

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector, HC 840

Tuesday 22 May 2018

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Mr Nigel Evans; Mrs Pauline Latham; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Paul Scully; Henry Smith.

Questions 284 - 361

Witnesses

I: Sir Alan Parker, former Chairman of Save the Children International.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Alan Parker.

Q284 **Chair:** Good morning everyone. This is a public evidence session as part of the International Development Committee's inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector. Before we start and in the interests of transparency, I should declare that I know both Brendan Cox and Justin Forsyth.

Sir Alan, thank you for joining us here today. You were the chairman of Save the Children International until last month. Can you tell us what your specific responsibilities were in this role regarding staff complaints and related proceedings?

Sir Alan Parker: Thank you. I was indeed chairman. I have held quite a number of roles across the sector over many decades. I was very proud to be serving Save the Children, both as chairman of Save the Children UK and then later as chairman of Save the Children Association and Save the Children International. They are incredibly important organisations, not just because of the important work they do for children around the world but because they should represent the best of the British aid sector, which is something we are world class at. They do an incredibly important job as an expression of the generosity and decency of this country around the world.

It is therefore deeply saddening when they fall short on any standards at all, and I am afraid we have fallen short in a number of cases. These were when I was chairman of Save the Children UK. There were apologies at the time, but I would like to take this opportunity to apologise again personally, unreservedly, and on behalf of the organisation. I am not sure that apology is enough. We have done a lot of work—I care deeply about this—to try to make sure these sorts of failings never happen again. We were dealing with issues in our head office in Clerkenwell, but there are wider issues here. That is why I absolutely applaud the work of this Committee and the time and commitment I know you have put in to try to make sure this sector, not just Save the Children, is more robust on all of these matters. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say that up front.

Being chairman is obviously a very important role. You are in many ways the same as any other trustee, but you do lead the board. One of the most important things is looking at the organisation to see whether it has the right processes, whether it has the right procedures in place, and whether it can deal with things as they come. It is not to be an executive; it is very clearly not that. It is a governance role in that way, but it is to support the executive and, if we do not get things right, to move accordingly. That has been the guidance I have always tried to



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hold as chairman of any one of the organisations within Save the Children of which I was chairman.

Q285 **Chair:** Did you see it as part of your role to ensure that staff members felt protected by their employer in cases of either sexual harassment or sexual abuse?

Sir Alan Parker: Absolutely. I have to say that we put a huge amount of effort into child protection over the period of time and over the last decade that I have been involved. In recent times, over the last few years, we have put a lot more effort into workplace conduct and the issues of sexual harassment within the organisation and how we protect and support everybody within the organisation better.

There is a very interesting wider position for the sector, which is that a lot of staff are put under extreme duress at certain times, both in terms of hard work in the office and also around the world in the field, and we absolutely have to have the highest standards in all places at all times. We have to look at how that is done. It is absolutely part of it.

Q286 **Mrs Latham:** What you say sounds absolutely right. During your time at Save the Children, how many allegations of sexual harassment or abuse between employees were actually brought to your attention?

Sir Alan Parker: In Save the Children UK, there were no other instances of senior issues apart from the two individuals that were mentioned. The normal issues of procedure would have been handled by HR, and I was not informed of any individual cases that were exceptional out of that. These issues would have been handled by both HR and also the deputy COO and COO.

Q287 **Mrs Latham:** At what point did you become involved in the handling of the allegations against Brendan Cox and Justin Forsyth? I just want to say one thing about Brendan Cox. He has been through hell. He and his children have had the most terrible, terrible time, and nobody would say anything other than that, but all this happened before Jo Cox was murdered. At what time did you become involved?

Sir Alan Parker: Interestingly, when we heard the allegation against Brendan Cox—it was brought to me on 13 August 2015, I think—I realised this was extremely serious. He was a senior member of Save the Children UK. We acted immediately. I called a full board meeting the very next day, and involved the whole board in this subject.

I felt it was very important that we had the best independent advice on it, and we went out and sought a third-party law firm that had no connection with any member of the board, with me or any member of the organisation at all. We appointed a third-party law firm, so literally within 24 hours we were around a table discussing what we thought the right option to go forward was.



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We set to work to do two things about it, because it was deeply troubling. One was to have a full investigation of the events around Brendan and the reports we got, and to interrogate those reports properly to find out what the witnesses said and what the individuals involved said. It was put to the law firm to carry that through. We also thought it was a worry. We wondered whether it presaged some wider cultural issue there, so we asked the law firm to go and purposely do a wider cultural review of the organisation at that point.

We actually did a full staff survey with workshops and everything else, because, as a board, we approached it together; we thought it was deeply serious; we created a subcommittee to look at other issues. The series of actions we did were immediate and very firm.

Q288 **Mrs Latham:** What advice did your in-house HR director give you?

Sir Alan Parker: Dealing with Brendan Cox, it was very clear that this was very serious. There was a question raised and a complaint raised about whether the handling of Justin Forsyth was right and whether there was a wider cultural issue. The HR director absolutely got involved in those points and understood that the independent law firm was the appropriate thing to do. We also went back and looked at the learnings in respect of what we may have got wrong before. It was a very important step change in what we were trying to address at the time.

