



**Government Response to the House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee Report HC 219 of Session
2013-14
The UK staff presence in the EU institutions**

Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty

September 2013



**Government Response to the House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee Report HC 219 of Session
2013-14
The UK staff presence in the EU institutions**

Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty

September 2013

© Crown copyright 2013

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or e-mail: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at Europe.Correspondence@fco.gsi.gov.uk

You can download this publication from www.gov.uk/government/publications.

ISBN: 9780101869829

Printed in the UK by The Stationery Office Limited
on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office

ID P002585755 09/13 32688 19585

Printed on paper containing 75% recycled fibre content minimum.

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE REPORT HC 219 OF SESSION 2013–2014 ON THE UK STAFF
PRESENCE IN THE EU INSTITUTIONS**

The Government welcomes the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry into the Future of the European Union and the separate report, under consideration in this response, on the UK staff presence in the EU institutions. We welcome the detailed work that the Committee has undertaken in presenting the current situation on the number of UK staff in the EU institutions.

This Command Paper sets out our response to each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations. The Committee's text is in bold, and the Government's response is in plain text. Paragraph numbers refer to the Committee's report.

UK nationals on the staff of the EU institutions: situation in 2013

1. In relation to its share of the EU's population, the UK is significantly under-represented among the staff of the major EU institutions (Council, Commission and Parliament). We were seriously concerned to learn that the number of UK nationals on the staff of the European Commission has fallen by 24% in seven years. The UK now fields 4.6% of Commission staff, compared to its 12.5% share of the EU's population; France's shares are 13.0% of the EU population and 9.7% of Commission staff. In the increasingly-powerful European Parliament, the UK's share of administrator-grade staff has fallen from 6.2% to 5.8% since 2010 (while France's has risen from 7.5% to 8.6%); and in the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU the UK's share of administrator-grade staff fell from 4.8% to 4.3% over the same period (while France's fell from 7.7% to 6.9%). (Paragraph 11)

The FCO is grateful to the Committee for highlighting this important problem. The deficit in the UK's representation among staff in the Institutions is not a new phenomenon – in fact, the UK never met its 'share' of EU staff. However, as the Committee rightly notes, the problem has become more acute, and is set to get worse before it gets better. It is difficult to envisage, given current trends and the lack of regular generalist *concours*, a situation in which the UK's share of EU staff matches its proportion of the population.

Nonetheless, the Government is committed to addressing this situation: firstly by halting the decline and, ultimately, reversing the trend. In the meantime, we are doing what we can to improve UK representation in the short term by increasing the number of civil servants we send on secondment to the Institutions.

Government action

Concours

2. The Government is correct to have identified both the importance of UK personnel on the staff of the EU institutions as a channel for UK influence in the EU, and the fact that the UK faces a serious problem with respect to its declining representation among EU staff. We commend the Government for launching an effort to increase the UK staff presence in the EU institutions. (Paragraph 18)

There is no shortcut to improving the UK position. Member States cannot parachute new staff into senior positions within the EU Institutions – the only way to increase the number of permanent UK staff is through success at the *concours*. As the Committee notes, the number of UK applicants has increased in recent years. Whilst the lack of a *concours* in 2013 has hampered our work this year, the FCO is now preparing for the next generalist *concours*, which we hope will be held in 2014.

3. The Government is taking steps to try to increase both the number and the success rate of UK entrants to the competition to become permanent EU officials:

- **The entry competition for new permanent EU officials is tough. As regards the success rate, among UK entrants it appears to be roughly the same as for the EU as a whole, although we were concerned to note that it is on a downward trend. We were especially disconcerted to discover that the Civil/Diplomatic Service European Fast Stream scheme, which is intended to prepare candidates to take the EU staff entry competition successfully, appears so far to have generated no additional permanent generalist EU officials for the UK since it was re-launched in 2010.**

As the Committee notes, the *concours* is an extremely challenging process, and the UK success rate is in line with that in other Member States. Many Member States direct applicants towards private companies that specialise in preparing people for the *concours*. Whilst this is an option that the FCO has explored, the costs can often be quite high, and we would not wish to discriminate against candidates without the financial means for such a service. The FCO therefore intends to continue to support candidates through staff in the UK Permanent Representation to the EU and existing expertise within Government.

It is clearly disappointing not to have had greater success in the *concours* with the European Fast Stream (EFS) candidates.

