, Ottawa and Hong Kong. Urgent out-of-hours calls continue to be answered by the 24 hour London-based Global Response Centre. The three new Consular Contact Centres provide a point of initial contact and aim to resolve many of the standard questions, such as what to do about a lost passport, at this stage. For more complicated or urgent cases that require local assistance, the call centre 'escalates' the call to the consular team at the relevant Post. The FCO told us that the centres allowed tailored training for staff, enabled better information management as repeated requests about the same issue are noticed and addressed by providing better information online, and most importantly, they freed up consular officers in post to spend time on consular cases.

18. The FCO told us that many calls are not related to consular work (for example, asking about visas, or commercial concerns) and that the Centres aim to resolve 80% of consular calls. When we asked Susan Caldwell, Head of Strategy and Network, to explain how the FCO defines "resolution" for such a high proportion of calls, she told us that of the calls that are not escalated to posts, "35% of those other calls are signposting people and helping

them get access to other government services, such as passports and visa services.” A further 17% of calls were about notarial issues¹⁹ where people wanted to understand the service and make an appointment. She agreed that this “signposting” could include call centre staff telling callers to go online for a service, but she said that the FCO had taken time to survey customers to understand better how they could find that information more easily online.²⁰

19. We visited the call centre in Malaga to see it in action. We were impressed by the multi-lingual staff who handled calls with professionalism. We also noted the comprehensive data system that enabled staff to access detailed information from each post’s consular team in order to answer queries. **The Consular Contact Centres appear to be an efficient and effective innovation by the FCO that allows frontline consular officers to focus on their main work.**

Move to digital by default

20. The FCO’s call centres are part of a broader strategy of ‘digital transformation’. This is part of the Government’s Digital by Default agenda, which requires that services be moved online for easier access and more efficient provision. The FCO’s Digital Strategy is both inward and outward-facing: internally, the FCO states that it is making better use of technology for example in its Compass system for recording consular cases; its Crisis Hub (see below); and its call centres. Externally, the FCO states that it is working to put more services for the public online, such as booking appointments and submitting applications for certain services, as well as making better use of technology and social media.

21. There are many advantages to this approach. The FCO reports success in its internal systems and we heard praise from members of FCO staff who used both the consular and crisis systems, though we noted that consular officers in post in Malaga were asked to enter all information about cases into a database but were not equipped with mobile devices with which they could access and update the files while working remotely (for example, on a visit to a hospital or a detention centre). This suggested that the system had added an extra time-consuming task—the need to enter information into an IT system in the office—rather than removed one. Further to increase the benefit of these systems for staff, the FCO could conduct a trial issuing mobile devices (such as a compatible tablet) to a group of consular officers to evaluate whether it increases efficiency, though the benefits of such a move would have to be calculated against costs. **The FCO has rightly dedicated significant resources to improving and developing IT systems capable of meeting the demands of consular services.**

Are online services leaving some nationals behind?

22. We acknowledge that there will undoubtedly be increasing demand for FCO services to be available online, and that online services will make them more accessible to the majority

19 British Consulates provide a range of legal documents for British nationals, such as registering births and deaths, providing certificates of ‘no objection’ to a marriage or adoption, witnessing a signature, etc.

of British nationals. However, we received some indications that there was an over-reliance on online services (for example, one man went to a Consulate to ask how to obtain a document and was told to go online to book an appointment at the same consulate);²¹ and that the system was causing distress to some older members of expatriate populations, who do not have access to or expertise in using digital services.²² This was confirmed on our visit to Malaga, where Spanish local authorities told us that British nationals often come to them to ask for help in filling in the British Government’s new online forms. When we asked FCO officials about this, we were told that services had not been withdrawn, and that British nationals could go to posts or call by telephone.²³ Susan Caldwell explained further how FCO staff respond to such a situation:

When citizens are facing exactly that scenario—they have said “I am old; I don’t have access to the internet, or I struggle with it”—we support them and talk them through it. “Actually, can you get somebody?” Often, people have friends, family or others around them in the community who can help them access online services.²⁴

She added that the FCO was “linked in” to the Government’s work on digital inclusion, and said that the FCO worked with local communities in areas where there were large elderly expatriate populations to provide support. **Demand for online services will continue to grow, and it is right that the FCO has embraced this approach. However, the FCO’s assurances that it continued to support those who could not access digital services via phone and in person were not borne out by the feedback we received. We are concerned that the digital strategy has resulted in a service that is harder for some expatriates to reach without third-party support. This could make vulnerable people even less able to operate independently. The Contact Centres should function as a genuine resource of consular information and support for people who have made the time and effort to call, rather than simply a ‘signpost’ to the FCO’s online services especially when people are not in a position to access these easily.**

