



House of Commons
International Development
Committee

**Sexual exploitation and
abuse in the aid sector:
Government response
to the Committee's
Eighth Report**

**Tenth Special Report of Session
2017–19**

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 28 November 2018*

The International Development Committee

The International Development Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for International Development and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Stephen Twigg MP](#) (*Labour (Co-op), Liverpool, West Derby*) (Chair)

[Richard Burden MP](#) (*Labour, Birmingham, Northfield*)

[Mr Nigel Evans MP](#) (*Conservative, Ribble Valley*)

[Mrs Pauline Latham OBE MP](#) (*Conservative, Mid Derbyshire*)

[Chris Law MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Dundee West*)

[Mr Ivan Lewis MP](#) (*Independent, Bury South*)

[Mark Menzies MP](#) (*Conservative, Fylde*)

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP](#) (*Labour (Co-op), Brighton, Kemptown*)

[Paul Scully MP](#) (*Conservative, Sutton and Cheam*)

[Mr Virendra Sharma MP](#) (*Labour, Ealing Southall*)

[Henry Smith MP](#) (*Conservative, Crawley*)

The following Members were also members of the Committee during the Parliament:

[James Duddridge MP](#) (*Conservative, Rochford and Southend East*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the [Committee's website](#) and in print by Order of the House. Evidence relating to this Report is published on the relevant [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Fergus Reid (Clerk), Rob Page (Second Clerk), Rachael Cox, Rebecca Usden and Louise Whitley (Committee Specialists), Alison Pickard (Senior Committee Assistant), Paul Hampson and Rowena Macdonald (Committee Assistants), and George Perry and Lucy Dargahi (Media Officers).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the International Development Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 1223; the Committee's email address is indcom@parliament.uk.

Tenth Special Report

On 31 July 2018, the International Development Committee published its Eighth Report of Session 2017–19, on *Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector* (HC 840). The Government response was received on 19 November 2018. The response is appended below.

Appendix

General Points

DFID welcomes the International Development Committee's (IDC) report into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. Aid must be delivered in a way which does no harm. For too long, the sector has failed to protect people from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment or hold perpetrators to account.

Since February, DFID has taken an international lead to ensure that tackling this issue is, and will remain, a priority for the sector. DFID has driven work that focuses on four things: to prevent incidents of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and sexual harassment from happening in the aid sector in the first place; to listen to those who are affected when it does occur; to respond robustly but sensitively; and to learn from every case.

The international summit, hosted by DFID on 18 October 2018, was a pivotal moment to galvanise the whole sector and provide a framework to drive further progress. Families of organisations presented commitments structured around four long-term fundamental objectives that will change the way the aid sector operates:

- Ensure support for survivors, victims and whistle-blowers; enhance accountability and transparency; strengthen reporting; and tackle impunity;
- Incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes;
- Adopt global standards and ensure they are met or exceeded; and
- Strengthen organisational capacity and capability across the international aid sector to meet these standards.

DFID recognises that it is important that we hold ourselves to at least as high a standard as we hold our partners. We have therefore conducted a rigorous assessment of our policies, systems and processes to make sure they provide the support needed to our staff, partners and beneficiaries. This is a long-term agenda and we will work to ensure that it remains a focus across the international system.

Response to specific IDC recommendations

- (1) *Following the International Safeguarding Conference in October 2018, DFID must display a high-level of sustained leadership and engagement on sexual exploitation and abuse. This means both driving forward change on the international stage, and ensuring that in-country offices are similarly displaying leadership at*

the national level. The Government should recognise the pivotal role that the DFID's Safeguarding Unit can play in ensuring coherence across ODA-spending departments, and should instruct the Unit to take responsibility for coordination. To display long-term commitment, and ensure sustained progress, DFID should report annually on its safeguarding activities. This report should have a particular focus on the Safeguarding Unit, tracking achievements against clear objectives.

