

7 April 2025

To: Mr Hamish Falconer MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

cc

Rt Hon David Lammy MP, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

Baroness Chapman, Minister of State for International Development

Baroness Harriet Harman, UK Special Envoy for Women and Girls

Rachel Chetham-Smith, FCDO

Robert Chatterton Dickson, UK Chargé d'Affaires of the UK Mission to Afghanistan

Dear Minister

Dame Anne-Marie Rafferty and I were most grateful to you for making time in your busy diary to meet us on 14 March. We are members of an informal working group which is part of the recently formed Dames Commanders Society. We have no formal status but as you will see from the number of Dames who have chosen to add their names to this letter, we want to use our influence through our networks, particularly with professional bodies, to make small impacts in Afghanistan to improve the lives of women and girls there. We understand that Baroness Harriet Harman, to whom we are copying this letter, has already taken an interest in Afghanistan in her new role as the UK Special Envoy for Women and Girls. As she will know, Afghanistan has the worst adherence to women's rights in the world.

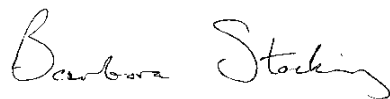
We really valued you sharing with us your interest in and experience of Afghanistan and the dreadful plight of women and girls living there. As you know, we have decided to focus on education and health where a number of interested Dames have expertise. Thank you for your encouragement to us to continue investigating carefully what might be helpful on pregnancy and childbirth, for example online training for midwives. We are in touch with colleagues in the International Confederation of Midwives who are putting us in touch with the Midwives Association of Afghanistan.

We were encouraged by what you were able to tell us about the intention of the UK government to continue to treat Afghanistan as a top priority country, despite the recent reduction in the ODA budget. We strongly support this focus and hope that the new Secretary of State for Development, to whom we are copying this letter, will too.

We believe that the UK, and the British Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office in particular, has a significant role to play not only through this indirect humanitarian and development assistance but also in keeping the position of women and girls in Afghanistan on the international agenda when other foreign affairs issues, from Gaza to Ukraine, demand so much of the time, effort and attention of Foreign Ministers and other global leaders. We hope that the Foreign Secretary, to whom we are also copying this letter, will agree that the UK is well-placed, through its position on the UN Security Council and other bodies, to continue to articulate the case for cooperating internationally to face up to and mitigate shared challenges and find mutual solutions at a time when in so many countries are focused on national self-interest. Charity may begin at home but helping our neighbours, however distant, helps us too.

We shall continue to stay in touch with the excellent team in the Afghanistan Policy and Programmes Department at the FCDO as our plans develop, and hope to meet the UK Chargé d’Affaires of the UK Mission to Afghanistan when he is next in London.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Barbara Stocking".

Dame Barbara Stocking

and

Dame Anne-Marie Rafferty (Baroness)

Dame Nicola Brewer

Dame Vera Baird

Dame Frances Cairncross

Dame Marie Gabriel

Dame Audrey Glover

Dame Asha Kemka

Dame Theresa Marteau

Dame Ruth May

Dame Jane Newell

Dame Lesley Regan

Dame Moira Whyte