

# Consular Strategy 2013–2016: Consular Excellence

“we aim  
to be  
the best  
consular  
service  
in the  
world”



Foreign &  
Commonwealth  
Office

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# The British Consular Service

Providing a modern and efficient service to British nationals overseas is a foreign policy priority.

To do this we:

- > provide assistance to British nationals in distress.
- > provide Emergency Travel Documents.
- > provide support during crisis situations.
- > run awareness-raising programmes to help British nationals avoid difficulties overseas.
- > offer documentary and notarial services.

- > issue passports to British nationals resident overseas on behalf of the Identity and Passport Service (this service will be run by the IPS in the UK from April 2014).
- > have a network of professional, trained, consular staff in British embassies and consulates in 146 countries around the world.

**Unlike most consular services, we are not responsible for visas, which are the responsibility of the UK Border Agency (UKBA).**



# Our Vision

Consular Excellence is about high quality, modern, cost effective and efficient support to British nationals overseas. This means having the right people in the right places with the right skills and the right support to deliver our services.

By 2016 our processes will be more efficient and staff will spend more time helping the most vulnerable people and the most serious cases. Our services will always be high quality, but we may vary the level of service across the network according to local circumstances. Customers will have more choice in how they access our services. We will be able to respond to changing needs and to react to crisis situations effectively.

**We will be the best consular service in the world.**

## **What our vision means for our customers**

We will be more responsive to our customers. They will have more choice in how they access our services and the processes will be easier and quicker.



# The Consular Journey

Our first 3 year consular strategy was launched in 2007 and the following 6 years saw major changes including greater investment in our staff through improved learning and development, improving our crisis response, building our regional structures and starting the transfer of overseas passport work to the Identity and Passport Service (IPS). We have strengthened the four central pillars of consular work that were central to [our 2010-13 strategy](#): our customers, our network, our people and finance.

## Consular Strategy 2013-2016

In formulating this strategy we have focused on customers' needs. As a starting point we have carried out a wide range of consultations with previous and potential customers and special interest groups.

We asked what services we should and should not offer, what our customers' needs were and how we should deliver our services. Headlines from our consultations indicated we need to:

- > build better partnerships with experts in the UK.
- > professionalise our customer handling.
- > make it even easier for our customers to access information about our services.
- > do more in some situations to assist British nationals, tailoring the service if possible to local needs and circumstances.



# Improving the Services we Offer

We support British nationals around the world through modern and efficient consular services. Our current commitment to customers can be found in our publication [Support for British nationals abroad: a guide](#).

## What this means to our customers

We want to improve the services we provide to our customers over the next three years so that our customers will:

- > get more help when they really need it.
- > have greater choice in accessing services.
- > receive the right kind of service.

## More assistance for those who need it

We will provide more assistance for customers who need it most, the customers who are most at risk because of who they are, or where they are.

By summer 2013 we will have developed new ways to identify the needs of customers by

looking at both who they are and what their circumstances are. This will help us decide how best to meet those needs and provide the most appropriate service. In some cases, where local standards are high, this will mean asking customers to be more self-reliant as we will focus our resources on places where standards are lower, hence where British Nationals will need more help.

## Changing current assistance services to meet customer needs

We will be making changes to our services, starting with improvements in the way we support customers in finding lawyers and translation services. This will help customers make more informed choices.



### **Offering the customer more specialised services through our partners**

We will establish more and better partnerships with organisations in the UK. Our partners will have more expertise and can assist our customers in those areas where we cannot. For example, we are working with the Airport Chaplains' Network to secure support at over 30 regional airports to make sure that the help our customers need continues when they arrive back in the UK. We will be exploring relationships with partners in the area of mental health to provide the right type of support to customers who need it.

