

“Guidance for Posts in dealing with Parliament”

Visits by Parliamentarians - principles

1. Ministers regard the FCO’s relationship with Parliament as being very important, and it is essential that the FCO makes visits by visiting Parliamentarians to Posts as successful as possible. This guidance recognises that pressures of resources and priorities will, on occasion, need to be accommodated. But we should make a real effort to ensure that Parliamentarians have an experience of visits that is positive, professional and welcoming.
2. This guidance for handling is based on the level of Parliamentary seniority of the visit, the benefit of the visit to FCO objectives, and fulfilling our obligations in terms of propriety. There is some flexibility because resources available at post, the seniority of visitors, and the frequency and size of visits will vary across the world.
3. In this guidance, Parliamentarian means a member of either of the Houses of Parliament who is not/ not a member of the Government.¹
4. Posts should keep a record of Parliamentarians who visit them – the itinerary, a brief outline of support provided, and (if available) an indication of cost.
5. Parliamentarians should expect an appropriate level of support. Details are outlined further down. Posts face resource pressures and it is important that Parliamentarians understand how this affects our work. However, it is very difficult to use lack of available transport, shortage of staff and other resource issues as reasons not to service visits adequately, because that makes it look as if we do not see them as a priority – and they are.
6. There are some general circumstances which can affect visits. Posts can contact PRD and discuss the best way to communicate the following:
 - a) **Visits by Ministers always take priority over visits by Parliamentarians.** If Post has a clash between a visit by Minister(s) and a Parliamentary visit which means that you cannot offer an appropriate level of service and support, contact PRD who will try to deconflict the visit by the Parliamentarians. If the Parliamentarians still want to come at that time, PRD will make them aware of the circumstances so their expectations are managed.
 - b) **Security is paramount.** Parliamentarians should not travel to countries against security advice. [Section 38] The House of Commons will not allow Committees to travel against our advice.
 - c) **Government money should generally not be spent.**
 - d) **Seasonal weather, elections, local holidays etc** may affect the availability of interlocutors (including our senior staff) or make internal travel difficult. For example,

¹ Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs) are not part of the Government, but can occasionally be authorised for official overseas travel by the PM.

PRD writes to advise Select Committees to limit travel to the USA during Presidential election year.

- e) **Sometimes we may need to manage Parliamentarians' expectation of the level of service or access we can reasonably provide.** In some instances, PRD will need to explain our guidance to Parliamentarians about the level of support we can offer. Alternatively, it may be impossible or inappropriate to seek calls at the level the Parliamentarians ask for, but they could be very helpful in other ways.
- f) **Parliamentarians need to be visiting on Parliamentary business.** Our staff should not be put in the position of feeling they are giving political cover to personal excursions. Part or all of the visit may be private and organised by, and paid for, by the visitor personally.

Parliamentarians can pursue their own business or financial interests, and both Houses have arrangements and rules for Parliamentarians to declare relevant business or financial interests. As far as the FCO is concerned, the yardstick must be whether the activity or visit contributes to HM Government and FCO objectives (for example, through commercial diplomacy). If a Parliamentarian is visiting on personal business, they should be extended the same advice and courtesies as a visiting UK national who is in country on business, but who is not a Parliamentarian.

We do not facilitate sightseeing trips. We do not organise or conduct programmes for the spouses of Parliamentarians but can give them advice on who to contact to make these arrangements.

The level and type of support offered for visits

- 7. Posts should be helpful to visiting Parliamentarians. Such visits help achieve FCO objectives and provide an opportunity to see the FCO in action. Parliamentarians should have a positive experience of visiting the FCO abroad.
- 8. This section should allow Posts to make the right judgement about the level of support to provide in order to create a successful visit. We cannot provide one size fits all guidance - the resources available at post, the seniority of visitors, and the frequency and size of visits will vary greatly across the world. It is possible that an MP visiting one country which has fewer, lower profile visitors will have a different experience than one visiting a major post which has a steady stream of Select Committees visiting.
- 9. [Section 38]
- 10. Before assessing the level of service provided for a visit, Posts should consider:
 - How senior is the visiting person or party?
 - How will their visit fulfil FCO objectives?
 - What do they want to do and who do they want to see? Is this useful and/or realistic?
 - Will those people want to see them, or be available?
 - What are their expectations of support, if they have any? This is particularly important if they have previous experience in another country as a benchmark.
 - If they are from a single party, how do we maintain our political impartiality as public servants?
- 11. The answers to these questions will allow Posts to categorise the visit according to these Tiers, and therefore the level of support you should offer. It is possible for Posts

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(particularly ones with very few visitors) to upgrade a visit to a higher tier if warranted – check with PRD if unsure.

