

**Press release**  
**Thursday 16 May 2013**

## **FCO: “No sir, we cannot translate your tattoo for you”**

### Foreign Office releases list of most bizarre requests

Silencing a noisy cockerel, supplying Olympic tickets and providing contact details for Sir Paul McCartney’s wife were among the most unusual requests to British posts abroad in 2012/13, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). These are often good natured but can take valuable time away from helping those in genuine distress.

Over the last year, the FCO handled more than a million consular enquiries and supported some 52,135 British nationals in difficulty abroad.\* However, our consular staff overseas continue to receive a number of enquiries that they simply cannot provide assistance for.

#### **Enquiries received by FCO staff include:**

- A man who required hospital treatment in Cambodia when a monkey dislodged a stone that hit him demanded help getting compensation and wanted assurance that it would not happen again
- A man asked FCO staff in Rome to translate a phrase for a tattoo that he wanted
- Consular staff in Beijing were asked to help a woman who had bought a pair of football boots that were ‘Made in China’ but were poor quality
- A woman requested that consular staff in Tel Aviv order her husband to get fit and eat healthily so that they could have children
- Consular staff in Kuala Lumpur were asked if the FCO could help pay to send their children to an International School
- A man asked consular staff in Stockholm to check the credentials of a woman whom he had met online
- A man asked the Consulate in Montreal for information to settle a £1,000 wager on the colour of the British passport
- A number of our staff across the world have been asked for the best place to watch the football
- A number of British Consulates have been asked to book hotels or to advise on where to watch the football

**Mark Simmonds, Minister for Consular Affairs, said:**

“FCO staff help many thousands of British nationals facing serious difficulties around the world every year. We also receive over a million enquiries each year, so it is important that people understand what we can and cannot do to support them when they are abroad.

“We are not in a position to help people make travel arrangements or social plans, but we do help those who face real problems abroad. These can include victims of crime, bereaved families who have lost a loved one abroad or Britons who have been arrested or detained. We aim to continue to focus on supporting those who really need our help in the coming year.”

The FCO set up a contact centre in Malaga in February 2011 to handle the volume of non-consular enquiries received by British Embassies and Consulates in Southern Europe.. Since its launch staff have handled 131,211 calls, 39% of which have been lifestyle enquiries.

**Head of the Contact Centre, Steve Jones, said:** “Our aim is to help staff at posts concentrate on what is important but some of the enquiries we received from British nationals last year were bizarre to say the least – for example, one customer contacted us to ask if we could provide the name of the watch that the Royal Navy sailors wore between the years 1942-1955.

“While we couldn’t help with the watch information, FCO consular staff in Southern Europe were able to provide assistance to a single mother of three young children who was suddenly hospitalised after a bout of sickness, and we also helped a family of four injured in a road traffic accident.”

The examples listed above indicate that some people do not know how the FCO can (and cannot) help Brits abroad. Recent research shows that 78% of people wrongly think the FCO could get them out of jail if arrested, and nearly half of 16-24 year-olds do not know what an Embassy or Consulate does.\*\*

**How the FCO can help when you are abroad:**

<b>The FCO can:</b>	<b>The FCO cannot:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Issue you with replacement travel documents</li><li>• Provide information about transferring money</li><li>• Provide help if you have suffered rape or</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Help you enter a country if you do not have a valid passport or necessary visas</li><li>• Give you legal advice or translate documents</li><li>• Investigate crimes or get you out of</li></ul>

<p>serious sexual or physical assault, are a victim of crime, are ill or in hospital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give you a list of local lawyers, interpreters, doctors or funeral directors</li> <li>• Contact you if you are detained abroad</li> <li>• Contact friends and family back home for you if you wish</li> <li>• Provide help in cases of forced marriage</li> <li>• Assist people affected by parental child abduction</li> </ul>	<p>prison</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get you better treatment in hospital or prison than is given to local people</li> <li>• Pay any bills or give you money</li> <li>• Make travel arrangements for you</li> </ul>
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For further information about what the FCO can do to help and how you can prepare yourself, check out our website at [www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo](http://www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo), or find us on Facebook (fcotravel) or Twitter (@fcotravel).

\* FCO staff received 1,053,109 consular enquiries, excluding visa and passport enquiries, between April 2011 and March 2012. The different types of assistance provided is available in the British Behaviour Abroad Report 2012, available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-behaviour-abroad-report>

\*\* Figures taken from the UK Travel Habits Tracking Research, July 2012

**ENDS**

**If you would like an interview or further information please contact 0207 478 7840 or [fcoteam@grayling.com](mailto:fcoteam@grayling.com)**

1. Enquiries are based on anecdotal evidence from Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff around the world
2. Before you travel, visit [www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo](http://www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo) and make a note of the telephone number of the nearest British Consulate to where you are staying, so you can ask for help if you need it. A directory of British Embassies, High Commissions or Consulates is available at: [www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations](http://www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations)
3. For up-to-the-minute travel advice find us on Facebook (fcotravel), Twitter (@fcotravel)), and follow Foreign Office Minister Mark Simmonds on Twitter @MarkJSimmonds

**Embassy, High Commission or Consulate?**

FCO offices abroad are known by a variety of names:

- In Commonwealth countries they are called High Commissions and are located in the capital city
- In other countries they are called Embassies and are located in the capital city
- Consulates are smaller offices in capital cities or regional centres and offer assistance to British nationals
- Honorary Consulates are smaller versions of Consulates in smaller cities and towns
- Mission or delegation is the name usually given to an FCO office attached to organisations like the UN or NATO