### **Removing unnecessary bureaucracy and addressing unhelpful processes**

We recognise there can be difficulties when dealing with overseas governments as a foreign national. We will be looking at increasing our political lobbying in a number of areas to try to address some of the issues that arise. These may include reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and improving standards of judicial processes and health care. We will also work with foreign governments to address any shortcomings in the help they offer our most at risk customers, such as minors, the disabled and the elderly, or those at risk of being sentenced to death. We will lobby host governments together with EU partners and other embassies to reduce the number of documents that can only be notarised or produced by embassies.

### **Streamlining and simplifying our notarial and documentary services**

We will withdraw all notarial services where the private sector offers alternatives and we will deliver more services electronically. We will concentrate documentary services and notarial work and expertise in our sovereign posts (ie the main embassy or high commission). Wherever possible customers will be able to access these services online or by post. We will stop providing notarial services to non-British nationals where

there is no UK connection to the document or service. We will centralise the registration of overseas births and deaths in the UK.

### **Raising our customers' awareness of problems they can face overseas**

British nationals need to plan for their own safety and wellbeing when overseas. We will continue to run our awareness-raising programmes such as "Know Before You Go" to help our customers understand how they can avoid some of the difficulties they could face. Our overseas posts will do more local awareness-raising activity, focussing on issues specific to that country and region. We will expand our presence in social media so customers have more ways to communicate with us.



# Changing How we Deliver our Services

British nationals often look for advice and help from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), or our embassy or consulate when they are going to travel or live overseas. Our customers have asked us to improve the way we handle enquiries, and they want us to provide services more flexibly and offer more choice in how they contact us.

## What this means to our customers

To address this, we will change how we handle first contact for all our customers by creating a global network of contact centres where trained staff will respond quickly to enquiries, whether by phone or digitally. We will provide as many digital services as possible and make them easy for the customer to understand and convenient to use.

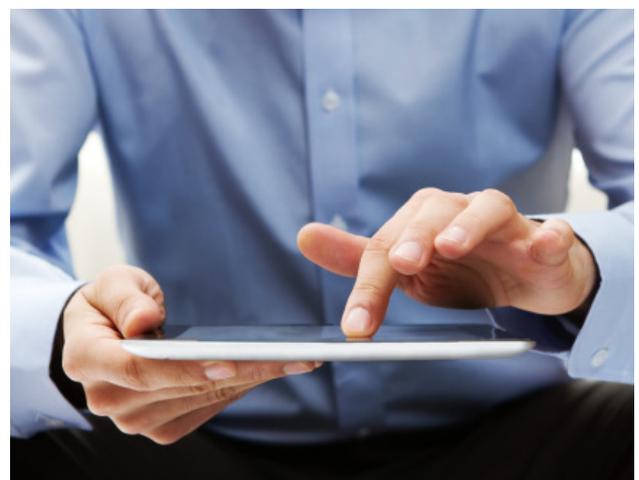
Our customers will:

- > have a seamless and professional route to consular services.
- > have greater choice in how they contact us, by telephone, email, text or social network messaging.
- > get immediate advice related to their enquiry, whether a direct answer or clear signposting to where they can access the service they need.
- > be able to access our information on a website, including filling out forms, applying for a service, making an appointment or making a payment.
- > pay a fee that just covers the cost of the service they receive, as we more closely align our fees and services.
- > In serious situations, always be offered in-depth help – in person wherever possible – from dedicated assistance staff.

## Ensuring that customers can access a range of digital services

The Government has set a “[Digital by Default](#)” agenda, which means that where possible, services should be offered digitally. The FCO will provide digital services that are easy for customers to understand and convenient to use. This includes moving our current online information and services to a new website, [GOV.UK](#), by spring 2013.

As we offer more online options we want it to be easy for the customer to find what they need. Customers will be able to choose the service they need, complete forms, pay and where necessary, book an appointment to see Consular staff. We will start offering this service in the summer of 2014.



### **Listening to our customers and their needs**

We will handle customer enquiries quickly and efficiently. Our customers will have great choice of how they contact us, either by telephone or digital means. We will provide customers with clear signposting services to the wider UK public service sector, either online or by telephone.