Government position: Partially agree

DFID remains committed to providing sustained international leadership and engagement on safeguarding. We will build on the summit's outcomes, but not be limited in our ambition by them, as we push for more concerted and coordinated action across the aid sector. DFID has agreed to co-chair a working group in the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the topic. DFID country offices have already been engaging with partners locally and the Safeguarding Unit will increase its engagement with offices to support that work.

DFID can promote coherence and full coordination across ODA-spending departments, but we cannot ensure it happens given that each department is accountable for its own ODA spend. DFID's Safeguarding Unit has provided all HMG departments who spend ODA with detailed guidance on safeguarding. DFID secured support from other ODA spending departments that the UK (including the Scottish Government) - rather than just DFID - endorse the donor set of commitments which were presented to the summit.

In 2018 DFID has already increased reporting on our safeguarding activities by providing more detail in our annual report to Parliament and including two specific indicators in our Single Departmental Plan. We will consider what additional level of detail to provide through both these tools. We will need to consider the approach taken for all DFID departments whose work is not generally reported in the level of detail suggested by the recommendation.

- (2) *Donors, and in particular DFID, must provide funds to support the implementation of reporting mechanisms as well as a broader programme of initiatives to increase understanding of rights and tackle sexual and gender-based violence more widely. There must also be provision of support services for those who do come forward and report abuse. Alongside this, donors must acknowledge and communicate their understanding of the fact that an increase in the number of reports of SEA will be considered an indicator of improved reporting mechanisms.*

Government position: Partially agree

The first commitment in the document presented by 22 donors to the 18 October summit says that donors will “Wherever possible actively include beneficiaries in the design, implementation and refinement of programmes and improved complaints and feedback mechanisms that will empower individuals to come forward with the confidence that they will be heard, that their concerns will be fairly pursued, that feedback will be provided to them as soon as possible and that their safety will be of the utmost concern.” It will be up to other donors to decide if they wish to provide funds for these or similar activities.

In the past few months DFID has been funding work through the NGO working group to produce complaints handling guidance for UK NGOs. The aim is to make reporting easier and ensure reports are handled better. The draft products are referenced in BOND's commitment document presented to the 18 October summit. We also engaged with the development of new reporting advice for UK charities on criminal reporting from the Charity Commission, working with the National Crime Agency and the National Police Chief's Council, which was [published](#) by the Charity Commission on 18th October.

DFID already funds an extensive programme of initiatives to tackle sexual and gender-based violence, including the £25 million What Works research programme. At the summit DFID announced a commitment of £20 million for research funding to improve understanding of the risks people affected by conflict face, including those subjected to sexual exploitation.

At the summit DFID and the FCO announced funding to the United Nations' Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate to map the UN's approach to victim assistance and to develop a statement of victims' rights.

It is not unusual for reports of abuse to be made by independent third parties. In such situations the use of scarce resources for any provision of support services might be best directed to the survivors of abuse rather than the person reporting the abuse.

The introduction in the donor commitment document also includes the statement: "In the short- to medium-term, we expect the number of reported cases to increase as individuals become more confident to come forward, as reporting systems improve and as accountability increases. But we expect the number of cases detected or reported to decrease in the longer term, as we implement the commitments below."

- (3) *The working group must ensure that [victims' extreme vulnerability] is at the heart of any recommendations they make on improving reporting mechanisms. Recommendations should also recognise the value of a proactive approach to gathering reports, involving outreach and the creation of spaces where victims and survivors feel they can talk about abuse.*

Government Response: Agree

The working group in question produced eight outline principles as a practical framework for developing people-centred accountable feedback and reporting mechanisms capable of building a safe environment in which safeguarding concerns, in any organisation within the context of programme work, can be raised. The principles are: context specific; inclusive and accessible; empowering; consistently closing the loop; collective responsibility; impartial; do no harm; and are appropriately resourced.

Victims and survivors are at the centre of DFID's overall approach on safeguarding. DFID also recognises that victims and survivors from vulnerable groups, including children and people with disabilities, will have unique needs. DFID has actively engaged beneficiaries and victims/survivors in our overall policy thinking to ensure that their views are represented and that any new reporting guidance will have them at its heart. On 18 October DFID [published](#) the findings of a listening exercise which included a focus on reporting mechanisms and systems. Victims and survivors' voices featured strongly during the summit itself.

