

# International Development Committee

## Oral evidence: Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: next steps, HC 605

Tuesday 22 September 2020

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Brendan Clarke-Smith; Mrs Pauline Latham; Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger; Navendu Mishra; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 53 - 100

### Witnesses

[I:](#) Ester Dross, Independent Consultant and PSEA adviser; Megan Nobert, Director, Safeguarding, International Rescue Committee; Lucy Heaven Taylor, Independent Consultant, Safeguarding.

[II:](#) Sarah Blakemore, Director, Keeping Children Safe; Pierre Hauselmann, Executive Director, Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative; Tanya Wood, Executive Director, CHS Alliance.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ester Dross, Megan Nobert and Lucy Heaven Taylor.

**Q53 Chair:** I would like to start the second oral evidence session that we have on sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector—the next steps. This session builds upon the extensive work the previous Committee has done around this. It is also a chance for us to update ourselves and see if all of the actions that were promised after our last report have been acted on and whether the aid sector is a safer place, both for workers and for beneficiaries.

We have two panels today. The first panel is made up of safeguarding practitioners and independent consultants. These are witnesses who have chosen to devote their lives to humanitarian work as well as safeguarding, so we are very grateful to have your input on this. We hope that you can be candid with us, because we really want to learn and make the sector a safer place. If I could ask you to introduce yourselves and then we will start with the formal questions. Can I ask you, Megan, and then Ester and then Lucy, to introduce yourselves and the sort of work that you do in this field?

**Megan Nobert:** Thank you very much. It is an honour to be here with MPs today. My name is Megan Nobert. I am currently the director of safeguarding at the International Rescue Committee.

**Ester Dross:** My name is Ester Dross. I am based in France and I work as an independent consultant on safeguarding and investigations into SEA issues.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** My name is Lucy Heaven Taylor. I am an independent consultant and I work on issues of safeguarding in the humanitarian and development sector and PSEA—protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Chair:** The first questions are from Committee member Pauline Latham. Pauline, you have been such a stalwart in making sure that safeguarding is embedded within all the development work that DFID does, so over to you.

**Q54 Mrs Latham:** I wonder if each of the panel members could briefly tell me what their main observations are about the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector and how it has been approached over recent years. Have you noticed any real sector-wide changes to this approach since our first report or the Oxfam scandal?

**Megan Nobert:** There has been considerable progress in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse, and safeguarding more broadly, in the last few years. What has been particularly different, in the last two years in particular, as it relates to beneficiary safeguarding is the sustained



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attention that has been placed on the issue; that is something that we never had in the past.

When you look at the revelations that came out in the media 20 years ago—the food-for-sex scandal and the revelations in the Central African Republic, which Code Blue helped to ensure came to light—and when you look at things like the work to report the abuse, there was attention on the matter but it was for short periods of time. There were a few media articles, organisations drafted up a policy and we made a few different efforts, but there was no sustained attempt to look at long-term change and actions. I genuinely think that that is the difference this time, compared to any other attempt to create a safer environment for staff and beneficiaries in the past.

I do not mean to pander, but I credit the UK Government for helping to create that environment of sustained change.

**Ester Dross:** A lot of what I have to say is in agreement with Megan. The more sustained attention that we have had over the last two years is very different from what we had before, when we had lots of these cycles of big attention, no attention, a lack of money and big attention again. We seemed to be following scandals all the time without making effective change. This is quite different now. It is high on the agenda and it seems to be embedded in what we do, so it will bring change.

The attention to beneficiaries is still something that we should improve. Luckily, we have improved a lot on something that we did not do so well before—attention to our own staff—and we can see that in all the harassment scandals that we are getting. This is really important. Beneficiaries still have quite a difficult time in having a voice and reaching us. We have probably not yet made the necessary progress to have really good systems but we are working on that, so I am confident that we will be successful over time.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** I echo what has been said by Megan and Ester. I have been working on these issues for 18 years now, since the first scandal came about in west Africa. Like the others, I have seen these constant cycles of, usually, a media scandal followed by attention, and then a drop again in resourcing and funding. I agree with the others that this feels different. I have seen a lot more put into this in terms of resources, particularly in staffing. Most medium-sized or large NGOs now have at least one safeguarding adviser, and there are also initiatives like this one whereby we are continuing to be held to account by pledges and promises that were made two years ago.

This definitely feels different to me. It has only been two and a half years. I see a lot of activity in standard-setting and compliance at the head-office level, but the closer you get to the practitioners who are working in the field, and particularly national organisations and CSOs, there has not quite been the trickledown of resources to that level where it is absolutely needed, where you have people interacting on a daily



basis with affected populations. This obviously needs time, but that is where I would like to see the focus going in the future.

**Q55 Mrs Latham:** That is really helpful, because you have taken out my next question, so thank you all very much. It is interesting that the money is still not getting down to the in-country posts where it really is needed, because that is where the beneficiaries are. You started off on a very positive note, which I am really pleased to see. Could you all just briefly cover what challenges you have encountered during your work to improve safeguarding standards and tackle sexual exploitation and abuse? Some of you have been doing it for a very long time.

**Megan Nobert:** I would say that the challenges are not necessarily in setting the standards but in taking those standards and bringing them to life in practice. It is very easy to put out on paper, “We must implement specific reporting practices. We must roll out capacity-building training. We must improve our ability to respond, our reporting mechanisms and our investigations”. The standards are there. We have made some improvements to them in the last two and a half years, but even before then, there were pretty decent standards in place. It is that interpretation into practice where the biggest challenge comes.

In terms of funding, both human and financial resources are needed to do that hard work and, at times, slogging, with day-to-day regular things that must be done in terms of recruitment, refresher training, setting protocols and behaviours with staff, ensuring that this is rolled out or trickled down to increasingly more local partners for those who work for larger INGOs like me, building that investigation capacity, building those reporting mechanisms and having contextualised responses, et cetera. That is all very valuable and necessary work, but without the adequate amount of human and financial resources, it is very difficult to get it done and to make real, proper, contextualised change that works—not at HQ level, for those of us sitting in the UK, but for those who are in the most remote local sites of our humanitarian development operations. From my perspective at least, that is certainly the most challenging part of my day job.

**Q56 Chair:** Megan, could I come in on that, please? I have heard a number of NGOs say, “We would do this but it is very expensive; safeguarding is very expensive”, which, to me, raises alarm bells, because it makes me think that it is not embedded into their current practice but also that they see it as an add-on. From my point of view, if they are working with vulnerable people, as aid beneficiaries are, safeguarding should be at the absolute core of what you are doing and you should not be running a programme. Do you find that attitude and do you think it is still justified?

