



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Stephen Kerr MSP
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

12th March 2023

Funding for organisations in Gaza

Dear First Minister,

There has been a great deal of coverage over the issue of your decision to direct Scottish Government funds to UNRWA in the light of the publication of email exchanges between you and your officials in January 2024 (FOI/202400398300).

I had hoped to raise this matter in Parliament, but my question was not selected by the Presiding Officer, so I thought the best way to achieve clarity on these issues would be to write to you directly.

I feel questions about the use of public money are always legitimate because the work of scrutinising the actions of Ministers is core to the functioning of our parliamentary system.

I believe sincerely you should be open to questions about your conduct and decisions taken as First Minister. I would be disappointed in you personally if you did not agree that this is a reasonable thing to expect.

I am interested in why you ignored the advice given by officials at the External Affairs directorate to approve relief funding for WASH activities delivered through UNICEF and instead intervened late in the process to send the money to UNRWA.

What was your rationale for overriding the official advice to fund UNICEF and instead directing the money to UNRWA?

Subsequent to the decision to allocate the funding in this way, serious allegations were made about UNRWA and their links to the terrorist attacks in Israel in October 2023. What steps had your office or the External Affairs directorate taken to gain assurance that UNRWA was a suitable organisation which presented no risk of misuse of funds. Was the advice of the FCDO sought?

You mention in the published emails with reference to the additional £250,000 that “it will need to be a budget pressure we carry forward”. Did you seek the advice of your financial officials on this and what was the assessment of the impact on the following year’s budget? Do you expect this overspend to be met within the 2024/25 Scottish Government budget and if so, where will this come from?

At one point in the emails an additional £50,000 is added to the funding that had been advised for UNICEF, the quantum changed from £200,000 to £250,000. What was the rationale behind the increased quantum?

You met with representatives of UNRWA a few days after the decision. In one of the emails PR support from UNICEF was mentioned. Did you, or anyone in your team, have conversations with UNRWA about the publicity impact of the funding announcement and what level of consideration was given to your upcoming meeting with UNRWA?

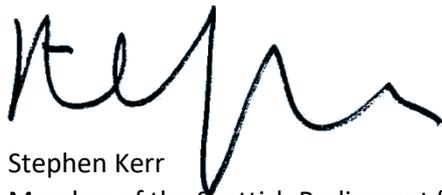
Was consideration given to involving officials from the FCDO in the decision-making process?
Without FCDO input how is the Scottish Government able to coordinate its activities with the rest of the UK aid efforts?

Did you have any discussions with, or receive representation from any local or international charities or representatives from political action groups related to the Palestinian cause? What weight did you put on these discussions and representations and were any of these representations made by friends, or political associates from within the SNP?

I hope you are able to give a full response to these questions. It is imperative that the office of First Minister must be protected from any implication that it is beyond scrutiny or does not have to answer to Parliament and the Scottish People. MSPs must be able to hold the executive to account and I would have hoped that you would seek to use the mechanisms at your disposal to allow this in Parliament. Getting assurance that you acted in good faith and within the powers and remit of your office is a key duty of the Scottish Parliament and understanding your rationale for decisions you make is essential for the operation of our democracy.

I await your response.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Kerr', with a stylized, wavy flourish extending to the right.

Stephen Kerr
Member of the Scottish Parliament for Central Scotland Region