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Minister of State

20<sup>th</sup> October 2015

The Rt Hon the Lord Laming CBE DL  
House of Lords  
London  
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Congratulations on your appointment as Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords. Your predecessor, Lord Sewel, wrote to the Rt Hon Matthew Hancock MP on 9 June to follow-up on the work of the House of Lords Select committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence. I am replying on behalf of the Government as the Minister responsible for public diplomacy.

The Committee asked whether the Government supports the aim of being "the best-networked state in the world", and whether it would commit more resources to the UK's Embassy network. The UK has continued to expand its international network, which the Foreign Secretary is committed to protecting. Since 2010 the FCO has invested £300m to ensure we can project UK interests wherever we need to. We have opened or upgraded 18 new posts. We have a new Embassy in Jakarta, and have expanded our network in China and India. We returned to Mogadishu before any other EU partner and have recently returned to Tehran. In Latin America, I have opened Embassies in Asuncion, San Salvador and Port-au-Prince, and we have upgraded our mission in Recife. Just last month, I opened a Consulate General in Belo Horizonte to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the 2016 Olympics in Brazil.

The Committee asked about the impact of modernising and streamlining corporate functions. These changes have been successful, and we have made substantial reductions to the overall running costs of our overseas platform. The £100m savings programme closed on 31 March 2015 by which time £102.4m of savings had been achieved. It is true that parts of our network are spread thinly: 134 posts – around half – have 2 or fewer UK diplomats in them. However, we have developed a highly-skilled workforce on local contracts, many of whom are British nationals themselves, who perform policy, economic, consular and representational work overseas, as well as ensuring our platform for the whole of Government is well managed.

The Committee asked about the role of the NSC in soft power. While it is not possible to confirm the frequency of NSC discussions on specific topics, I would

like to reassure the Committee that the NSC regularly discusses the use of the UK's soft power to achieve UK prosperity and security objectives.

The Committee asked about the Government's position on recruitment of advisory staff from the private sector, to support opportunities for SMEs. The FCO and UKTI regularly recruit from the private sector, on permanent contracts and on secondment, where there is a business need for specific expertise. Their input has increased commercial experience, specialist knowledge and professional skills within our workforce. This has been instrumental in creating greater opportunities for SMEs.

The Committee asked what steps had been taken to promote intra-Commonwealth trade, in particular in emerging markets. In 2014, the Government provided financial and political support for the establishment of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC), an initiative founded with the purpose of promoting and supporting intra-Commonwealth trade. As Minister for the Commonwealth, I speak regularly at their events and have encouraged other Commonwealth countries to provide financial support. Lord Maude and I will lead a trade delegation to the Commonwealth Business Forum in Malta, alongside trade delegations from across the Commonwealth. The Government is working on several policy initiatives for CHOGM 2015 to further facilitate intra-Commonwealth trade. We are also looking forward to the outcome of the Commonwealth Secretariat's study into the nature and potential of intra-Commonwealth trade.

The Committee asked a number of questions about visas. There is always room for improvement here. However, visa application processes in growth areas have been improved through the extension of Priority and Super Priority services. Priority services are now available in over 100 countries, and Super Priority services allow customers in China, India, Istanbul, Pretoria, Bangkok, Manila, New York, Paris and Abu Dhabi to receive a visa within 24 hours. In April 2015, the number of visitor routes (ie. types of visitor visa) was consolidated from 15 to four as part of a new streamlined system for travellers to the UK, simplifying visitor routes for business and leisure travellers.

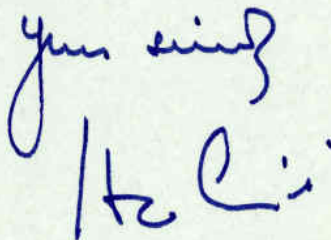
The Committee also asked about UKVI's Customer Service Excellence accreditation, which has now been achieved across the UKVI operation and graded as beyond excellent in several areas.

The Committee asked about communicating the 'UK offer' to international students. We are confident that we are communicating this effectively. The UK is the second most popular destination in the world for international higher education students. Visa applications from university students are now 17 per cent higher than they were in 2010 and visa applications to Russell Group universities are 33 per cent higher than in 2010. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded in its recent report 'International Migration Outlook 2015', the UK's share of the global market has grown constantly since 2000, more than that of any other OECD country over the same period.

The Committee asked about the outcome of a review into the three Government-funded scholarships: Marshall, Commonwealth, and Chevening. Earlier this year, the review recommended that the three unique schemes should continue, but should sit side by side in a single FCO-sponsored Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), and that further work is required to look more closely at the detail of the governance options that would protect the brands and objectives of each scheme. Departments remain committed to the review's recommendations on bringing better alignment of overall scholarships strategy, funding, partnership development, and alumni engagement between the three programmes, but are still working through the detail of how this should be achieved. The FCO will continue to use its global network and platform to promote and support scholarship activity across the schemes.

The Committee asked about DfID funding for the BBC. As you will be aware, the Government is currently reviewing the BBC's Royal Charter, and asking the BBC to develop proposals for the next Charter period. At present, BBC Media Action receives government funding from DfID and the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. In recent years, it has diversified its funding base. For example, income from non-UK government sources increased by 26% between 2012 and 2014 and BBC Media Action expect it to continue to grow. DfID's £90 million 5 year global programme supports BBC Media Action's development work in 15 countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East but comes to an end in October 2016. DFID is discussing with BBC Media Action the options for continuing and deepening its long term partnership through to 2021, particularly to expand support for free media in developing countries, and for new forms of digital media. The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund will continue to provide other funding opportunities for BBC Media Action's global work, not just in DFID's focus countries.

I recognise that the scope of the Committee's questions is wide-ranging, in keeping with the original report. I hope that you have found my response helpful. My officials would be happy to meet with Committee members to discuss the points they raise in more detail, should they wish.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'you said' followed by a stylized signature that looks like 'H Swire'.

**THE RT HON HUGO SWIRE MP**  
**Minister of State**