

Research Briefing

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CHOGM 2022 in Rwanda: Key issues

Summary	2
1 Outcomes of CHOGM 2018	5
2 Themes for CHOGM 2022	6
2.1 Health	6
2.2 Ukraine	9
3 Rwanda as host	10
3.1 Human rights record	10
3.2 UK relations with Rwanda	11
4 Selecting a Secretary-General	13
5 Applications for membership	15
5.1 How do members join?	15
5.2 Togo	16
5.3 Gabon	16
5.4 Zimbabwe	17
6 Further reading on the Commonwealth	18

Summary

From 20 to 25 June 2022, Rwanda will host the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The meeting was due to be held in 2020 but has been delayed twice due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This will be the first in-person meeting of Commonwealth leaders since the London CHOGM in 2018. Prince Charles [will represent the Queen](#) and open the meeting. The UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, will also hand over the role of chair-in-office of the Commonwealth to the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame.

Rwanda is the most recent country to have joined the Commonwealth, in 2009. This will be the first CHOGM held in Africa since Uganda in 2007.

This paper explains the background to the conference and the issues likely to arise. This includes scrutiny of Rwanda's human rights record.

What is the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth is an [association of 54 member-states](#), including the UK, Jamaica, South Africa, and Pakistan. It has a population of 2.5 billion (around a third of the world's population), and a collective Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimated at US\$13 trillion in 2020.

The Commonwealth collaborates on issues such as human rights, trade, climate change and democracy through formal meetings such as CHOGMs and the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and country leaders.

The chair-in-office represents the Commonwealth at international meetings and supports the "good offices" work of the Secretariat (such as mediation and arbitration). The Secretariat is responsible for its day-to-day work.

What are CHOGMs?

[Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings](#) (CHOGMs) normally take place every two years. These operate by consensus, and a communiqué is issued at the end of each.

The last CHOGM was held in London in 2018. This year's CHOGM will be the 26th since the first in 1971.

Outcomes of 2018 CHOGM and progress against commitments

[Outcomes of the 2018 meeting](#) included a commitment to boosting intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030, ensuring all Commonwealth states ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and providing more support for small states vulnerable to climate change. 25 of the world's 38 small island developing states (SIDS) are [Commonwealth members](#).

In its 2022 [update on progress against the 2018 commitments](#), the UK Government said it now has 33 trade agreements with Commonwealth states, had funded projects to develop domestic violence legislation overseas, and supported 13 SIDS monitor their marine economies.

CHOGM 2022 themes: Health and Ukraine

CHOGM's theme is "[Delivering a common future: Connecting, innovating, transforming.](#)" This includes protecting natural resources and increasing trade. No further details have been published.

The Rwandan Government has also identified [health as a key focus](#). This is likely to [include discussion](#) of the effects of Covid-19 on wider health services and ongoing Commonwealth commitments to halve malaria in the Commonwealth by 2023 and ensure access to quality eye care.

The Commonwealth Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, has [condemned Russia's invasion on Ukraine](#). However, several Commonwealth countries including Uganda, South Africa, Pakistan, and India have assumed [more neutral positions](#) on Russia's actions.

Re-appointment of Secretary General

Commonwealth leaders will consider the reappointment of the Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, who is seeking a second term in office. She assumed the role in 2016, and her four-year term was temporarily extended in 2020 in response to the pandemic.

The UK, among others, has been [critical of the Secretariat's governance and financial stability](#). Her significant challenger is Jamaican foreign minister Kamina Johnson Smith. Smith has the backing of the UK, India, and Belize. Scotland is backed by Dominica and Antigua and Barbuda. Tuvulu is also intending to [put forward a candidate](#) with a focus on climate change.

Togo and Gabon are expected to apply for membership

Togo, a French-speaking West African state, is expected to [apply for Commonwealth membership](#). Britain historically ruled part of Togoland, which is now part of Ghana. To join the Commonwealth, countries must meet [several requirements](#) including on human rights and democracy and usually having a historic link to the UK. A decision on membership is reached by consensus of member states.