Consular response to major crises

23. When a crisis occurs abroad, the Consular Service is the UK’s emergency response for its nationals. Depending on the form of crisis, the local and wider consular service work to locate missing, injured and deceased British nationals; provide support and care; and organise evacuation if necessary. It will also provide public information and support to families at home. Perceived failings in the FCO’s response to various consular crises in the first half of the 2000s saw what one witness called “quite radical thinking”²⁵ about crisis response, resulting in a number of major developments, including:

21 Foreign Affairs Committee, [Consular Services Web Forum: Routine consular services to British citizens who live/work abroad](#), Jan–Feb 2014, page 2

22 Foreign Affairs Committee, [Consular Services Web Forum: Routine consular services to British citizens who live/work abroad](#) Jan–Feb 2014

23 Q189

24 Q192

25 Q93 [Sir Michael Arthur]

- the establishment of a new crisis centre to coordinate consular responses
- the establishment of Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs) of experts (for example, from the Red Cross) to support the consular teams in post;
- increased professionalisation of consular staff including Honorary Consuls; and
- the Global Response Centre (GRC), which handles out-of-hours calls from members of the public who need urgent consular assistance.

24. Nonetheless, in 2011 the FCO's crisis response was heavily criticised for failings in its handling of the Arab Spring, particularly in relation to a delayed evacuation of British nationals in Libya.²⁶ Following an internal review, the FCO again overhauled its consular crisis response mechanisms to increase capacity to handle "multiple, concurrent crises".²⁷ This included:

- the launch of an expanded consular crisis centre in London in October 2012, following £2m of investment, with 50% more staff (31 staff).²⁸
- A new crisis IT system, 'Crisis Hub', with improved ability to record cases and share information.
- New crisis decision-making structures based on the system used by emergency services.
- Expanded crisis training and mandatory crisis planning for posts.
- Increased number of crisis management experts, and enlarged surge capacity of trained crisis response volunteers.
- An extra Rapid Deployment Team for the Middle East and North Africa.

Each FCO post has its own Crisis Management Plan taking note of the risks specific to their country or region and detailing how to respond. These plans are reviewed and tested annually.

25. Mark Tanzer, Chief Executive of ABTA,²⁹ was positive about the FCO's efforts to improve its crisis response, telling us that his colleagues who had been involved in FCO crisis simulation exercises "said that it was a very effective simulation of what would happen, especially if two big crises happened simultaneously. Both our members and the Foreign Office will have learned a lot from that simulation."³⁰ Former Ambassador Giles Paxman was strongly supportive of the changes, telling us:

26 See, for example, Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2012–13, *British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring'*, HC 80, Chapter 3

27 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 103

28 HC Deb, 11 Dec 2013, [col 272W](#)

29 ABTA (previously the Association of British Travel Agents) is a UK trade association for travel agents and tour operators

30 Q20

I am absolutely convinced that we are now much, much better prepared than we were, particularly before the tsunami in Thailand. We have much better structures. We have clearer policy and better organisation. We have a fully equipped and well-staffed crisis centre. We have much better tools. We have regional rapid deployment teams with the right skills. We have the right partnerships with the emergency services. We have the right planning—better planning—overseas, and better liaison with the local authorities overseas.³¹

However, he warned that, “we will never be totally prepared. There will always be situations that arise in places where we will not expect them to arise”.³² We visited the new crisis centre at the FCO in London in January 2014 and were briefed in detail on the expanded resources and facilities for handling crises. Since then, the centre has dealt with crises in South Sudan, Iraq and Libya. We note that, unlike in 2011, we have received no complaints and seen very little media criticism about more recent crisis responses. **It is of the utmost importance to get the FCO’s response right in a crisis. We believe that the FCO has responded to earlier serious problems in its crisis response with energy and the seriousness they deserved, and that lessons have been learned and effectively applied. By their nature, crises are often unpredictable and the FCO will require continuous vigilance to maintain and improve its crisis systems.**

Changing the way information is communicated in a crisis

26. As part of its reforms, the FCO has moved away from some of its previous means of distributing information to British travellers and expatriates in a crisis. Most notably, in April 2013 it scrapped a global online registration database of British nationals in each country called LOCATE, which had been operational since 2007. The LOCATE system was intended to make it easier for FCO officials to get in touch quickly with British nationals in times of crisis, but the FCO said fewer than 1% of British nationals abroad had registered with the service. An FCO blog in 2013 by the Ambassador to Lebanon explained:

