

WHAT CAN I EXPECT?

WORKING FOR THE FOREIGN & COMMONWEALTH OFFICE AS AN OPERATIONAL OFFICER



VAISHALI PATEL - DIARY SECRETARY TO MINISTER - LONDON

My name is Vaishali Patel. Before joining the FCO I was an Immigration Officer at Heathrow Airport for two years. I enjoy learning languages (at Cardiff University I read Law and Japanese) and I wanted to pursue a career working in international relations and foreign policy. I joined the FCO in March 2002 as an Operational Entrant. I was appointed as diary secretary for the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Baroness Amos. From June 2003 after the reshuffle, Chris Mullin MP became my boss and the job changed from working for a member of the House of Lords to working for a member of the House of Commons. Mr Mullin's responsibilities are varied and include Africa, the Commonwealth, UK Visas, Migration and Asylum & Information Directorate. He is also the spokesperson on consular issues in the Commons. The Minister could be having a meeting about Africa one minute and talking to Parliament or the media the next.

As Mr Mullin's diary secretary, I co-ordinate his FCO appointments and engagements, making sure they do not clash with his parliamentary work, especially when he is called to the House of Commons to vote. The job involves multi-tasking and requires strong organisational skills. As well as arranging Mr Mullin's meetings, I ensure that he is prepared for them. If he is due to meet a diplomat or Minister from another country I contact the Desk Officer for that region to make sure he receives either an oral or written brief to keep him abreast of the most up-to-date policies and issues. I line manage one Administrative Assistant whose job is to provide administrative support to the whole office, including the Minister. Before joining the FCO I had never managed anyone directly before, but the training and support I have received enabling me to do this, has been really good.

I was pleasantly surprised and impressed by the personal and career development the FCO offers its employees. The induction course and training I have received has been excellent. My first 18 month position is now over and I will very shortly be moving on to work as an Assistant Desk Officer in conflict issues group, international security directorate, focusing primarily on the rule of law in post conflict countries. I will also start bidding in a few months for my first overseas posting.



CHRIS KIMBER - WORLDWIDE FLOATER

After working overseas for a package-holiday company, I joined the FCO as an Operational Entrant in November 2001. It was due to my interest in travelling, current affairs and learning about new people and cultures that I applied to join the FCO. The real 'hands-on' nature of the work and the comprehensive training package encouraged me to apply to the operational entry stream.

Following a four-week induction period I joined Consular Directorate; working for two-and-a-half years in London as a Desk Officer on projects including the consular response to the football World Cup 2002 in Japan and Korea and the FCO's travel awareness campaign, Know Before You Go. Although I had to hit the ground running following my induction period; the World Cup was less than eight months away, I received a great deal of support from my line-manager and undertook further training that helped me to develop and better utilise my skills.

After spending nearly three years working in the FCO headquarters in London I was itching to get overseas, and the opportunity to see lots of new places and sample the wide range of work the FCO offers Operational Entrants led me to apply for a position as a 'worldwide floater'. As a floater, you're expected to fill in for colleagues on leave – or wherever there is a vacant position. Since starting on the floater circuit I have worked in places as diverse as Amsterdam, Guyana, India, Algeria, Yemen and Rio de Janeiro. The work, a mixture of consular, visa and management work, has been as varied as the locations.

The real plus is that no two days are the same and there's certainly no chance of getting bored! While filling in as British Vice Consul in Rio de Janeiro, I dealt with a variety of consular cases during the three weeks I was in Brazil. I was called upon to visit British prisoners in jail and to help a number of British nationals who had lost their passports or got into difficulty while travelling. The work I do as a floater can be rewarding but it can also be pretty taxing – the decisions I make on a daily basis as an Entry Clearance Officer can have a big impact on people's lives and I'm conscious of the need to treat people fairly and with respect. It can be pretty difficult emotionally to have to refuse someone a visa to visit their friends or family in the UK but we have to stick strictly to the rules.

I would recommend a career with the FCO to anyone who enjoys travelling, meeting new people, who can use their initiative and has a positive outlook on life. Operational work can be challenging and it's pretty important to be outgoing and able to make the best of any situation. However, all things considered, I wouldn't swap jobs with anyone!