There are also reports that Gabon, like Togo a former French colony, will [apply for membership](#) at the summit.

Rwanda as host

Rwandan President Paul Kagame will take over from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson as the chair-in-office of the Commonwealth until the next CHOGM.

As the host nation, Rwanda's human rights record may come under scrutiny. 24 organisations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have written an open letter to Commonwealth Heads of Government to ask them to speak up on Rwanda's human rights record. They argue failure to do so "[risks undermining the organisation's human rights mandate, as well as its integrity and credibility](#)".

In the UK, the focus is likely to be on the agreement to transport some people to Rwanda who would otherwise claim asylum in the UK. This is discussed in Commons Library paper [UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development partnership](#), CBP9568.

The UK Government has previously expressed concern about [restrictions to civil and political rights](#) and media freedoms in Rwanda. The Government has said "[we are clear that Rwanda must mirror its social and economic progress with gains in civil and political rights for its people.](#)"

1

Outcomes of CHOGM 2018

The last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) was held in London in 2018.

What was decided at CHOGM 2018?

The April 2018 communiqué set out a [series of general political commitments and practical actions](#), including:

- Promoting gender equality in social, economic, and political life
- Promoting the participation of young people in decision-making
- Addressing the stigma around disability
- Strengthening the Secretary-General's capacity to support national requests for peace building
- Strengthening national human rights institutions
- Commitments to free trade and a rules-based trading system
- Concerted action to address the vulnerabilities of small states such as climate change, natural disasters, and unsustainable debt.¹

Progress against 2018 commitments

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO's) [UK Commonwealth Chair-in-Office report 2018 to 2020](#) (September 2020) provides information on progress made in priority areas since 2018. The UK committed £500 million of funding to meet Commonwealth goals.

A [further update](#) was published in May 2022. This said that UK funding had supported:

- SheTrades Commonwealth, which helped over 3,500 women-owned businesses to become more competitive since 2018.
- Supporting small island developing states (SIDS) to develop sustainable and climate resilient marine economies, including through the Commonwealth Blue Charter.
- A variety of cybersecurity projects, including incident response capacity, increased cooperation and online safety.²

Further reading on CHOGM 2018

- House of Lords Library, [Outcome of CHOGM 2018](#), May 2018

¹ The Commonwealth, [Towards a common future](#), April 2018. Sources accessed 9 June 2022

² FCDO, [UK Commonwealth Chair-in-Office report addendum 2020 to 2022](#), 19 May 2022

2

Themes for CHOGM 2022

The Prince of Wales and the Commonwealth

Prince Charles will attend the CHOGM in June 2022, instead of the Queen. The Prince has previously attended CHOGMs in Edinburgh (1997), Uganda (2007), Sri Lanka (2013), Malta (2015) and the UK (2018).

This will be the second CHOGM in which he has formally represented the Queen, the first time being in Sri Lanka.³

In 2018, Commonwealth leaders agreed that Charles should succeed the Queen as Commonwealth head. To date, he has visited 46 of the 54 Commonwealth countries.⁴

Overview

CHOGM 2022 will be held in Kigali, Rwanda in June 2022.

It has been delayed twice due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It will meet under the theme of “Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming.” This includes protecting natural resources and increasing trade. Rwanda’s Government have also said health is a priority issue for the CHOGM.⁵

No further details have been published. Updates are found at the [Commonwealth page on CHOGM](#).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may also be considered, though many Commonwealth members may want to retain a neutral position on the conflict.

Section 6 provides links to further reading on Commonwealth human rights

2.1

Health

Covid-19 vaccines

The Commonwealth Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, has criticised the inequalities in administering Covid-19 vaccines worldwide.