Last year, the FCO reviewed LOCATE worldwide—and found it actually hindered rather than helped our recent crisis responses in Japan and the Arab Spring. We had teams of people calling out-of-date mobile numbers, and contacting families who had long since returned home. Those teams could have been out there, helping the people who really needed them.³³

Mark Tanzer told us that customers of ABTA companies did not use the LOCATE system in great numbers, and said the FCO was right to scrap it, “although it was a good initiative.”³⁴

31 Q128

32 Q128

33 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ambassador’s Blog, [‘The Brits are coming...but please stay in touch’](#), 20 May 2013

34 Q18

27. In addition, more long-standing means of keeping track of expatriates appeared to have been quietly dropped. Registration of expatriates at the local Embassy or post has ended; and we were surprised to find no mention of the FCO's networks of voluntary wardens in their submission to this inquiry. Warden networks have been used for decades to help distribute messages from the Embassy to their local communities of British nationals about their safety and security. Commenters on our web forum also expressed regret that warden networks were no longer available in their country of residence.³⁵ When we asked the FCO about wardens, it confirmed that in fact some 69 countries continued to have warden networks, and the Minister praised the volunteers: "they are still extremely helpful and many of them are very dedicated and committed British citizens, often in extremely challenging areas." The Minister highlighted in particular the work of wardens in Kaduna in northern Nigeria.³⁶ It is unclear why the latest consular strategy does not mention wardens at all, while the previous 2010–13 strategy planned to update and extend the networks.

28. The FCO has replaced the LOCATE and registration systems with an increased focus on social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook to help British nationals in times of crisis.³⁷ The FCO has also introduced a new mobile registration system for British nationals caught up in a crisis, which will enable people to register with the Foreign Office by phone call, email or text message from their mobile phones.³⁸ British nationals can also sign up to the FCO's country-specific travel advice alerts via email or social media, and updates will then be sent to them.³⁹ *There appears to have been a shift from attempting to keep track of British nationals abroad in normal circumstances so that they could be contacted if a crisis occurred, which proved difficult, to making it easier for British nationals to contact the FCO at times of crisis. This may be less reassuring for long-term expatriates who enjoyed the comfort of knowing that their embassy knows their number and address, but it is a sensible response to the problems encountered by previous systems. However, we remain concerned about potential over-reliance on internet-based services to distribute information in a crisis, when internet services might not be working, or the internet is deliberately cut off by the Government in question. In its response to this report, the FCO should set out the contingency measures it has in place to mitigate the loss of internet-based communication in a crisis, such as its surge capacity on phone lines.*

Closure of posts

29. Since May 2010, the FCO has permanently closed 15 consular posts, nine of which were in Europe. In the same period, it has opened four embassies which have consular functions, and "upgraded" the consular capacity of three embassies and one consular post. A further

35 Foreign Affairs Committee, [Consular Services Web Forum: Routine consular services to British citizens who live/work abroad](#), Jan–Feb 2014, page 4

36 Q195

37 "[FCO axes expat register and turns to Twitter](#)", The Telegraph, 3 May 2013

38 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

39 HC Deb, 12 December 2013, [col 55WS](#)

eight posts that do not have a consular function have also opened or been upgraded since 2010.⁴⁰ This has resulted in a net loss to the consular network. In 2012, the Foreign Secretary made a speech in which he acknowledged these new embassies and upgraded consulates, and promised six further new consulates in emerging economies. Embassies containing consular offices have since opened in Laos and Paraguay, but the remaining four promised consulates are yet to open.

Consular openings and closures since 2010

Year	Posts with consular functions closed	Posts with consular functions opened	Posts with consular functions upgraded
2010	1	0	0
2011	3 (+ 1 suspended)	1	1
2012	4(+ 1 suspended)	1	1
2013	4	2	2
2014	3 (+ 1 suspended)	0	0
Total	15 (+ 3 suspended)	4	4

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office⁴¹

In the speech in April 2012, the then Foreign Secretary said that the closures of consulates had allowed new consular offices to be opened elsewhere, adding: “We will always ensure that our diplomatic network is configured in the best way to support British nationals as well as our wider interests.”⁴² A full list can be found below:

40 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 36](#)); See also Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Committee Correspondence](#), 4 November 2014 for information on the latest closure of an Honorary Consulate building in Bodrum, Turkey.