### **Providing a seamless route to assistance for customers**

Customers who are in need of consular assistance will experience a faster, more professional response at their first contact. These customers will be fast tracked to a consular officer who will be ready to provide the most appropriate assistance.

### **Providing more options for our customers to find and access our services**

We realise that customers have changed the way they gather information. We will therefore aim to have a wider virtual presence. We will increase our use of social media and digital tools to provide consular and crisis services, including through Twitter and Facebook.

### **New online transactional services for customers**

Many foreign authorities require a UK public document to be legalised before they will allow it to be used for official purposes in their country. Legalisation is the placing of an official certificate (an apostille) on a document to confirm that a signature, seal or stamp is genuine. The apostille does not authenticate the content of the document. Currently the process is entirely on paper, but as part of the Digital by Default agenda we are looking at options for offering digital services. We will start by offering customers a digital apostille verification service so that customers and receiving state authorities can verify its authenticity. This will be



available by summer 2013. A full electronic apostille service for suitable e-documents will follow by spring 2015.

### **More customer choice in paying for services**

We will give customers the choice to make online payments for fee-bearing services. We will be piloting online payments [for Emergency Travel Documents](#) and [birth, death and marriage registrations](#) in spring 2013. More services will be made available progressively thereafter. We aim to have all of our chargeable services available for online payment by 2015.

# Helping Customers in Crisis

Since the Arab Spring in 2011 we have further improved the way we respond to crises involving British Nationals overseas, including through:

- > more robust and flexible crisis response structures.
- > better crisis IT tools, training and exercising.
- > improvements in how we work across Whitehall and with external partners such as the travel industry.

We will continue to improve our crisis response, through identifying lessons from every crisis.

## What this means for our customers

There are limits to the assistance we can provide in a crisis, so we encourage customers to take sensible precautions, read and follow advice we provide and take responsibility for their own safety first, particularly if they are travelling to or living in a high risk location.

Due to the exceptional nature of crises, it is impossible to predict every eventuality. We have prepared an [outline of the principles we follow](#) when assisting British nationals and other eligible persons in a crisis.

## Better use of social media during a crisis

More and more of our customers are looking for information on social media. We will be more responsive to this need, taking a more proactive and systematic approach to how we use social media during a crisis.

## Improving how we manage information about British nationals in need of help

We will change our crisis IT system through designing and implementing an improved system for managing reliable data about British nationals who need help in a crisis. It will be simple for customers to use and will be a database of those believed or known to be affected by a crisis.



# Getting a Passport Overseas

We are repatriating overseas passport services to the UK in partnership with the Identity and Passport Service (IPS). IPS has already started processing overseas passports through the Passport Customer Service Centre in Liverpool. The successful transition of the overseas passport process to the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) will be completed by March 2014, and from then on all passport customers overseas will apply directly to the IPS in the UK.

## **What this means to our customers**

Our customers will receive a consistent, trusted, secure, efficient and cost-effective service online, and our borders will be more secure.

By 2014 all British nationals overseas will submit their full validity passport applications to the UK for processing.

We will keep customers informed about changes through a range of communications including the [GOV UK website](#). Information on the website will direct customers to the relevant centre responsible for handling enquiries from their country of residence. IPS aim to introduce a global Customer Contact Centre for all passport related issues.



## Assessing our Progress

We are committed to ensuring we meet the aims of our 2013 -2016 strategy. We will seek strategic customer feedback again in summer 2013, and over the life of this strategy, to assess our progress. We will aim to develop our mechanisms for obtaining regular direct feedback from those who have used our services and ensure this drives continuous improvement.

We will continue to get better at working with special interest groups, informing and consulting them on changes that matter to them. We will use these regular discussions to build better relationships so that others can provide specialised services where we cannot.

We believe that these steps will allow us to offer the best consular service in the world.

