Dear Tom,

Thank you for your letter of 2 November asking for more detail on my plans for the future of the FCO, following my Policy Exchange Speech on 31 October.

For ease of reference, your questions are shown italicised before each answer.

1. Of the new overseas FCO posts, positions in London and positions in the overseas network that you announced on 31 October, how many are additional to those that have already been announced?

Of the nearly 1000 additional positions in London and the diplomatic network, 450 were announced by my predecessor, both in support of EU Exit work and Global Britain. So more than 500 are additional. As regards the twelve overseas Posts, the new UK mission to the headquarters of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta and the future British Embassy in Djibouti had not previously been announced.

2. What criteria and priorities were used in deciding where to open new posts and create new positions?

There have been three inter-linked processes to determine new priorities and secure resource to meet them: Global Britain, the Africa Strategy and EU Exit requirements.

Within the Global Britain process, new Posts were considered in two phases. My predecessor considered advice on Commonwealth countries. I did so additionally for non-Commonwealth countries. Decisions on opening new Posts take into account the potential to advance UK interests, considerations of current laydown and potential value for money. New positions created under Global Britain will help to deliver impact for the UK under four themes:

i) Fulfilling our international obligations;
ii) Strengthening the multilateral system;
iii) International policy, standards and rules setting ('regulatory diplomacy');
iv) Maximising UK soft power.

In February 2018 the National Security Council (NSC) agreed to reprioritise approximately 1% of the UK’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) annual spend on Africa to expand HM Government’s network in sub-Saharan Africa. New Posts and positions will support five strategic shifts:

i) A strengthened cross-HMG focus on inclusive growth;
ii) A longer-term focus on security and stability;
iii) A step change in our support for access to voluntary family planning;
iv) A stronger focus on climate change and sustainable resource management;
v) Increased presence in the Sahel region.

The FCO has received £42m funding from HM Treasury in support of EU Exit. This funding supported the creation of 550 new positions: 220 in London, 190 UK Based overseas and 140 locally engaged. The positions were assessed against value for money and five overarching themes:

i) Deepening our relationships with our European partners and increasing our capacity to engage and influence;
ii) Supporting key foreign policy issues;
iii) Developing EU expertise for all HMG staff working on EU Exit;
iv) Bolstering the UK Representation to the EU (UKREP);
v) Adequately planning for a possible ‘no deal’ outcome.

3. Will there be formal criteria set for the skills, including diplomatic skills, that external candidates for Ambassadorial positions are expected to hold?

For the limited number of Head of Mission positions that we will open to candidates from outside the Civil Service, external candidates will compete alongside internal candidates and will be assessed against the same Job Specification, and using the same criteria and processes, in keeping with the FCO recruitment practices.

4. Will external appointees be formally required to divest themselves of financial interests which could pose a conflict of interest in their ambassadorial role?

Any successful applicant would, like all FCO staff, be expected to meet the standards set out in the Civil Service Code and Diplomatic Service Regulations. As part of the recruitment process, external candidates would be asked to declare any interests which might pose a conflict of interest in their capacity as a Head of Post.

5. Will you commit to external appointees receiving proper scrutiny by way of pre appointment hearings before the FAC?

No. These will not be political appointments, The FCO’s recruitment processes meet the standards set by the Cabinet Office for the Civil Service. All senior appointments will continue to be overseen by the FCO’s Senior Appointments Board (SAB), chaired by the Permanent Under-Secretary and comprising senior members of the FCO Board and a non-executive representative, and made on the basis of merit. The SAB
is best able to assess applicants’ suitability, based on their skills, experience and performance, and considering the FCO’s organisational needs. All senior appointments are ratified by the Prime Minister and by me. For Heads of Mission roles, HM The Queen approves the FCO’s recommendation.

6. What assessment has been made of the likely effects on recruitment and retention of career FCO diplomats of the proposals for external appointments?

My announcement does not represent a significant change in recruitment policy, and I do not expect it to have any effect on the recruitment and retention of career FCO diplomats. I am proud that we have the finest diplomatic service in the world. The strongest candidate will continue to get the role. Opening the FCO to new approaches and skills can only strengthen our network and benefit the organisation as a whole, including career diplomats.

7. What additional budgetary and other resources have been or will be committed to deliver your plans for expanding the FCO’s language skills?

The increase in the FCO’s language skills will take place over the next five to ten years. Officials are working up the detail of implementation, taking into account budgetary, diversity and workforce planning factors. This will also inform the FCO’s bid in the next Spending Review.

8. How will additional speaker slots in the network be allocated? For example, will this be done in proportion to the size of each mission, or will Priority 1 languages be expanded more than others?

The precise balance between these approaches is being worked through, taking into account the deployment of additional personnel under the Global Britain, Africa and EU Exit strategies. We envisage around 20% of the 335 new UK Based overseas positions to be created by 2020 to be for foreign language speakers.

9. Will the increase in the number of language speakers be achieved by adding positions to the overseas network, or will it be done by re-designating existing positions as speaker slots?

The expansion will be achieved by several means, including upgrading some non-speaker slots to speaker, the creation of some new speaker slots and a greater emphasis on language skills in recruitment and appointment processes, so that less training time is required.

10. Will the FCO be maintaining its commitment to reaching 80% target-level attainment in speaker slots by 2020?

Yes.

11. How will proficiency targets for languages be set under the new system?

Most speaker slots will continue to be at C1 or C2 level, including upgrading some C1 slots to C2. The exact percentages at each level will evolve over time. The additional
speaker slots will be allocated in the same way as we allocate speaker slots now, taking into account the diplomatic benefits gained from being able to operate in the foreign language in each country while maintaining a focus on Priority 1 and 2 languages, as we have always done. The process for certifying a language speaker’s proficiency will be the same as now, with an external awarding body delivering examinations for us.

THE RT HON JEREMY HUNT MP