

FCDO Progress Report on Safeguarding Against Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH) in the International Aid Sector, 2019-20

A summary of work by FCDO between October 2019 and October 2020 to improve global standards and performance on safeguarding against SEAH in the international aid sector.



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Overview

Since February 2018, the UK has played a leading role in pushing for improved global standards and performance on safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) in the international aid sector. In October 2018, the UK hosted an international Safeguarding Summit, *Putting People First: tackling sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in the aid sector*. At the summit, 22 donors presented a set of donor commitments on SEAH, designed to bring about four long-term strategic shifts:

1. Ensure support for survivors, victims and whistle-blowers, enhance accountability and transparency, strengthen reporting and tackle impunity;
2. Incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes;
3. Agree minimum standards and ensure we and our partners meet them;
4. Strengthen organisational capacity and capability across the international aid sector, including building the capability of implementing partners to meet the minimum standards.

All UK Government Departments who spend Official Development Assistance (ODA) signed up to the donor commitments. Each department is responsible for its own ODA spend and translating these commitments into action. All UK ODA-spending departments agreed a strategy on tackling in SEAH in the international aid sector which was published in September 2020.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) merged on 2 September 2020, creating the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Safeguarding remains a top priority at FCDO and the department engages across Whitehall to ensure a co-ordinated and, where appropriate, consistent approach to safeguarding against SEAH in the international aid sector, convening quarterly meetings to share lessons and guidance with other departments. This report from the FCDO covers progress in the period before the merger and ongoing work as FCDO.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed challenges for the aid sector, delaying some safeguarding initiatives and forcing organisations to rapidly adapt. Evidence shows that the risk of SEAH increases during emergencies. At the same time, restrictions on movement make it harder to report concerns, engage with beneficiaries and communities, investigate cases, and provide support to victims and survivors. Despite these challenges, progress has continued to be made.

The sections below highlight work carried out by DFID and now FCDO over the past 12 months to take forward the donor commitments. That work has built on the foundations laid the previous year, with some significant progress achieved and solid plans in place for the year ahead. FCDO's work and that of others in the aid sector is having a positive impact, but more is required from us all in order to stop sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the aid sector. We continue to work diligently towards this goal.

Strategic Shift 1

Ensure support for survivors, victims and whistle-blowers; enhance accountability and transparency; strengthen reporting; tackle impunity

FCDO is committed to taking a survivor-centred approach to safeguarding. This means putting the victims' or survivors' needs at the centre of our thinking, based on principles of safety, confidentiality, respect and non-discrimination. We must collectively keep working to ensure any individual feels able to speak up and challenge abuses of power.

Progress Highlights

FCDO has finalised a new programme to support victims and survivors of SEAH. It will improve support to victims and survivors at all stages of responding to an SEAH case, from reporting concerns, to safe and trusted investigations, to support services. Consultations for the programme included survivors of SEAH, their representatives, and the broader aid sector. The programme will begin in 2020 and run for an initial two years.

FCDO is taking steps to prevent perpetrators of SEAH from moving around the sector. Project Soteria, a UK-funded programme with INTERPOL to strengthen vetting of potential aid workers, will start implementation in 2021. FCDO is supporting the [Misconduct Disclosure Scheme](#) (MDS), run by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response. In 2019, the MDS received over 2,900 requests for misconduct data, of which 2,100 received responses, and prevented 36 people from being hired. FCDO is collaborating with an expert steering committee to develop an Aid Worker Registration Scheme to verify aid workers' identities and work history. We have mapped similar systems, completed a legal review and consultation, and plan to pilot the Scheme in 2021.

FCDO's Independent Reference Group (IRG) continues to guide and challenge our safeguarding work. The group, established in 2019, meets quarterly and includes survivors of SEAH, survivor representatives and experts on working with vulnerable groups (e.g. children, people with disabilities). FCDO convenes sub-groups of IRG members to discuss specific topics in depth, including support to victims and survivors.

FCDO funded the UN Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate (OVRA) to develop a Statement of Victims' Rights. The statement will clearly define victims' rights and victim-centred approaches to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse, serving as a reference for all personnel working under the UN flag. It is due to be adopted by the High-level Steering Group in December 2020. FCDO also supported OVRA to [map SEAH services](#) in 13 countries to inform survivor responses.

