



**Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs
Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2014-15 (HC516)**

FCO Consular Services

Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs by Command of Her Majesty

January 2015



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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE'S FIFTH REPORT OF SESSION 2014-15 (HC516)

FCO CONSULAR SERVICES

The Government welcomes the scrutiny of its Consular Services by the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Government strongly welcomes the Committee's commendation of our work in many areas, including our focus on the most vulnerable British nationals needing our assistance, our improvements to planning and responding to large-scale crises, and the high-quality support we provide in areas such as kidnapping and forced marriage. We also welcome the Committee's recognition of the challenges we face around managing the public's expectations of our services, and the importance of British nationals taking responsibility for their own safety and security overseas. We recognise many of the areas the Committee has identified as areas for improvement, including our policy and support to the families of victims of murder and manslaughter, and will work to improve our services in these areas.

This Command Paper sets out the Government's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee's report of 23 November 2014 into the FCO's Consular Services. The Committee's conclusions and recommendations are set out in bold. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to paragraphs in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report (HC516).

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)

The Government welcomes the Committee's endorsement of how the FCO has prioritised the provision of consular services to British nationals overseas, as one of our three foreign policy priorities.

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)

We strongly welcome the Committee's comments on our global contact centres and the professional skills of our staff, who provide a consistent first response to British nationals around the globe and support consular officers delivering services to those who really need consular assistance. We are working to improve the provision of essential information and the contact channels available to our customers, for example, 'assisted digital' by telephone for customers who do not have access to the internet - to provide an even more effective and resilient frontline response to our customers.

3. The FCO has rightly dedicated significant resources to improving and developing IT systems capable of meeting the demands of consular services. (Paragraph 21)

As part of the Diplomatic Excellence initiative, the FCO will continue to improve our IT, ensuring it is fit for purpose and helps us achieve our ambitions. This includes plans to overhaul the FCO's main IT system, including replacement of hardware and software, and improvements to system capability and resilience. In Consular Directorate, we are working to establish a new consular case-management system to enable us to deliver our consular services more effectively and efficiently.

The new system will make it simpler for staff to access consular guidance, to record assessments of their case-work including the support they provided and the rationale for

this, and will enable managers to check that we are delivering a high-quality service. It will also provide us with better management information, to help us monitor workloads and trends, and ensure better consistency of service to our customers.

Consular Directorate is leading the development of the FCO's digital services, including online applications, appointments and payments, which will be integrated into the new case-management system. Our aim is to make it simpler and more convenient for customers to access our services. These digital improvements will also improve the efficiency of our internal processes, thereby enabling our staff to focus on supporting British nationals who most need our help.

Crisis Hub, the FCO's new crisis IT system, was used successfully as part of our recent crisis responses, including in Nepal, Iraq/ISIL insurgency and the Philippines (Typhoon Hagupit). Our crisis teams around the world had access to the same real-time information on British nationals needing our help. We provide our Rapid Deployment Teams (RDTs) with mobile devices so they can link up to the Crisis Hub. The RDTs deployed for the snowstorm crisis in Nepal and in Valletta to help with the Libya evacuation, accessed and used effectively the Crisis Hub on their mobile devices.

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)

We welcome the Committee's endorsement of the FCO's approach to digitisation of services and we recognise the need for us to ensure our consular services continue to meet the needs and expectations of the majority of our customers, including through technological innovations. We will continue to follow the key principles of the Government's *Digital by Default* service standard when designing changes and improvements to our transactional services, with the mandate to raise awareness of our digital services and encourage an increase in digital take-up amongst our customers.

We will continue to assess all our customer feedback to ensure we fully understand any concerns with accessing our digital services. In some areas, this may involve working with Government Digital Service (GDS) to improve the information on GOV.UK, or providing clearer signposting on how to access our services, and those provided by host governments that are used by British nationals living overseas.

We recognise that not all British nationals travelling and living overseas are online, or will be able to access digital services independently. Our contact centre staff are trained to deal with general consular enquiries and can provide information over the telephone to assist British nationals. In response to feedback from customers, and in consultation with government departments with responsibilities for issuing visas and passports, we have improved the way we redirect customers whom we cannot help by telephone, to make sure they are immediately able to contact departments who can assist them directly.