There have been 30 EFS opportunities to take the *concours* since the programme restarted in 2010. From these opportunities, no candidate has completed the process and taken up a post. We are looking closely at the lessons we are learning

each time. Our experience has shown, for example, that the computer based testing is particularly challenging to UK candidates, and we are therefore putting in place a more rigorous and targeted programme of training and preparation for this element of the assessment process. Moreover, the EFS will be remodelled for 2014/15. This reformed scheme will give entrants a greater variety of experience in the home civil service whilst maintaining the current opportunity for a five month secondment to an EU Institution. The scheme will also be extended to three years, allowing candidates additional opportunities to take the *concours*.

Preparing candidates for the *concours* is not however the EFS's only role. Since the scheme was reintroduced, we have begun to rebuild a cadre of UK officials with EU skills and experience across the Civil Service.

- **As regards the numbers of UK candidates in the EU staff entry competition, we welcome signs that more UK nationals are becoming interested in embarking on this career path. However, given the pass rate, the numbers of UK entrants to the competition remain too low (at 2.4% of the total in 2012, for example) to generate an up-and-coming UK presence in the EU institutions large enough to compensate for the numbers of UK officials who are retiring, having gone to work for the EU institutions when the UK joined the then-European Economic Community forty years ago. This applies particularly to the European Commission. The Government must therefore reckon with a declining UK presence among Commission staff in coming years, especially at the most senior levels. Even if UK representation at entry levels in the Commission were to pick up significantly now, it would be too late to fill what the Foreign Secretary has correctly identified as a 'generation gap' in the UK presence. (Paragraph 19)**

We agree with this assessment. Even were UK applicant numbers and success rates to improve dramatically, the situation would still get worse before it improves. In order to combat this short-medium term deficit, the Government will be funding more seconded national experts (SNEs) to the EU Institutions in areas of key strategic importance for the UK. This activity is being coordinated by the newly created EU Staffing Unit, housed in the FCO but funded from across Government.

Seconded national experts (SNEs)

4. We welcome the creation of an EU Staffing Unit in the FCO with a remit to increase secondments of UK civil servants into the EU institutions. We recommend that, as it develops its plans for Civil Service reform, the Government should ensure that undertaking secondments into the EU institutions will be encouraged and recognised. We recommend that in its response to this Report the FCO should set out in detail how its new EU Staffing Unit will work with other Departments, and Ministers and officials

**responsible for Civil Service reform in the Cabinet Office, to deliver more secondments from among UK civil servants into the EU institutions.
(Paragraph 23)**

The EU Staffing Unit has been in place since April 2013. Its remit is to increase the number of UK nationals working in the EU. In the short term this will primarily be by the placement of the additional Seconded National Experts (SNEs) in key areas of UK interest.

The EU Staffing Unit is a cross-Whitehall unit with a budget to fund SNEs in areas of strategic importance to the UK. The unit is funded by contributions from 18 different Government Departments and, whilst it is based in the FCO, it is governed cross-Whitehall. The Staffing Unit has an agreed set of criteria against which potential SNE positions are judged. These are, primarily but not exclusively, that an SNE post should:

- Be linked to HMG’s cross-cutting EU objectives; fostering a more competitive EU through the Single Market, promoting trade and reducing regulation; stimulating jobs and growth across all sectors; safeguarding the UK’s interests in national security and public safety; reforming the EU Institutions; and promoting our interests and values in the EU’s external action.
- Have clear benefits for more than one Whitehall Department.
- Provide timely opportunities to influence decision-making (eg. through Council working groups, drafting of proposals, consultations, impact assessments etc.) on key priorities.
- Be a stretching post for a high-performing Whitehall civil servant, with clear opportunities for both personal and professional development, including EU expertise.
- Be in a unit with sufficient profile/influence within the Directorate-General, where SNEs are used effectively and have a positive experience.
- Be in an area of the EU Institutions where UK under-representation is a serious problem.

SNE vacancies are open to the UK in two ways. Firstly, the European Commission publishes, on a monthly basis, a list of all vacancies. Secondly, the UK can offer to second an expert, at its own expense, to a specific unit. In both instances, a vacancy, if it fits the above criteria, is circulated to all funding Departments along with a business case from one or more of the sponsoring Departments. It is then subject to robust challenge to ensure that the Staffing Unit is funding SNEs of clear strategic importance. The Senior Responsible Officer for the Staffing Unit is the FCO Director General for Economic and Consular, Barbara Woodward, and the unit is governed by a steering board comprising Europe Directors from funding Departments.

Thus far, the unit has placed four SNEs in the following policy areas: cloud computing; nuclear, chemical and biological non-proliferation; climate change; and trade – specifically the EU-US trade deal. All secondments are agreed by the Departments which fund the Unit, and there is now an active cross-Whitehall interaction on potential posts to fund. The FCO commits to keep Parliament informed of the progress the unit makes in this regard. In the longer term, the EU Staffing Unit will be leading work to promote EU careers and increase the numbers of UK nationals applying for and succeeding at the concours.