**Megan Nobert:** I would reframe that approach. Safeguarding is absolutely and utterly essential to good programming. There is no question about that. If you cannot ensure that staff and beneficiaries are going to be safe when you are providing an aid service, that they feel that they are treated with respect, dignity and humanity, and that they



are free from violence, exploitation and abuse, it is, without question, not a safe programme.

The tricky part is that, if you are a large INGO with quite a bit of unrestricted resources, it is easier to find those funds, but that is not the case for the vast majority of aid organisations. We know that donors are—and have been for a number of years—increasingly cutting those overhead costs, which is anything that they do not deem to be completely and utterly essential to delivering that very specific programme in that very specific location for that very specific group of beneficiaries. There are some cases of being able to integrate safeguarding costs and activities into grant proposals, which is something that the IRC has been successful at, but absent that ability to do so, the vast majority of organisations simply will not have access to the funds to be able to cover that sustained, constant attention that safeguarding needs.

**Q57 Chair:** If you are running a project in the UK, such as a building project or a factory, you would expect that the Health and Safety Executive might come in and audit you at any time, so you build that cost into your core cost to make sure that you meet the standards. Are you saying that safeguarding is not a core standard in most projects?

**Megan Nobert:** Safeguarding has traditionally not been funded as being as core to a grant proposal or a project as has financial health or ensuring that a human resources officer is assigned to the project or that there is a sufficient number of staff members to implement the project. To date, safeguarding has not been seen as being as core to good programming as other aspects, like finance. I am beginning to see a bit of a shift in donor approaches to that and, through DFID, we have been able to fund some safeguarding activities that have had a very positive effect, both in the places where we are operating as well as more globally in IRC, but that is still the exception; it is not the rule.

**Ester Dross:** On your initial question, I could not say much more than what Megan just said. To bring up the discussion you had afterwards with Sarah, I do not think the problem is in the core cost, and in the big INGOs where these safeguarding issues are taken up and dealt with in their policies, there is a lot of effort.

When it goes down to the grassroots organisations and to our partners, it is a very different problem. When you talk about safeguarding in the UK, people know what it is. When you use this word in France, we do not know what it means. This is already a cultural difference. When you go to Latin America, they do not know what *salvaguardia* means. At the international level, you have to explain to the staff what you mean by that: "This is a whole system of protection". When you go down to partner staff, it is even worse, because you need to really build understanding. Even though we want to say that it does not cost money, it does cost; it costs human resources, transfer of knowledge and time,



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so somehow it costs money. In the end, you also need to give that knowledge to the beneficiaries.

For us, it is very clear what we are talking about when we talk about core commitments, such as no sex with children. If you throw that out somewhere in Africa, however, there is a big debate about what a child is. The understanding of the population is not necessarily the same as we have in our policies. You need to build up all this awareness and to be sure that you are talking about the same thing, so that we have the same scope and objectives. Then we can be more efficient, with better reporting and better reporting mechanisms. We know that we do not get sufficient reports from beneficiaries, for example. Very often, when you go and talk with beneficiaries, you can see that there is a lot of exploitation going on, but people do not necessarily identify this as exploitation. They will sometimes identify it as an exchange for mutual benefit, or whatever the reason behind it is.

To tackle this work is very time-consuming and means that you have to go out and talk to a lot of people. It also means that there is a language problem because we cannot just go out and talk about safeguarding in English. We need to adapt to a lot of local languages, not just French and Spanish; I am talking about all the national languages. If you really want to reach out to everybody, this is a huge task. In my moments of depression, I think we will never get there because it is too big, but of course that is what we all work towards.

It does need a lot more than the headquarters policy knowledge. We have lots of policies, which is a good thing and has been a positive development over the last 20 years, but how do we now make these policies alive? How do we bring them from my office desk out to the communities where we want to bring about change in their lives? We do not want to just have a nice policy. For me, the big challenge is how we make them alive, so that it is not sufficient that we are committed. People need to know what we are talking about. They need to feel that they can trust us, so that they report, we take things up professionally, fairly and independently, we have some results when we get complaints, and there is a change in behaviour afterwards. That is challenging.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** Megan and Ester have both very eloquently covered the issues that we have in terms of the transfer of capacity to practitioners who are working day to day with affected populations. I wanted to cover another angle of this, which is organisational culture change. This is something that I have really seen coming through in the last two years. For the first time on a large scale, organisations have started looking at themselves and at the structure of the aid sector. The work that we do in safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is about power imbalance. We are now beginning to look at our own organisations and our own sector, and to see that we are perhaps replicating those power imbalances in the very structures that we are working in.



Everybody then puts organisational culture change on their strategy but it is a really hard thing to unpick and to say, “What does that mean? What are we looking at?” Some organisations are taking steps towards that. I see, for example, that ActionAid have come up with some feminist leadership principles, and so on. If we are going to address the power imbalances that we see replicated in the work in safeguarding and PSEA, it is a really difficult and long journey. It is one that requires quite hard self-reflection. For example, I look at us who are feeding back to you today and I see that we are all quite homogenous, and I think that needs to change.

**Q58 Mrs Latham:** Lucy and Megan, in particular, what impact has the global pandemic had on your efforts to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector this year?

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** It has had a really big impact. I have been heartened by the fact that I have seen, right from the beginning, a real commitment from organisations to try to tackle it, to be flexible and to come up with new approaches. Many of the organisations that I work with do humanitarian work, and it is quite a familiar way of working to really have a complete U-turn—to look at a completely new situation and to think, “How can we address this and how can we work in these circumstances?” As a sector, we have been fairly well placed to deal with this. It has only been six months in a completely new and unprecedented situation, but I am beginning to see guidance coming out, as well as changes in practice.

The message that we want to get across is that this is a really dynamic situation that people need to be constantly risk-assessing to find out what the current risks are, the main ones being a lack of oversight and an increase in safeguarding concerns that we are seeing in the wider community, which we can assume are taking place in our work as well. We need to be looking at new and creative ways to address those. If we do not, and if we use the pandemic as an excuse to not try to stay on top of safeguarding issues, there is always a danger that we are going to create a culture of impunity.

**Megan Nobert:** Internally, we have been focusing on continuous messaging: making it clear that, yes, there is a global pandemic, the world is in complete and utter chaos and we are worried about our beneficiaries and programmes, but we cannot forget about safeguarding. Continuing to find small ways of reminding staff that this is still important, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, was a focus of ours.

The other piece is that, echoing what Lucy said, in many ways we are uniquely placed to adapt to something like a global pandemic. In the aid sector, we are used to working in very dynamic and changing situations. The types of safeguarding violations in some cases are changing. We are seeing the potential, at least, for more online abuses, with people not being in physical contact as much as they might have been previously,



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and so we have been adapting our internal guidance and our messaging to staff to reflect this.