Q289 **Mrs Latham:** There was just one legal team involved at this time.

Sir Alan Parker: Yes. The board wanted a third-party law firm that was completely unconnected and that was actually a specialist in this subject. We felt these were complex issues, and we really felt we needed it.

Q290 **Mrs Latham:** What was the conclusion of each case? Neither employee was dismissed as a result of this. Were they issued with any formal warnings or letters of reprimand?

Sir Alan Parker: Yes, absolutely. Again, on the issue of Brendan Cox, it was very frustrating. It led to a sense of dissatisfaction and, for a lot of people, a sense that there had been a lack of closure on it. The board put in place a full disciplinary panel following that board meeting I mentioned. We created a disciplinary panel; we put two very senior trustees on it with particular experience in regulatory issues. We put a third-party lawyer on it. We actually even went out and got a Queen's Counsel and put him on it. We really felt we wanted to address this.

Q291 **Mrs Latham:** But was there any reprimand?

Sir Alan Parker: The problem was that before we got to the end of Brendan Cox, at the end of that process, literally before the end, he then resigned. In a way, that was very saddening because there was no closure. It was one of the reasons there has been a residue of discontent here: because people felt justice was not seen to be done.

Q292 **Mrs Latham:** Why did you think it was appropriate to offer him a



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£20,000 bonus in the same year, if you really understood that this was such a serious complaint? Did you think this behaviour was the sort of thing that should be rewarded?

Sir Alan Parker: I am sorry. I do not think Brendan Cox was offered any bonus.

Mrs Latham: No, Justin Forsyth was.

Sir Alan Parker: Oh, Justin Forsyth. He did not take a bonus of £20,000.

Q293 **Mrs Latham:** But you offered him one.

Sir Alan Parker: The remuneration committee was chaired by an individual who was aware of it, and it was agreed that Justin would not take the bonus. The rest of the committee was not informed of the issues with Justin in that previous case in 2012, because it had been held confidentially according to the wishes of the individuals involved at the time.

Mrs Latham: Of course.

Sir Alan Parker: The wider committee did not know, but the head of the committee knew, and obviously I knew. Justin Forsyth did not take that bonus at that time.

Q294 **Mrs Latham:** But he was offered it. He was offered a £20,000 bonus when you knew and the head of that committee knew that he was under suspicion.

Sir Alan Parker: What we knew was that it would be inappropriate for him to take it. That was expressed clearly to him, and he did not take it.

Q295 **Mrs Latham:** But he was offered it.

Sir Alan Parker: The HR scoring unfortunately did not take this incident into account because it was not a matter that the rest of the committee was informed of at the time.

Q296 **Mrs Latham:** Should they have been informed of it?

Sir Alan Parker: As long as we got the result that he did not take it—and the chairman of the committee knew and I knew—then I felt we were trying to keep it confidential, according to the wishes of the individuals involved.

Q297 **Mrs Latham:** Of course he would not want it to be made public, would he?

Sir Alan Parker: It was not so much public. Within the committee at that time, I just felt that as long as the result was he did not get the bonus, that was the appropriate and important thing.

Q298 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Just to be clear, when you say “the wishes of the individuals involved”, who do you mean?



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Sir Alan Parker: I mean the individuals affected by it.

Q299 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The individuals who had been affected wanted it not to be discussed in open forums.

Sir Alan Parker: Yes, that is absolutely right. Can I make one very important point? Handling these things is a challenge. We really want to be working for a culture where people can stand up. It is very courageous. It is not easy. It is very important to be able to do that. One of the things around that is how you can keep confidentiality for the individuals who have been affected, because it makes it much more likely that they can stand up and speak out on these issues. You then need a robust process to deal with it, but this sense of protection and support of the individuals affected and being able to do that in privacy, or at least with confidentiality, is very important.

Q300 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** It was clear that the offer of the bonus in this case was more of a technicality; the reality was that it was never really on the table. While the committee offered it, you effectively arranged for that to be vetoed.

Sir Alan Parker: I am afraid that is right, yes.

Q301 **Mr Evans:** Good morning, Sir Alan. Did you at any stage say to Brendan Cox that it would be in his best interests if he left Save the Children?

Sir Alan Parker: No, absolutely not. It is very saddening that we could not reach a conclusion in this case, because it was a very open subject within the organisation at this stage; an awful lot of people knew about it, going back to the shame about trying to keep these things confidential. An awful lot of people knew about it, and it just meant that we as a board could not be seen to deliver justice appropriately.

There was a lot of misunderstanding about how much had been done. Lots of people did not fully understand about the disciplinary committee, the third-party lawyers and the QC investigating it. We really did think we absolutely put the most robust process in. It was very sad. It would have suited us a lot better to get to the conclusion.

Of course, at the time of his resignation, Mr Cox was still fully denying everything, and in his resignation letter was saying very clearly that he felt this was unfair and that he would not get proper justice. He was very robust on this subject and literally just left. From the moment we received the report on Brendan Cox—he was away at the time, and we then moved to suspend him—he never returned to the building once during that whole process.

