



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 - REQUEST REF: 0849-16

Thank you for your email of 5 September 2016 asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). You asked:

"Acknowledging your comment that "building closer relationships with growing economies is important", can you very kindly disseminate results of the Foreign Secretary's review, the details of which were disseminated by a foreign office spokesman to the BBC on the 25th June 2015 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33266167>) please? Most respectfully, I am especially interested to learn full details of projects the Foreign Secretary considered to be a waste of British Taxpayers' money".

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information which you requested, and I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold information relevant to your request.

In respect of the first part of your request, I have copied below the findings of the review on FCO ODA spend, conducted by the former Permanent Under Secretary Sir Simon Fraser:

For this review I have:

- a) Reviewed current FCO guidance to staff involved in all project work;*
- b) Written to all Directors and Heads of Mission reminding them of the importance of value for money and sense checking any project proposal from a reputation point of view;*
- c) Asked Directors and Heads of mission to undertake a quick review of all current and pipeline Projects against the guidance and provide assurances that all projects meet the standards, and reviewed their responses;*
- d) Asked relevant Posts to review those projects highlighted in the Sun and provide the rationale for agreeing to fund them;*

e) Commissioned a review of the current system for publishing transparency returns to ensure that we will in future scrutinise at the centre the presentation of all returns;

f) Asked British Council for a note on their ODA spend

Findings

Heads of Mission and London based programme teams have reviewed all current and pipeline projects. Geographic Directors were able to give me assurance that the overwhelming majority of projects met ODA, value for money and reputation criteria. The review did highlight a handful of projects which give cause for concern, particularly from a reputational perspective. In most cases I think the rationale is sound, but some project titles need to better reflect the purpose and link to both development and to HMG objectives. I have asked for pipeline projects in this category to be paused pending the outcome of this review.

As you might expect there is detailed context behind all of the projects highlighted in The Sun article. These appear to have been thoroughly considered, although there are one or two in the Middle East which are weaker cases than the rest. Again I think a number of these projects could have been better described and I am recommending that we do more on the media and reputation handling side in future. I also think there is a wider communications point about how HMG uses ODA in support of our foreign policy objectives overseas.

I don't suggest you need to look at all of the returns, but I am including them in case your private office wants to go through them

Conclusions

I conclude that:

We have sound structures in place both in London and overseas to ensure that project spend is ODA compliant where it needs to be. This has been confirmed by Directors. Heads of Mission understand that programme spend needs to represent value for money and that projects need to be in line with broader HMG objectives. In the vast majority of cases this is working. The review has highlighted a handful of projects, among several hundred, where the justification of the project and/ or the way it has been presented, is unsatisfactory.

The sums of money concerned in bilateral programme projects administered by Posts are relatively tiny. The total cost of all projects mentioned in the Sun was £240,043. This is 0.07% of FCO ODA spend, and less than the cost of DECC's project on eel conservation in the Philippines

From the supporting documents provided, the projects highlighted in the Sun all went through a considered selection process either at post or in London and comply with ODA rules and value for money criteria. There are also clear links to support wider HMG objectives, although one or two might be open to question. Many of these projects would have benefitted from a title/description which made them less vulnerable to critical media coverage. But on the other hand the press coverage is exaggerated.

This type of story is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the fact that the great majority of our disposable programme spend is now ODA. We have very few alternative sources of funds to promote activities which support wider HMG objectives in ODA eligible countries.

DFID are often involved in decision making at posts

Recommendations

I recommend:

(a) At the project generation stage managers need to do more to ensure that projects are thoroughly considered from a reputation perspective and described in a way which clearly underlines the link to HMG objectives. Project owners should be required to include a press line for each project when providing descriptions as part of the data completion process;

(b) We need to have a clearer and more effective system in place to ensure that all data are verified and considered from a reputation standpoint ahead of release into the public domain. Media office must be part of this system and automatically involved. A communications specialist should be tasked to check these descriptions ahead of publication;

(c) Project management guidance should be reviewed, streamlined, simplified and better communicated to all those involved in running projects;

(d) While we can improve our processes and checks, our overseas spend will continue to be vulnerable to attacks in the press. We need to ensure we are better prepared to defend our good record in this area;

(e) We should not change the current arrangement which allows Heads of Mission discretion to run small value projects in country. This bilateral programme spend can have significant local impact and posts have very few other means at their disposal to do this;

(f) We should be rigorous but avoid putting in place excessively heavy centralised controls which will add to the bureaucratic burden.

In respect of the second part of your request, we do not hold any information on “projects that the Foreign Secretary considered to be a waste of British Taxpayers’ Money”.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Office, Operations Unit



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