41 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 36](#))

42 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

Consular closures since 2010:

Country	Post	Type	Status	Date
Switzerland	Geneva	Consulate-General	Closed	2010
France	Lille	Consulate-General	Closed	2011
Italy	Venice	Consulate-General	Closed	2011
Italy	Florence	Consulate	Closed	2011
Iran	Tehran	Embassy	Suspended	2011
Syria	Damascus	Embassy	Suspended	2012
Iraq	Basra	Consulate-General	Closed	2012
France	Lyon	Consulate-General	Closed	2012
Portugal	Funchal	Consulate	Closed	2012
Portugal	Oporto	Consular Office	Closed	2012
Greece	Thessaloniki	Consular Office	Closed	2013
Andorra	Andorra	Consular Office	Closed	2013
Curaçao	Willemstad	Consulate	Closed	2013
Thailand	Pattaya	Consulate	Closed	2013
Colombia	Cartagena	Consulate	Closed	2014
Colombia	Cali	Consulate	Closed	2014
Afghanistan	Lashkar Gah	PRT	Closed	2014
Libya	Tripoli	Embassy	Suspended	2014

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office⁴³

Consular openings since 2010:

Country	Post	Type	Status	Date
South Sudan	Juba	Embassy	New	Jul-11
Brazil	Recife	Consulate General	Upgrade	Nov-11
Cote d'Ivoire	Abidjan	Embassy	Upgrade	May-12
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	Embassy	New	Jul-12
Laos	Vientiane	Embassy	New	Mar-13
Madagascar	Antananarivo	Embassy	Upgrade	Mar-13
Liberia	Monrovia	Embassy	Upgrade	May-13
Paraguay	Asuncion	Embassy	New	Oct-13

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office⁴⁴

30. The FCO told us that consular services had not deteriorated as a result of the closure of these offices. The Foreign Secretary explained in 2012 that the “re-shaping” of the European consular network via the closure of 12 consular offices in Europe was a result of “changing customer demands and the opportunities of new technology”, which meant that the UK no longer needed established consulate offices where the bulk of routine services were provided by “hubs” in major cities.⁴⁵ The FCO told us that “Honorary Consuls are still present in all the major locations for British tourists and residents. They continue to

43 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 36](#))

44 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 36](#))

45 Speech by the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon William Hague MP, [Looking after our own: strengthening Britain's consular diplomacy](#), 4 April 2012, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

provide an invaluable emergency response to crises or urgent consular cases, which are then reinforced and taken on by the consular teams in Posts.”⁴⁶ However, we received evidence from Prisoners Abroad, an NGO providing support to British prisoners in detention overseas and which is part-funded by the FCO, expressing concern about the withdrawal of an FCO presence from some parts of the world, including Europe:

Closures of consular posts around the world have already resulted in loss of support to prisoners, for example reduced visits or increased complications in receiving funds, and Prisoners Abroad is deeply concerned about deterioration of conditions even in European countries.⁴⁷

The Minister rejected the suggestion that services had deteriorated, telling us that prisoners were a consular priority, and that the FCO would look into any specific complaints about this. Susan Caldwell added that “Some [consulates] have been replaced by honorary consuls where those consulates were originally present, to ensure that we still have a presence for those who are most vulnerable.”⁴⁸ However, the FCO also told us that Honorary Consuls did not carry out routine consular work.

31. We conclude that there has been a net reduction in the size of the consular network on the ground, which is a concern. The closure of posts in Europe has not been replaced by the equivalent number of openings elsewhere, nor has it been accompanied by substantial increases in alternative means of consular representation, such as honorary consuls. We are concerned that vulnerable British prisoners abroad are reportedly receiving less assistance than before. The FCO should set out in its response how it intends to review allegations that the support it offers to prisoners has deteriorated as a result of the closures.

Honorary Consuls

32. Honorary Consuls are volunteers (paid a stipend) who help Posts provide some forms of consular assistance to British nationals in areas where the FCO judges it does not require a full consular presence. Their duties may include crisis response, consular assistance, local authority liaison, or assisting official consular visits, but do not usually include routine consular services. The time devoted to consular matters varies widely between Posts, but Honorary Consuls are expected to work on average no more than 4 hours a week. At present, the FCO has 224 Honorary Consuls in its global network and has provided a full list of their locations.⁴⁹ By comparison, France has 500 honorary Consuls and Germany has 350.⁵⁰

46 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 64

47 Prisoners Abroad ([CON 07](#)) para 5

48 Q206-207

49 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 35](#))

50 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 32

33. The FCO states that Honorary Consuls provide a good, more accessible and responsive service in places where it could not justify a consular presence.⁵¹ It adds:

many [Honorary Consuls] are British expatriates who have lived overseas and have built up valuable local knowledge and contacts. Honorary Consuls are potentially our public face in the crucial first hours of a crisis, and are considered Consular Officers under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR). They are a cost effective way of maintaining a high standard of customer service. Other Honorary Consuls are host country or third country nationals with strong ties to the UK. They have a good standing in the local community, and many are also in paid employment elsewhere.⁵²

Honorary Consuls are paid a small honorarium (to an annual maximum of £2,300) in recognition of their services. This honorarium has not increased since 2005.