Q302 **Mr Evans:** Can I turn to references? What is the policy at Save the Children on giving references to individuals who leave the organisation?

Sir Alan Parker: The policy is that we do give proper, accurate and fair references. If there is anything that has been a formal issue and formally



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addressed, that is always given as part of a reference if a third-party asks for it.

Q303 **Mr Evans:** Do you have a policy as well of giving a reference even if there is an investigation going into somebody and they leave the organisation before that investigation is concluded?

Sir Alan Parker: I am not technically sure, but I can come back and confirm that. I am pretty sure, if there is any formal investigation going on, that would be mentioned in the reference to the next employer, certainly if they were under one at the time.

Q304 **Mr Evans:** Let us just drill down a little bit further, then, because we are clearly talking about Justin Forsyth and Brendan Cox. Did either of those receive an employment reference from the organisation?

Sir Alan Parker: Brendan Cox certainly did not. At the time there was no formal reference sought on Brendan, though there was a conversation with a third-party head-hunter about Justin Forsyth.

Q305 **Mr Evans:** Brendan Cox never sought a reference, and one was never offered.

Sir Alan Parker: No, not at all.

Q306 **Mr Evans:** Justin Forsyth did have a reference.

Sir Alan Parker: The head-hunters involved contacted my successor. I am not quite sure what stage they were at, whether it was a general one or a specific one. I was not involved in that conversation.

Q307 **Mr Evans:** Are you aware, then, whether any mention of the sexual harassment cases was made in Justin Forsyth's case?

Sir Alan Parker: I am pretty certain they were not because they had not been formal complaints and there was no formal process around that.

Q308 **Mr Evans:** What does that mean: that there was no formal process around Justin Forsyth's case?

Sir Alan Parker: There was an informal process of mediation, which settled it, at the time satisfactorily. In the end, we went back to double-check whether we had got that right. At the time they had been satisfied with the process. There was an informal process, so it had not triggered the normal triggers for a marker in a reference.

Q309 **Mr Evans:** There was absolutely no reference to the investigation made in the reference given to Justin Forsyth, so he was able to seek further employment without any stain on his character whatsoever.

Sir Alan Parker: It is the policy of the organisation not to mention things if they have not been subject to a formal disciplinary process.

Q310 **Mrs Latham:** You said, "Not subject to a formal disciplinary process", but you had legal people advising you. This was not just a little chat behind



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closed doors. This was pretty formal if you had a firm of solicitors working and advising you on it. Why did Save the Children not tell Unicef about Justin Forsyth's investigation? Just because there had been no formal complaint. That was untrue: there had been a formal complaint by somebody who had been subjected to his misdemeanours, if you like. Why on earth do you think that was not a formal complaint? Surely you should have disclosed this before.

Sir Alan Parker: The formal complaint arrived after the incidents that arose with Justin Forsyth. It arrived in August, and it was really a complaint about the handling of Justin Forsyth; it was not a complaint about new misbehaviour or workplace issues on Justin. It was very clearly about the process of handling it. That was treated extremely seriously by the board. That is part of the reason we created a sub-committee to go back and see whether there had been those problems. That is why we established a third-party review by a law firm to go and look at the events back in 2012 and 2015.

Q311 **Mrs Latham:** When you had these lawyers, they suggested to you, I understand, that you were supposed to send Justin Forsyth a formal written warning about his behaviour. It was even drafted by them, and yet the letter does not appear on Justin Forsyth's record and he claims he never received it. Why did you not send it to him? Was it because he was a friend of yours?

Sir Alan Parker: Not at all, no. We had a package of actions to address Mr Forsyth. The letter was absolutely one of them.

Q312 **Mrs Latham:** But you did not do it.

Sir Alan Parker: Yes, we did indeed. I understand it was not in the file when they went to look for it some years later, and that I cannot account for. I apologise for that.

Q313 **Chair:** When was that letter sent to Mr Forsyth?

Sir Alan Parker: The letter was sent in March 2012. We kept copies of it, I am glad to say, but my understanding of this is that the original would have been filed with HR somewhere. It was part of a package of addressing this issue directly with Justin.

Q314 **Chair:** But that was not considered to be something pertinent to mention to Unicef when he was moving from Save the Children to Unicef?

Sir Alan Parker: As you say, it was not a lucid formal process. It was a process, but it did not formally trigger a formal disciplinary process, which would have been marked and kept.

Q315 **Chair:** On reflection, would it have been better for that to have been mentioned when he was applying to go to Unicef?

Sir Alan Parker: When I look back, there are a number of things we would have done differently. We would have done it in a way that would have settled it each time more appropriately. Very clearly, there were



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quite specific HR failings in this, which I have to take on board. I was chairman at the time. We did not give the individuals the right information, we did not give them the right handbooks, we did not take them to the right places on the website to look at the processes and we did not really give them the right advice on the options.

There were real failings in there. Ultimately, the people handling these issues at the time were very well-motivated. They were motivated by the protection and support of the individuals who had been affected. The fact is we did not follow the proper procedures.