Our consular contact centres will continue to develop our approach to providing ‘assisted digital’ support for British nationals unable to access the internet. Our new online Consular Appointment Booking Service (CABS) has been developed with a capability for contact centre staff to be able to support customers through the appointments process or to offer bookings by telephone, as required. We will adopt similar approaches to all future digital services.

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)

We warmly welcome the Committee’s assessment that the FCO’s response to crises involving British nationals has improved. We systematically undertake lessons-learned exercises immediately following each crisis, in order to continually review and improve our crisis systems.

We have implemented a more agile and clear crisis decision making structure, based on the Gold-Silver-Bronze crisis response system used by emergency services. This model has ensured that decision-making is delegated to the appropriate level and that Bronze, Silver and Gold leaders are empowered to take decisions. The model has proven flexible and can be scaled up or down according to the scale of the crisis. We have expanded our crisis training and exercising capability through increased levels of training for staff across the global network, including crisis leadership courses and semi-live crisis exercises in 12 high-risk posts. We also have three volunteer cadres of trained FCO staff across the world that we can deploy rapidly to augment the FCO’s crisis response.

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)

We have established a number of processes to ensure we have significant surge capacity on phone lines. Our call-handling centre in London, with capacity for 26 call-handlers, is able to receive more than 300 calls an hour from members of the public. We have a pool of over 60 trained Emergency Response Team volunteers who we can rapidly deploy to handle calls from those affected and concerned family and friends in a crisis. In addition, we have arrangements in place with Police Casualty Bureau, TelePerformance and our contact centres to enable us to increase call-handling capacity during a major crisis.

Through our Crisis Hub IT system, British nationals caught up in a crisis can reach us by telephone, SMS, in person with a consular officer on the ground, as well as via an online webform. Loss of internet connectivity during a crisis is always a possibility, but all of our

posts have Crisis Management Plans (CMPs) which have measures in place to mitigate against these risks. In posts where internet outage is identified as a potential risk, alternate methods of communication with the public are identified, which may include radio and TV broadcasts, warden networks, notice-boards and town-hall meetings with British nationals.

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)

We do not agree that there is a link between changes to the shape of our consular network and the support received by prisoners, including those who are more vulnerable. We consider that someone is vulnerable when they cannot protect themselves from significant physical or emotional harm, or be protected by others. Vulnerable British prisoners abroad receive more assistance, not less, than prior to the introduction of our Consular Strategy 2013-16. This strategy, reflected in the publicly-available guide: *Support for British Nationals Abroad*, outlines our reinforced support to our most vulnerable prisoners, wherever they are. We deliberately moved away from a set level of assistance to every prisoner regardless of their circumstances to assessing individuals based on who they are (i.e. what specific needs they have) as well as where they are (i.e. the nature of the facility they are being held in). We can then provide greater assistance to the more vulnerable prisoners, for example through earlier and more regular visits.

There is no link to changes in our consular network. Within Europe, the risk of human-rights violations and mistreatment of detainees is generally relatively low, with some exceptions, and recourse to justice is generally more readily available than in other parts of the world, again with some exceptions. This means that overall, fewer prisoners in Europe are likely to be deemed vulnerable because of where they are. But there are exceptions and, as above, the way we assess vulnerability includes assessing an individual's needs as well as where they are. Vulnerable prisoners in Europe receive greater assistance than before.

We also work with partner organisations, including Prisoners Abroad, to identify and resolve any issues that affect the support offered to prisoners around the world.

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)

We agree with the Committee's assessment that Honorary Consuls play an important role in delivering consular services. Honorary Consuls are required to declare potential conflicts of interest prior to taking up appointments and throughout their tenure, during discussions with their line managers. Honorary Consuls have access to the majority of the learning and development opportunities available to all consular staff. During 2015, we plan to introduce a new e-learning package for line managers of Honorary Consuls, to provide the knowledge needed to manage Honorary Consuls effectively, including in areas such as recruitment and annual review procedures. If, in future, we replace a consular office with an Honorary Consul, we will communicate to our customers and stakeholders, through the most appropriate channels, to explain the changes to our services. We expect that customers would continue to have access to broadly the same services but the method for accessing them may be different, for example, through contact centres or staff in neighbouring consular posts.

