

**Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee**  
Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan, 2021 - 2022

**QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken**

**QoN 012 – Public Hearing 11 October 2021**

**Topic: Number of locally engaged employees**

**Senator Penny Wong**

**Question**

Senator WONG: Did anybody ascertain or indicate how many people were likely to apply as locally engaged employees?

Mr Wilden: There was no specific number given to the Department of Home Affairs.

Senator WONG: Did DFAT or Defence ever come up with a number that they anticipated about likely demand?

Unidentified speaker: We constantly monitored how many numbers we had and yes—

Senator WONG: You would probably have seen over 20 years of estimates—on the other side and on this side—that I really dislike the word 'constantly'.

Unidentified speaker: Yes, I agree.

Senator WONG: It doesn't actually give me a time frame. I'm trying to understand if, as a consequence of the deteriorating security situation, you gave an assessment about increased numbers for locally engaged employees to anybody inside the department or to Home Affairs?

Unidentified speaker: I'd have to take that on notice.

**Answer**

The LEE visa program has run since December 2012. This was an important element of our contingency planning. By the time of Embassy closure, 1,400 LEE and their families had been granted humanitarian visas and had the opportunity to resettle in Australia.

Once the Government had taken the decision to close the Embassy, a different approach was determined. DFAT, Defence and Home Affairs worked closely to advise the Government on the overall estimated number of LEE and families who may seek to depart Afghanistan under the LEE visa program, taking into account those who already had humanitarian visas, those holding a certification applying for a visa, those seeking certification, and those who might apply in future.

The assessment at that time was that these cohorts amounted to around 1,000 individuals. Home Affairs with input from DFAT and Defence maintained an up-to-date assessment.

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**QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken**

**QoN 019 – Hearing 15 November 2021**

**Topic: Advice to the Foreign Minister**

**Senator Tim Ayres**

**Question**

Senator AYRES: Let me come to that question. In the period from March through to 13 May, were you tasked with doing an assessment of alternatives to temporary closure?

Mr Cowan: Senator—

Senator AYRES: I understand that those issues may have been canvassed prior to that, because it sounds like there was a lot of work going on over a sustained period of time in a complex and very challenging security environment. What I want to know is: in that period between March and 13 May, did the minister ask for canvassing of those alternative options, including the ones that you just alluded to?

Mr Cowan: I might have to take that specific question on notice. What I could say is that we certainly did provide advice on what was feasible and what might be possible. That was one of the issues on which we provided advice to the minister.

Mr Newnham: Senator, I know your question goes to a very specific time period. That's understood, and we'll take that on notice. I think, though, it's just worth remembering the context here, which flows, really, for a number of months. There was advice to the foreign minister in January which pointed to these emerging risks and the decreasing ability to actually deal with those and mitigate those risks. Then, of course, there was a series of announcements, including from the US and NATO, with respect to troop withdrawal, followed by the Prime Minister as well. Then security agencies and intelligence agencies reported in late April against those security risks and concluded that they could not be mitigated. So, as you can see, Senator, there are changing sets of security risk circumstances, which then go to the ability to work through alternatives. That was a very narrowing set of options that, over time, narrowed to the point of needing to close the embassy and temporarily relocate.

Senator AYRES: Was one of those options co-location?

Mr Newnham: That was explored, yes.

Senator AYRES: Was the department tasked with canvassing the option of co-location in the period that I've just referred to—from March through to the May decision date?

Mr Newnham: We'll have to take that on notice. ...

Senator AYRES: Were there any co-location options other than the United States embassy?

Mr Cowan: Ms Perera might want to come in on this.

Senator AYRES: Seriously, it's a logical possibility that it could be anywhere, but were there any serious, credible options other than the United States embassy?

Ms Perera: We also had some very early conversations with the UK mission. As my colleague notes, I'm not quite sure of the time frame of those discussions.

Senator AYRES: When you say 'very early', do you mean early in May or in April or in early 2021?

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Ms Perera: I'd have to come back to you on the time frame.

Senator AYRES: So you can come back to me, Ms Perera and colleagues, on notice on those questions.

**Answer**

Yes, DFAT was tasked in the period from March to 13 May with assessing alternatives to temporary closure. No option was assessed as being able to accommodate Australian needs while lessening the security risks faced by staff.