Q316 **Mrs Latham:** In 2012, when the first complaint came in that we are talking about, you said that if anything else happened you personally would march him out of the door, so what did you do when two more people came forward in 2014? What did you do then?

Sir Alan Parker: Actually, I think that comment was made by the then HR director, who was the acting HR director, a very competent person. I had not heard that comment at the time.

Q317 **Paul Scully:** Sir Alan, do you regard yourself as having a personal relationship with either Justin Forsyth or Brendan Cox beyond being a colleague?

Sir Alan Parker: Honestly, I think I met Justin once a year before. I really only met Justin—

Q318 **Chair:** A year before what?

Sir Alan Parker: I met him the year before we started the search for a new CEO. The CEO was Jasmine Whitbread, who had been an outstanding CEO at Save the Children UK. She moved across to Save the Children International. I think I met him a year before at something. Otherwise, I had never met him properly before we started the search process. The search process was carried out by a big head-hunting firm, and there was a committee of us.

When I did meet him and go through that—obviously Mr Forsyth had an impressive track record—we did actually hire not Justin Forsyth alone; we also hired at the same time, through that search process, a very senior lady by the name of Anabel Hault, a woman with outstanding business credentials. She came in as COO and deputy chief executive, so we felt we were putting in place a very strong, robust leadership team at the time. No, I had never worked with him; he was not a friend of mine. There was nothing like that.

I only met Brendan Cox when we were finalising the appointment procedures when Justin Forsyth was bringing him into the organisation. I had never really known either of them; I had never worked with them before. We had a good working relationship. It was an organisation that was moving to deal with the big issues in the world at the time, whether they were Somalia or, increasingly, the Syrian war or any of the other big



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issues. We were trying to step up. You cannot lead an organisation like this without a strong working relationship with the CEO, if you are the chairman, but it is fundamentally a professional relationship, and it was all the way through.

Q319 **Paul Scully:** Did you intervene in either of the cases beyond putting those things in train as you have described?

Sir Alan Parker: No, I was asked by the individuals who had been affected to be informed of it and, in both cases, I was asked personally to address Mr Forsyth to make clear how serious his failings had been in these areas. Otherwise, not at all.

Q320 **Paul Scully:** Of course, you said you intervened with the bonus, but in terms of—

Sir Alan Parker: Yes, in that way, absolutely. I made sure that we had discussed that.

Q321 **Paul Scully:** Because of your close working relationship, especially with Justin Forsyth, because of the roles, did you consider standing aside at any point in the process to avoid any conflict of interest?

Sir Alan Parker: Again, as I said, I felt that the individuals who were handling it were very well-motivated, but we did have some failings there. As chairman, because he was chief executive, I felt I should at all times put that distance in there. That was the case in both instances where we had to step in with Justin Forsyth. In the first instance I put in a very senior and experienced trustee who had had a lot of experience in HR issues particularly. That trustee spent a lot of time with the individual affected in a guidance role to make sure everything was fairly and properly done to support the individual.

The second time I took my vice-chairman and asked them to take a role in making sure that it was settled to the satisfaction at the time of the individuals and, overall, was motivated to support the individuals who had been affected by it. In both cases, I put a trustee in as well as made sure it was dealt with by HR.

Q322 **Paul Scully:** Had you taken advice on that point, or was that your decision?

Sir Alan Parker: No, I just felt it was an appropriate thing. First, I wanted people who were particularly skilled in this area, but I also felt it was appropriate. There was no question of this ever being done undercover or something. I wanted another trustee in the room dealing with it directly, spending time with the people who had been affected and helping guide the responsible organisation.

Q323 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Was it your role as chairman to communicate with the complainants during this process, particularly with senior staff?



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Sir Alan Parker: In the two instances that took place, they both requested that I was informed. In the second instance, they also directly asked me to respond to them. They had suggestions about what they particularly wanted to settle the issue at the time.

Q324 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Was all that communication done by writing? Did some of those communications happen by telephone or in-person conversations?

Sir Alan Parker: I wrote a letter to the first individual involved at the end of the process, when Justin Forsyth wrote an apology letter to the individual. I put a note with that just to make sure she sensed that at any time my door would be open if she felt in any way this was not a satisfactory position at the time or if there was anything else the organisation could do to help.

Q325 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** What about the second case?

Sir Alan Parker: In the second case there were conversations and I spoke to the individuals again to ensure that they were getting what they felt was apparently at the time.

Q326 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Did you speak to them in person or on the telephone?

Sir Alan Parker: That was a telephone call, I think. It was a telephone call at the end to establish that the meetings of apology had gone appropriately for them. I will double-check that, but I am pretty certain that was it.

Q327 **Mrs Latham:** When the BBC was reporting that Save the Children had lied to Unicef, why did you spend charity money on two sets of expensive lawyers to shut the story down?

Sir Alan Parker: We are talking about 2018 now. There was a lot of media interest at the time, and I felt very clearly and Save the Children UK felt very clearly that the most important thing was the accuracy of reporting. At no time have there been any lawyers' letters trying to close a story down. There was a lot of misinformation and some seriously misleading statements around.