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)

When the FCO took the decision to move away from the non-core activity of notarial services, we assessed the impact on customers and on overall consular finances. In many countries, customers are able to obtain a similar service from alternative providers often at a lower cost. In places where there are no suitable alternative providers, we continue to offer the service. We forecast that the changes in policy would result in a reduction of around 1% of our total income. This reduction in income is made up by increasing demand for, and revenue from, our legalisation services and will not impact on the fee levels of other services. We will continue to monitor the financial implications of these changes.

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)

We welcome the Committee's support for our policy of providing emergency loans to vulnerable customers. We acknowledge that we need to do more to improve how we recover debt. We are working on improving the debt-recovery process through clearer communications to staff and customers and better management information of debts. We are exploring a range of options to improve our debt recovery by September 2015 and will inform the Committee if we adopt any of those options.

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)

We agree with the Committee on the importance of equipping future leaders with consular skills early in their careers but believe we can provide this without the need to make 20% of our positions overseas UK based.

The majority of consular positions overseas are in Bands A and B. Reducing the overall number of Band A and B roles overseas was a difficult decision, which the FCO Management Board took after careful consideration, including of the operational impact. As confirmed by the May 2014 report of Stephen Hawker (Non-Executive Member of the Audit and Risk Committee), significant savings have been made but not, we believe, at the expense of delivery. As the Committee has noted, locally-engaged staff are playing a vital role in the delivery of consular services, and bring with them invaluable skills and knowledge. In addition, Band A and B staff remain essential to our crisis response plans, but these do not depend upon these officers being permanently posted overseas.

There are a range of other avenues for our staff to gain experience of consular work overseas and we will continue to explore other opportunities. A large number of FCO staff at various grades gain consular experience through participation in Rapid Deployment Teams, Emergency Response Teams and London Crisis Response Teams as part of the FCO's crisis response. Consular is a key element of our crisis response and volunteers for these teams gain first-hand experience of providing consular assistance to British nationals, often in very difficult circumstances.

From April 2015, the new Diplomatic Academy will provide greater knowledge of consular work for all FCO staff, including future leaders, through the Foundation Level curriculum. All staff, UK-based and local, will be able to work through foundation-level material, and new UK-based recruits will be expected to cover the ground during their first year in the FCO. UK-based staff considering promotion will be expected to demonstrate active participation in Academy learning in order to progress to the next grade. The Consular and Crisis Management faculty of the Diplomatic Academy will have a dedicated learning and development pathway for Heads of Mission and Deputy Heads of Mission.

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)

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgement that the public's expectations of our services are often not realistic and its endorsement of our proactive communications activity to help inform and advise British nationals of the extent of the support we are able to provide.

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)

We welcome the Committee's feedback on our public guidance and commit to revising it as part of our review on how we support families after murder and manslaughter cases – with the aim of making it clearer what families can expect to receive in such circumstances. We cannot offer guarantees of assistance as all consular assistance is provided at the discretion of the Government, but it would be rare to refuse to support vulnerable people or those who have suffered a bereavement overseas. We wrote to the Committee in January 2015 setting out our response to our review into the support provided in murder and manslaughter cases. This includes commitments to produce new, clearer guidance. We also established a new Access to Justice Unit in January 2015 to lead on this.

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)

We recognise that a death abroad is a traumatic experience for family and friends and we aim to support families as best we can during this difficult time. The FCO dealt with over 3,000 deaths of British nationals overseas during 2014. We wrote to the Committee in January 2015 setting out our response to our review into the support provided in murder and manslaughter cases, which also identified areas in which we could improve our guidance for dealing with non-suspicious deaths of British nationals overseas. This includes clear recognition of the importance of consistency and a compassionate approach, and new commitments in this area.

