



House of Commons  
Foreign Affairs Committee

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**Viral Immunity—  
The FCO's role in  
building a coalition  
against COVID-19:  
Government Response  
to the Committee's First  
Report**

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**Third Special Report of Session  
2019–21**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

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## The Foreign Affairs Committee

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## Third Special Report

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On 6 April 2020, the Foreign Affairs Committee published its First Report of Session 2019–21, "[Viral Immunity—The FCO's role in building a coalition against COVID-19](#)" (HC 239). The Government's response was received on 9 June 2020 and is appended to this report.

In the Government's Response the Committee's recommendations are shown in **bold** type, and the Government's responses are shown in plain type.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak is the biggest public health emergency in a generation. No country is untouched by what is happening across the world. An effective global response is in our national interest and will support domestic recovery.

The FCO and our diplomatic network have mobilised on an unprecedented scale to respond to the crisis. Our aim is to drive the international action needed to enable domestic and global recovery and to help shape the world that emerges from the crisis, including in the area of better pandemic preparedness. The UK's international response to COVID-19 has four pillars:

### ***Supporting British nationals abroad, particularly to help them return home***

One of our top priorities has been to get our nationals home and to support those unable to return to stay safely overseas. 1.3 million British nationals have returned to the UK via commercial routes since the start of the outbreak—the majority supported by our work with airlines and foreign governments to keep vital routes open. As of 5 June, we have also returned over 36,800 people on over 175 charter flights, and supported all of the more than 19,000 British passengers who were on board 60 cruise ships to return home.

Since January, the FCO has reprioritised a significant proportion of staff to deliver our repatriation work. In the most intense phase, approximately 565 staff were involved, drawn from the FCO and other government departments in London and the overseas network, working across a shift pattern of approximately 250 people per day to give us 24/7 coverage. In March, consular call volumes increased from a seven-day average of 6,923, to a peak of over 47,500 (a 586% increase), with a single day peak of 14,852. We restructured our call handling capacity to manage the unprecedented upsurge in calls and, from 4 April, we were staffed to answer 20,000 calls a day, with an average answer speed of less than 4 seconds. We have answered 99% of calls out of 44,390 made over the last month (4 May to 4 June) and over 112,767 in total since 28 March.

We are proud of the help we already have provided to tens of thousands of British nationals and continue to offer consular assistance to British nationals globally, not least those who are still waiting to return to the UK and who have been left vulnerable by this crisis. Our package of support addresses financial concerns, including offering loans as a last resort to those seeking support with repatriation or for their essential costs while they are waiting

to return. Our travel advice has been updated around 4,300 times in the year until end of May (compared to 2,300 in the whole of 2019) with specific sections for each country or territory on returning to the UK and for those waiting to return. We have also published advice on mental health and wellbeing for those overseas.

### ***Ensuring a strong and co-ordinated global health response, particularly for the most vulnerable countries***

The UK is playing a leading role in shaping the global health response to COVID-19. We are working with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the wider UN system, member states and regional organisations to support an effective, evidence-based public health response, including increasing the resilience of the most vulnerable health systems. We have so far committed up to £764 million of UK aid funding to combat the outbreak of COVID-19. The UK is now leading the work of the G7 on the humanitarian dimension of the crisis and support to vulnerable countries. Further detail is set out below in response to the FAC's recommendations.

### ***Accelerating the search for a vaccine, better testing and effective treatments***

There is an urgent need to develop, manufacture and equitably distribute better testing technology, more effective treatments, and vaccines. Without this, our eventual recovery will take longer, be more uncertain and bring greater risk of repeated outbreaks. We are working with a wide range of partners to make this happen, including international organisations, our partners in the G7 and the G20, the pharmaceutical industry, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and foundations such as the Wellcome Trust. We have provided £250 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) to support the development of a vaccine and have announced a £1.65 billion contribution to the Global Vaccine Alliance, Gavi's appeal. We co-led the Coronavirus Global Response pledging event on 4 May and hosted the Global Vaccine Summit on 4 June, generating \$8.8 billion of pledges, comfortably exceeding our target of \$7.4 billion. More detail is set out below.

### ***Enabling an effective economic response globally, keeping open vital trade routes and supply chains, including for food and medicines***

Through the G20 and other organisations we have urged collective action and a rapid, coordinated and effective international economic response. We played a leading role in developing the ambitious G20 Finance Ministers' Action Plan. Under this, G20 members have committed to coordinate their economic and financial responses, and their support to vulnerable countries. We are working closely with key international partners to implement this plan. We have also pressed for global supply chains to remain open, and for any measures that restrict trade to be targeted, proportionate, transparent and temporary.