We are also adapting the way we are going to be doing capacity-building, starting in the new fiscal year. In a number of activities, we are adapting our approaches to ensuring that our beneficiaries know that we care about them beyond handing them that dignity kit or receiving them at that safe space, finding new ways for them to report in a manner that works for them and for all the different types of beneficiaries who we serve. It is not easy, without question, but it has been a really interesting snapshot of how we can adapt and adjust within the sector, without dropping the standards on safeguarding.

**Chair:** Could I just be the bad cop here? You are fascinating; I am loving everything that you are saying, and it is really helpful for our inquiry, but we only have 20 minutes left and we are still on question 1. I am going to have to ask witnesses to focus on the question and give us brief answers, if possible.

Q59 **Mrs Latham:** The next question is to Lucy and Ester. What policies and practices do organisations have in place to enable recipients of aid to report sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by aid workers? That is one of the fundamental things that we need to understand.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** Our sector has been working on the issue of enabling complaints and reports for quite some time—for about the last 15 years—so there was already that structure that we could build on and look at how we can make sure that we have safe and accessible mechanisms for receiving reports of sexual exploitation and abuse. However, although there has not been any rigorous global research done on it, we are aware, as practitioners, that we are going to get only a really tiny minority of people coming forward and using those kinds of systems to report.

We want to improve that, but we need to be a little more imaginative about how we find out that this is happening in the places where we are working, both in terms of making sure that the pathways through which affected populations can report to us are more appropriate, but also things like observing trends where they are happening, being more proactive, looking at red flags and thinking about whether there is something that we should be concerned about in a particular area of operation.

**Megan Nobert:** I agree with much of what Lucy said, but I disagree that we need to be thinking creatively. On the contrary, we need to go back to the most basic approach, which is about asking the beneficiary population how they want to report and breaking it down by gender, age, religion, language, ethnicity or disability. We need to ask them how they want to report and then build what works for them, not what works for the INGO. That is how we need to start approaching reporting mechanisms and building that trust.





**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** Thank you, Megan. That is what I meant, but you articulated it much better than I did.

**Ester Dross:** Thank you, Megan. I really wanted to add this, because that is the main issue. I work a lot with small and local organisations, all of which have some kind of reporting mechanism. That is nice, and you think it is a success, but they get no complaints, so there is the big question of how we build trust. They are obviously not adapted. When I ask people, "How did you create this? Did you ask the beneficiaries?" I find that they did not. They have a phone number and an email, and they are happy, but this is not how it works.

In order to encourage people, you need to go out and ask them how they would feel confident. They do not always have very complicated answers, and they often have very simple answers. Then you just need to do it, even if it does not look fancy in a big report. They can be very simple things, but we should be more attentive to the people we work for and who are at the centre of what we do. We need to ask them, for the sake of their own dignity, to decide themselves what the best way is.

Q60 **Mr Sharma:** My question is to Ester first, but Megan and Lucy can join in if they think there is anything missing. What mechanisms should aid organisations have in place to guarantee that, when abuses are reported, they are dealt with sensitively and objectively, and that appropriate action is taken against the perpetrators if the complaint is upheld?

**Ester Dross:** I could simply say that you need a good investigation guideline, good retaliation and whistleblower protection and a good complaints system, but we all know that it is not that easy, because most of us have these guidelines. You need to ensure that, first, this is known; and secondly, you act swiftly on the complaints you receive. You ensure that they are dealt with professionally, independently, neutrally and safely. You ensure that the people dealing with complaints have the right training, know what they are doing, are aware of confidentiality and of the risks, think outside the box and are not too closed.

If something goes wrong, which sometimes happens—such as a breach of confidentiality—you ensure that your organisation takes the right steps and the right disciplinary action if people retaliate or make threats, for example. This is maybe something that we do not always see, because that is what beneficiaries and communities look at: has there been any disciplinary action or any change? If there has been and if they feel protected, they trust us. If not—and they can all tell you about lots of negative examples—they will not trust us. Next time, they will not come and tell us.

We need not only to have strong policies, returning to the same thing as before, but also to implement them and to make people aware of them. There need to be consequences if somebody breaches the policy, even if it is not a breach of the SEA policy—it might be confidentiality.



Q61 **Mr Sharma:** Have you observed any changes in the way reports of exploitation and abuse are handled across the sector in light of efforts taken since the Safeguarding Summit in 2018?

**Ester Dross:** I would love to say that I have, but I am quite realistic. I have seen some really good changes and much more professional approaches, but unfortunately, as we said before, there is also a lack of capacity and we do not always do the right thing.

Clearly, since the Safeguarding Summit and the scandal before, people are much more aware and realise that getting complaints is important, but how you deal with them and find out what happened is quite complex. It is not just about right and wrong; it is about going and digging out the reality. Again, a lot of capacity-building is needed.

Q62 **Mr Sharma:** Do victims and survivors have easy access to the psychological support and legal advice that they need?

**Ester Dross:** It very much depends on the organisation and on the country. When we take it down from the HQ level and go into the different countries, in some countries it is very difficult to identify what legal support you could get. It may even be impossible for a victim to get legal support; for example, if we talk about homosexuality, in some countries it is a crime, so that victim would not get any legal support. That is where the organisation needs to come in and think about how we can protect people who cannot get legal support, with our own resources.

**Megan Nobert:** When we are talking about something like legal support, in many of the places where we work, where there are fragile systems, this is going to require long-term investment, thought and change. Something like Project Soteria, funded by the UK Government, is one small way in which we can start to build that type of change on the ground when we are looking at legal systems and setting up the processes and procedures whereby survivors are believed, and where it is illegal to experience something like rape—that is not the case in all the places where we work—and where you have a system that is sensitive, survivor-centred, empathetic and compassionate, with all the pieces that are necessary for a survivor to even want to seek that level of accountability. Unfortunately, it is not something that we fix in five minutes with one training to the police and hope for the best. Project Soteria is an interesting step in the right direction.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** In terms of support generally to victims and survivors who come forward, there needs to be a recognition that it is not a case of us spamming them with all the support services that are available to them when they first come forward—although we obviously do provide support straight away—but that this is really a long-term engagement. Many survivors do not access support, certainly within the first three months after coming forward. It might be several years down the line. In terms of support through legal processes, I was recently involved in a case where the perpetrator is not even going to come to



trial within the next two years, so this is really a long-term investment. We need to be aware of being victim and survivor-focused, and of the pace at which we need to keep up that support to them.

**Q63 Mr Sharma:** Megan, what measures, legal or otherwise, have been taken since 2018 to actively support people who speak up or whistleblowers who disclose sexual exploitation and abuse?