During 2015, we are planning to implement additional monitoring mechanisms for assessing staff performance – to ensure our staff are providing high-quality standards across the network and to minimise inconsistencies in service standards. We have also begun a comprehensive two-year programme of gathering customer feedback from assistance cases, including our most vulnerable customers, which will result in biannual reports highlighting areas for improvement.

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)

The review we conducted in 2014 into the support provided in cases of murder and manslaughter identified areas in which we could improve our guidance for dealing with non-suspicious deaths of British nationals overseas. As a result, we will be creating new training for all types of cases involving deaths of British nationals overseas. Staff will be able to build further on this knowledge through complementary developmental opportunities, both within and outside the classroom.

We will continue to use the feedback from customers to develop our future learning and development packages for our staff. We will also include feedback from staff and their managers about gaps in skills, knowledge and competence in handling death cases, and will work with independent research partners to gather evidence from a representative selection of all our customers including our most complex cases. This evidence will be gathered regularly from May 2015 onwards and will provide the evidence base for improvements to

case handling and FCO service delivery. It will also provide a valid customer satisfaction measure, to be published in the FCO annual report.

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)

We agree with the Committee that we need to improve in this important area of our consular service. Many of the Committee's recommendations, including on staff training, were echoed in the findings of our own review on how we support families after murder and manslaughter. We wrote to the Committee in January 2015 setting out our response to this review, the commitments that we have made to improve our service and the new unit that will oversee this work.

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)

We note the Committee's support for our position to not fund repatriation, legal fees or translation costs especially where adequate insurance would have covered costs and support for our policy of working with partners who can provide funding where needed.

We welcome the Committee's comments on our approach to working with partners such as Victim Support and Missing Abroad, who provide specialist support to some of our most vulnerable customers. We will continue to develop links with relevant organisations in the UK and overseas to improve the service we provide to British nationals.

We believe the criteria and availability of third-party funding is consistent but we cannot guarantee that every family will receive the same levels of funding or assistance as each case is assessed on the individual circumstances. We acknowledge the Committee's comments about the clarity of the information available. We will work with our partners to improve the information on our funding in our public guidance, on their websites and in their published materials. We will also review by April 2015 the activity reporting we receive from the partners whom we fund to ensure there is consistency in the services delivered to British nationals.

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)

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgement that loans should not be provided to cover legal fees, due to the length and uncertainty of court cases. We will review the criteria for short-term loans to consider whether they can be extended to cover repatriation or travel to attend a court case abroad, whilst fully considering the potential cost of any changes to policy and the need to avoid undermining the provision of this service included in many travel insurance policies. We agree with the Committee's comments that we need to do more to improve how we recover debt. We are working on improving the debt-recovery process through clearer communications to staff and customers, and better management information of debts. We are exploring a range of options to improve our debt recovery by September 2015.

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)

We thank the Committee for its comments in this area. It is already standard practice for staff to follow-up telephone calls to family members in bereavement cases with emails and/or letters re-stating the information provided. But we acknowledge that we need to provide this consistently on every case, and we will review and clarify our internal guidance to staff in this important area.

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)

We acknowledge that providing a compassionate and comprehensive level of service to bereaved families is of the upmost importance and that this service needs to be applied consistently. During 2015, we are planning to assess our staff and their work more closely which will help to ensure that they are delivering a consistent service to our customers.

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)

We agree with the Committee's recommendation that we should establish a central unit to manage our responses to murder and manslaughter cases abroad and help ensure consistency of service. We reached the same conclusion following an internal review of the structure of Consular Assistance Department and a review of the support we provide to families after murder and manslaughter. Our new Access to Justice Unit started work on this in January 2015.

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)

We agree that consular services are immensely important to British prisoners. We believe that the criteria for considering assistance to prisoners are consistently applied so it was a concern to read that this might not be the case. Our Consular Strategy includes a focus on providing increased support to the most vulnerable prisoners, wherever they are. We review each prisoner's case individually and offer a tailored service accordingly; this allows us to use our resources to support those most in need. We will be providing our Prisoner Policy Team with additional resources in 2015 to support its work in this important area.

We are also working on introducing a new, systematic programme of gathering feedback from a representative range of all our customers, including detainees. This will enable us to better understand where we are able to assist detainees and help us improve our case-handling and service delivery.