³ The Commonwealth, [The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall will attend the CHOGM in Rwanda](#), 14 March 2022. Sources in this section accessed 7 and 9 June 2022

⁴ Prince of Wales, [Their Royal Highnesses host reception ahead of CHOGM in Rwanda](#), 9 June 2022 and The Commonwealth, [CHOGM Leaders’ statement 2018](#) (PDF), para 3

⁵ FCDO, [UK chair in office report addendum 2020 to 2022](#), 19 May 2022, ‘Continued delivery’

As of mid-May 2022, while 1.3 billion people in the Commonwealth had received two Covid-19 vaccine doses, 40% had yet to receive one. In several African Commonwealth states, the proportion of their populations fully vaccinated remain less than 15%.⁶ There is a global target for [70% of the world to be vaccinated by September 2022](#).⁷

The UK has committed to share 100 million Covid-19 vaccines by June 2022. As of 26 May, [82.7 million doses have been donated](#), of which 36.5 million have been deployed.⁸ 19 Commonwealth countries have received doses.⁹

The effects of the pandemic on health systems

Covid-19 has put substantial pressure on country's health systems.

According to a World Health Organization (WHO) survey of 129 countries and territories between June and November 2021, 92% reported some degree of disruption to their health services over the time period. Major causes of the disruption included supply chain and work-force interruptions, and fewer patients visiting due to fear of the virus and greater financial difficulties.¹⁰

The pandemic disrupted routine vaccination programmes in many countries, including India, Pakistan, and Mozambique. The WHO reported that India saw a fall in coverage of Diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccines from 91% to 85% of children in 2021, for example.¹¹

The UK has continued to fund Gavi, the vaccine alliance. It is the largest donor for 2021-25, at £1.65 billion.¹² However, reductions in UK aid spending have reduced funding for organisations such as Unitaid, which funds medicines and health tools for lower-income countries. 2021 funding was reduced from £77 million to £6 million.¹³

Malaria

In 2018, Commonwealth leaders committed to halve malaria incidence and deaths by 2023. A 2022 Commonwealth report suggests the association is not on track to meet this goal, with mortality rates across the Commonwealth, as a whole, greater in 2020 than they were in 2015.¹⁴

⁶ The Commonwealth, [Commonwealth health ministers unite on post-COVID-19 health agenda](#), 18 May 2022

⁷ Commons Library, [Covax: Vaccinating the world against Covid-19 in 2022](#), February 2022

⁸ PQ 9952 [on [Coronavirus: Vaccination](#)], 6 June 2022

⁹ FCDO, [Chair-in-Office report addendum 2020 to 2022](#), 19 May 2022, 'Global health security'

¹⁰ WHO, [Third round of global pulse survey](#), February 2022, p4

¹¹ WHO, [Covid-19 pandemic leads to major backsliding on childhood vaccines](#), 15 July 2021

¹² PQ 393 [on [Development aid: Health services](#)], 16 May 2022

¹³ Unitaid, [UK government funding cuts](#), 10 June 2021

¹⁴ The Commonwealth, [New Commonwealth malaria report launched](#), 19 May 2022

This is likely to reflect the pressure the Covid-19 pandemic put on some country's health systems. While Bangladesh, Belize, India, Malaysia, and South Africa are among those to have reduced their mortality rate by half, Botswana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia are not on track to meet the goal.¹⁵

The UK Government has not said how much it plans to pledge for the Global Fund's seventh replenishment in 2022, having previously committed £1.4 billion in the sixth. The Fund works on Malaria, AIDS, and Tuberculosis.¹⁶

Ensuring quality eye care

In 2018, Commonwealth leaders committed to reduce inequalities in access to eye care for all. This included eliminating the tropical disease blinding trachoma by 2020, which disproportionately affects women and children.¹⁷

In 2020, 24 million people across the Commonwealth were at risk of trachoma. This was a fall from 42 million in 2018. Gambia had eliminated it, and Malawi and Vanuatu were near elimination.¹⁸

In response to the reduction in UK aid spending, the Government reduced funding for programmes such as the Accelerating the Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ASCEND) programme.¹⁹