One of the donor group's commitments was to "Adopt a victim/survivor-centred approach to help victims and survivors to access tangible and practical help to recover from the effects of abuse, exploitation and harassment, for example, by supporting the work of the United Nations' (UN) Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA) and the UN Victims Support Trust Fund."

- (4) *Accessibility of whistleblowing systems and protections for the people who use them should be key aspects of this [systematic audit of whistleblowing practices across the sector]. The remit of the audit should go beyond an examination of what exists at the policy level, and should test the extent to which systems and protections are working effectively.*

Government response: Partially agree

DFID commissioned a report from our Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk, which mapped the evidence of the effectiveness of different approaches to allow beneficiaries, staff and others to report sexual exploitation and abuse. The report compared arms-length, in-house and other approaches, and summarised best practice on what works and why. This report was shared with the NGO working group responsible for taking forward initiatives to ensure that concerns are heard and acted upon. The NGO Working group did not feel that an audit of whistleblowing practices was necessary in addition to the review of evidence above, but did request DFID support to commission work to develop guidance on reporting procedures including work on definitions to ensure consistency about what should be reported to whom and by when. DFID supported this work, which is referenced in the response to recommendation three.

DFID's enhanced safeguarding due diligence guidance which was published on 18 October includes a focus on a partner organisation's whistleblowing policies. The guidance states that an organisation's policy should be widely understood and accessible to all staff and explicit that there can be no reprisals for the whistle blower. Example questions that an organisation may be asked include: 'Do you have a whistle-blowing policy which protects whistle blowers from reprisals and includes clear processes for dealing with concerns raised and by whom and the timelines involved?'; and 'Do you provide mandatory training on whistle-blowing to new trustees/staff/volunteers within a suitable and appropriate timeframe of them joining your organisation?' Without these policies and processes in place an organisation cannot pass the due diligence assessment.

DFID has actively engaged whistle-blowers in our policy process through our expert working group and will continue to work with them. Whistle-blowers were among the speakers and voices heard at the 18 October summit.

- (5) *DFID's Safeguarding Unit can play a role in communicating [revised guidelines on referring allegations of potential crimes to relevant national authorities] widely. The Safeguarding Unit should also set and communicate best practice standards for robust, victim-centred investigations, led by specialist investigators.*

Government response: Partially agree

The Safeguarding Unit does not have specialist investigators and so it is not for them to set standards on this issue. The DFID team that leads on receiving and responding to allegations sits within the Internal Audit Department's Counter Fraud Section. This

team has received specialist training from CHS Alliance in investigating allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and is also recruiting two additional specialist safeguarding investigators. When DFID partners receive safeguarding allegations that relate to DFID funding or could impact on DFID's reputation, they are required to report this to DFID. Although the DFID investigation team does not set best practice standards, they do review and quality assure the responses of partners on a case-by-case basis. The Internal Audit Department's Counter Fraud Section would intervene in these investigations if deemed necessary. DFID has also invested in the investigations capability of HR staff to ensure that any concerns raised internally are investigated thoroughly and managed appropriately.

The five-year Interpol pilot which DFID will support will help individuals and organisations better understand what should be reported to relevant authorities. DFID also announced at the Summit that it would support the establishment of a Resource and Support Hub to provide guidance drawing on the latest research alongside support and training to NGOs and others. This will include access to specialist investigators.

The sets of international standards which donors committed to at the summit and which they will require implementing partners to adhere to - The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Minimum Operating Standards on PSEA and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability –include best practice on leading investigations.

The new reporting advice for UK charities on criminal reporting from the Charity Commission and National Crime Agency, which DFID engaged on, also includes guidance on investigations.