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)

As the Committee notes, we have begun work on improving our lawyers lists and prisoner information packs. During 2014, we developed new templates and guidance for our posts to update lists of service providers, including lawyers, and publish them on GOV.UK. The target is for all posts to have updated these by end February 2015. We will continue to review and update the prisoner information packs that we provide to British nationals in prison and their families. We aim to complete our review of all prisoner packs during Summer 2015 and update the public information on GOV.UK by September 2015. The FCO shares aspects of consular best practice, guidance and policy with other partners. We will carefully consider whether information on local services produced by other countries is appropriate for our customers.

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)

The FCO takes all allegations or concerns of torture and mistreatment extremely seriously. With the prisoner's permission, we will follow up all allegations of torture and mistreatment at the appropriate level, depending on the circumstances of each case. In each instance, when we are asked to by the British national concerned, we request a full, transparent and independent investigation by the local authorities into these matters. Alongside raising individual cases, where we have received a number of allegations we will raise any concerns about the prevalence of mistreatment and torture allegations. When responding to an

allegation, consular staff will avoid any action that might increase the risk to the detainee concerned. We will review the specific cases raised in the Committee's report and write to the Committee with our findings by April 2015.

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)

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the value of the new guidance we have introduced for staff on torture and mistreatment. This guidance was launched in November 2013 and was accompanied by a newly developed workshop for staff to participate in. As of December 2014, 101 staff from across 37 countries have completed this workshop. In addition, our entry-level consular training course for all frontline staff includes a session specifically on the new torture and mistreatment guidance. To date, 168 consular staff have attended this workshop.

During 2015, we will develop a new torture and mistreatment e-learning programme, which all staff will be able to access from their desks or mobile devices. We will also introduce a new two-day workshop for our staff in priority high-risk countries of torture and mistreatment. By the end of 2015, we aim to have trained 36 staff in these countries.

Consular staff are required to report and respond to all complaints of torture and mistreatment. A mistreatment panel of FCO staff and consular special advisers carries out regular reviews of all cases to consider whether further action should be taken and ensure consistency. The panel reports to Ministers on the number of complaints received. We will undertake a review by Summer 2015 of the information we record and share.

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)

We welcome the Committee's recommendation and recognise the advantages of setting out the range of support available to victims of torture and mistreatment and to their families. We will review the content of the public guidance available and make changes, where appropriate, by Summer 2015, with the aim of making clearer what support British nationals and their families can expect to receive in such circumstances.

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)

We welcome the Committee's assessment of the support given by the FCO, and through partners, including the Death Penalty Project and Reprieve, to British nationals facing the death penalty.

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)

We established minimum standards of consular support so that British nationals overseas are aware of what service they can expect to receive and to help us provide a consistent service. But in cases where a prisoner is assessed as particularly vulnerable, for example, due to age, mental health, or concerns over due process, human rights or prison conditions, we will provide more support.

We value our relationship with Fair Trials International and the role it plays in highlighting the risks of fair trial rights violations. Guidance and advice are available in cases where staff are concerned that due process rights are at risk and staff will intervene to raise concerns if they believe British nationals are not receiving a fair trial overseas. Staff are able to consult our Honorary Legal Advisers at posts and colleagues in the FCO's Legal Directorate, and can draw from expertise within the Human Rights and Prisoner Policy Team within Consular Assistance Department to make these assessments.

In addition, the FCO Pro Bono Lawyers Panel is available to help promote and protect the human rights of British nationals detained or imprisoned overseas. The panel can in some cases provide legal expertise and advice to British nationals and their local lawyers where we have concerns about due process or human rights violations.

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)

We agree with the Committee that consular assistance must be independent from press interest. We believe the assessments we make in identifying appropriate assistance reflect this position. Where possible, we aim to share all information we have with the families of prisoners and with our partner organisations. There will be occasions when we are not able to do this, either because it is not in the best interests of the prisoner or because we do not have the necessary consent.

