



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

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Rt Hon. Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
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06 October 2020

Dear George,

Thank you for your email of 4 June to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on behalf of a number of your constituents who found themselves stranded overseas during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am replying as the Minister with responsibility for Consular Services.

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event. The focus of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has always been to assist British nationals who found themselves overseas at the time as best we could. Whilst commercial flights remained operational, we encouraged British nationals to utilise them to return to the UK. This decision reflected the fact that demand far exceeded our delivery capacity in organising charter flights. Repatriating the 1.3 million British nationals who have returned since the beginning of the crisis would have required over 4000 charter flights. A dual approach allowed us to organise charter flights where they were most needed. Our assessment was that if the Government undercut commercial airlines, commercial traffic risked stopping – exacerbating the problems faced by British nationals around the world. We continue to engage with the airline industry and countries with key airline hubs to ensure vital air routes remain in operation.

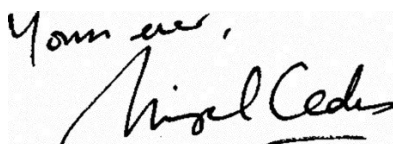
Where necessary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as was, organised charter flights to return British nationals to the UK. This included 20 flights from South Africa between 9 April and 9 June. These flights departed from both Johannesburg and Cape Town. The repatriation effort was a complex operation which happened in phases with assessments of the need for additional flights continuously happening. To ensure the Foreign and Commonwealth Office complied with Government procurement policies, airlines were invited to bid for flights at the beginning of each phase. Price fluctuation was due to prevailing commercial demand and availability of aircraft and crew. We asked passengers to pay a reasonable share of the overall cost of their flight, just as they would do with a commercial flight. This was a policy followed by all of our partners and peers, including Germany, France, the US and Canada.

Flight charges varied, depending on the length of the flight. The policy evolved during the early stages of the operation. During the final phase of the operation ceilings were set at: up to £400 for flights of less than 6 hours; up to £600 for flights between 6 and 10 hours; and up to £800 for flight over 10 hours in duration. Initial flights from South Africa, before these caps were introduced were priced at £856.

We understand that these were anxious times for many British travellers. Consular staff around the world worked tirelessly to support our nationals. British travelers were able to apply for an emergency loan when they had exhausted other funding options. This loan could cover essential costs including the cheapest one-way ticket to the UK as well as food and accommodation until the flight departed. Anyone who took out an emergency loan or received their ticket on the basis of an undertaking to repay (UTR) was able to pay back the money once they got home. Loans are due to be repaid six months after the individual has returned home. Flexible repayment schemes are available to enable them to do that. All loans are interest free.

We continue to encourage airlines to provide refunds for flights which were cancelled and the travel insurance industry to look sympathetically on claims for extra expenses incurred.

Should any of your constituents remain overseas and need consular assistance I would urge them to contact their closest Embassy, High Commission or Consulate. Our consular staff are always available to provide appropriate support.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background. The signature reads "Yours ever," followed by "Nigel Adams" in a cursive script. The name "Nigel Adams" is underlined.

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