**Megan Nobert:** The way we need to start thinking about whistleblowing is that this is the last-resort option. Whistleblowing means that something else has gone wrong within an organisation, whereby a staff member or witness has not felt safe or has not felt that there is a space to be heard. Prior to the revelations relating to Oxfam and Save the Children coming into the media and prior to the Safeguarding Summit, most organisations had a whistleblowing policy, which is, like many of the policies in relation to safeguarding, very easy to put on paper but much more difficult to put into practice at times.

My own focus as a safeguarding professional is not on how we have the most beautifully written whistleblowing policy at the moment, but on how we create an environment whereby whistleblowing never becomes necessary and where, from the absolute top to the bottom, everybody feels that they have a voice and that there is a space, a manner, a way and a moment where they can talk about the most uncomfortable truths in the organisation without fear of retaliation or retribution. That is also a little easier said than done, but that is my focus when it comes to whistleblowing.

**Q64 Mr Sharma:** Are whistleblowers adequately protected from retaliation, and are those who retaliate against whistleblowers held to account?

**Megan Nobert:** Whistleblowing is a very individual experience. It is difficult to say whether there is sufficient protection across a sector as dynamic and diverse as the aid sector. Again, there are organisations that are more open than others will be to hearing these kinds of truths, and being willing to treat that whistleblower with respect and dignity and to acknowledge the courage that it must have taken to come forward with those allegations. Is there enough collective support in place for whistleblowers? I would argue there is not. A couple of NGOs in the US are focused on supporting whistleblowers, but it is probably not sufficient.

In terms of how to protect whistleblowers from retaliation, in many ways this comes down not only to organisational change, but to a change in the sector. It is a truth to say that, prior to a few years ago, speaking out about a very challenging issue that confronted the core way that the aid sector saw itself—as being really good people, saving people who were vulnerable, doing the right thing and bringing about more good than the harm it potentially could cause—and saying that we were not living up to that image that we hold of ourselves did result in blacklisting, in never having a job again in the sector and in having to feel unsafe.



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I do not consider myself to be a whistleblower, but when I spoke out—as the first aid worker to do so with their name and with their image—about my experience of being raped by a colleague in South Sudan five and a half years ago, I have repeatedly said that, if it had not been for the CAR revelations three months prior to that, and the work and voices of individuals like Miranda Brown releasing that information through Code Blue in relation to CAR, I would probably never have a job again in the sector.

There is a moment. There is change. We are not as scared of confronting these uncomfortable truths as we used to be. Certainly, there is still a way to go, and it is the last-resort option that you should have to feel that you have to speak up in such a public way about issues that we should be grappling with within the sector and grappling with together. Sorry, that was not a short answer at all; I do apologise.

**Chair:** Megan, thank you for sharing that with us. Thank you also for coming out at the time, because you really changed the world, and a lot of us owe a huge debt to you. It is appreciated, and we are really grateful that you are sharing your experiences with us here now.

Q65 **Navendu Mishra:** This is for Lucy and Ester. What are the primary ways in which aid organisations are held to account for their safeguarding responsibilities?

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** The primary way that aid organisations should be held to account is through the affected populations that we seek to serve. That is not the reality of the world that we work in. Essentially, you follow the money, and the best way to hold aid organisations to account is for donors to expect certain things from them, by which I mean not just compliance with standards—although standards are very useful tools to have a temperature check of where an organisation is at any given time—but for donors to build capacity in-house to really know and understand what they are looking at and to be able to see whether organisations are implementing these standards in a meaningful way.

Q66 **Navendu Mishra:** Building on that, DFID's annual report contains a specific safeguarding section, as recommended by our predecessor Committee. Is this a satisfactory example and should the new FCDO follow this model?

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** The short answer is yes, but there are more things that can be done. The FCDO would do well to take up the mantle of the work that DFID has done so far.

Q67 **Navendu Mishra:** What actions should the new FCDO take to ensure that all organisations that it funds uphold the highest standards possible?

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** Again, to reiterate what I said in answer to the previous question, DFID has been doing an awful lot of work with the enhanced due diligence that it created and the work of the team. They have been creating quite meaningful work on holding the sector to



account. There were definitely some areas where work could be looked at further, particularly in terms of partnership and how we work in a more collegiate and partnered way with organisations, especially national organisations that are at the forefront of delivery. I notice from the FCDO strategy that it has already taken on the top-line standards and principles that DFID created, so taking that work forward would be a good first step.

**Megan Nobert:** I would encourage other donors to take a similar approach to what was set out in the safeguarding strategy released earlier this month. The section in relation to DFID/FCDO looking at its own behaviour, actions, staff and relationships in country programmes was one of the most extraordinary things that I have seen a donor do in the last year, without question, and something that we are now going to be taking to other major donors and trying to encourage them to think as introspectively.

**Navendu Mishra:** All Committee members would agree that the loss of DFID will be felt in many ways, and this is one of the most important areas in which we need to make sure that, within FCDO, practices are in a good place when things move on.

Q68 **Kate Osamor:** I just wanted to pick up a little on FCDO. I know it is early days, but have you gained any impression of whether the new Department regards safeguarding as a priority?

**Megan Nobert:** The fact that the safeguarding unit has been retained in full within the FCDO was a very welcome signal for us that safeguarding continues to be top of the agenda. Hopefully, we will be working together to ensure that stays the case.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** As far as I understand it, the funding is going to be kept intact for the safeguarding resource and support hub as well. I am aware that one of the ways of operating for that hub is to reach out, and they are working with networks and organisations such as Ethiopia to really try to cascade capacity-building out to practitioners. If my understanding is correct and that will continue to be funded, that is good news as well.

Q69 **Kate Osamor:** I know that we are running out of time, but I just have one more question that I want to ask Megan and Lucy. What is your top priority for the new Department to make sure it is working effectively to combat sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector?

**Megan Nobert:** Since the Oxfam scandal revelations in the media, I have been grateful to be part of DFID's approaches, thoughts and workings on this. I was one of the original members of what has now become the independent reference group, which I continue to be part of. I am part of the ongoing conversations in relation to the survivor-centred approach, the advisory board for Project Soteria, part of the group's work on the misconduct disclosure scheme, and possibly every initiative at the moment that the UK Government have been putting out in relation to



safeguarding. My intention is to keep that attention going and to keep supporting the safeguarding unit in bringing together colleagues within the UK, as well as extending across the pond to our US and Canadian colleagues, and to try to think as locally and as contextualised as possible as we evolve what we want to focus on in relation to safeguarding.

