

ICAI follow-up: The UK aid response to COVID-19

A summary
July 2023

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact works to improve the quality of UK development assistance through robust, independent scrutiny. We provide assurance to the UK taxpayer by conducting independent reviews of the effectiveness and value for money of UK aid.

We operate independently of government, reporting to Parliament, and our mandate covers all UK official development assistance.

Individual review scores and what they mean



An adequate score means:

- Enough progress has been made in the right areas and in a sufficiently timely manner in order to address the core concerns underpinning ICAI's recommendations.



An inadequate score results from one or more of the following three factors:

- Too little has been done to address ICAI's recommendations in core areas of concern (the response is inadequate in scope).
- Actions have been taken, but they do not cover the main concerns we had when we made the recommendations (the response is insufficiently relevant).
- Actions may be relevant, but implementation has been too slow and we are not able to judge their effectiveness (the response is insufficiently implemented).

OGL

© Crown copyright 2023

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3, or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. Readers are encouraged to reproduce material from ICAI reports, as long as they are not being sold commercially, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. ICAI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ICAI website.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at icai-enquiries@icai.independent.gov.uk.

 [@ICAI_UK](https://twitter.com/ICAI_UK)

icai.independent.gov.uk

Executive summary

ICAI's follow-up review is an important element in the scrutiny process for UK aid. It provides parliament and the public with an account of how well the government has responded to ICAI's recommendations to improve spending. It is also an opportunity for ICAI to identify issues and challenges facing the UK aid programme, which helps to inform subsequent reviews. For each of the reviews included in the follow-up, we provide a score of adequate or inadequate, illustrated by a tick or a cross.

This document is a summary focused only on the results of the follow-up of our review of *The UK aid response to COVID-19*. The full follow-up report of all 2021-22 reviews, including overall conclusions from the process and details of our methodology and scoring, can be found on our website.

Findings

The UK aid response to COVID-19

ICAI found that the UK had effectively pivoted its work on vaccines to focus on supporting vaccine supply chains, local production and capacity for rollout, including through engagement with the GAVI Alliance. However, there was little evidence of a move towards greater delegation for local specialist staff, and FCDO's revised drawdown policy does not allow for consideration of individual staff preferences to remain in post in the case of future drawdowns. ICAI therefore judges the government's response to this review to be inadequate, but it will not return to this review next year, and will instead use the follow-up to its review of *The FCDO's Programme Operating Framework* to assess progress on addressing relevant challenges relating to delegation.



ICAI's rapid review of *The UK aid response to COVID-19* was published in October 2021. The review examined how well the UK government prioritised and redirected its aid resources in the first 16 months of the global response to COVID-19, from March 2020 to July 2021. It looked at the response at both central and country level, with an in-depth analysis of the response in Pakistan, Sudan and Zambia. It also targeted two thematic areas for in-depth analysis: violence against women and girls and health.

This rapid review found that the UK aid programme's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic was rapid, credible and appropriate, but that pressures resulting from significant reductions to the aid budget in 2020 and (especially) 2021 meant that several later funding decisions did not reflect the evidence on needs.

Since this review was published the COVID-19 context has evolved, with less virulent strains emerging, vaccine access increasing and supply of vaccines outstripping demand. As a result, countries are now starting to refocus on routine immunisation and other health priorities.

Table 1: ICAI's recommendations and the government response

Subject of recommendation	Government response
Building on its investments in vaccine development, the UK government should now do more to accelerate the supply of COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries and support their equitable rollout to vulnerable populations.	Partially accepted

FCDO should delegate as much operational discretion as possible to specialist staff close to the point of programme delivery to ensure the UK's COVID-19 response is nimble, adaptable and fully informed by the local operating context.	Accepted
FCDO should review and adapt its drawdown strategy to be more clearly differentiated by risk and individual staff preferences to guide repatriation of staff to home countries during future crises.	Partially accepted

Recommendation 1: Building on its investments in vaccine development, the UK government should now do more to accelerate the supply of COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries and support their equitable rollout to vulnerable populations

The original rapid review noted that the UK had made a valuable pledge to provide 100 million vaccine doses to developing countries and that its funding to the COVAX facility – to promote greater access to vaccines in developing countries – was a sound one at the time. However, it also found that, despite the establishment of COVAX and the good level of support provided, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries had been slow and that these countries still lacked the delivery and distribution systems to deploy vaccines rapidly. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO do more to speed up the supply and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries. FCDO partially accepted this recommendation, noting that the UK was using its presidency of the G7 to intensify efforts to vaccinate the world in 2022, and that it was working with the boards of GAVI and the World Bank to secure adequate and timely funding to support vaccine rollout.