Beyond this, the diplomatic network has played a pivotal role in procuring medical supplies from overseas, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators. As of 4 June, we have ordered more than 11.6 billion items of PPE since the start of the crisis, including 5.75 billion aprons, 2.67 billion face masks, and 2.54 billion gloves. Thousands of ventilators have been delivered to the UK since the beginning of March.

Given our constitutional relationships with the UK's Overseas Territories, the FCO also has a particular role to play in helping the Overseas Territories manage the immediate and long-term impacts of COVID-19. Working with other government departments and the Overseas Territories' governments, we have procured and delivered essential medical supplies, provided public health advice, helped them enhance their security capability, and provided transport access for people and essential supplies.

**Pandemics do not respect borders. They require a response based on science, evidence and international co-operation. We welcome the Foreign Secretary's assurances that the Government is working closely with partner countries to combat COVID-19, both bilaterally and through multilateral forums including the EU, G7 and G20. We also welcome the UK's financial support for the World Health Organization. But it is clear that existing regional and multilateral organisations, including the WHO, are not achieving the international co-operation needed to fight a global pandemic. It is up to Governments to forge consensus on action required to save lives now and to prepare for future pandemics.** (Paragraph 9)

We fully agree on the importance of greater multilateral cooperation to fight COVID-19, based on science and evidence. We have worked energetically to promote this, furthering the goals set out in our four-point international plan. Whilst there is more to do, the UK has played a central role in promoting a rapid and coordinated international response.

The G7 is working to address the health, economic, trade and political impacts of COVID-19. The Foreign Secretary represented the UK at the G7 Leaders' virtual meeting on 16 April, building support for the approach set out in our four-point plan. The UK is now leading the G7 Foreign Ministers' work-strand on support to vulnerable countries. The UK Presidency of the G7 in 2021 offers further opportunities for the UK to drive the international agenda on COVID-19 and beyond.

As co-chairs of the G20 Framework Working Group, the UK and India have put forward an ambitious Action Plan to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Published on 15 April, the Plan provides a framework to target the \$200 billion support package for vulnerable countries announced by the World Bank Group and Regional Development Banks. We have worked through the G20 Finance Ministers' forum to agree a temporary suspension of \$12 billion of debt payments for the 77 poorest countries in the world, to help them cope with the economic impact of the crisis. Through the G20 Trade and Investment Ministers, we have secured a commitment that members will work together to keep supply chains open, and ensure that any measures introduced in response to the crisis that restrict trade are targeted, proportionate, transparent and temporary.

The WHO has an important role to play in the global health response. We recognise there will always be lessons to learn and we will expect a robust, credible and independent review of the global response, covering the WHO and other multilateral institutions, as well as global systems and country level response. The UK co-sponsored the WHO Resolution on COVID-19 adopted by the World Health Assembly on 19 May which provides a clear mandate to take forward this work.

The UK has also played a leading role in accelerating progress towards a vaccine. We co-led the Coronavirus Global Response pledging event on 4 May alongside France, Germany, Japan, Norway, Canada, Italy, Spain, Saudi Arabia and the European Commission.

Approximately €7.4 billion in pledges were registered on the day, in support of the development of new COVID-19 vaccines, tests and treatments, including a UK pledge of £388m. UK lobbying also helped secure the involvement of important partners including Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Mexico, Oman and South Africa.

The UK is proud to have hosted the Global Vaccine Summit on 4 June. It raised \$8.8 billion for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which will support the manufacture and delivery of vaccines for COVID-19 and other diseases to the poorest countries. 64 countries participated, with supportive statements from 44 Heads of State or Government, plus the UN Secretary General, Chairperson of the African Union Commission and President of the European Commission. Our £1.65 billion pledge to the Global Vaccine Alliance is further evidence of our commitment to this agenda and makes us the largest single donor to Gavi.

The UK's world-class life sciences sector, with support from the Government, is at the forefront of international efforts to find a vaccine—for example through the groundbreaking partnership between Oxford University and AstraZeneca.

***Disinformation about COVID-19 has already cost lives. It is essential that the Government issues clear and transparent messages at home to confront and rebut disinformation spread by foreign powers. It must also work closely with allies to present a united front where possible, and to help ensure that vital international research efforts are not compromised by propaganda and bad data.*** (Paragraph 10)

The Government takes the issue of disinformation very seriously. Our priority is the safety of the British public which includes ensuring the information the public accesses about Covid-19 is accurate.