For 2022, the UK has committed to continue to fund organisations that contribute to progress on trachoma, including the WHO.²⁰

Further resources on the Commonwealth and health

- The Commonwealth, [Our work: Health](#). Summary of the Commonwealth's work, key priorities, and links to related reports.
- International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness report, [Eye health in the Commonwealth](#) (May 2021).
- The Commonwealth, [Accelerating universal healthcare access and other Commonwealth commitments](#). Information on goals such as malaria elimination, trachoma and avoidable blindness, cervical cancer elimination, and gender-based violence.
- Commons Library, [Reducing the UK's aid spending in 2021](#), CBP9224

¹⁵ The Commonwealth, [The Commonwealth malaria report](#) (PDF), 2022, pp12, 14

¹⁶ FCDO, [UK chair in office report addendum 2020 to 2022](#), 19 May 2022, para 27

¹⁷ CHOGM 2018, [Communiqué "Towards a Common Future"](#) (PDF), 2018, para 33

¹⁸ The Commonwealth, [Meaningful progress show blinding trachoma can be eliminated in the Commonwealth](#), 19 May 2021

¹⁹ The Guardian, ["A very cruel exit": UK's aid cuts risk rapid return of treatable diseases](#), 13 September 2021

²⁰ PQ 7954 [On [Development aid: Trachoma](#)], 31 May 2022

2.2

Ukraine

The Commonwealth Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as an "act of aggression."²¹

However, not all Commonwealth states have criticised Russia's actions. In the UN General Assembly vote in March 2022, in which 141 of the 193 members of the Assembly called for immediate Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, nine Commonwealth members abstained.

These were: Bangladesh, Mozambique, Namibia, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, and India. Two further Commonwealth countries did not register an abstention or a vote: Cameroon and eSwatini.²² The host of CHOGM 2022, Rwanda, voted to condemn the invasion and called for dialogue.²³

India has not introduced sanctions against Russia nor condemned the invasion. The country is reliant on Russian military equipment, with military ties dating back to the Cold War.²⁴

The UK Government has said it has engaged "very constructively" with India on the crisis and that India's Government recognises Russian attacks to be "unprovoked."²⁵

The UK will now focus on developing stronger security and economic relations with India with the aim of bring it "closer to a circle of countries that support freedom, democracy and sovereignty."²⁶

In March, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa also blamed NATO for the war in Ukraine, arguing its expansion into Eastern Europe was likely to lead to greater instability in the region. However, he did not condone Russian's invasion and has called for negotiation.²⁷

²¹ The Commonwealth, [Statement by Commonwealth Secretary-General](#), 27 February 2022

²² Commonwealth Round Table, [Opinion: Shadow of Ukraine looms over Kigali](#), 17 May 2022

²³ All Africa, [Rwanda speaks out on Ukraine conflict](#), 3 March 2022

²⁴ Foreign Policy, [Modi's multipolar moment has arrived](#), 6 June 2022

²⁵ HL Deb, [17 March 2022](#), c455

²⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: Work of the FCDQ](#), HC 517, 7 March 2022, Q601

²⁷ Al-Jazeera, [Ramaphosa urges end to Ukraine war during talks with Zelenskyy](#), 21 April 2022

3 Rwanda as host

Rwandan President Paul Kagame will take over from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson as the chair-in-office of the Commonwealth until the next CHOGM.

Kagame was re-elected for a third term in August 2018, with nearly 99% of the vote, after amending the constitution to allow him to stand again. He has been in office since 2000, and effectively ruled Rwanda since 1994.

3.1 Human rights record

As the host nation, Rwanda's human rights record is likely to come under scrutiny.

The NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) state its government allows little space for opposition groups to organise, that journalists and media organisations are subject to state interference, and that detention conditions are likely to be harsh.²⁸

24 organisations, including HRW and Amnesty International, have written an open letter to Commonwealth Heads of Government to speak up on Rwanda's human rights record, saying failure to do so "[risks undermining the organisation's human rights mandate, as well as its integrity and credibility](#)".²⁹

The country's human rights record was also [considered by the UN Human Rights Council](#) in 2021. In response to the Human Rights Council, the Rwandan Government said they would:

- Continue to provide compulsory human rights training for the police.
- Strengthen national capacities to investigate enforced disappearances.
- Guarantee legal safeguards for detainees.
- Ensure respect for the judiciary.
- Strengthen media freedom and freedoms of association and opinion.³⁰

The journalist Michela Wrong details human rights abuses in her 2021 book *Do not Disturb*. It uses the murder of Patrick Karegeya, Rwanda's former

²⁸ HRW, [Rwanda: Events of 2019](#), 2020. All sources in this section accessed 17 June 2022.

²⁹ HRW, [Call for Commonwealth Leaders to Speak Up for Rights of Rwandans](#), 10 June 2022

³⁰ UN Human Rights Council, [Report of the working group: Rwanda](#), 9 July 2021 (PDF), paras 134.18, 134.27, 134.31, 134.39, 134.49, 134.51

intelligence chief, to discuss Kagame's presidency. Wrong argues Western support, including from the UK, has helped Kagame entrench his power.³¹

Rwanda has been widely hailed a [development 'success-story'](#).³² The World Bank says Rwanda has "[achieved impressive development gains](#)" since the 1994 genocide. The Bank says Rwanda's strong economic growth has been accompanied by substantial improvements in living standards, with a two-thirds drop in child mortality and near-universal primary school enrolment.³³

Rwanda: Economy and human rights

- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Economic factsheet for Rwanda](#) in December 2021. 2-page overview of Rwanda's economy.
- BBC News, [Rwanda's Paul Kagame-Visionary or tyrant?](#), August 2017. Provides a short biography of Kagame and developments in Rwanda.

3.2

UK relations with Rwanda

The UK, under successive Governments, has been a [major bilateral aid donor](#) to Rwanda and a supporter of reforms.³⁴

However, the Government's recent agreement with Rwanda to transport some people to Rwanda who would otherwise claim asylum in the UK has drawn attention to the Government's assessments of human rights in Rwanda. For further information on the scheme, see Commons Library paper [UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development partnership](#), CBP9568.

The UK Government expressed concern about restrictions to civil and political rights and media freedoms in its [statement on human rights](#) in Rwanda at the 37th Session of the Universal Periodic Review on 25 January 2021. The Government made three recommendations:

1. Conduct transparent, credible and independent investigations into allegations of extrajudicial killings, deaths in custody, enforced disappearances and torture, and bring perpetrators to justice.
2. Protect and enable journalists to work freely, without fear of retribution, and ensure that state authorities comply with the Access to Information law.

³¹ The Guardian, [Do not disturb review](#), 13 April 2021

³² The Guardian, [Rwanda-A dazzling tale of growth and political repression](#), 3 April 2014

³³ World Bank, [The World Bank in Rwanda](#), 17 April 2022

³⁴ FCDO Development Tracker, [Rwanda](#)

3. Screen, identify and provide support to trafficking victims, including those held in Government transit centres.³⁵

In March 2021, in response to a written question, the Government lauded Rwanda's "huge strides" in gender equality in parliament and government, and improvements in healthcare, development and prosperity.

However, it also expressed concern about Rwanda's overall human rights record and the state of civil and political rights: "We are clear that Rwanda must mirror its social and economic progress with gains in civil and political rights for its people."³⁶

In June 2022 Home Secretary, Priti Patel, described Rwanda as a "safe and secure country with an outstanding track record of supporting refugees and asylum seekers."³⁷

Further reading on UK-Rwanda relations

- The Home Office's [Country Policy and Information Notes on Rwanda](#), includes a note on [human rights in Rwanda](#), updated in May 2022.
- Commons Library paper [UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development partnership](#), CBP9568. Details on the partnership announced in 2022.

