



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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Thank you for your letter of 22 May about the media reporting on the loss of Government papers loaned to the FCO from The National Archives (TNA).

The FCO is committed to compliance with the Public Records Act and we take our obligations to protect original records seriously. The FCO regularly requests files back from TNA for business purposes. Over 4,000 files have been temporarily withdrawn from TNA since 2013, the vast majority of which have been returned. The few that have not yet been returned are all accounted for.

The attached note provides detailed answers to the Committee's questions.

Simon McDonald

1. Approximately how many files has the FCO withdrawn from the National Archives since 2013?

Since 2013, the FCO has withdrawn 4,463 files from The National Archives (TNA) for use on FCO premises. This figure excludes an additional 4,694 files which have been temporarily withdrawn from public access for use by the FCO at TNA. The main reasons for requisitioning files are to re-review the files for release when a closure period expires, to examine the files in the context of a legal case or for FCO research purposes.

The vast majority of files have been returned to TNA. Of those that remain on FCO's premises, all are accounted for.

2. How many of those files withdrawn from the National Archives by the FCO are considered lost? What subject matter do those lost files cover?

None, since 2013.

3. What measures is the FCO taking to recover the lost files?

This is not applicable. In the past, the Departmental Records Officer (Head of the FCO's Knowledge Management Department) has written to the Directors of the FCO departments in receipt of the files which have been mislaid seeking assurance that full and thorough searches had been completed. Where necessary, a physical inspection was carried out by records management staff.

Since 2013, FCO policy is not to allow recalled files to be loaned outside the custody of the Knowledge Management Department (KMD). Files are viewed at TNA wherever possible to mitigate the risks of files going astray or being lost. If files are recalled to the FCO, colleagues in FCO departments who wish to consult them are asked to visit KMD's offices.

4. How does the FCO manage the transfer of files to The National Archives from its facility in Hanslope Park? What steps does it take to ensure the security of files borrowed?

Files borrowed from the TNA are now held within the custody of the records management staff. They are transported using official FCO Services transport and drivers with appropriate security clearance (FCO Services are part of the FCO). The files' movements are tracked and monitored until such time as they are returned to TNA or applications are submitted to change their status.

5. Have any disciplinary actions been taken, or are any being considered, in relation to the lost files?

No disciplinary action has been taken as we do not consider any files to have been lost, since 2013.

6. What procedures does the FCO have in place to ensure openness and transparency in the transfer of files to and from The National Archives?

The FCO does not publish any data regarding requisitioned files. TNA do not amend their publicly-available catalogue (Discovery) unless files are lost on requisition. However, members of the public are informed if they request a requisitioned file that has been loaned to a government department.