We are clear that transparency and accuracy of information about the virus is essential for an effective global response. False narratives can originate from a range of sources, and we know that certain states routinely use disinformation as a policy tool. Our priority is to protect UK citizens from disinformation by any actor, whether state or non-state.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading the cross-government response and has set up a cross-Whitehall Counter-Disinformation Unit. The Unit brings together specialists from across Whitehall with expertise in analysis, strategic communications, and disinformation policy, to address disinformation and misinformation related to COVID-19. The Unit's primary function is to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and impact of disinformation and misinformation on Covid-19. The FCO has a particularly important role to play in identifying disinformation narratives about the UK. In addition, the Department for International Development (DFID) have provided £500,000 in UK aid funding to the Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian Network, whose partners, such as BBC Media Action, are addressing the spread of misinformation during epidemics.

The UK is also galvanising international action against disinformation, working with like-minded nations who share our democratic principles and values to better understand the scale, scope and impact of disinformation. For example, we are supporting Canada's lead to strengthen the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism against disinformation. This involves sharing analytical assessments and best practice, and developing countermeasures to COVID-related disinformation.

***Although the Government is focused rightly on resolving the current crisis, it would be a catastrophic error to deprioritise learning lessons from this pandemic and implementing them before the next one. This must be a cross-Government effort, and the FCO should play a key role in its international and diplomatic dimensions [...].*** (Paragraph 11)

We agree with the Committee on the importance of learning lessons. As a co-sponsor to the 19 May World Health Assembly Resolution, which provides for an impartial independent and comprehensive review, we will work closely with the WHO and other member states to continue to improve the agency's health emergency systems and operations.

Despite the many differences in context, lessons learned from the 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak have informed the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak exposed significant weaknesses in the global response, including for the WHO, around speed of response, management and resource mobilisation. The WHO recognised these failures and has worked with Member States on significant reform, including establishing a WHO Health Emergencies Programme. We have supported this through our core funding. Subsequent reviews of the WHO have demonstrated an improved response to health emergencies. The 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak also demonstrated the importance of vaccines. As a result, we have prioritised rapid research and development.

The UK is looking closely at how other countries are approaching the challenges associated with COVID-19, and what we can learn from one another. The FCO diplomatic network is playing a central role in this, sharing insights to inform UK policy-making, and facilitating contact between experts across government and their international counterparts. At the same time, we are conscious that every country faces particular circumstances, and what is right for other countries may not be right for the UK. The Prime Minister has been clear that while we are learning lessons all the time, we need to wait until the end of the pandemic before making comparisons between the UK and other countries.

After the pandemic, as the Foreign Secretary has noted, we will also need to look at the hard questions about how the outbreak came about and whether it could have been stopped sooner. The FCO will have a central role to play in that. Right now, however our priority is to work with international partners to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.

***In its response to this report, the FCO should set out:***

- ***How data on the virus is being collected and shared with partner countries, and what efforts it has made to encourage and facilitate the sharing of comparable data collected by those countries;*** (Paragraph 11)

The FCO is supporting others across government, including the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), DFID, and Public Health England (PHE), to collect and share information about the virus, both bilaterally and through multilateral organisations, notably the WHO. Detailed information on the virus is largely collected and shared through health channels. PHE regularly shares data through the formal mechanisms established under the WHO, and in line with the International Health Regulations (IHR), to promote understanding of the virus. From early in the outbreak, the FCO has been pressing other countries to do likewise. PHE has also worked through the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

DHSC and PHE have published scientific findings to date, including sequencing of the virus and genomic analysis of the virus. The Government has also been making guidance publicly available online and sharing this with other countries. PHE has produced over 50 pieces of guidance for a variety of settings including healthcare, employers, funerals and more.

The UK is committed to sharing research where possible, including the results of world-leading modelling produced by Imperial College and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and outputs from the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform.

- ***How it supports UK researchers in verifying data arriving from other countries;*** (Paragraph 11)

The FCO's global Science and Innovation Network helps British government and research institutions to understand the research environments elsewhere in the world and to build partnerships with credible institutions overseas. At the same time, in line with long-established academic principles, the onus remains on researchers to verify and take responsibility for how they use their data.

- ***What financial and operational support it is offering to developing countries where infrastructure may be unable to cope with the pandemic, both bilaterally and through multilateral organisations.*** (Paragraph 11)

The UK is at the forefront of the international response to COVID-19, drawing on our relationships, expertise and aid budget to save lives around the world. We are tackling this crisis using the full range of development, diplomatic, national security, prosperity and influencing tools available to address the direct and wide-ranging secondary impacts.

