

Written Ministerial Statement

Update on Safeguarding in the Aid Sector

Following the safeguarding issues exposed through the case of Oxfam in Haiti, I am updating the House on three key areas of work DFID has undertaken.

1. Statements of assurance from UK charities and follow up on cases

All UK charities that I wrote to on 12 February have replied and provided me with a clear statement of their assurance on their organisations' safeguarding environment and policies, organisational culture, transparency and their handling of allegations and incidents.

This exercise has delivered results in terms of increasing reporting of live and historic cases to the relevant authorities. As of 5 March, 26 charities funded by DFID had made Serious Incident Reports to the Charity Commission, concerning some 80 incidents. There has also been an increased level of reporting of safeguarding concerns into DFID's 'Reporting Concerns' hotline and inbox.

I cannot provide information on live investigations, but will keep the House informed on developments with partners and with regard to DFID's internal case review.

Writing to UK charities was the first stage in a broader process, which also includes requesting assurances from our top 30 suppliers, 43 multilateral organisations and other partners. Assurances received are a first step, but do not constitute a final conclusion by my Department on the quality of safeguarding. We will test this further through the measures I announced at the Safeguarding Summit held on 5 March and set out below.

A high-level summary of the returns from UK charities and a list of organisations we have written to will be published on gov.uk today.

2. Safeguarding Summit follow up

On 5 March, DFID co-hosted a Safeguarding Summit with the Charity Commission where I challenged UK charities to drive up standards and ensure that the aid sector protects the people it serves. As a result a number of actions were agreed. These include immediate short-term measures and longer term initiatives.

Four working groups, including civil society and independent experts, have been established and are meeting this week to refine and test ideas further. They will report back on concrete actions in time for the international Safeguarding Conference that the UK will host this autumn. The working groups are taking forward the following areas:

- Accountability to beneficiaries and survivors - prioritising those who have suffered and survived exploitation, abuse and violence, and designing systems of accountability and transparency that have beneficiaries at their centre;

- How the aid sector can demonstrate a step change in shifting organisational culture to tackle power imbalances and gender inequality;
- Ensuring that safeguards are integrated throughout the employment cycle, including work on the proposal for a global register / passport; and
- Ensuring full accountability through rigorous reporting and complaints mechanisms, and ensure that concerns are heard and acted on.

At the Summit, I announced new, enhanced and specific safeguarding Due Diligence standards for all organisations that DFID works with. These are being piloted from this week and will be rolled out shortly. No new funds will be approved to organisations unless they pass these new standards, which will be integrated into DFID's Due Diligence Assessments, Supply Partner Code of Conduct and ongoing programme management and compliance checking processes.

Major UK charities, the Charity Commission and DFID agreed on initiatives to be taken forward to improve safeguarding standards - including immediate short term measures, and longer term initiatives to be developed in the coming weeks and months. These include:

- Exploring an international safeguarding centre to support organisations to implement best practice on safeguarding and maximise transparency in the sector. This could include conducting safeguarding reviews, offering guidance and support to organisations, and a deployable team of experts on sexual exploitation and abuse who can advise organisations on the ground.
- Carrying out an urgent review of referencing in the sector. The summit agreed that vetting and referencing standards are required for: UK-based staff; international staff; locally-employed staff – to ensure no offender can fall through the cracks.
- Planning for a systematic audit of whistleblowing practices across the sector to ensure individuals feel able to report offences, and developing and implementing mandatory standards which would make organisations accountable to beneficiaries – ensuring those receiving aid are able to identify and raise concerns.
- Making annual reports more transparent, with specific information published on safeguarding including the number of cases, and carrying out mandatory inductions on safeguarding for all staff to ensure any issues are identified and acted upon.
- Establishing clear guidelines for referring incidents, allegations and offenders to relevant authorities - including the National Crime Agency.

The Summit agreed a Joint Statement which is on the Bond and gov.uk websites.

DFID is now building on the 5 March Summit outcomes and working with a wide range of stakeholders, including other nations, to shape and deliver an ambitious agenda for the Safeguarding Conference to be held later this year.

3. Driving up standards in the UN and multilateral organisations

I have written jointly with the Foreign Secretary and with the support of other donor countries to the UN Secretary-General.

Last week, I was in New York to speak at the Commission of the Status of Women to highlight that we will only prevent sexual exploitation and abuse and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, if we deliver our commitments on gender equality.

I hosted a roundtable and held meetings with senior UN partners, calling for a step change across all constituent parts of the UN to ensure they put beneficiaries first, shift their organisational culture, integrate safeguards throughout the employment cycle and ensure that there are robust systems for reporting, complaints and whistleblowing. I challenged the UN to set out concrete actions to take this forward.

I will take this message to other multilateral organisations at the Spring Meetings next month.

A donor group has been established to capitalise on our collective leverage to deliver changes across the international aid sector at the Safeguarding Conference.

I am determined that the UK will continue to lead this agenda to drive up safeguarding standards across the sector and keep people safe from harm.