**Lucy Heaven Taylor:** I agree with Megan's points. I would also add that, hopefully, we will not see a dilution of the work that has been done already. It is great that they put out a strategy straight away. It is quite top-line compared with what DFID used to produce, but I assume it is a starting point to be taken forward: things like the independent reference group continuing to have the team but also to seek expertise and to make sure that they stay at the forefront of thinking around safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Chair:** Panel, that was incredibly informative. We are only on our second witness session. We will be continuing this work up until Christmas, so if you have additional thoughts that you could feed in through written evidence, or if you want to give us specific examples in a future panel, we would be really grateful to hear from you. We want to make sure that the new FCDO embeds safeguarding in all of the work that it is doing and is genuinely a world leader on this, because there is much work that still needs to be done. Thank you all very much for your contributions; it is greatly appreciated.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Blakemore, Pierre Hauselmann and Tanya Wood.

Q70 **Chair:** I would now like to introduce the Committee to our second panel, which features directors of organisations that are at the forefront of ensuring high standards are maintained across the aid sector. We have the directors of CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative and Keeping Children Safe. DFID had invested heavily in these organisations to promote safeguarding standards that the NGOs have been held to, but there have been some concerns about how this is going to continue, and also that the standards are not robust enough. Could I ask the panel to introduce themselves and to give a little background about their organisations?

**Sarah Blakemore:** My name is Sarah Blakemore and I am the CEO of Keeping Children Safe. We have been around since about 2002 and most of our work is focused on child safeguarding. That is where we begin, but we also broaden that to work on SEA and safeguarding of all people in vulnerable circumstances.

**Tanya Wood:** I am Tanya Wood, director of the CHS Alliance. We are an international organisation based in Geneva and our real focus is a



commitment to strengthening accountability to affected people. We do that through implementing the core humanitarian standard. We are not necessarily a regulatory body. We are a membership organisation supporting our organisations to implement the standard. The standard is a broad, wide framework standard for the entire humanitarian sector and it states the essential elements of principled and accountable aid.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** Good afternoon. First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this hearing. It is a great opportunity. I am Pierre Hauselmann, the executive director of HQAI, the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative. This is an organisation that was created at the end of 2015 as one of the outcomes of the CHS development process and the merger between HAP and People in Aid. We audit humanitarian and development organisations against and around the CHS.

Q71 **Kate Osamor:** I have a question for all three of you. What do you consider to be the most important features of a robust standard to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector?

**Sarah Blakemore:** There are a number of elements. The foundation for a good safeguarding framework is risk assessment. We need to know where our staff, our partners, our programmes and our associates come in terms of contact with people and what safeguarding risk that might pose. That is the foundation and that is fundamental.

We then need to work together with the people who we work with and for, to look at those risks and build a set of robust safeguarding mitigations of those very specific risks. They will be different, depending on what you do, who you are working with and where you are working. Elements of that will include having a robust code of conduct that sets out acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It will include a safeguarding policy. It will include reporting mechanisms. It will include a robust response and investigations policy. It will include robust protections and systems for whistleblowers. It will have, as its foundation, a commitment to supporting and protecting survivors. On top of those things, you would expect to see a whole range of very robust accountability measures in order to make sure that these things are practically implemented and regularly reviewed.

**Tanya Wood:** Sarah captured well some of the technical aspects, so I will zone out from there. One of the elements from a CHS perspective is that it does take a holistic approach to how to address PSEAH. Like Ms Champion said, safeguarding cannot be an add-on, and we know that sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment operates in a culture where it is allowed to operate. What the CHS tries to do is to take a broader, holistic approach to accountability. It is central to the whole standard but it weaves PSEAH considerations in amongst a whole accountability lens, which includes how we work with local partners, how we work with and listen to affected populations, and how, as you heard from the previous panel, we are treating our staff and using our financial resources. These



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are all broader situational elements of where we put in PSEAH. That is the first one around taking a more holistic approach.

The second one for a robust standard is that it has to be well-known and used in terms of its applicability. The CHS was, as you are all aware from the first panel and the first inquiry, a really heavy consultation process with both affected people and Governments to launch the standard. It was incorporated into the Sphere handbook and standards, which are widely used and known in the humanitarian sector.

I would like to draw on what Ester said before about it being an international standard. This is important for us. We have tried to lay out the commitments in ways that are accessible to people affected, so that they can know what to expect from these aid organisations. Again, someone in the previous panel said how important it was that the first people to hold us to account are the people affected themselves, so they have to know about these standards, and that has been the work that we have done on the CHS.

My final point, which I cannot stress enough, is that it is used and applied, and is driving improvements in the sector. That is where the CHS is being produced as a verifiable standard. We now have 98 datasets of verification on our website, almost a third of which have been audited by Pierre's organisation, who you will hear from. It is about not only the tick-box exercise but this process that we have set up of verifying, which forces organisations to improve to meet those standards. I am broadening out from the PSEAH technical requirements, which we can talk more about, but those three elements are important for a standard to have teeth and impact.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** I am going to build on nearly 30 years of experience in standard and verification mechanisms across different sectors aimed at improving conditions for the people and the environment on the ground. I am first going to answer in a generic way and then focus on PSEAH. First of all, an international standard needs to strike a balance between flexibility and prescription. If it is too flexible, it is very broadly applicable but may become meaningless. If it is too prescriptive, it becomes applicable only in very specific situations, so there is a balance that needs to be struck between these two dimensions.

The second point is that the standard needs to be verifiable. If it is not, it is not possible to measure its application, it is not applied and it remains a piece of text without much impact. You have two types of aspects. One is what is directly verifiable with the outcome of the prescription, such as providing information to affected people about the programmes and expected behaviour of staff. This is one element of the CHS, and it is really easy to go and check by asking affected populations whether they have received this. However, this is going to give you only the picture of what is happening at the time when you are in the field with your auditors. It does not give you a picture over time or across the





organisation, so there is another aspect that needs to be taken into account, which is a mix between performance—what I just mentioned as an example—and the system requirements. What processes are there behind the output so that this is, indeed, put in practice everywhere? Another example of the CHS is that policies for open communication are in place. Of course, there are many other elements, but these are just two examples.

This can be verified by the existence of the policies and procedures, of course, but also by the fact that the staff know and apply them. The combination of these two elements gives you a broader view of the organisation and allows operating by sampling, i.e. maintaining costs relatively low in terms of the audit. These are very important elements.

Another aspect is that the organisation assessing the compliance with the standard needs to be independent from the one building capacity from the standard. It is a basic principle that you cannot be judge and party in this situation. These are the generic elements.

When we come back to the CHS, I must say that it is the best balance that I have ever seen of these different elements across many standards, and it is very interesting because it really offers an enabling environment from many aspects. PSEAH is one very important aspect across the whole CHS. One third of the standards address it. We must also take into consideration that the outcomes do not happen in a vacuum. The whole of the CHS is necessary to be implemented for good PSEA mechanisms to be in place. These different elements are very important and I do think that the CHS perhaps does not cover every single topic but offers a very good background and enabling environment to address PSEA and other accountability-related aspects.