It is a difficult job: you have a responsibility for the reputation of the organisation. Once stories turn up in a newspaper, they can easily be repeated. We felt very clearly that the facts should be put down by a lawyer rather than just a communications department, so that they were seen to have absolute veracity and absolute clarity. That was for the journalists and the media publication. It was not an attempt to close anything down; it was just an attempt to make sure that the organisation was properly protected by getting the facts right.

Q328 **Mrs Latham:** That is not how it was seen. Anyway, how much did you spend on lawyers? I have heard figures of over £100,000.



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Sir Alan Parker: It was Save the Children UK that was doing that. I cannot verify that figure. I am terribly sorry. I do not know.

Chair: Pauline, we will write to Save the Children UK and ask for that figure.

Q329 **Mrs Latham:** We must do, because Save the Children's website is currently asking people to donate £7 to provide warm clothing to help Afghan children and £12 a month for food sachets to feed the most malnourished children. Obviously they would not have spent money from DFID on this, because that is all tracked. The other source of income you get is from people donating by phone or however; you also have people fundraising for you. Indeed, I am a former fundraiser for Save the Children. I have baked loads of cakes and had coffee mornings where we raised a lot of money for Save the Children.

It takes a lot of effort by people to fund that, and you have possibly spent £100,000 on this to shut the story down. Whatever you say about what you were intending to do, it does not appear that that is how it was seen by the media out there. They felt under pressure to shut the story down.

Sir Alan Parker: I can absolutely understand why it could appear like that. As soon as one says "lawyers" in these circumstances, it can. I would thank you and applaud you for your support for Save the Children. I am absolutely one of those volunteers, too, over many years and I believe passionately in this cause.

We have to be enormously sensitive to this issue of cost in every area. We have a lot of advisers who have worked over time pro bono in a large range of different ways here. When you are dealing with an organisation of this scale, and with the sensitivity and importance of this, you do have a duty to protect it. For a lot of the donors and supporters that Save the Children has, accuracy in reporting is incredibly important. I can understand that it can be portrayed as closing a story down. I am not sure you can close a story down. What you can do is try to ensure the facts are properly and fairly reported. That was the only thing. We did feel that was absolutely in the interests of the organisation for its protection.

By "the organisation", we also mean the terrific supporters who work absolutely tirelessly on our behalf. If it is wrongly reported, misreported and repeated again, this could be terribly damaging, and ultimately it could take real money away from children who need it most. There is a responsibility for making sure here. The fact is that when you are dealing with a big organisation, you do need legal advice from time to time, but you have to be careful, sparing and very thoughtful about it.

Q330 **Mrs Latham:** It does not sound sparing to me when we are talking about sums of over £100,000.



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Sir Alan Parker: I cannot confirm whether that is the accurate number, and I am very happy to help support any clarification.

Q331 **Chair:** It would be useful to have that response, yes. Sir Alan, your answer raises a broader question that arose when we had Oxfam before us. Have organisations like Oxfam, Save the Children and others put their own reputation ahead of the rights of those who have suffered alleged abuse or harassment? “Reputation” is the word you used.

Sir Alan Parker: It is a very distinct problem for this sector, because you are absolutely right: when you rely on support, whether it is from Governments or the public, the trust in the organisation is incredibly important. We do live in a time and a period when there is immense scrutiny on this sector and an enormous amount of interest. It is incredibly important. The fact is that in the end you cannot put reputation—however great your responsibility is as a trustee—ahead of protecting the individuals involved, whether they are children or people in the communities in which we work or whether they are members of staff.

There is an issue about making sure that is all properly reported and where and how that is formally reported, and that is different from publicising it. It is not an easy line. It is one of the reasons why strong boards are incredibly important, because there are judgments to make in these matters over what is and what is not. Again, this is one of the reasons you need very good advice on it. Ultimately, you can never put reputation ahead of dealing fully with your responsibilities for dealing with the individuals.

Ultimately, you have to have a culture where this stuff really happens and works. When looking at this Committee, I would hope at some stage we could put a submission in of what we have been working on in Save the Children International over the last few years, because it is a quantum change, not an incremental change.

Since 2016, we have put an absolutely first-rate chief people officer in. We have created a whole new system of safeguarding, not just for our children and beneficiaries in the field but also our staff. We have done it by working with our risk officers on fraud; we have created a system, Datix, so that now every single issue that takes place within 24 hours is reported to the country officer and up the line. Every instance that happens, with over 20,000 people, is now reported to the chief people officer within 48 hours. We have what I would consider a service agreement, which is that in 72 hours and by the end of that week we have it informed up the line within the organisation to the member and the donor.

This has never been possible before, but if we can really implement what we are trying to do in Save the Children International, it will lead this sector. It is a whole new standard. It has taken an enormous amount of time. Interestingly enough, it is not a huge issue of a lot more money. It is actually about creating a better culture; it is about putting disciplines



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and training in. We have over 400 people concerned with child safeguarding and over 300 people involved with the workplace. It is actually about creating systems that deal with it up front and address the very frontline people.