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CATHERINE CLEEVE - DESK OFFICER - LONDON

I joined the FCO in June 2002, and my first job was in a resource management unit looking after the administration budgets for International Security Directorate. During this job I was able to take on other work such as co-ordinating an International Security themed FCO Open Day, and a brief stint in the consular crisis unit during the run up to the Iraq war. As well as finance I got some experience of event management and contingency planning. Working in the FCO allows you to get experience of different areas of work (and of the world) and develop a broad range of skills. Over your career you are encouraged, and expected, to try a variety of roles rather than just sticking to one area of work.

My current job is as a Desk Officer in South Asia Group, covering Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives. As part of my training, I undertook familiarisation visits to these countries. My job consists of providing advice and information on these countries which ranges from briefing for Ministers to drafting replies to letters from MPs to producing the country profile that the public access through our website. To do this I keep in touch with a wide range of contacts including our Posts overseas, other government departments, the Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Maldivian High Commissions in London and non governmental organisations. I also line manage the Administrative Assistant in the section.

Before joining the FCO, I took part in the undergraduate overseas attachment scheme and spent a month working at our Embassy in Lima. It gave me a taste of diplomatic life abroad, and I am now looking forward to going on a full overseas posting in about a year's time. It could be anywhere from Asia to the Americas - we have a network of 233 diplomatic Posts worldwide!



RYAN BENNETT - DESK OFFICER - LONDON

I joined the FCO in March 2002 after gaining a degree in Business Admin; Marketing (BA) at Anglia University. I think it is really important to encourage people from all backgrounds to apply to the FCO. Too many people rule themselves out.

My first job with the FCO was as a Desk Officer for Slovenia and Slovakia. I have been in my current position since April 2003. It's a more hands on role than my previous one and calls for more urgent action.

I work within Country Casework Team, which is part of Consular Directorate. We help British nationals who get into difficulties overseas. I deal with those travelling in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. I am line manager to my Assistant Desk Officer.

I'm not sure there is such a thing as a typical day as the work is so varied! Cases can be fairly routine. For example, I might be helping someone whose passport has been stolen or speaking to a travel agent about someone who has lost his or her airline tickets. However, I also deal with more involved cases. If there has been a death overseas, I will speak to the family and if they wish, arrange for the body to be returned to the UK. If there is a missing person, or a kidnap victim, I liaise with the Police, National Criminal Intelligence Service, family and our overseas Posts to help keep everyone informed.

If someone is the victim of a serious crime, I support the victim and make him or her aware of the legal system in the country. Where a British national has been imprisoned overseas I try to ensure that they are treated in accordance with international minimum Human Rights standards. Essentially, our priority is welfare. I work to Ministers providing briefing, attending meetings and drafting responses to queries from MPs and members of the public. Strong interpersonal skills are important for this job, as are good drafting skills. The job is rewarding but can be emotionally draining and calls for flexibility to effectively meet the needs of families and our consular customers.

I have a disability and as far as general disability issues are concerned, the FCO has been very good. The FCO welcomes applications from people with disabilities and uses the "two ticks" disability symbol, which is awarded by the Employment Service. Although I chose not to use it, people with disabilities may apply under the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS), where the FCO guarantee an interview to anyone with a disability whose application meets the minimum criteria at the shortlisting stage.



ASIF SIDDIQUEE - DESK OFFICER - LONDON

While undertaking my degree in Chemistry and a Masters in International Management I had not envisaged that I would end up joining the Diplomatic Service. Prior to joining the FCO, I was working for a chemical company as a marketing assistant. I joined the FCO in 2002, as it offered me the opportunity to work in a diverse range of roles rather than specialise in one area. The other attraction was the opportunity to travel around the world.

My first role as a B3 new entrant was as Desk Officer for Sub Sahara Africa in Consular Directorate. The job involved liaising with our High Commissions/Embassies in Africa and providing guidance when dealing with distressed British nationals. The consular cases I handled involved everything from lost passports to kidnappings. I thoroughly enjoyed this role and helping members of the public made it highly rewarding. I also had the opportunity to spend three weeks working in the busy consular section in Lagos, Nigeria. This was a great insight into what working abroad would be like. I spent 18 months as the Desk Officer for Africa and line managed two members of staff during this time.

I am currently the Desk Officer for the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands in the Overseas Territories Department. This is a policy based job that covers a wide range of issues from dealing with hurricanes to constitutional reform. This role is interesting and involves having to keep Ministers up to date with political events on the islands.

I am due to go on my first posting in early 2006 and am looking forward to my next role.