In responding to this follow-up review, FCDO noted that it had already supplied 85 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine and made available the full 100 million that it had pledged. ICAI also found that FCDO had shifted its focus towards strengthening vaccine supply chains, targeting countries with the lowest COVID-19 vaccine coverage, and integrating COVID-19 vaccine delivery into existing health responses (through engagement with GAVI on its strategic plan).

FCDO has responded adequately to this recommendation by taking forward a range of important actions that are relevant to the changing strategic context for COVID-19.

Recommendation 2: FCDO should delegate as much operational discretion as possible to specialist staff close to the point of programme delivery to ensure the UK's COVID-19 response is nimble, adaptable and fully informed by the local operating context

The original rapid review reported that the centralisation of decision-making was reducing the ability of officials to make the kind of timely, agile and context-driven decisions necessary to respond to COVID-19 and its long-term impacts. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO delegate greater operational discretion to specialist staff working in-country on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This recommendation was accepted by FCDO, although the management response was limited and merely committed the department to implement relevant elements of its new PrOF.

FCDO's official response to this follow-up review states that the department has learnt lessons about the type of information that is needed to make centralised decision-making more effective, and that this learning is being applied in the business planning process. Recent business planning processes were highly centralised and ICAI has not so far seen evidence of change. FCDO also notes that it recognises the need to upskill legacy Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff on ODA programme management and is focusing on training to embed programme management skills across the department, especially through rollout of the PrOF. However, ICAI's recent review of *The FCDO's Programme Operating Framework*¹ found that training on the PrOF is not mandatory even for programme staff (except with regard to 'Sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment (SEAH)' modules), which suggests that uptake of this training has been low to date and compliance mixed.

¹ *The FCDO's Programme Operating Framework: a rapid review*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, April 2023, p. 14, paragraph 4.34, [link](#).

ICAI therefore judges that, based on the evidence seen so far on putting learning about empowerment of frontline staff to take decisions based on local context into practice, FCDO's response to this recommendation is inadequate.

Recommendation 3: FCDO should review and adapt its drawdown strategy to be more clearly differentiated by risk and individual staff preferences to guide repatriation of staff to home countries during future crises

The original rapid review noted that the mandatory repatriation (known as a 'drawdown') of many overseas UK government staff failed to take differences in the impact of COVID-19 and the risk to UK aid staff sufficiently into account. ICAI concluded that the mandatory drawdown had a detrimental effect on the UK's response to the pandemic and ran counter to learning from addressing previous global health threats, including Ebola. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should review and adapt its drawdown strategy to allow for an approach differentiated by risk and staff preferences in different locations. FCDO partially accepted this recommendation but defended its COVID-19 drawdown decision. It noted that a new FCDO drawdown policy was being developed for the merged department, which would take into account learning from the COVID-19 drawdown.

The new drawdown policy was finalised in August 2022. It incorporated learning from the COVID-19 drawdown on the package of support offered to returning staff and communications around the drawdown process. However, the new policy does not allow for consideration of individual staff preferences to remain in post in the case of future drawdowns, which FCDO argues is based on its legal obligation to provide duty of care. FCDO has recently obtained information about the drawdown policies of six other bilateral donors, some of which appear to have allowed their staff greater discretion than UK staff about whether to remain in-country. FCDO noted to ICAI that it would use some of this information to further review its duty of care policy in the coming months.

ICAI judges FCDO's response to this recommendation to be inadequate, given that it does not address the central elements of the recommendation, namely differentiating drawdown requirements by risks and staff preferences.

Conclusion

Overall, ICAI judges that the government's response to this review has been inadequate, given that FCDO could have gone further in adapting its drawdown policy and has only made limited progress in taking forward training on and implementation of its PrOF. However, ICAI will not return to this review next year, but will use the follow-up to its review of *The FCDO's Programme Operating Framework* to assess progress on improving delegation to specialist staff close to the point of programme delivery.



This document can be downloaded from www.icaei.independent.gov.uk.

For information about this report or general enquiries about ICAI and its work please contact:

Independent Commission for Aid Impact
Gwydyr House
26 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NP

icaei-enquiries@icaei.independent.gov.uk