Safeguarding concerns reported to FCDO (formerly DFID) have increased. We see this as an indicator that there is greater confidence in FCDO's reporting and investigation systems. Since early 2018, we have made clear that partners must report credible suspicions and actual allegations of abuse, including SEAH. Since then, the number of safeguarding concerns reported to FCDO's Safeguarding Investigation Team by implementing partners has increased from 73 in 2017-18 to 452 in 2019-20. Approximately two thirds of allegations in 2019-20 related to SEAH. We continue to reiterate that partners must have effective reporting mechanisms in place, and that these should be publicised and accessible to beneficiaries and staff.

Strategic Shift 2

Incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes

The causes of SEAH are rooted in power imbalances, including inequality and discrimination resulting from gender, disability, sexual orientation, poverty and ethnicity, among others. We must tackle underlying inequalities within our organisations and the communities in which we work. At FCDO, this starts with setting the tone from the top and ensuring staff understand that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

Progress Highlights

FCDO has a Safeguarding Champion on its board. This position is held by Professor Charlotte Watts, Chief Scientific Adviser and a well-respected academic in the area of gender-based violence. The Safeguarding Champion chairs quarterly Safeguarding Delivery Board meetings, attended by seniors from across FCDO, to oversee delivery against our priorities and commitments on safeguarding against SEAH. During the past year the DFID Management Board had two substantive discussions about safeguarding and monitored related risks on a monthly basis.

FCDO is funding the UK NGO alliance Bond to develop a digital leadership and culture tool. Building on leadership and culture guidance developed by Bond and a group of NGOs in 2019, the digital tool will support leaders of aid organisations to assess and improve their safeguarding culture through facilitated discussions with staff. The tool is due to be published on the Bond website by the end of 2020.

The UK continues to Chair the donor Technical Working Group to progress donor [commitments made at the international summit in 2018](#), as well as the [DAC Recommendation on Ending SEAH in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#).¹ Donors meet quarterly to collaborate and update each other on progress.

The UK is a member of the UN Secretary General's Circle of Leadership and a signatory to the [Voluntary Compact](#) on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Alongside other Member States, the UK uses its position on UN Executive Boards to encourage continued focus on SEAH and drive progress, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have authored or contributed to multiple donor statements on SEAH to UN Executive Boards in the past year.

The Civil Service published [Gender Pay Gap statistics](#) for 2020. As at March 2020, there had been encouraging improvements across most measures for DFID with a reduction in both the median hourly pay gap, from 8.4% to 5.6%, and the mean, from 7.2% to 5.9%. Over the last four years, both DFID and FCO saw fluctuations but an overall steady reduction in the gender pay gap. There is still more work to be done and the FCDO is committed to closing the gender pay gap as it reviews terms and conditions in the new department.

¹ The Recommendation was adopted in July 2019 by the 30 members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Development Assistance Committee (DAC). DAC members provided combined aid of approximately \$150 billion in 2019.

Strategic Shift 3

Adopt minimum standards, and ensure we and our partners meet them

FCDO works with organisations across the aid sector, including other donors, the UN, NGOs, private sector and others, to align approaches, share lessons, and ensure that our partners adhere to internationally agreed minimum standards on SEAH.²

Progress Highlights

The UK launched a strategy on safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the aid sector. The new strategy builds on commitments made at the London Safeguarding Summit in October 2018 and applies to all UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) spend. The strategy requires all organisations funded by UK ODA to have robust measures in place to prevent and respond to SEAH, and makes explicit the UK's zero-tolerance approach to mishandling of SEAH.

The UK and 14 other donors³ have developed aligned language on SEAH for funding agreements with multilaterals. The language commits partners to zero tolerance for inaction to tackling SEAH and requires them to apply the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and adhere to the IASC Minimum Operating Standards on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and/or the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). It also commits multilateral partners to take a survivor-centred approach and report any SEAH concerns to donors. The language has been presented through a joint letter to the UN Chief Executives Board, noting the intention to apply it to future funding agreements.

The FCDO holds itself to the same high standards we require of others. We require staff to meet the highest standards of conduct. FCDO has adopted the six standards of the UN Secretary General's Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

FCDO is funding the CHS Alliance's revision of the CHS Index on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment, and the accompanying guidance. These will be launched in October 2020 and will significantly strengthen the CHS standard, specifically on SEAH prevention and response.

