

Government response: Regulator welcomes International Development Committee report into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector

The Charity Commission welcomes the findings and publication of the International Development Committee's report 'Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector' (eighth report of session 2017-19).

Michelle Russell, Director of Investigations, Monitoring and Enforcement at the Charity Commission said:

The Commission welcomes the findings of the International Development Committee's report into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector.

We are clear that sexual exploitation and abuse, and any other behaviours that put beneficiaries, staff, volunteers and members of the public at risk, have absolutely no place in charity. We are pleased that the report makes a number of helpful suggestions to the sector as to how these can be stamped out. We take safeguarding extremely seriously. Our role is to hold all charities, including those working in the international aid sector, to account for the way they fulfil their duties in keeping people safe.

But the charity sector must go further than simply box-ticking against their legal duties or improving processes and policies. We are particularly pleased to see the Committee's focus on the responsibility of charity leaders to set an organisational culture that demonstrates zero tolerance for abuse.

Charities should be judged not just by what they do or achieve, but how they go about it. Our research shows that the public expect charities to demonstrate the highest standards are met through everything they do. In the context of safeguarding this means creating safe and trusted environments, including for victims to come forward if abuse does occur, and being transparent with us as the regulator, and the public where appropriate, when things go wrong. It is time for charities and their leadership to fully confront these issues with a real commitment to lasting and demonstrable change.

We are pleased that the Committee recognises our crucial role in monitoring and upholding standards on safeguarding in charities,

and welcome the Committee's recommendation that the Commission should be properly resourced to meet these challenges. We will continue to work with government to ensure we are adequately resourced to meet future challenges.

Responding to some of the key recommendations and themes raised in the Committee report, the Commission said:

Improving reporting

We welcome the Committee's focus on transparency from charities, by recommending an increase in the quality and quantity of reports of serious incidents. We expect all charities to report serious incidents to the Commission. The considerable increase in the number of safeguarding reports received this year shows that there was, as we had consistently warned, historic under-reporting and we remain concerned that there is still inadequate and inconsistent reporting of serious incidents across the charitable sector.

We are particularly pleased with the Committee's focus on the need for a sector-wide approach to reporting, in order to ensure the whole sector takes responsibility for exploitation and abuse that occurs through its service delivery. The Committee acknowledges, and we agree, that an increase in the number of reports should be considered an indicator of improved reporting mechanisms, and provides an opportunity for the sector to improve.

Commission's funding

We are pleased that the Committee has understood the important role that the Commission plays in holding to account charities for their decisions, governance and oversight of the people they are responsible for keeping safe.

We are pleased that the Committee recognising the challenges faced by the Commission with an ever increasing demand on our services, including from an increase in safeguarding related incident reports, and the need for the Commission to be resourced to meet public expectations.

We will continue to work with government to ensure we are adequately resourced to meet future challenges.

Organisational culture and sector leadership

We are particularly pleased to see the Committee's focus on the responsibility of charity leaders to set an organisational culture

that prioritises transparency and has zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse, at all levels of the organisation. We are clear that charities must live their values, and demonstrate clearly to the public how they ensure the safety of their beneficiaries, staff, volunteers and members of the public.

We agree whole-heartedly with the Committee's focus on the need for charity leaders to show ethical leadership and to set and uphold an organisation's values. The Committee calls on the Commission to penalise charities where there is a failure to do this, something that we already take extremely seriously in our regulatory engagement with charities.

We are also pleased to see the Committee's recognition of the need for gender balance in the sector's leadership, and the connection they have made between diversity and the ability to challenge and change cultures. The Commission's own research demonstrates that trustee boards are not reflective of the communities charities serve, with men outnumbering women two to one; the Committee's report adds to an already compelling case for the sector to address this.

Resources for safeguarding

We are pleased that the Committee highlighted the importance of donors considering the resource implications of statutory safeguarding and keeping people safe, when offering grants. As we said during oral evidence, the Commission is clear that the costs associated with keeping people safe is a fundamental part of delivering a high quality, safe, front-line service.

International Aid Sector Ombudsman

We recognised in our evidence that, by virtue of the size, complexity and multi-jurisdictional nature of the aid sector, there are a number of regulatory gaps that must be addressed in order to ensure victims and survivors of exploitation and abuse have a right to recourse. We note with interest therefore the Committee's recommendation of the creation of an international aid ombudsman in order to provide access to further recourse to justice to victims and survivors of exploitation and abuse. It is beyond the Commission's remit and role to investigate individual complaints of abuse – our role is focus on a charity's governance and trustees' compliance with their duties – and acknowledge therefore the potential for an organisation to provide a right of appeal and an avenue for victims and survivors. We stand ready to work together with government, the charity sector and the broader international aid sector, if this recommendation is taken forwards.

Next steps

We are pleased to have worked closely with DFID to help ensure charities learn the wider lessons, following to the allegations that surfaced in February. The International Safeguarding Conference in October provides another focal point for the charitable sector to come together to demonstrate their commitment to change. We have worked significantly to ensure alignment of this work with the international aid sector, with the UK charitable sector, particularly on improving safeguarding standards and practices, including on organisational culture.

Notes to editors

1. The Commission's approach to safeguarding and action taken prior to the allegations being published in February, are set out in our [written evidence](#) to the Inquiry.
2. We recently published an update on the work of our safeguarding taskforce, which is available on [GOV.UK](#).
3. In December 2017 we issued a [regulatory alert](#) to charities around safeguarding.
4. The Charity Commission is the independent regulator of charities in England and Wales. To find out more about our work, see the [about us](#) page on GOV.UK.