³⁵ FCDO, [37th Universal Periodic Review: UK statement on Rwanda, 25 January 2021](#)

³⁶ PQ 156360 [on [Rwanda: Human Rights](#)], 1 March 2021

³⁷ HC Deb, [15 June 2022](#), c291-316

4

Selecting a Secretary-General

The Commonwealth Secretariat is led by a Secretary General, elected by Commonwealth heads of government for a four-year term in office. They may serve a maximum of two terms. They are usually re-elected without a challenge.³⁸

Current office holder

The current officeholder is Baroness Patricia Scotland, who took office in 2016.

While her term was due to expire in 2020, in response to the pandemic her term was extended until the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (now to take place in June 2022).³⁹

Reappointment of Baroness Scotland

Baroness Scotland's reappointment has caused some controversy.

The UK, New Zealand and Australia have been critical of the way the Baroness has run the Secretariat, citing a report from auditors that the Secretariat had waived usual tendering rules on 50 occasions over three years.

In 2020, all three suspended their discretionary funding to the Secretariat until it improved its financial procedures—£4.7 million per year in the case of the UK, the largest donor.⁴⁰

For more on the suspension of funding, see the Commonwealth Round Table, [UK suspends funding to the Commonwealth Secretariat](#) (February 2020).

Who might stand for the role?

Baroness Scotland is expected to stand again. Some Commonwealth states have offered the Baroness support. These include Antigua and Dominica, where Baroness Scotland was born.⁴¹

³⁸ The Commonwealth, [Secretary-General Patricia Scotland](#), Unless stated, all sources accessed 7 June 2022

³⁹ The Times, [Baroness Scotland's term \[is\] extended as Commonwealth chief](#), 26 June 2020

⁴⁰ BBC News, [Baroness Scotland: UK suspends funding to Commonwealth Secretariat](#), 12 February 2020

⁴¹ Commonwealth Round Table, [Patricia Scotland fights for another term as Commonwealth Secretary-General](#), 16 July 2020

Monica Juma emerged as an initial challenger but withdrew her candidacy in February 2022.⁴² Juma serves as the Kenyan energy minister. The Kenyan Government said she had received the backing of the African Union.⁴³

A new challenger, Kamina Johnson Smith, has now emerged. From Jamaica, Johnson Smith has the backing of the UK, Maldives, Singapore, India, and Belize.⁴⁴

The UK Prime Minister says Johnson Smith has “vast experience.” His endorsement drew criticism from the Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy. He said the UK, as chair of the Commonwealth, should remain neutral.⁴⁵

Pacific state Tuvalu is also seeking to nominate its former Governor General Sir Iakoba Taeia Italeli as Secretary-General. It hopes his election would allow the Commonwealth to focus more on climate change.⁴⁶

Expected reforms to the Secretariat

Following CHOGMs in 2015 and 2018, it was agreed to establish a working group to consider reform to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The UK chaired the 2019 meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers which supported the recommendations.

These are expected to be endorsed at CHOGM 2022 and improve the performance and delivery of Secretariat work. No further details have been published.⁴⁷

⁴² Business Daily Africa, [Monica Juma quits race for Commonwealth job](#), 22 February 2022

⁴³ The East African, [Kenyan Minister gets \[African Union\] support in quest for Commonwealth job](#), 14 February 2022

⁴⁴ Commonwealth Round Table, [Scotland v Jamaica: UK leads move unseat Commonwealth Secretary General](#), 3 June 2022

⁴⁵ The Guardian, [Boris Johnson to try to oust Lady Scotland from Commonwealth role](#), 26 May 2022

⁴⁶ The New Daily, [Pacific minnow wants to head Commonwealth](#), 7 June 2022, accessed 10 June 2022

⁴⁷ FCDO, [UK Commonwealth Chair-in-Office report addendum 2020 to 2022](#), 19 May 2022, ‘Strengthening the Commonwealth’

5 Applications for membership

The last two countries to join the Commonwealth were Mozambique and Rwanda, in 1995 and 2009, respectively. Togo is expected to make an application at CHOGM to join, which, if successful, would make it the Commonwealth's 55th member. Gabon may also apply.