- (6) *DFID should take responsibility for ensuring that safeguarding is a line in every budget for programmes where there are safeguarding risks, and should ensure that grants and contracts awarded to such programmes allow for these costs.*

Government response: Partially agree

We expect DFID partners to integrate safeguarding in their core practice and should budget for it accordingly. If, however, specific safeguarding risks are identified at a programme level which require additional safeguarding measures, these costs can also be submitted transparently as part of a programme bid. If organisations feel that they need more resources to reach the high standards that we expect on safeguarding, they should discuss it with DFID on a programme-by-programme basis. But DFID is not in a position to ensure that safeguarding is a line in every budget.

- (7) *The international aid sector, led by DFID, should create an international register of aid workers, collectively resourced and independently managed. DFID should secure commitment to this at the International Safeguarding Conference in October, with an agreed action plan for taking it forward. This plan should include consideration for how the register will be funded and managed, the level of checks required, and which types of aid workers it will be applied to.*

Government response: Partially agree

DFID has established NGO and expert working groups and a donor technical working group to inform and test policy ideas and achieve collective action on safeguarding. We

have worked through these groups to identify measures within the employment cycle which will help prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. As previously stated we do not think a standalone international register is currently feasible.

The 18 October summit saw the launch of a series of pilot measures which, if successfully rolled out, will achieve the desired effect of the proposed register – namely to deter and prevent perpetrators from entering the sector and to quickly identify and root them out if they do. These include:

- a “passport” for aid workers to prove an individual’s identity, provide background information on previous employment and vetting status;
- a new Disclosure of Misconduct Scheme across the NGO sector which will prevent known perpetrators moving around undetected; and
- a new system to improve background checks on staff who work in the aid sector piloted by Interpol, with financial support from DFID, which will also provide advice to employers on international vetting and identify high-risk individuals. This will also lead to better information sharing across borders and help close the net on criminals.

- (8) *The International Safeguarding Conference in October provides an excellent opportunity to secure commitment on a series of best practice standards with regards to referencing. These should be based on a clear statement of what information can and cannot be shared between organisations, according to data protection law, and should include the following principles: organisations should always, without exception, seek references for prospective employees and follow-up on any incomplete references; organisations should ensure that all references given to other employers have been signed off by HR or an accredited referee; and if an individual resigns mid-way through an investigation, references should highlight that this was the case.*

Government response: Agree

As mentioned above, the October summit saw commitment to important pilots related to referencing:

- a “passport” for aid workers to prove an individual’s identity, provide background information on previous employment and vetting status.
- a new Disclosure of Misconduct Scheme across the NGO sector which will prevent known perpetrators moving around undetected.

The donor set of commitments for the summit included:

- Clearly communicate requirements and best-practice guidance for the reporting of incidents, and work towards aligned reporting practices and the sharing of information. Considerations of confidentiality, the protection of relevant individuals, and relevant legislation will be central to this work.
- Review, and where necessary, renew efforts within and between aid agencies and across governments and the wider international system, to avoid the hiring

and recirculation of perpetrators in the aid sector, and to hold them to account, including by helping to bring them to justice, when appropriate, all in line with due process and relevant legal obligations.

- Ensure that relevant information about allegations, confirmed cases, prevention measures and response activities, are an integral part of reporting mechanisms, which for some donors will include annual public statements. The confidentiality of information and the safety of individuals will be paramount.
- Review, and where necessary, strengthen recruitment and referencing processes to build workplace cultures of respect and accountability, and so help prevention.

DFID has also recently updated its own referencing policy to allow us to share any ‘live’ sanctions on an employee’s record in reference requests and to disclose information to third parties if a risk assessment determines there could be a safeguarding issue.

- (9) *DFID should use the opportunity of the International Safeguarding Conference in October to secure a commitment from all aid organisations to regular assessments of culture, based on agreed indicators.*

Government response: Partially agree

Each group of organisations presented their own sets of commitments to the summit and so it was not in DFID’s gift to secure a commitment from all organisations. Having said that, DFID encouraged organisations to focus on culture by structuring the commitment documents around four strategic shifts, one of which was to “incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes.”

DFID will continue to support the UK NGO working group focused on organisational culture to develop a set of indicators for an effective safeguarding culture which organisations can use to as a benchmarking tool.