34. Our web forum comments on Honorary Consuls have been mixed, with some contributors writing rather scathing comments about the English language skills, effectiveness and knowledge of certain Honorary Consuls, while others have been highly complimentary about particular individuals' work.⁵³ Prisoners Abroad was critical of the perceived lack of clarity about the role of an Honorary Consul:

It has never been clear [...] what guidance applies to Honorary Consuls, and which posts can provide which services. Their presence is relied upon in many areas of the world but they seem to receive different levels of training or supervision from employed consular staff, which can lead to inconsistency of service and—in the worst cases—lack of notification regarding very serious issues.⁵⁴

As a result, Prisoners Abroad recommends clearer guidance on the remit and responsibility of Honorary Consuls and more regular training.

35. The FCO states that Honorary Consuls work under the supervision of superintending posts, and “their work is carefully managed and monitored by trained Consular staff who assess whether the task is appropriate for delegation to an Honorary Consul or whether a full time member of staff ought to be deployed.” The only mandatory training consists of three ‘e-learning’ courses, though the local manager at the superintending post is responsible for determining whether any additional training is needed.⁵⁵ Former Ambassadors Giles Paxman and Sir Michael Arthur both told us that the Honorary Consuls were now better trained, and Sir Michael told us that the FCO had “got better at finding the right people to do it”, adding that this had not previously been the case.⁵⁶

51 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 150

52 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 19](#)) para 151

53 Foreign Affairs Committee, [Consular Services Web Forum: Routine consular services to British citizens who live/work abroad](#), Jan–Feb 2014

54 Prisoners Abroad ([CON 07](#)) para 9

55 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([CON 35](#))

56 Q120

36. One contributor to our web forum raised the potential conflict of interest arising from Honorary Consuls' business interests.⁵⁷ We have previously questioned the FCO on this during our Report on FCO Performance and Finances 2011–12, and the FCO told us that:

As Honorary Consuls are not our employees, there is no specific requirement for them to disclose their financial and business interests prior to appointment. They are however required to undertake a formal interview with the Embassy/High Commission staff prior to taking up their appointment, and to inform senior management at post of any perceived conflict of interest that may arise.⁵⁸

Former Ambassador to Spain, Giles Paxman, acknowledged that there were benefits to being an Honorary Consul in terms of contacts and status:

It is also fair to recognise that being the British honorary consul gives you a certain status locally that you might not have. I think that it also gives you a certain amount of access to the local authorities that you might not otherwise get. So if you are working, for example, as a local lawyer, it can be advantageous to your business also to be the honorary consul and have access to the mayor and the local authorities.

But there is a very big element of public-spiritedness in it as well. I think the motivation for most of our honorary consulates is certainly not financial.⁵⁹

He agreed that there may be a need for greater transparency about the business interests of Honorary Consuls before their appointment (contracts are renewed every five years, and they are security vetted every seven years). However, both Giles Paxman and Sir Michael Arthur both highly praised the work of Honorary Consuls as “a tremendous extension of our own network”⁶⁰ who provide “eyes and ears on the ground, liaison with local authorities and providing that first advice in times of crisis.”⁶¹ Both also considered that Honorary Consuls were usually motivated by a genuine desire to perform a public service.⁶² *We consider Honorary Consuls to be an important and efficient part of the FCO's consular network, enabling it to extend its reach beyond capital cities. They do important work for British nationals at very low cost to the service. We understand concerns about potential conflicts of interest, and we recommend that the FCO consider recruiting Honorary Consuls on shorter contracts and that the FCO require Honorary Consuls to declare any relevant business interests throughout their tenure, and that the FCO ensure that training and supervision of Honorary Consuls in connection with potential conflicts of interest is standardised. We further recommend that, where the FCO*

57 Foreign Affairs Committee, [Consular Services Web Forum: Routine consular services to British citizens who live/work abroad](#), Jan–Feb 2014, page 1

58 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report HC 690 of Session 2012–13](#), Cm 8636, June 2013

59 Q124 [Giles Paxman]

60 Q118 [Sir Michael Arthur]

61 Q118 [Giles Paxman]

62 Q124