On the frontline are our country directors, which are now over 50% women. We hope that will move to over 60% and move that all the way up the system. This is something we have absolutely put front and centre, because of the concerns of this Committee. This is absolutely groundbreaking in the sector. We are in 57 countries but, as it rolls forward, given your purview generally, I would love to make sure you had sight of this. I am obviously not part of the organisation, though.

Chair: We have certainly had evidence from Save the Children UK as part of this inquiry. If Save the Children International want to send us written evidence, it would be very helpful.

Sir Alan Parker: Thank you. It is a step change.

Q332 **Henry Smith:** Thank you very much, Sir Alan. There was a review that reported in 2015 into harassment at Save the Children. Who commissioned that review, who conducted it and who was it submitted to?

Sir Alan Parker: We faced two real challenges in August 2015. We had the second instance of a senior individual brought to our attention. We created a sub-committee of the board specifically to look into the previous issues and this disciplinary panel to go forward once we had established what the grounds were on Brendan Cox. It was committed by the board and, importantly, it had two direct aspects at the time. The first was the handling in 2012 and 2015 of Justin Forsyth and any other issues that came to light around that. The second one was cultural, because by the time we had had two instances at a senior level this was a matter of deep concern to the board.

We asked Lewis Silkin, the law firm we brought in. Lewis Silkin then brought in a specialist HR team to run a full staff survey and workshops within the organisation. They came back with two reports. One was about the events of 2015 and the handling of that, which showed that we had had these failings in HR at the time, and the other one was on wider culture. We recognised that report was very interesting on the cultural points, because on the cultural side it said we did need to have more employee engagement.

When I think back, the expression in it was "pockets" of issues around these senior individuals, but overall Save the Children was seen as having a "positive" work culture in employment. That was quite important to us, because, given that culture clearly starts at the top, we really were concerned that this may have run more broadly.

Q333 **Henry Smith:** So here we are in 2018, almost three years after this review reported. Do you think it was effective in its implementation with,



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clearly, issues and concerns going on well past 2015?

Sir Alan Parker: Yes, I do; I really, really do. It really brought to light where we had weaknesses. It really set an agenda for us. The changes that took place in the UK were phenomenal. It also helped inform and empower a lot of what was then going to happen across the movement. As I said, we put a major focus on upgrading child safeguarding and protection, not just for the individuals we serve but for the community we work in. If you are going into a community, it is not just the individual; it is how you behave more generally. We have put a lot of effort into that. That review really made us pick up that.

If you look at Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the chief executive of Save the Children International, and the efforts she and Janti Soeripto, her chief operating officer have put in again there, they really have focused enormously on this. I do think that was a pivotal point.

Q334 **Henry Smith:** Was this review across both Save the Children UK and Save the Children International?

Sir Alan Parker: The original one in the UK in 2015 was just the UK at the time.

Q335 **Henry Smith:** Has that subsequently been rolled out to other parts of Save the Children?

Sir Alan Parker: Exactly right, yes. That was the question we asked ourselves. It was the very same question: "If we can see it here, what do we do?" In 2017 we did a full members' audit for the first time ever, across the whole movement. One of the challenges we have is about how you put these standards in right across the movement in all the other members everywhere. That is very much the progress we are trying to make.

We actually have a very progressive and active programme of change within SCA, which is the membership side of the 28 Save the Childrens, and within SCI, which is the programme development arm. Both of those are directly driven by that. It was a lot of work, but it did help lead to a lot of change.

Q336 **Mr Evans:** Sir Alan, according to the *Daily Mail*, the law firm Harbottle & Lewis were hired by Save the Children to send multiple highly aggressive letters to news organisations on their behalf discouraging the reporting of scandals at the charity. That is Harbottle & Lewis. Was that your decision?

Sir Alan Parker: I was part of those decisions. They acted for and were instructed by Save the Children UK. The representation of them as highly aggressive is a difficult interpretation. They were trying to make the facts clearer at the time.

Q337 **Mr Evans:** You saw those letters before they went out and you authorised them.



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Sir Alan Parker: I would have seen some of them, particularly the ones that related to me. I do not know whether I would have seen all of them or seen all the communications by Save the Children UK to the media at that time.

Q338 **Mr Evans:** Do you regret now that those letters went out?

Sir Alan Parker: No, I do not think so. It was very important that the facts were put on the table and that the media deal with the facts, not just other reports.

Q339 **Mr Evans:** It goes back to what Pauline was saying. Basically, people put the odd £1 into a collecting tin or they put £5 in a small envelope, and yet, although you cannot confirm exactly how much was paid to the law firm, that will run into thousands. When you are trying to protect the reputation of an organisation, do you really think that the people who put £1 or £5 in will think that is money well spent?

Sir Alan Parker: It is a judgment you have to make, on the protection point. If really misleading comments are made in the media, and repeatedly so, it can undermine a lot of the good work that the people in Save the Children around the world are doing. It can undermine a lot of the support that everybody has put into it.

Q340 **Mr Evans:** What was the misleading article? What did it say that really offended you, or was wrong?

Sir Alan Parker: There were a lot of comments around cover-ups and statements that simply did not meet the facts at the time, which really concerned us.