**Q72** **Kate Osamor:** Tanya, does the CHS explicitly require organisations to protect victims, survivors, witnesses and whistleblowers?

**Tanya Wood:** It will. We have been improving the CHS for PSEAH over the last two years. My predecessor, Judith Greenwood, the previous director of the CHS Alliance, gave evidence to this Committee back in 2018, where she recognised that it did not include everything but that it was a good basis. We have taken that and consulted with our members and with members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on PSEAH. We have field-tested it in Palestine with the PSEAH network. We have recently mapped it against all the other PSEAH standards in the sector, including DFID's due diligence safeguarding, the IASC minimum operating standards and the OECD DAC.

We have incorporated all of the requirements, including those exact ones that you asked, Kate, to make them explicit in what we call the verification framework, which is the framework that we verify the organisations on. In some areas, we had to add additional aspects on. The whistleblowing policy is a key one that we had to add in additionally, as it was not explicitly stated. It is now explicitly stated in the new



verification framework. In some areas, we have just had to make it more explicit around what we were stating, but explicitly saying what the PSEAH requirement is to fulfil this indicator. I am really pleased that we are launching that on 7 October. We have had support from DFID for that update to this PSEAH index, as we call it. It is going to be launched and I am very happy to share that with the Committee. We have mapped it against all the standards that are out there to make sure that we now have the requirements for PSEAH incorporated into the standard.

**Kate Osamor:** That is really good to hear, and please do share it with the Committee. It is good to hear that you are in a much more robust position to be able to announce that to us as well. I appreciate that work.

Q73 **Mrs Latham:** Pierre, as you know, there was a big scandal about Oxfam, but they held HQAI certification when they had these serious safeguarding flaws and when they were identified. How do you explain HQAI's certification of Oxfam despite the presence of these flaws?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** The audit of Oxfam happened very shortly after the scandal broke. These elements happened in 2010-11, seven years before the audit took place. What the audit looked at is whether measures had been taken from this learning and from this scandal in terms of what happened at that time, and what mechanisms Oxfam had put in place to avoid this happening again. We need to be clear that the audit and its results is not to say that it has never happened, whatever it may be, but to say that, if it has happened, lessons have been learned and implemented, lessons are in place to minimise the risk of these elements happening again, and the possibility to react quickly on this basis.

Q74 **Mrs Latham:** What year was that?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** 2018.

Q75 **Mrs Latham:** They did not have everything in place and they still do not have everything in place. It still is not perfect. They still have certification.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** Yes, it is not perfect but they have no flaws that mean that they are not able to deliver against one or other of the CHS commitments. This is also a very important element to understand. The certification is accompanied by different levels of weaknesses, which we call corrective action requests. Some are major and mean that it is impossible to deliver the outcome and there is no certification. The others are minor weaknesses, and they are accompanied by a timeframe for resolution. Then you have observations and different graduations in this direction.

Once an organisation is certified, if they do not act on these weaknesses within the timeframe, the certificate can be suspended and eventually withdrawn. We have had suspensions—not of Oxfam—but never a



withdrawal. This is an extremely powerful tool to foster improvements and the correction of these elements.

Q76 **Mrs Latham:** I am sorry, but it does not sound to me like it is a very powerful tool if nothing has happened to Oxfam in spite of what happened at Oxfam, and in spite of the fact that it has taken them a very long time to get out of the problem that they have had, but you have still carried on certifying them. Was there any qualification whatsoever in that certification?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** Of course there was. As I was trying to explain, the certificate was associated with a number of minor cases that have been addressed to some extent during the two years of the cycle. I can tell you that Oxfam is not always very happy with the maintenance of these weaknesses. Indeed, it is associated to conditions and, if they are not met, they will lose their certificate.

Q77 **Mrs Latham:** I was going to ask you about what changes HQAI has made to ensure that organisations with inadequate safeguarding policies will not be HQAI-certified in the future, but, clearly, you will certify organisations that are inadequate, because you have done with Oxfam.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** It is your appreciation that, today, Oxfam is not dealing with safeguarding issues. According to our auditors and the reports I have seen, it is. I have not seen any organisation that had no weaknesses, but we are in the process of trying to drive improvement. If we had been auditing Oxfam in 2011 and had witnessed what happened in 2011, they surely would not have been certified. However, this happened quite a long time afterwards. There were changes in Oxfam and, because of that, it was the decision of HQAI, on the recommendation of the auditors, that the progress was sufficient to grant the certificate.

I can also say that there is a mechanism alongside the certification, which is a complaint procedure. Any stakeholder can complain to HQAI against a certification decision and say, "I do not think that Oxfam"—or any other organisation—"deserves this certificate. Justify the reason why". This will stimulate a further inquiry, so it is another element.

Q78 **Mrs Latham:** How frequently do you certify people? How long does the certification last? If you did not do it in 2011-12 and you did it in 2018, that is a very long time. It was probably eight years since you last looked at Oxfam. How frequently do you look at organisations?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** The first time we looked at Oxfam was in 2018.

**Mrs Latham:** That was the first time.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** The first time we looked at Oxfam was in 2018. HQAI did not exist before 2015.

Q79 **Mrs Latham:** Could I just ask you a final question, because we seem to be getting ravelled up with the system? In March this year, DFID told us



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that they had allocated £300,000 to HQAI to help with the verification of NGOs' adherence to the core humanitarian standard. How have you spent that?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** We have spent that in developing our systems. The money from DFID is part of our core funding. We have funding from the Government of the UK, but also from the Governments of Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and Luxembourg, which finance HQAI in equal parts. We have developed the systems. We have been accredited against ISO standards, which mean that we are audited for the quality of our services. We have started operating the system. We have covered about 55 organisations with different approaches. There are different elements. Some are verification, which is a weaker approach than certification. These 55 organisations are operating in about 90 countries.

Q80 **Mrs Latham:** I am asking you a specific question. You talk about your general funding. I am asking you how you have spent the additional £300,000 that DFID have given you.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** We only have core funding, so I can only tell you about what we have done with the common money from all donors. I am very happy to share with you the detailed accounting which we report to Oxfam every three months to provide the answer. Unfortunately, because this is all combined with the money from other donors, I cannot give you a specific answer to your question.

Q81 **Mrs Latham:** When DFID gives you £300,000, then, you just spend it on what you want. You do not have to spend it on the verification of NGOs' adherence to the core humanitarian standard, which is what the money was given for. You do not have to spend it on that; you can spend it on anything you like.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** No, not at all. We have a work plan. Everything we do is about auditing organisations, not just NGOs. We have audited UNICEF, for example. We have audited members of the Red Cross movement.

**Mrs Latham:** This was about NGOs.

**Chair:** Can I pause you both here, because of time? What you are saying is very interesting and we would probably like to write to you and follow this up, Pierre, if that is okay. We will go to Virendra Sharma now, please.