12. Where an MP or another individual (eg a former Prime Minister) is acting as a government envoy, they should be treated like a Minister.

Tier A

13. This includes visits by the Foreign Affairs Committee and other Select Committees. They should automatically receive a very high level of support at any Post – even the busiest Post must do this. The Select Committee Team in PRD will co-ordinate with Committee Clerks, Desk and Posts on the planning of the visit.
14. This tier includes the Leader of the Opposition and former Foreign Secretaries.
15. Tier A also includes former Prime Ministers. See paragraph 54, below, for more detail.

Tier B

16. This is formal visits under the banner of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (UK) and the International Parliamentary Union (IPU). They do not carry quite the same level of status as Select Committees, but should be looked after fully.

Tier C

17. Tier C is All Party Parliamentary Groups. There are about 122 country groups, plus a number of thematic groups. They do not have the same status as Select Committees. They are effectively clubs which are registered with the Parliamentary authorities.
18. We have received many successful and worthwhile APPG visits to Post by Parliamentarians with a strong record of interest in the relevant country. APPGs can vary in how active and representative they are. Some are serviced, for example in their secretariat, by particular lobby groups. As they are not funded by Parliament, it is possible that APPG visits will be supported by corporate, overseas government or NGO funding which the delegation will need to declare in the register of interests.
19. Desks should liaise with Posts and determine how far the proposed APPG visit meets FCO and HMG objectives. This is in terms of the depth and range of the proposed programme, and whether we can expect any useful follow-up in London. Desks should seek some form of feedback or washup after the visit.
20. The FCO will not manage or create APPG visit programmes. In fact, sometimes APPGs do not want or expect FCO support in country (which sometimes leads to them turning up unannounced). However, Posts should be as helpful as possible in helping parliamentary groups when they are calling on Governments.

Tier D

21. This includes visiting single MPs and peers, including the Opposition front bench, and single party groups from any party. Our involvement needs to balance how the visit furthers FCO and HMG objectives, and make best use of available resources. We will be better placed to offer support if the visit is clearly focused on, and dominated by,

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business; where the visitor(s) have a track record of interest in the country and/or region; and where there is a prospect of the visit leading to future benefit to the FCO or useful follow up. However, as with Tier C, Posts should be as helpful as possible in helping parliamentary groups when they are calling on Governments.

22. The litmus test is:

- Does this visit further FCO objectives?
- Does it compromise the FCO and/or its staff politically, bearing in mind that we serve the Government of the day? (see appendix for further guidance)
- Is the use of resource proportionate and defensible?
- Does the need to ensure the personal safety of visitor(s) require us to take a more direct interest?
- Is there a more pressing call on resources (ie a Ministerial or Select Committee visit)?

23. If a post is unable to assist an MP on an overseas trip due to resource issues, the relevant Minister's Private Office and PRD should be informed. If in doubt officials should seek Ministers' approval for such a refusal in advance.

24. Parliament provides funds for each MP to make up to three visits per year to the national parliament of any EU or EFTA country and to any EU institution. MPs can claim airfares and subsistence for two nights for any such visit. They are required to submit in advance a statement of the visit's purpose, location and duration and the people or organisations to be visited. The House of Commons Department of Finance and Administration is in charge of the financial arrangements. The House of Lords allows its Members to recover the costs of two return journeys per year to any EU institution in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg or to the national parliament of an EU state.

25. Parliamentarians may occasionally request assistance when travelling abroad as part of an OSCE/ COE/ NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation, on an election observation mission, or as a Rapporteur. In most cases, their request will be for an oral briefing, either in London or at post, or for a written off-the-shelf brief (no higher than Restricted). Programmes for such visits would normally be arranged by the relevant body's secretariat; the FCO would only expect to become involved in exceptional circumstances (eg visits with problematic security or political issues).

