

Press release: Mordaunt leads aid sector action on sexual exploitation at landmark summit

The Department for International Development and the Charity Commission will co-host a safeguarding summit today (Monday 5 March) to bring together UK international development charities, regulatory bodies and independent experts to commit to drive up safeguarding standards and take bold steps to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse within charities and by staff abroad.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt has tasked the delegates to come up with a series of actions to address the shortcomings in the aid sector. Some of the ideas to be discussed at the summit include:

- Introducing new standards for vetting and referencing across the sector.
- Ensuring whistle-blowers and survivors of exploitation and abuse get the counselling and support they need.
- Creating an independent body to promote external scrutiny and ensure the highest possible standards across the aid sector.
- Changing organisational culture to tackle power imbalances, encourage reporting, take allegations seriously and hold people to account.

NGOs and charities in attendance will sign a joint statement setting out the key principles they will adhere to, and agree on a set of practical actions to take forward. This summit will speed up the process of improving standards and restoring full trust following the allegations that have come to light since early February.

Speaking ahead of the event, International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said:

Now is the time for action. The aid sector needs to ensure it is meeting its duty of care to the world's most vulnerable people. It needs to be honest about past mistakes. It must do all it can to win back the trust of the British public.

This summit is a crucial moment to learn lessons from the past and drive up standards across the sector.

Today, we begin taking the practical steps to ensure the safety of the people we help is always our first priority and that the British aid sector sets the standard for the rest of the world to follow.

In a strong statement to Parliament following the Oxfam scandal, Ms Mordaunt set out how the public must be able to trust organisations, not only to do all they can to prevent harm, but to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing when they occur.

Baroness Stowell, Chair of the Charity Commission added:

The recent accounts of sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector are deeply distressing. Not only have some aid workers abused the people they were sent to support, but by not exposing and responding to these serious failings properly at the time, charities have betrayed the public's trust in what the word charity actually means.

I am encouraged to see leaders of international aid agencies coming together at today's summit with a firm commitment to bringing about cultural change in charities and making the protection of people their top priority. The Charity Commission will work constructively with charities to identify practical changes and help make them work.

But however noble the cause, it will never justify means which fall below basic standards of conduct expected of any organisation. And if we are to restore public trust and the nation's pride in what charities achieve, we have to show that's what we understand.

The points raised at the summit will be taken to a wide-ranging global safeguarding conference later in the year to drive action across the whole international aid sector.

This summit will build upon the action already taken by DFID in response to allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector, including:

- Establishing a new Safeguarding Unit in DFID to urgently review safeguarding across all parts of the aid sector and catalyse further action to ensure everything is being done to protect people from harm, including sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Appointing Sheila Drew Smith, a recent member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, to bring her expertise to support DFID's ambition on safeguarding. She will report to the Secretary of State directly and will Chair the Safeguarding Summit.

- Writing to every UK charity that receives UK aid insisting that they set out the steps they are taking to ensure their safeguarding policies are fully in place and confirm they have referred all concerns they have about specific cases and individuals to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities. A similar request has been sent to non-UK charities and other DFID suppliers, including those in the private sector.
- Agreeing with Oxfam that they will withdraw from bidding for any new UK Government funding until DFID is satisfied that they can meet the high standards we expect of our partners.
- Continuing to work with UN Secretary-General António Guterres to stop abuses under the UN flag and we have introduced specific clauses in our funding agreements with a number of UN agencies to take every action possible to prevent all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse and take robust and prompt action in response to any allegations.
- Reviewing any allegations of sexual misconduct involving DFID staff, which will conclude shortly.

Notes to editors

- On 12 February, the International Development Secretary announced a series of actions to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. The fourth of the five actions was “to co-host a safeguarding summit with the Charity Commission to agree a set of actions to strengthen safeguarding processes and mechanisms, including around staffing and recruitment.”
- In a statement to Parliament on 20 February, International Development Secretary committed DFID to a review of reported allegations of sexual misconduct involving DFID staff and delivery partners. That is due to report back by Tuesday 6 March.
- The International Development Secretary has written to every UK charity working overseas that receives UK aid—192 letters to 179 organisations—insisting that they spell out the steps they are taking to ensure that their safeguarding policies are fully in place, and that they confirm that they have referred all concerns they have about specific cases and individuals to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities.
- The Charity Commission opened a statutory inquiry into Oxfam on 12 February after it examined documents sent by Oxfam regarding allegations of misconduct by staff involved in its humanitarian response in Haiti. The Commission has concerns that Oxfam may not have fully and frankly disclosed material details about the allegations at the time in 2011, its handling of the incidents since, and the impact that these have both had on public trust and confidence. Details on the scope of the inquiry is available [here](#)
- The Charity Commission has [announced a suite of measures](#) to help ensure charities learn the wider lessons from recent safeguarding revelations involving Oxfam and other charities, and to strengthen public trust and confidence in charities. This includes a new Charity Commission taskforce to handle the recent increase in safeguarding incident reports.