The £764 million of aid funding we have committed so far to fight the outbreak of COVID-19 is split across three areas: building resilience in vulnerable countries; finding a vaccine, new drugs, therapeutics and research and development; and supporting the economic response. It makes the UK one of the largest donors globally. A great deal of this funding will be delivered through NGOs and CSOs, who are key partners in responding to COVID-19.

## Multilateral action

The UK is committed to finding vaccines, tests and treatments for all. In addition to the UK's £250 million contribution to CEPI—the largest by any country—the Prime Minister has announced £40 million for research on new therapeutics/treatments and up to £23 million on diagnostics/testing. By strengthening fragile health systems to prevent the virus from spreading in the poorest countries, we will reduce the risk of future waves of infection.

The UK's aid commitment includes £145 million for UN appeals, comprising:

- £75 million for the WHO;
- £20 million for UNICEF and £5 million to Education Cannot Wait to help refugee, migrant and displaced children with basic supplies and lessons;

- £20 million for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to provide access to handwashing stations and drinking water for displaced people;
- £15 million for the World Food Programme (WFP); and
- £10 million to United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) to support work on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence prevention.

The UK is a top donor to Gavi, the Global Fund and Unitaid. We are ensuring that our support to these organisations prioritises the COVID-19 response. The Global Vaccines Summit on 4 June raised \$8.8 billion, enough for Gavi to vaccinate 300 million children and save up to 8 million lives over the next five years. The Summit also saw the launch of Gavi's new COVID vaccine advanced market commitment designed to ensure low and lower middle income countries have access to any future vaccine.

Up to £150 million of UK aid funding will go to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT) to help developing countries meet their debt repayments so that they can focus their available resources on tackling COVID-19. With UK support, the International Financial Institutions, including the IMF, World Bank and Regional Development Banks, have made over £300 billion available over the next 15 months to help countries tackle the economic impact of the crisis.

## Bilateral support

A number of existing DFID bilateral programmes are also being adapted to support communities affected by COVID-19 in partner countries. For example, the UK is helping prevent and respond to cases of COVID-19 in South Sudan, including through programmes on infection prevention and water sanitation and hygiene. In Bangladesh, the UK is helping maintain essential humanitarian services in the Rohingya refugee camps.

FCO and DFID-led programmes under the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) are helping fragile states or countries that are coping with large, vulnerable refugee populations to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. In Lebanon, we have provided funding to bolster public health services, with a focus on Palestinian refugee camps across the country. In Jordan, the CSSF has provided £1.6m to help municipal services in areas with high refugee populations to respond to COVID-19. In Pakistan, the CSSF is helping local authorities respond to the increased risk of violence against children during the crisis.

The UK is also responding to COVID-19 in the Overseas Territories through £15m of CSSF funding and £5m from the FCO's International Programme. This is in addition to the £10m in DFID funding we have committed to support those Overseas Territories that are eligible for ODA.

The Prosperity Fund is also adapting its programmes to help manage the medium- to long-term effects of the virus in partner countries, by supporting inclusive economic growth and recovery as well as health system resilience. The FCO-led Better Health programme is working with senior health officials, including in Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, to adapt and prioritise activities to respond to COVID-19. The FCO-led Global Future Cities

programme is helping municipal authorities in Cape Town to improve the delivery of emergency services in informal settlements, and to strengthen local healthcare supply chains.

The UK Public Health Rapid Support Team (UK-PHRST), funded by DHSC, and led by PHE and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, has a tripartite remit of outbreak response, research and capacity building for control of outbreak-prone diseases in ODA-eligible countries. The FCO provides support to the UK PHRST when it is deployed overseas, including in recent deployments to the Philippines, Nepal and Ethiopia to help tackle COVID-19.

***The FCO should lead the way in building international support for reforming existing multilateral organisations and building new structures to respond more effectively to the next pandemic. A 'G20 for Public Health', for example, could ensure that co-operation between expert researchers across the globe can flourish, even in the absence of united political leadership. Such a framework should be science-led, with participation contingent on honest co-operation in the open and transparent sharing of public health data.*** (Paragraph 12)

The UK has long been a leading advocate of reform in international organisations. We support the UN Secretary General's wide-ranging internal reform agenda, which includes greater coordination between UN agencies and better collaboration with other international organisations. We work closely with the UN Secretariat and the UN agencies, funds and programmes—including the WHO—to press for stronger performance, and greater efficiency and accountability. The COVID-19 crisis—and the international response to it—will point to further areas for improvement and reform, which will require serious consideration and concerted action once the pandemic is over.