The donor commitments included: “Encourage at least annual discussion at the Board or equivalent level in all organisations of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment and how the organisation is addressing them.” That annual process could include a regular assessment of culture.

Donors also agreed to support the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to formulate a new DAC instrument that in 2019 will set standards on preventing and managing the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse in development cooperation, and drive donor accountability in meeting them. The details of that are still to be agreed, but DFID would support assessment of culture on safeguarding being assessed as part of regular DAC-led peer reviews.

- (10) *Aid organisations should report the full number of SEA allegations each year, as well as the number of allegations upheld. At the International Safeguarding Summit in October, DFID should secure commitment from all participating aid organisations that this information will be published annually.*

Government response: Partially agree

Each group of organisations presented their own sets of commitments to the summit and so it was not in DFID's gift to secure a commitment from all organisations. Having said that, DFID encouraged organisations to think along those lines by structuring the commitment documents around four strategic shifts, one of which was to "incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes."

The agreement reached at the summit among donors as reflected in their commitment document was to ensure that relevant information about allegations, confirmed cases, prevention measures and response activities, are an integral part of reporting mechanisms, which for some donors will include annual public statements.

The United Nations already publishes all reported cases of sexual exploitation and abuse across its agencies quarterly. As stated in the commitment document from the International Financial Institutions, many of them report in aggregate and anonymously on the number and types of cases of misconduct investigated to their Boards and publicly as part of their annual reports.

- (11) *Aid organisations should follow the example of the UN and aim to achieve gender parity on boards, at senior management level, and throughout the workforce. DFID should use the International Safeguarding Conference in October as an opportunity to secure commitment on this, with agreed targets and timeframes.*

Government response: Partially agree

Each group of organisations presented their own sets of commitments to the summit and so it was not in DFID's gift to secure a commitment from all organisations.

DFID itself is aiming to achieve and maintain by 2020 and onwards as close to gender parity as possible on our boards, at senior management level, and throughout our workforce to send a clear signal about the importance of gender balance and structural equality in organisations. We also commit to recruiting and promoting into leadership positions only those who can display a clear commitment to a diverse and inclusive workforce and to the rights of women and minorities.

The donor set of commitments encourage the recruitment and career development of women at the senior management level and throughout organisations to send a clear signal about the importance of gender balance and a diverse and inclusive workforce. DFID was unable to persuade all other donors to go further than that.

- (12) *The UK should urge the UN Special Coordinator on SEA to create, in consultation with both the OIOS and the individual investigative functions of the UN agencies, funds and programmes, best practice standards for investigations, which all agencies responsible for conducting investigations must follow. These standards should reflect the importance of ensuring that investigations reach a timely conclusion as well as the necessity of having investigators with specialist expertise in sexual exploitation and abuse. The Victims' Rights Advocate should work with the Special Coordinator on SEA to ensure that these standards reflect a victim-centred approach to investigations. The UK should hold agencies to account for the adoption of these best practice standards, and should encourage other States in the donor working group to do the same.*

Government response: Agree

The United Nations' documents presented to the summit reference the "Development of uniform guidelines for investigations of sexual exploitation and abuse to harmonize investigative methods and approaches across United Nations investigative bodies." The target date for completing this initiative is the fourth quarter of 2018. The documents also state that prioritising the rights and dignity of victims is the first element of the UN's overall strategy and that one of the priorities of the Victims' Rights Advocate is to ensure that a victim-centred approach is integrated into prevention and response work.

- (13) *It is imperative that all [SEA] cases referred to Member states are thoroughly investigated and brought to trial where there is a case, and that the outcome of this judicial process is communicated back to the initial complainant. The UK must lead the way and use its influence within the donor working group to ensure that other Member States do the same.*

Government response: Agree

Too many reports of sexual exploitation and abuse in the UN system continue to surface. It is the responsibility of the troop and police contributing countries to investigate and bring to justice any personnel that have SEA allegations made against them and it is the responsibility of the UN to investigate and to report to the appropriate authority any allegation of SEA made against a UN employee. The UK government supports this and regularly calls on troop and police contributing countries and the relevant authorities to take prompt action and ensure justice is delivered.