The EU Staffing Unit is also working to develop a talent pool of officials interested in SNE positions and to date has had excellent interest from high quality applicants. As part of this the EU Staffing Unit is working with Civil Service Resourcing (HMRC) Talent Consultants who are leading work on the Civil Service Talent schemes. The EU Staffing Unit is also working with FCO communications experts, and publishing vacancy notices as widely as possible. Current secondees report varying experiences as to how secondments are viewed by their Departments. The EU Staffing Unit is therefore researching how different Whitehall Departments keep in touch with their secondees and help them reintegrate into Whitehall.

With regard to ensuring that secondments are a positive career choice, a review is currently underway across Government to produce guidance on international secondments. As part of this work, ensuring that civil servants can return to their home Department after a secondment to the EU institutions or other international organisations is important. The FCO is working to ensure that secondments are seen as part of a regular career path, and do not undermine an official's ability to advance in the Civil Service. Moreover, the expertise from secondments must be used to its fullest extent when secondees return to their home Departments.

European External Action Service (EEAS)

5. In the new European External Action Service (EEAS), one-third of policy jobs must go to national diplomats seconded from the Member States. This appears to be enabling a slightly larger UK presence in the new Service than in other EU institutions. However, the number of such jobs remains limited, and UK candidates face tough competition to secure them. We endorse the FCO's strategy of seeking to target EEAS jobs of particular potential importance for the UK, although it must do so without risking UK candidates being seen as representatives purely of UK interests. (Paragraph 32)

6. We endorse the view taken by our predecessor Committee when it first examined the European External Action Service (EEAS), namely that it will be to the benefit of the FCO and the UK if high-quality UK diplomats and other civil servants undertake secondments into the EEAS and then return to UK service. While we recognise that FCO and Civil Service financial and staff resources are strained, it must be to the UK's benefit to have UK officials in key EEAS positions and to gather first-hand experience of the new Service to

feed back into Whitehall. As UK diplomats move through their periods of secondment to the EEAS, we recommend that the FCO should focus on maximising the prospect that they will return to UK service. (Paragraph 33)

Of the 308 positions held by national diplomats in June 2013, the UK holds the second highest number at 25. France has 39 (reflecting the higher number of applicants it has put forward); Belgium has 16; Germany 22; and Spain 22. We consider the secondment of credible, high quality UK officials to the EEAS as a central part of our strategy to increase UK influence in Brussels and in the work of EEAS delegations abroad. We continue to work to promote the EEAS as a career option for talented UK officials and to develop and maintain our relationship with secondees whilst they are in the EEAS to ensure they provide maximum value for HMG, and at the end of their secondment bring back new skills and experience that will be of benefit to their Department.

EU membership uncertainty

7. We recommend that the FCO should report annually to Parliament, either in its departmental annual report or separately, on the numbers of UK nationals working for the main EU institutions (as permanent staff, temporary agents, seconded national experts, and seconded national diplomats in the European External Action Service), and on the representation and performance of UK nationals in the EU staff entrance competition (the *concours*). This is warranted by the importance of the issue for UK influence in the EU, the resources that the FCO is devoting to increasing the numbers of UK personnel working for the EU, and the difficulty otherwise of compiling relevant published data from multiple sources. Such an annual publication could also act as an indicator if the Prime Minister's commitment that a Conservative Government after 2015 would hold an 'in/out' referendum on the UK's continued EU membership were to weaken the willingness of UK nationals to pursue EU careers. (Paragraph 35)

The FCO will report to Parliament in this way. We aim to produce the first report for May 2014. Normally, an annual report in May would be able to encompass the most recent generalist concours. Whilst there has been no generalist concours in 2013, a May 2014 report would still inform Parliament of the state of affairs and present an opportunity to update on some of the planned activity highlighted in this document.



information & publishing solutions

Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522

Order through the Parliamentary Hotline Lo-Call: 0845 7 023474

Fax orders: 0870 600 5533

Email: customer.services@tso.co.uk

Textphone: 0870 240 3701

The Houses of Parliament Shop

12 Bridge Street, Parliament Square

London SW1A 2JX

Telephone orders: 020 7219 3890/General enquiries: 020 7219 3890

Fax orders: 020 7219 3866

Email: shop@parliament.uk

Internet: <http://www.shop.parliament.uk>

TSO@Blackwell and other accredited agents

ISBN 978-0-10-186982-9



9 780101 869829