5.1 How do members join?

In 2007, Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed several criteria for membership:

- Having historic constitutional ties to an existing Commonwealth member, as a “general rule.” Exceptional cases will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Accepting and complying with Commonwealth values set out in the [1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles](#) and contained in other subsequent [Declarations](#). This includes commitments to human rights, the rule of law and good governance.
- Accepting the Queen as Commonwealth head and use of English as the medium of communication within the Commonwealth.⁴⁸

Countries that have withdrawn or been expelled from the organisation are expected to reapply and demonstrate the values and principles of the Commonwealth “when it first joined.”⁴⁹

There is a four-step process for joining:

1. An informal assessment by the Secretary-General
2. Consultation by the Secretary-General with member states
3. Invitation to the country to make a formal application
4. Submission of a formal application providing evidence of a country's functioning democracy and popular support for joining the Commonwealth.

A CHOGM would have to reach consensus on any application.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The Commonwealth, [Joining the Commonwealth](#), accessed 7 June 2022

⁴⁹ As above

⁵⁰ As above

5.2

Togo

In April 2022, the Togolese Government said it would make an application to join the Commonwealth at the next CHOGM.⁵¹

Togo is a former French colony in West Africa, being granted independence in 1960. Britain previously ruled part of Togoland along with France. The British-ruled western territories were incorporated in Ghana, which has been a Commonwealth member since 1957.⁵² Togo has been interested in joining for several years.⁵³

The UK [expressed concern](#) about widespread allegations of human rights violations and abuses in its statement at Togo's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the Human Rights Council in January 2022. The UK called on Togo to tackle child abuse and modern slavery; investigate all allegations of arbitrary arrest, detention and torture; and decriminalise same sex consensual relations.⁵⁴

5.3

Gabon

Gabon, like Togo, is a former French colony.

Gabon's President Ali Bongo Ondimba discussed his country's ambition to join the Commonwealth with Baroness Scotland in May 2021.⁵⁵ A [report in La Libreville](#) on 16 June 2022 reported that Gabon's application will be made official at CHOGM.⁵⁶

Jane Flanagan, The Times' Africa correspondent, describes Gabon as "[Africa's longest running and most corrupt political dynasties](#)." She says Gabon's admission is "likely to ignite debate over how it and other member states, including the host Rwanda, might align with the Commonwealth's stated values."⁵⁷

⁵¹ The Voice, [Togo to join Commonwealth](#), 26 April 2022, accessed 7 June 2022

⁵² BBC News, [Togo profile-Timeline](#), 10 May 2018, accessed 7 June 2022

⁵³ France 24, [After Rwanda, now Togo looks to join the Commonwealth](#), 27 July 2017, accessed 7 June 2022

⁵⁴ FCDO, [40th Universal Periodic Review of human rights: UK statement on Togo](#), 25 January 2022, accessed 7 June 2022

⁵⁵ Ali Bongo Ondimba, "I had a warm and rich conversation with the Honorable @PScotlandCSG on Gabon's possible integration into the @commonwealthsec. Available from <https://twitter.com/presidentabo/status/1392196598873169925>

⁵⁶ BBC Monitoring, "Gabon set to join Commonwealth, report says", 17 June 2022

⁵⁷ The Times, "[Questions for future of Commonwealth as it welcomes Gabon to the club](#)", 16 June 2022, accessed 17 June 2022

5.4 Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, which joined the Commonwealth in 1980 and withdrew in 2003, began the process of re-joining in 2018.⁵⁸

In 2017, then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said it would be a “fine and noble aspiration” for both the Commonwealth and Zimbabwe if it re-joined but said the country must meet certain standards in human rights, the rule of law and democracy.⁵⁹

In 2021 the UK Government said examples such as the arrest of female activists and a proposed law to criminalise criticism against Zimbabwe’s President Emmerson Mnangagwa meant the country was “not liv[ing] up to the standards set out in the [Commonwealth] charter.”⁶⁰