The UK is implementing the DAC Recommendation on Ending SEAH in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance. We continue to co-chair the related Reference Group (with Australia and Portugal), supporting the DAC Secretariat to implement the Recommendation action plan. DAC peer reviews help track members' progress. The UK was peer-reviewed by the DAC in 2020, submitted a progress report to the DAC Secretariat on implementation actions up to September 2020, and continues to participate in DAC initiatives that review SEAH progress.

² [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) and [Interagency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Minimum Operating Standards for PSEA](#).

³ Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, USA

Strategic Shift 4

Strengthen organisational capacity and capability across the international aid sector, including building the capability of implementing partners to meet the minimum standards

Safeguarding remains a priority for FCDO. We want to raise safeguarding capability across the sector to ensure that our partners take all reasonable steps to tackle SEAH. We continue to improve our own policies and procedures, and will facilitate the sharing of lessons and guidance with others, including via our [Resource and Support Hub](#).

Progress Highlights

FCDO is boosting staff capability to prevent and respond to SEAH. We launched a support package in January 2020 for FCDO's overseas network, initially focusing on three countries. FCDO's Safeguarding Champions Network, also launched January 2020, has more than 60 members in the UK and overseas. The network holds bi-monthly calls to boost safeguarding knowledge, facilitate conversations and share best practice. FCDO has developed [guidance](#) on safeguarding in programmes during COVID-19. Two safeguarding training modules were rolled out in 2019.

The UK-funded [Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub](#) provides guidance, tools and analysis for the sector – The Hub creates opportunities for engagement through communities of practice, webinars, discussion forums and live events. It has an associated [national hub](#) based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to quality assure local safeguarding service providers and build safeguarding capacity of locally-based civil society organisations. Further national hubs are planned in Nigeria and South Sudan.

FCDO completed [safeguarding-specific assessments](#) of 31 civil society partners. We funded Keeping Children Safe (KCS) to assess civil society organisations (CSOs) against the six pillars of FCDO's Enhanced Safeguarding Due Diligence. The assessments included specific recommendations, which the organisations have agreed to implement. Between them, the CSOs assessed account for over £2 billion of UK aid funding and deliver UK-funded programmes in more than 30 countries.

FCDO funded advanced safeguarding leadership training through the Open University. The interactive training for safeguarding leads in humanitarian and international development organisations will be made available via three Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Open University are working with Bond and CHS Alliance to develop the curriculum, with input from the wider sector.

FCDO engages across the sector to make progress on commitments made at the 2018 Safeguarding Summit. The Cross-Sector Safeguarding Steering Group (CSSG), which includes the groups and organisations that made commitments at the summit, meets quarterly to discuss best practice, opportunities and challenges. The CSSG published a progress report in October 2020. FCDO meets quarterly with other donors and ODA-spending UK government departments to share lessons and align approaches to tackling SEAH. We are funding staff in UK NGO alliance Bond and British Expertise to support civil society organisations and private sector suppliers to improve safeguarding and implement their summit commitments.

5. Next Steps

Over the coming year, one priority for FCDO will be to implement the new UK SEAH strategy.

Of the many priorities for learning, one of the biggest challenges for the aid sector relates to understanding and implementing survivor-centred approaches. Our new programme on support to victims and survivors of SEAH will help address this challenge, alongside work we are doing with the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate at the UN, and guidance and tools provided through the Resource and Support Hub.

Another major challenge is the lack of data on SEAH across the aid sector. Under-reporting by survivors and many organisations' reluctance to publish information on the number and types of allegations received through reporting channels hampers efforts to analyse trends and effectively support prevention and response efforts. The FCDO will work with its partners in the coming year to explore ways to improve data collection, data management and reporting systems, with the aim of improving coherence, transparency and accountability in tackling SEAH and supporting victims and survivors.

Credible, independent and impartial investigations into SEAH allegations are critical to tackling the problem and providing support and justice for victims and survivors. There is a dearth of experienced SEAH investigators in the aid sector and, while some training programmes exist, there is no standard qualification for SEAH investigators. FCDO will fund the CHS Alliance, in partnership with Humentum, to develop, test and pilot a four-tiered investigator qualification, to ISO standards, between 2020 and 2022.

Strengthening the employment cycle to prevent perpetrators from moving around the aid sector is a continuing priority and will be facilitated through our work with INTERPOL, the Aid Worker Registration Scheme and the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.