Q341 **Mr Evans:** According to the BBC, they had a leaked document that suggested that Save the Children had failed to adequately deal with the allegations. Do you accept that?

Sir Alan Parker: We did indeed have failings. As I have mentioned, these were very disappointing. We should have supported the HR process at the time better. That absolutely happened while I was chair.

Q342 **Mr Evans:** What failings did you personally make?

Sir Alan Parker: We were all well-motivated and trying to support the individuals. The fact is, when I look back now, we would have done it differently. In particular, I would have pushed back and sought further advice to check on some of the procedural issues. That was a mistake.

Q343 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** How many non-disclosure agreements have been agreed with the organisation and people leaving the organisation in the last five years?

Sir Alan Parker: I am not aware of any.

Q344 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** There are none at all.

Sir Alan Parker: I am not aware of any at all.



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Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Okay, that is very positive. Thank you very much.

Q345 **Mrs Latham:** If I could go back briefly to the Lewis Silkin report, they record in the evidence that you responded to the allegations with the words, "Justin Forsyth is very important to the organisation. People behave differently when they are abroad. They would have been tired. They would have needed some mutual support". That is bad enough, but then you go on to say, "What were the complainants doing by agreeing to go to his hotel room in the first place?" Do you think they are appropriate responses from the chairman?

Sir Alan Parker: They are not actually accurate. Those are a string of statements—

Q346 **Mrs Latham:** It is in the report.

Sir Alan Parker: The report actually says that someone reported words like that in a number of cases. If I could address them directly, I would be happy to. On the first one, Mr Forsyth was important to the organisation. That does not mean he should not be dealt with properly at any stage and never did I mean that. I think a chief executive should be.

If there was any suggestion in there that I would accept lower standards of behaviour or they should be held to account in any lesser way if they are in Clerkenwell or Beirut, I absolutely do not accept that and I never have.

Q347 **Mrs Latham:** They were not held to account, though, were they? They just were not held to account. You did not even complete the findings of what was going on, because they left. You allowed them to leave before the conclusion of the investigations, which is a very easy way to get out of it both from your point of view but from their point of view as well. Do you think it is much too easy for people to leave early and then move from charity to charity with no stain on their character? Should there not be some sort of register of people who have allegations made against them so that people can refer to that? Unicef perhaps could have looked at that and said, "We are not touching him with a bargepole".

Sir Alan Parker: You raise a very important question about the register and what should be passed on. I am aware that Kevin Watkins, the chief executive of Save the Children UK, has a very clear view that a register is important and there is a big debate about it in the sector. That is probably right. I have also heard quite a lot of interesting advice, though, that it is not about a single set of rules that run across everything; it could well be that what we are looking for is standards of reference-taking, for instance, that would be shared more commonly. It is not just about what is on a register, because there are a lot of legal implications in different jurisdictions. That is one of the reasons this has been difficult to apply across the sector, which is a shame.



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A register sounds simple; it is quite difficult to deliver. One thing we could establish very fast is better versions of formal reference-taking. There should be formal references in a better and deeper way that could cover this sort of issue. You are absolutely right to be pressing at what a better solution to this is.

Q348 **Mrs Latham:** It seems to me that the people involved are the people at the top, and there ought to be something very severe happening to them. After all, the new chief executive was on the board with you, and you appointed him to be chief executive. That sounds like quite a cosy and unusual relationship. Was there an open, advertised job interview for this person?

Sir Alan Parker: There was a very big and open process on looking for the new CEO of Save the Children UK. Kevin Watkins was on the board at the time and has an outstanding track record in this sector. The board and the nominations committee were very clear about why they felt he was by far the best candidate we had, and I absolutely stood by that.

Q349 **Mrs Latham:** Does it not smack of jobs for the boys?

Sir Alan Parker: No.

Q350 **Mrs Latham:** It is very unusual for a board member to become chief executive.

Sir Alan Parker: It is very unusual, and the board were very aware of that. That is why they looked at it very carefully and formally. On the point about jobs for the boys, in the 10 years I was serving Save the Children and the different boards I chaired, we probably had 30 or so trustees appointed to those boards. I worked on one board with one of them, and I probably knew one or possibly two of the others out of that 30. I would absolutely dispute any question of jobs for the boys.

Q351 **Mrs Latham:** I am sorry, but it sounds like it. Sir Alan, I have a final question for you. You are obviously an important person; you are a knight of the realm. Could you tell me whether you think that an aid organisation that does not act effectively in cases of sexual harassment between staff, which clearly is the case for senior members of your organisation, is likely to have the will and mechanisms to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse in the field?

Sir Alan Parker: The sector is going through a massive challenge on this front. It is why we have put up so much effort in Save the Children. As I said, we are going through a quantum change in SCI. Whether it is in the head office, where we had the problem—which, thank heavens, did not address children or beneficiaries in that way—we are endlessly aware of it down there.

As I said, you cannot deal with this incrementally. It does need a step change; that is absolutely what we have been trying to do in the programme of Save the Children. It is the same cultural challenges in



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child protection as it is in the workplace and with any issues of sexual harassment or misconduct. It is about having cultures where people are prepared and feel supported in standing up and speaking out. They cannot walk past it; they have to name it and call it out. They have to do so knowing that there is a system that will deliver justice. We have got a lot further on both of those.