Schedule of typical level of support by tier

	TIER A	TIER B	TIER C	TIER D
Factual briefing before departure	Y	Y	Y	Y
Enquiries about local costs and conditions (taxis, hotels, climate, security,etc)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Internal flight enquiries	Y	Y	N	N
Hotel queries	Y	Y	N	N
Contact details for local interlocutors	Y	Y	Y	N
Booking hire cars	Y	N	N	N
Meeting at airports to facilitate arrivals	Y	N	N	N
Briefing by other Sections of Mission (Defence,Commercial, etc)	Y	Y	N	N
Official accommodation provided (Ministers	Y	N	N	N

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only)

Translation duties	Y	N	N	N
Assistance with security of visitors (in a small number of posts)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Subsequent reporting following visit	Y	Y	Y	N

What Posts should (and should not) pay for

26. Government money should generally not be spent. Parliament provides funds for Parliamentarians to make overseas visits. Even if Posts are involved in administrative arrangements for visits, they should not bear the costs themselves for hotels, transport, the provision of any office-type accommodation outside the mission, and any entertainment done by Parliamentarians.
27. Any entertainment (such as a lunch or reception) offered by the post to visiting Parliamentarians should be paid for by the post.
28. Posts should cover the cost of any official transport and any staff time (i.e. translators and drivers) if visiting Parliamentarians are part of an official party (ie a Select Committee). Post should pay costs if a Parliamentarian has been invited to an official conference or seminar; the post considers that their attendance supports FCO objectives; they are the most suitable individual (irrespective of political party) to attend the event; and no other sources of funding exist.
29. Whilst we should be helpful in countries with less developed banking systems, visiting Parliamentarians should not look to FCO staff to keep them in petty cash for expenses such as taxis, meals etc. If need be, Parliamentarians should obtain forex before reaching the country, or visit readily available ATMs or bureaux de change after arrival.

Party political contact and activity

30. Party political activity generally means the visit of a single party group from the UK (see guidance for Tier D visits, above); and/or Parliamentarians (and this includes Ministers) meeting party political groups in country.
31. The Ministerial Code says: "Facilities provided to Ministers at Government expense to enable them to carry out their official duties should not be used for Party or constituency work. Government property should not generally be used for constituency work or party activities.... Where a visit is a mix of political and official engagements, it is important that the department and the Party each meet a proper proportion of the actual cost."
32. Posts must therefore clearly respect the principles of political impartiality and should not:
 - offer official premises for party political purposes
 - assist delegations when the purpose of the visit is solely party-to-party activity.
33. Ministers may wish to attend party political events during visits and Posts should allow for that in the planning of itineraries. This can be a convenient way for Ministers to engage the local community of UK nationals and the local political organisation may in fact operate an event attended by non-members or the non-affiliated. It is important that public resources are not used to plan or support events, but it is legitimate for Posts to be in contact with local party organisations so they can be included in the programme, sometimes briefly and/or at short notice, if the Minister so wishes.

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34. There are a number of active single party groups – for example, particularly covering the Middle East. Guidance on their visits is set out above. It is important to treat them the same regardless of party.

Visits by Parliamentarians to military theatre

35. [Section 38]

