08 January 2016

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF 1184-15

Thank you for your email of 9 December 2015 asking for information that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) might hold under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

You asked:

"I would like to know how many British citizens have been lent money to buy a ticket home, giving up their passports as surety, in 2014 and 2015"

Outcome of Search and Release

I am writing to confirm that the FCO does hold information relevant to your request.

Policy

We issue Under Takings to Repay to British Nationals who have received financial assistance to facilitate travel back to the UK. All loans issued are sent to our corporate services centre to pursue payment. A stop will be put on passports to ensure that no further overseas travel is possible until the loan is repaid (which may also include the cost of an Emergency Travel Document if provided).

A full guide to what we can and cannot do to help British Nationals abroad can be found at the following link. This includes the exceptional circumstances where we can offer financial help when all other options have been exhausted.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/317474/FCO_Brits_Abroad_2014.pdf

We applied your question underline when analysing our data to:

- cases of over £200, as it is only when a loan exceeds this value that we retain the passport
- cases where a passport has been retained by the consular office
- cases where a ticket was purchased to allow the customer to travel home

The outcome of our search yielded the following information:

- 2014: we forwarded to HM Passport Office (HMPO) 82 passports, retained by Posts
- 2014: there were 157 loans issued and recovered in the same year of value exceeding £200
- 2015 (As at 18 December): we forwarded to HMPO 84 passports, retained by Posts
- 2015 to date: there were 204 loans issued - and recovered in the same year - of value exceeding £200

Withheld Data

What we don't know and cannot find out without exceeding the cost limit (Section 12 of the FOIA) is as detailed below:

- Of the loans issued, how many of these involved the purchase of a flight ticket
- Of the loans issued, how many of these involved the retention of a passport

FOIA Exemptions Applied

Section 12

Section 12 of the FOIA makes provision for public authorities to refuse requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would exceed the appropriate limit. The limit has been specified in the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004. For central government the appropriate limit is set at £600. This represents the estimated cost of one or more persons spending 3 ½ working days in determining whether the Department holds the information, and locating, retrieving and extracting it. Your request as presently formulated is widely-framed and I estimate that it will take more than 3 ½ working days to locate, retrieve and extract this information. In these circumstances, we are not obliged under the FOIA to comply with your request.

Next Steps

Once an FOI request is answered, it is considered to be in the public domain. To promote transparency, we may now publish this response on gov.uk in the FOI releases section. All personal information in the letter will be removed before publishing.

You can also find out more about previous FOI responses published on our website using the hyperlink Publications - Inside Government - GOV.UK

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number noted above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely,

Head of Customer Interaction Team

Consular Directorate