I cannot speak across the rest of the sector, but the work to review it is crucial. It is such an exciting and important time. We see all the hard and dark things for this sector, but in 20 years we have halved child poverty and infant mortality. What a time it is to be alive. What a time to be able to say that change for children has never been like this. What a great role it is for these aid organisations to play a part in that. To do that, they really have to be up to the job at hand. These are big challenges.

Q352 **Mrs Latham:** They have to have the trust.

Sir Alan Parker: They have to have the trust. To me, that is ultimately the key issue at hand. That is terribly important.

Q353 **Mrs Latham:** The Secretary of State is very strong on gender equality in all the programmes. Is Save the Children likely to work on gender-specific issues very seriously, or are we talking about closing the stable door after the horse has bolted in the case of Save the Children?

Sir Alan Parker: It is hugely committed—absolutely hugely committed. As I said, I believe that for Save the Children UK and, most recently, in Save the Children Association. This is right across the movement. It is led by Helle Thorning-Schmidt. She is absolutely passionate on this issue. She has a very committed COO, Janti Soeripto, who came from Unilever. She is a hugely effective operator. We have an outstanding chief people officer, whose view is that this comes from leadership. They are utterly committed now. I agree: if we do not regain that trust, the people who will pay for this are children in the field. I cannot tell you how saddening I find that.

Q354 **Mrs Latham:** The leadership was lacking before.

Sir Alan Parker: Completely, and that is the only way of dealing with it. That is why now, as soon as something is reported, within 48 hours it is actually on the group chief people officer's desk. This is a direct system. We have to be seen to deal with it everywhere immediately. This is not something we can have any confusion about.

Q355 **Mrs Latham:** You have not just resigned as chairman; you have resigned from the board now, have you not?

Sir Alan Parker: I resigned from the board, yes.

Q356 **Mrs Latham:** But you went from being, as I understand it, chairman of Save the Children UK. When all this happened, you were rewarded by leaving there and going to Save the Children International as chairman.



Sir Alan Parker: I would add a bit of chronology in there. I was asked at the beginning of 2015 to become chairman of Save the Children International after being chairman of Save the Children UK. I was appointed by the board in March or April in 2015. I went to the full membership—we have an annual meeting—and they supported that in June 2015. The actual events with Brendan Cox were some months after that, and so was then a concern about the handling of the Justin Forsyth cases. I had been appointed by the board and by the full membership.

Q357 **Mrs Latham:** It had been going on a very long time, though. It was not just at that point that it all came to light. It had been going on for some years, and you knew about it, but you then went to Save the Children International. Why is it you feel that you should resign from the whole board now if everything is so good at Save the Children?

Sir Alan Parker: Ultimately, you just raised the point: it is about trust. Trust in this organisation is massively important. If you do lead the board, it is very important that you carry the trust of the members and of all the stakeholders. We had had a Charity Commission inquiry raised; we had issues around funding in Save the Children UK. We have a very, very strong internal agenda and programming in Save the Children Association and in Save the Children International, both of which I have been very, very committed to.

It was a very hard decision. I just felt the best thing I could do for the organisation was to put a fresh face in the role and ask them to pursue and continue that, to settle things down and keep up the momentum. Ultimately, it is about maintaining trust in the organisation.

Q358 **Mrs Latham:** The trust had been completely lost.

Sir Alan Parker: That was my fear. My fear was that we would have a breakdown of trust, and that is why I felt it was the best thing I could do for the organisation at the time.

Q359 **Chair:** At the heart of this whole set of issues is the abuse of power, typically by men over women. Sir Alan, do you think that women working for Save the Children can now feel that cases will be taken seriously in the future?

Sir Alan Parker: I profoundly hope so. I completely agree. At the heart of all these issues has been that concern about abuse of power and, as you say, it is generally in that form. Whether it is in the workplace or in the field, in the communities in which we work, we just have to make sure for every individual in the organisation.

I profoundly believe this is also true when we are in the communities we work in. We cannot have the trust of the communities if, when a British aid worker turns up, they are not absolutely trusted to live to the highest standards. I would hope that, through all of this and the changes we have made to the process and the culture, they do feel that profoundly. I hope they do.



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Q360 **Chair:** Do you accept, therefore, that in the past under your chairmanship of Save the Children UK women working for Save the Children were failed?

Sir Alan Parker: They were, and I, as chairman at the time, must take responsibility for that.

Q361 **Mr Evans:** What damage do you think this has done to Save the Children?

Sir Alan Parker: It has raised a real issue of trust. It has done reputational damage to Save the Children. I would hope that people will see the huge amount of care and decency of the people in Save the Children in dealing with a difficult subject. I would hope that we would continue to carry their support, because the mistakes that were made were made with good motivation by very decent people. We did not get it right, but we have to show that, which is why, as chairman, I have to stand up for that one.

Chair: On that note, we draw this evidence session to a close. I thank you for giving evidence to us today.