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)

Her Majesty's Passport Office (HMPO) is responsible for passport policy and production. HMPO note the Committee's acceptance of the rationale for transferring work to HMPO in the UK. HMPO recognises that there is more that could be done to communicate and improve the service offered to British nationals who apply for UK passports from overseas. HMPO has developed new methods for forecasting application volumes and is recruiting staff to meet these volumes and deliver their services within public commitments. In addition, a new International Directorate in HMPO will help to focus on the needs of overseas applicants and will improve services based on that understanding.

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)

The Home Secretary announced on 26 September 2014 that the additional contingency measure we introduced on 12 June 2014 – to provide Emergency Travel Documents (ETDs) free of charge if a passport applicant overseas had waited more than the published turnaround time through no fault of their own and needed to travel within seven days – would continue. There may be circumstances where a premium service could provide an additional service option. HMPO will explore the demand for such services, with the new International Directorate engaging with stakeholders and representative groups locally during 2015. This work will focus on logistical solutions and any fee structure. Implementation of such a service would likely be on a limited trial basis initially, after consultation and agreement with stakeholders.

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)

We do accept that many customers did not receive an acceptable level of service after the transfer of passport production to HMPO in the UK. HMPO experienced significant levels of demand since the start of 2014 and in June 2014 received over 750,000 passport applications, the highest received in a single month for 12 years. The Chief Executive of HMPO and the Home Secretary apologised for this and the Home Secretary introduced additional contingency measures in June 2014 to allow people who needed to travel to be able to do so. The repatriation process was subject to consideration by this and the previous administration and was subject to a phased implementation starting in December 2012 and ending in March 2014. We learned lessons throughout the repatriation process, and holistically over summer 2014, and these are being applied to prevent similar problems occurring in the future.

HMPO and FCO moved very swiftly to put the emergency measures in place operationally. Furthermore, HMPO has committed to reimburse additional FCO staff-related costs in processing the emergency measures and the loss of income for any Emergency Travel Documents issued free of charge where a fee would otherwise have been payable.

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)

We welcome the Committee's interest in our complaints handling. We take complaints and all forms of customer feedback seriously. During 2014, we strengthened our complaints handling processes in response to feedback from the Parliamentary Ombudsman. We now record centrally all complaints received across our network to ensure we are responding appropriately and consistently, and this also enables us to monitor trends. We have also committed to introduce new public targets to measure customer satisfaction from a representative range of customers and data on this will be available by mid-May 2015. We will publish satisfaction statistics in our annual report. The FCO Board takes a strong interest in how we manage complaints and our work to encourage a culture where complaints and all forms of customer feedback are valued. We will continue to engage with the Committee on this issue.

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)

We welcome the Committee's endorsement of the improvements and innovations the FCO has made to consular services over the previous eight years and we will continue to make further improvements to ensure that our customers receive a consistent and high-quality service.

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)

We welcome the Committee's endorsement of how the FCO has managed organisational changes within the consular network. We remain focused on maintaining the resilience and morale of the network, and will continue to reflect this in any future plans for the development of the network, and in delivering future improvements and efficiencies in how we provide support to British nationals overseas.

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)

We welcome the Committee's comments that British nationals must take responsibility for their own safety and security abroad and its endorsement of the FCO's public messaging campaigns. We provide detailed travel advice on GOV.UK and promote this through conventional and social media, including on Twitter, to help British nationals get the right information before they travel or live abroad.

We also promote key messages through our Know Before You Go campaign and try and drive behaviour that will prevent people facing problems or help ensure that they are well placed to deal with them. We have also provided more subject-specific pointers to travellers to help them take responsibility, for example, to encourage travellers to take out appropriate insurance; bespoke travel advice to distinct groups, such as LGBT travellers and those travelling overseas with mental health needs; and reaching out to British travellers

visiting large gatherings, such as pilgrims going to the Hajj and football fans attending the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

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)

We welcome the Committee's endorsement. During 2015, we plan to implement additional monitoring mechanisms for assessing staff performance – to ensure our staff continue to provide high-quality standards across the network and to minimise inconsistencies in service standards. We welcome the Committee's recognition of the support the FCO provides to British nationals overseas, often in difficult circumstances. We are also proud of our staff and the work that they do.

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