

[Press release: Charity Commission reports on inquiry into Oxfam GB: “No charity is more important than the people it serves or the mission it pursues”](#)

Charity Commission publishes critical report on Oxfam GB, finding that aspects of the charity’s past record on safeguarding amount to mismanagement, and takes regulatory action.

Charities are being warned that no charity is more important than the people it serves or the mission it pursues, and that all are judged on their actions, not their words.

It comes as the [regulator publishes a critical report on Oxfam GB](#), and finds that the charity repeatedly fell below standards expected, had a culture of tolerating poor behaviour, and concludes that it failed to meet promises made on safeguarding, ultimately letting everyone down.

The inquiry finds the charity failed to heed warnings, including from its own staff, that its culture and response around keeping people safe was inadequate, and made commitments to safeguarding that were not matched by its actions.

The report, which takes into account over 7,000 items of evidence, examines the charity’s handling of events in Haiti, and separately its more recent record on protecting people, including its beneficiaries, volunteers and staff, from harm.

It concludes that some of the charity’s failings and shortcomings amount to mismanagement, and the Commission has used its powers to issue Oxfam GB with an Official Warning, and Directions under Section 84 of the Charities Act 2011.

“Missed opportunities and a flawed response” – Oxfam GB and Haiti 2011

The regulator finds that the then executive of Oxfam GB mishandled aspects of its response to allegations of misconduct in Haiti in 2011.

Overall, the Commission concludes that there had been a “culture of poor behaviour” and poor accountability among staff in Haiti at the time, of which individuals took advantage.

The Commission also finds that the charity’s reports to donors and the Commission itself were “not as full and frank about the nature and

seriousness of the incidents and problems in Haiti as they should have been". The inquiry's view is that Oxfam GB's approach to disclosure and reporting was marked, at times, by a desire to protect the charity's reputation and donor relationships.

Specifically, the inquiry found that the charity:

- did not adequately follow-up whether victims of sexual misconduct in Haiti were minors
- did not report allegations of child abuse by Oxfam GB staff in Haiti, failing to take the risks to alleged victims seriously enough
- dealt with staff members implicated in sexual misconduct in Haiti inconsistently, notably by appearing to treat senior staff more leniently than junior staff
- missed opportunities to identify and tackle early warnings before the events in Haiti in 2011

"Repeatedly failed to meet promises made"— Oxfam GB's wider record on safeguarding

The inquiry also examined Oxfam GB's wider approach to safeguarding, historically, and more recently, and concluded that the charity's own commitments and promises in the past were not always matched by its actions.

It says this results from its leadership, up to 2018, applying insufficient resources to keeping people safe from harm, and concludes that this and other systemic weaknesses amount to mismanagement in the administration of charity.

The inquiry also finds the charity missed opportunities to address issues raised by its own safeguarding staff, and exposed the charity to undue risk.

Specifically, the inquiry finds that:

- resourcing and capability around safeguarding at the charity between 2015 to 2017 did not match the risks associated with the charity's global reach and the nature of its work
- the charity's approach to safeguarding case work was at times unstructured and a lack of adequate assurance and oversight mechanisms meant trustees were unable to identify serious failures in case handling, including poor record keeping, failings of which the inquiry is "extremely critical"
- weaknesses in the charity's HR practices prior to 2018, particularly concerning problems around vetting and referencing and management oversight, led to a 'culture of tolerance of poor behaviour'
- as late as 2017, promises that the resources for safeguarding would be increased were not delivered

Helen Stephenson, Chief Executive of the Charity Commission, said the regulator's findings demonstrate that the incidents in Haiti were symptoms of a wider problem:

What went wrong in Haiti did not happen in isolation. Our inquiry demonstrates that, over a period of years, Oxfam's internal culture tolerated poor behaviour, and at times lost sight of the values it stands for.

The charity's leadership may have been well-intentioned. But our report demonstrates that good intentions have limited value when they are not matched with resources, robust systems and processes that are implemented on the ground, and more importantly, an organisational culture that prioritises keeping people safe.

I would like to thank the whistleblowers in this case, who took the courageous decision to come to us with their concerns. Their contribution has made, and will continue to make, an important difference.

She added that there is continued hard work ahead for Oxfam GB:

The charity's new leadership has acknowledged past mistakes and committed publicly to learning the lessons.

But significant further cultural and systemic change is required to address the failings and weaknesses our report identifies. And so the conclusion of our inquiry marks the beginning, not the end of the process of change for Oxfam GB. Its leadership has hard work ahead of it. We will be watching their progress closely in the weeks and months ahead.

In a foreword to the report, Baroness Stowell, Chair of the Charity Commission, says no charity is more important than the mission it pursues or the people it serves:

No charity is so large, nor is its mission so important that it can afford to put its own reputation ahead of the dignity and wellbeing of those it exists to protect. But the implications of this inquiry are not confined to the failings of a single, big charity, because no charity is too small to bear its own share of responsibility for upholding the wider good name of charity.

Ultimately being a charity is more than just about what you do, it is also about the way in which you do it. The Charity Commission is determined to reassure the public that it understands this fundamental point and will work with the sector it regulates to demonstrate that fact in the months and years ahead.

Regulatory action and next steps

On 7 June 2019, the Commission exercised its legal powers and issued an

official warning under section 75A of the Charities Act 2011 on the grounds there has been some areas of mismanagement in relation to Haiti and its safeguarding governance prior to 2018.

The action will give the public assurance the charity was being held to account for past failings, corporately and collectively and also assist in giving confidence to current and potential donors and funders that there has been sanction for previous failings where the charity has fallen short on safeguarding.

The inquiry concludes that the charity, through its leadership, has made significant progress in improving weaknesses in its safeguarding, but makes clear that “significant further cultural and systemic change” is required to address fully the failings and weaknesses identified.

Therefore, on 10 June 2019, the Commission exercised additional legal powers and issued Oxfam GB with a regulatory Direction under Section 84 of the Charities Act 2011. The order directed the trustees to take specified actions including to submit an action plan for the Commission’s approval by 30 June 2019, which will set out the steps by which it will implement the outstanding actions and recommendations required by the Commission. The direction will provide the regulator assurance that the charity will implement the outstanding actions necessary.

In closing the inquiry the Commission provided general regulatory advice and guidance under Section 15(2) of the Act in relation to trustee duties on safeguarding and trustee duties.

Background to the inquiry

The Commission’s statutory inquiry into Oxfam GB opened in February 2018, after the regulator examined documents shared by the charity regarding allegations of misconduct by staff involved in its humanitarian response in Haiti.

The Commission was, at that time, already engaged with Oxfam GB on safeguarding matters, and in November 2017 had issued the charity with an action plan setting out a range of actions the charity was required to undertake, including an externally led review of its HR culture, and a review of the organisation’s structures, management reporting lines, and resourcing.

Notes to editors:

1. The Commission’s investigation opened in February 2018, to examine the charity’s governance, including leadership and culture around safeguarding matters, and its management, policies and practices. The inquiry consisted of two parts; the first examined the charity’s handling in 2011 of the complaints about its staff in Haiti; the second part examined Oxfam GB’s wider approach to safeguarding, historically, and currently, which included supervising an independent review around safeguarding in the charity.

Ends.