The UN's Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU) [website](#) tracks SEA allegations, and includes data on numbers of allegations, nationality, the state of play of investigations and what action is/has been taken. The UK has funded CDU activity as part of our effort to address SEA with uniformed personnel and welcome this continued transparency in reporting.

Courts in England and Wales already have jurisdiction over certain sexual offences committed by UK nationals or residents overseas where the victim is aged under 18 at the time of the offence. The UK Government recently consulted on proposals to extend extra-territorial jurisdiction to certain offences committed overseas against those aged 18 or over via the Domestic Abuse Bill, as required by the Istanbul Convention. We are currently considering the responses and will publish this later in this parliamentary session. Through the donor working group and other mechanisms, the UK will continue to share best practice with other Member States.

- (14) *The UK should ensure that the theoretical waiver of [UN] immunity also applies in practice, and should press the Secretary-General to deliver on his commitment in all cases where it applies.*

Government response: Agree

We welcome the UN Secretary General's announcement earlier this year that it does not and will not claim immunity for sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment cases, reflecting a UK government request for this in October 2017. Ending impunity is also a core theme of the UN Secretary General's Special Measures report on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and the UK is working closely with the donor technical working

group and the UN to ensure delivery and effective implementation of this strategy. The UK will encourage signatories of the Voluntary Compact, which includes commitments from both the UN and Member States on accountability measures, to review progress within the next 12 months.

- (15) *The Government must ensure that the Charity Commission is provided with sufficient resources to enable it to meet the demand created by the increase in safeguarding related incident reports.*

Government Response: Agree

The Charity Commission is a non-Ministerial Government department that is directly funded by the Treasury. DFID and other departments such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are in regular contact with the Commission as it deals with the large increase in the number of cases reported to it in 2018, including from charities funded by DFID and it continues to hold charities to account for their responses to safeguarding matters. In January 2018, the Charity Commission received a temporary £5million a year increase in funding in response to an overall increase in its regulatory work and volumes. DFID and other departments will provide views to the Treasury as requested.

- (16) *The aid sector must recognise the vital importance of establishing an independent aid ombudsman and take tangible steps towards making this a reality. DFID should play its part by ensuring that there is a sector-wide commitment on this at the International Safeguarding Conference in October and by facilitating the development of an action plan with agreed next steps for taking this forward.*

Government response: Partially agree

Since March the donor group has actively considered the idea of an international aid ombudsman. The Netherlands facilitated an independent study into the matter and circulated the final report on 17 October. It was too late at that stage to agree on next steps in time for the summit. Over the coming months DFID and other members of the donor group will examine the study and consider next steps.

- (17) *The working group looking at organisational culture must take into account the experiences of aid workers who have suffered harassment and abuse in the workplace in order to fully understand the pervasiveness of these cultures. The agreed indicators for a positive organisational culture should include the way that organisations handle the sexual harassment and abuse of staff, and this should be subject to review in the same regular assessments of organisational culture which we have advocated.*

Government response: Agree

The experiences of aid workers who have suffered harassment and abuse in the workplace has been a core part of DFID's work on safeguarding and was taken into account by the working group looking at organisational culture. DFID also did the same in preparing for the summit, including by engaging with aid workers who are victims and survivors as part of the planning and including their testimony in a video on the experience of victims and survivors.

DFID will continue to engage with the UK NGO working group focused on organisational culture to develop a set of indicators for an effective safeguarding culture which organisations can use to as a benchmarking tool. These will include reference to sexual harassment.

DFID will argue that the new DAC instrument referred to in recommendation 9 also covers sexual harassment.

(18) As we recommended in Part I, DFID should use the International Safeguarding Conference in October as an opportunity to secure commitment from aid organisations on achieving gender parity, with agreed targets and timeframes. Alongside this, organisations must commit to recruiting and promoting into leadership positions only those who can display a clear commitment to the rights of women and minorities.

Government response: Partially agree

See response to recommendation 11.

Department for International Development, October 2018