In 2021, the Zimbabwean Government said they were in the second of the four-stage process of re-joining, with the application undergoing consultation among Commonwealth members.⁶¹

In April 2022, the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Goldsmith, said Zimbabwe “cannot yet credibly be said to meet the principles set out in the Commonwealth charter.”⁶²

⁵⁸ The Commonwealth, [Zimbabwe begins process to re-join Commonwealth](#), 21 May 2018, accessed 7 June 2022

⁵⁹ HC Deb, [21 November 2017](#), c836

⁶⁰ HL Deb, [28 April 2021](#), cc2234, 2236

⁶¹ IOL, [Zimbabwe on course to re-join Commonwealth—official](#), 6 April 2021, accessed 7 June 2022

⁶² HL Deb, [26 April 2022](#), c58GC

6 Further reading on the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth: Background

The Library Briefing, [The Commonwealth](#), provides a timeline of key Commonwealth events, how it is organised (including the role of the Crown and Heads of Government Meetings), and information on its membership.

“Fast Facts”

The Commonwealth publishes a [series of “fast facts” summaries on the Commonwealth](#), covering:

- The Commonwealth as a body
- The Commonwealth Secretary General
- Commonwealth elections
- Gender equality
- Climate change

Commonwealth Innovation [also publishes data on the Commonwealth](#), including on the pandemic and sustainable development goals.

UK Parliament committee reports

- International Trade Committee, [Trade and the Commonwealth: Developing countries inquiry](#), HC 667, November 2018
- Foreign Affairs Committee, [The role and future of the Commonwealth](#), HC 114 November 2012

Commonwealth trade

As of January 2022, the UK has trade agreements with 33 Commonwealth members.⁶³

The Commons Library briefing, [Statistics on UK trade with the Commonwealth](#), provides more on trade between the UK and individual Commonwealth countries from 2000 to 2020.

The Lords Library note, [Renewing the UK’s trading relationship with the Commonwealth](#) provides information on the UK Government’s policy towards the Commonwealth and boosting trade links.

⁶³ PQ 102778 [[Commonwealth: Trade](#)], 20 January 2022

UK aid to Commonwealth countries

The FCDO [publish annual statistics on the value of Official Development Assistance](#) (ODA) to Commonwealth members, as table A4G.

ODA is aid intended to promote the welfare and economic development of developing countries.

In 2020, bilateral ODA to the Commonwealth totalled [nearly £1.5 billion](#). Nigeria received the highest amount, at £241 million and Bangladesh second, at £203 million.

Bilateral ODA is that spent directly in another country, being different to multilateral ODA that is provided to a multilateral organisation, such as the World Bank, which then allocates it in accordance with its priorities.

Human rights in the Commonwealth

Past Commonwealth declarations set out the Commonwealth's commitment to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Five Commonwealth countries: Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Tanzania, are human rights priority countries for the UK Government.

The Commons Library briefing, [The Commonwealth and human rights](#) provides general information on the human rights situation in Commonwealth countries. This includes the rights of women, girls, and LGBT+ people, and estimates of modern slavery in Commonwealth countries.

The briefing also details the steps the Commonwealth can take against members who see their democratic or human rights deteriorate.

Climate change

25 of the 38 UN-member states recognised by the UN as small island developing states (SIDS) are members of the Commonwealth. SIDS are considered particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and experience significant constraints on their development, such as being remote from trade and markets.

The Commons Library briefing, [Commonwealth SIDS and climate change](#) provides information on the challenges SIDS are experiencing, Commonwealth efforts to address them, and further reading.

The monarchy and the Commonwealth

In February 2022, Queen Elizabeth II marked 70 years as Head of the Commonwealth. The Library Insight, [70 Years: The Queen's role in the Commonwealth](#) describes the Commonwealth's changing role during her reign and the role of the monarchy within it.

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