Q82 **Mr Sharma:** My question is to Pierre and Sarah. What are the main benefits of external audits in place of a more streamlined system of self-assessment accompanied by external spot checks?

**Sarah Blakemore:** It is important to have a great number of ways of getting assurance on safeguarding. Self-assessment and clear standards are really important. Spot checks are really important. Doing reviews of past cases is really important. It is also extremely useful to have robust, transparent external processes so that we can reassure ourselves that



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organisations are doing everything we would like them to do on safeguarding, and they can reassure themselves and benefit from that broader external perspective.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** I support what was just said. Our audits are very different from financial audits, but from this perspective, if this is the same, you have the self-accounting system of the organisation but you still need external auditors to check that this is correct and independently done. This is one aspect.

The other aspect is that there is a lot of internal learning that is done from the external view provided by the auditors. Finally, it is an important tool to build trust for external stakeholders in terms of the quality and accountability of organisations.

Q83 **Mr Sharma:** What is the average cost of an audit? Do they represent good value for money?

**Sarah Blakemore:** It depends on the audit and on the level of assurance. When we do it, it is about £1,400 for a central assurance assessment, but we want to do it in greater depth than centrally, so we would also review all of the locations and a number of in-depth deep-dives in the different locations. The other thing that I would say is that we have been lucky in that we have never had to turn down an organisation that does not have the funding for it. We make a charge, but we have been lucky so far to have had the resources; we also have never been in a position to have to do that.

Q84 **Mr Sharma:** You think it is good value for money.

**Sarah Blakemore:** Yes. An external financial audit or a small or medium-sized organisation is about £4,000 or £5,000, so yes, I do.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** Our audits are typically more expensive than that. They vary between £12,000 and £130,000, as was the case with UNICEF, for example. We look at the whole organisation and its systems and different projects, so it is extremely valuable. Like Sarah just said, we also have a subsidy fund that allows for subsidies of up to 90% of the cost, because we do not want cost to be a barrier. We have also developed other mechanisms.

It is good value for money, I would say, because that is what most of our audited partners say, but also because none of them have dropped out of the system. Even with the Covid-19 crisis, they have all stayed in the system. What is really interesting is the potential for saving that these tools can bring if they are connected with due diligence requirements. We have seen that, with the CSH audit, we can cover about 80% of the typical due diligence requirements, and the cost of adding the remaining 20% is minimal compared to the cost of a full-scale due diligence audit.

Q85 **Mr Sharma:** Tanya, how do the results from the NGOs' self-assessments compare to the results of external audits?



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**Tanya Wood:** Maybe I will start with a couple of comments that feed in from that last point. I really want to echo what Sarah said around value for money. I really feel that we have to start putting a level of scrutiny on audits and assessments, when it comes to areas around working with vulnerable people and accounting, on the same level that we do with how we look after our finances. I really want to make the point that we have to have a different outlook on that.

When it comes to the difference between self-assessment and full audit, we are comparing apples and pears, to some degree. Self-assessment is a real process of self-learning. We need the audits to come in and make that objective, viable assessment. When we plot the trends on the website, we have them tracked by full audit and our self-assessment. Overall, the trends match but there are some subtle differences, particularly on ones connected to PSEAH and possibly around complaints, where we see that the auditors are harsher than what we have on self-assessment. That speaks to a number of areas and, if we had more time, we could look into why that was.

Again, we have to be careful of comparing, but the trends overall show they plot against, but there are more subtle differences, when we come to the more sensitive areas that we need to be cognisant of as this Committee and this grouping.

Q86 **Mr Sharma:** Do HQAI and KCS publish the guidance used by its auditors so that it is clear what is being assessed?

**Sarah Blakemore:** Yes.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** Yes.

**Chair:** We love short answers.

Q87 **Navendu Mishra:** Tanya, what have you learned from the data collected by the CHS Alliance based on member assessments and verifications?

**Tanya Wood:** You are asking at a very good time as we are about to launch our "Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020" in two weeks' time, which I can share with the Committee. It analyses the five years of data, again remembering that these are quite new standards. It shows what the data trends are. There are two main messages for this Committee. First, we have more work to do on meeting these standards. When these standards were introduced as the CHS, there was a commentary about whether they were just stating what everyone has in place anyway. No; the data shows that we still have a long way to go to be able to meet these commitments.

The second important message for us here is that our lowest scoring, quite markedly, is on the issue of where we are meeting the indicators on welcoming feedback and complaints, and that complaints are well-handled. This is by far our lowest scoring, and this goes back to many of the comments from the previous panel. While we can put in all the



policies—and our organisations are getting better at putting in the right policies and practice, we are on this cultural learning journey and there are a lot of positives—we still have to do far more to learn, to address and to be able to respond and build that trust with the people who are affected. Those are the two main messages. Again, I will send that report to the Committee.

**Q88 Navendu Mishra:** Just building on what you said, in recent years have you noticed any trends or changes in the application of the standards across the sector?

**Tanya Wood:** The report looks at a snapshot of the amalgamation of data over the five years. We can also look at the trends around where we have made changes. This builds on what Pierre was saying before. Where we can track progress is through the certification process, because it has this rigorous approach of going in and doing re-certification and mid-term audits, and a process where we can track over time. While the message is that we are struggling most on complaints, it is also the area where we have made most progress, and this is of value to this ongoing process where organisations were shown in the spotlight how much more work they had to do and have then been able to make those trends.

The other one where we have made progress—again, it is relevant to yourselves—is on some of the areas around PSEAH. We have testimony from our members where, because of doing any of the verification processes, they really saw where the gaps were and had to make those changes. It is early days, but we can now plot where those changes are being made, and they are the areas where we see the biggest weakness. We have to continue in that vein and trend.

**Sarah Blakemore:** I would say that some of the biggest changes that we have seen are to do with accountability more broadly. The CHS Alliance deals with accountability in a broader way than perhaps we do, which is very useful because, in my experience, where you find safeguarding violations, you very often find other gaps in accountability as well. We have seen that organisations are moving beyond, “I have my policy and I have my code of conduct”, to “What does that mean more broadly? What does that mean for our mission, for our vision and for the decisions that we make? What does that mean for how we are communicating with communities, with families and with children? How are we really listening to them and how are we using that we get there to keep them safe and also to be a real foundation and a way of transforming our programmes?” That has steadily grown and grown.

One slight concern is that, while it is fantastic that we have this focus on SEAH, it is really important that we do not forget that safeguarding itself is broader than that and that we need to be thinking about protecting people from all types of harm. We need to remember that some groups of people might need special protections around that. We talk about children, but we need to talk about disabled people and LGBTI people as well. There is no one-size-fits-all. We are beginning to see that and to



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move a bit beyond, “This is safeguarding. This is what we do. This is what it means” to “How can we be broadly more accountable? How can we, as leaders in organisations—in fact, as people working at all levels in organisations—ensure that the rights, safety and dignity of the people we serve are at the heart of all of our decisions?”