Communication by Heads of Mission with Parliamentarians

36. Ministers lead the FCO in keeping MPs abreast of policy. However, Heads of Mission have a valuable role to play – in particular, outreach to APPGs when they come to the UK, support of Parliamentary events in Leadership Week, successful visits to Post by MPs and Committees, etc. Heads of Mission are respected and seen as credible by MPs.
37. As part of directorate Parliamentary engagement strategies, directors should consider the active and ongoing participation of Heads of Mission so there is consistency in channels and messaging (so that we don't appear overactive in one Post and too quiet elsewhere).
38. When Heads of Mission are back in London for calls, they should seek to find space in their programme for meetings with relevant Parliamentarians – members of APPGs are an obvious example. Desks in London can help fix meetings. They don't need to seek approval from your Minister's Private Office for setting these up but it is always worth letting them know who they are meeting/have met, not least in case MPs or peers mention it to Ministers.
39. If requested, Heads of Mission should participate in the programme of Parliamentary engagement in the Leadership Conference.
40. Communication – especially written - should be targeted. Desks should know who in Parliament is most interested in their country as an output of the directorate Parliamentary strategies. Unsolicited blanket newsletters to Parliamentarians are ineffective owing to the vast amount of email they get. So any communication from Post needs to fit in with ongoing contact by departments in London. There could be a periodic letter to the Chairman of the relevant APPG, which could be copied to the Library of the House and published on the Post's website, as appropriate. Alternatively, a periodic VTC.
41. The rule with communication from Post is to stick to unclassified, uncontroversial factual updates on what the Post is doing and what is happening the country. Heads of Mission should focus on their own responsibilities.
42. Likewise, Heads of Mission may reply direct to MPs' letters on practical issues (such as follow up to visits or factual questions) but they should avoid engaging in policy discussions which Ministers would be better placed to respond to. Consult the relevant Private Office if unsure. Any MP letters for Ministerial reply should be scanned and sent to PRD for logging and allocation for reply.

Use of the diplomatic bag

43. Parliamentarians who are not members of the Government should not use the diplomatic bag. Its use is governed by international law, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which requires that it is used only for the official purposes of the sending state

and its diplomatic missions. Any enquiries or requests from third parties should be referred to IMD [Section 40]

Use of the residence for visiting Parliamentarians

44. There is no/no expectation that Heads of Mission should be obliged to offer accommodation in the Residence for visiting Parliamentarians, unless security considerations mean that there is no other suitable accommodation. Heads of Mission may choose to offer accommodation to Parliamentarians, remembering the importance of maintaining impartiality and the proper use of public resources.

Press support for visiting Parliamentarians

45. Visiting Parliamentarians may seek advice, support or practical help in engaging with both foreign and UK media during overseas visits. In many cases, such engagement, especially with local foreign media, may actively assist Post's efforts to achieve their objectives – for example in supporting British business or in wider public diplomacy around, say, the Olympics. As with other aspects of visits, propriety and impartiality must be maintained at all times. MPs should be treated equally, regardless of political party.
46. Posts may:
- inform local/resident UK press in advance;
 - provide facilities for briefing with journalists (eg a room in the mission); if an on-camera briefing is arranged, reasonable care should be taken not to visually associate the FCO or the Government with the visitor (eg having the Ambassador stand next to them);
 - as part of a programme arrange calls on commentators and others in the media, and/or include them at social events;
47. Visitors should be aware that it would be improper for such support to be given if/when the visitor is either intending to make party political announcements or likely to face significant party political questioning.
48. Particular care should be exercised with shadow Ministers where there is a risk they may criticise Government policy, especially through UK media.
49. Posts usually should not:
- handle individual interview or other media bids;
 - act as spokespeople for the visitor;
 - live-stream elements of non-cross-party visits on their websites. Posts may Tweet about such visitors, blog, or FB post about them on official channels if this assists the achievement of FCO objectives and is done in a non-political manner. They should not upload digital content (eg to YouTube) for visitors.
50. In environments where security or other logistical issues make it very challenging for visitors to make their own arrangements, the degree of support (eg facilitating individual interviews) can be increased, consistent with the operating environment in the country.
51. The arrangements above do not apply during "purdah" in advance of UK elections. During "purdah", MPs should make their own arrangements for media and digital engagement.
52. If in doubt, consult Press and Digital Department, the PUS' office and PRD.

Visits by former Prime Ministers

53. [Section 40] travel abroad regularly, mostly on private business. This includes work on behalf of non-governmental organisations, charities and national or international organisations. [Section 40] also travels as Quartet Representative on the MEPP. [Section 38]. Their private offices occasionally ask for Posts help in arranging calls on heads of state/government. Posts send in a note verbale to their host MFA detailing the requests. Some countries will agree.
54. Where a former Prime Minister is acting as a government envoy, they should be treated like a Minister.
55. We expect missions to:
- [Section 38]
 - Request VIP facilitation through immigration and customs on arrival and departure. Any costs for VIP facilitation to be paid by either the host or the former PM's private office
56. We do not expect missions to:
- Send someone to the airport to meet the former PM (this is at the discretion of Post)
 - Provide transport for the former PM or arrange hire cars. It is the responsibility of the host government, organisation or the former PM's private office to arrange transport, including the provision of armoured vehicles.
 - [Section 38]
57. [Section 38]
58. Contact [Section 40] in the Diplomatic and VIP Security Section of Protocol Directorate for further information

Outreach to foreign Parliaments

59. As long as they are not in any way summoned or required to speak under oath, Heads of Mission should be able to brief or give evidence to foreign Parliaments on UK policy, while avoiding commenting on the host government's policies. In case of doubt, contact PRD.
60. The rules on appearance before UK Parliamentary Select Committees may be helpful: "Officials should as far as possible confine their evidence to questions of fact and explanation relating to government policies and actions. They should be ready to explain what those policies are; the justification and objectives of those policies as the Government sees them; the extent to which those objectives have been met; and also to explain how administrative factors may have affected both the choice of policy measures and the manner of their implementation. Any comment by officials on government policies and actions should always be consistent with the principle of civil service political impartiality. Officials should as far as possible avoid being drawn into discussion of the merits of alternative policies where this is politically contentious. If official witnesses are pressed by the Committee to go beyond these limits, they should suggest that the questioning should be referred to Ministers."

Electoral registration

61. Encouraging British citizens to register to vote is the remit of the independent Electoral Commission, not the Government. If posts are asked to engage in, or facilitate, campaigns to promote electoral registration, they should ask the organiser to contact the international department of the Electoral Commission (www.electoralcommission.org.uk/)

Appendix: Civil service guidance

The Civil Service Code says:

14. You must:

- serve the Government, whatever its political persuasion, to the best of your ability in a way which maintains political impartiality and is in line with the requirements of this Code, no matter what your own political beliefs are;
- act in a way which deserves and retains the confidence of Ministers, while at the same time ensuring that you will be able to establish the same relationship with those whom you may be required to serve in some future Government; and
- comply with any restrictions that have been laid down on your political activities.

15. You must not:

- act in a way that is determined by party political considerations, or use official resources for party political purposes; or
- allow your personal political views to determine any advice you give or your actions.

The Directory of Civil Service Guidance (2000) says:

As a general principle, there is no objection to contacts between senior civil servants and leading members of the Opposition parties if the latter wish to inform themselves about the factual questions of departmental organisation or to keep abreast of organisational changes. Such contacts should always be cleared with departmental Ministers.

It is an established principle set out in the Civil Service Code that civil servants should not engage in activities likely to call into question their political impartiality, or to give rise to criticism that people paid from public funds are being used for party political purposes. This is reinforced in the Ministerial Code.

..... These general rules should not be regarded as inhibiting factual briefings of small all-party groups of MPs by military officers or officials unaccompanied by Ministers when MPs are on overseas or regional visits. Nor need they cut across long traditions of providing briefings for MPs who are about to go on overseas visits, even if the MPs are all of the same party. It is also open to Ministers to agree factual briefings by senior officials for MPs of one or more parties, whether singly or in small groups (including briefing on the organisation and management of departments, technical matters, or operational aspects of agencies and regional offices) provided facilities are available even-handedly to MPs of all parties. It is for Ministers to decide whether to attend such meetings, although a Minister should always be present when MPs are invited to discuss sensitive matters of public policy with officials.

.... Material provided by civil servants for Ministers may be distributed to backbench MPs provided that it is of a kind that would be released to any bona fide enquirer, and that MPs of all parties can have access to it. It would be wholly improper for civil servants to provide a briefing service confined to the backbench MPs of one party. A service limited to the backbenchers of one party would only be in order if civil servants involvement were confined to providing factual information for the Minister, and the arrangements for circulating the

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factual information were made by the party concerned and the costs met by them. The basic principle is that the Civil Service should not be open to criticism for favouring one political party. The possibility of criticism can never be ruled out, and in particular the question of the use of official resources should always be carefully considered.

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