That is great. We are seeing a lot of interest and a lot of progress, but it is important that we do not allow this increased focus on SEAH to let us forget about some of the other things that we have been working on so successfully and for so long.

**Q89 Navendu Mishra:** Thank you for that. Would it be fair to say that more and more organisations are moving away from having a slick policy and branding, and moving more towards addressing the real issues?

**Sarah Blakemore:** Yes, but, to echo some of the things that Tanya and Pierre have been saying, lots of organisations do not have even a very basic policy framework in place. We hear lots of talk about this not being a tick-box procedure, and not being about policies and procedures. That is true but, in my experience, even in very large organisations, there is a lack of the basics at the very foundations of it. In particular, there is a real lack of acknowledgement that some organisations in our sector have the potential to cause harm. It is not a risk that they are considering. When we see the way that they consider risks as an organisation, safeguarding often is not in those risk registers. Where it is, it talks about the risk to the organisation rather than from the organisation: “We might lose donors. We might have a scandal”, rather than saying, “These are the risks from us”. It is harder and harder for organisations to escape thinking about that now, and that has been one of the biggest changes in terms of that realisation and then building a safeguarding framework based on that.

**Pierre Hauselmann:** I wanted to confirm what Tanya said. We are now in the second round of the first certificates after four years. Although there is an annual audit, it is really after the full cycle that we can see, and these improvements that Tanya mentioned are very obvious from the audits. We also have specific testimonies of improvement in the bad treatment of people, et cetera. I wanted to highlight that and also to add that we see a better integration of accountability as a general term into the daily activities of the organisation. Four years ago, it was an add-on, a bit like when we were speaking about PSEA being an add-on in the programme. Now, it is being integrated into the ways that organisations are working. Nonetheless, there is still a lot to be done.

**Q90 Navendu Mishra:** On that point about accountability, if an HQAI-certified NGO is found to have a flawed complaints process, what powers do you have to hold them to account?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** If it is a certified organisation, we can withdraw the certificate through a defined process. As a first stage, we suspend it. Part of the suspension involves them having to announce to all their





directly impacted stakeholders—their donors, basically—that their certificate is suspended. I can tell you that this is extremely powerful.

**Q91 Navendu Mishra:** Tanya, going back to CHS Alliance, does your complaints committee have sufficient independence from its members to effectively deal with complaints that you may receive?

**Tanya Wood:** We have recently updated our policy after some time of learning what is best for the CHS Alliance. As I stated before, we are not necessarily a regulator or an ombudsman but an organisation that is trying to support our members to do better and meet these standards. The purpose of our complaints-handling process is that people can raise complaints where they feel their own organisation's complaints policy has not been held appropriately. The teeth that we have are to work with members on supporting that. We can either alert HQAI, if it is a certified organisation, of these complaints or we will bring it up through the self-assessment process. We can do investigations, but the point is more to work with and support our members to have their own well-functioning complaints processes in place. We truly believe that the more we can enable our members to have well-functioning complaints mechanisms, the more we can start to make some progress on this weakness that we have. It is more on referrals and working with our membership.

**Navendu Mishra:** I am sure that the Chair or one of the team members will correct me, but I think DFID was a member of CHS at some point. The Committee would find this interesting.

**Q92 Brendan Clarke-Smith:** These questions are mainly to Sarah and are about KCS and assurance assessments. What was the most important conclusion that you drew from the central assurance assessments that KCS undertook of DFID partners?

**Sarah Blakemore:** I do not think I can tell you the most important one, but I have four top ones here. The first is that organisations were not particularly strong on risk assessment, which is worrying because it is the foundation of safeguarding. As I mentioned before, we were not seeing it done in central risk assessments. We were not seeing risk being considered throughout the organisation. We were not seeing them asking affected populations what they felt the risks were. They were not, then, making decisions around those safeguarding risks. Where they did talk about safeguarding risks, the risks were, "We are not rolling out our policies and procedures quickly enough. We cannot comply with donor requests. We might have a scandal", and so on. That is a big, fundamental problem. That was one important thing.

There were a number of gaps in terms of the support that they were providing for victims and survivors. All of them were talking about it and were aware of the need for it, but there seemed to be a great lack of clarity in terms of what that meant in a very practical way. We were hearing about it and hearing leaders speak about it and about how important it was, but when I asked, "What does that mean, practically,



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that you are doing?" the answers were not very robust, in all sorts of ways.

Another gap is working on safeguarding of partners. Often, they identified that themselves. At times, they would feel that they had their own policies and procedures in place but they were delivering their programme through partners and were unclear about how to support their partners to have robust safeguarding or, indeed, how to hold them to account. Those were three big gaps.

One thing that is important for people to understand is that we carried out central assessments of policies and procedures, with some assurance that they were being implemented. That is very different from a full audit. It gives you a snapshot of one point in time. It is useful and helpful information but what is really important is looking at the countries where the programmes are being implemented and listening to affected people. You then really get that level of understanding, and that was not part of this assessment. It is useful information and it is good to know but it is only part of the story.

**Q93** **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** These assessments concentrated on head offices and did not really reach into country or field offices. Why was that?

**Sarah Blakemore:** There was some evidence of it but, in terms of what we were asked to do, that was the focus—that we would remain at head office. It was a central assessment of policies and procedures. It is important to do more and good to do more, and it is important to be aware that that does provide a level of assurance, but it certainly is not the whole story.

**Q94** **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Is there scope for future assessments to look at the practices and procedures in place at the local level?

**Sarah Blakemore:** Absolutely. There is no way that it would be considered sufficient, if we were talking about financial procedures, for an organisation to have one audit once of their central policies and procedures and to rely on that forever, and never to look at the financial management in their programmes and in the countries where they operated. It is absolutely essential.

**Q95** **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Finally, how should organisations and the FCDO work together to ensure that the findings of these assessments are acted on to drive up standards?

**Sarah Blakemore:** It should be a partnership of mutual accountability. The standards should be very clear, transparent and evidence-based. They should be subject to regular review and learning. They should be very public and people should know to which standards they are being held to account. They should also be mandatory. If you are receiving taxpayers' money, you should absolutely adhere to DFID's standards and be required to demonstrate that regularly. We would not hear anything



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less if we were talking about money here, and I doubt that any members of this Committee would consider the safety and dignity of children or adults in vulnerable circumstances to be any less important than managing money.

Q96 **Chair:** Tanya, why did you defend the use of non-disclosure agreements in the aid sector in the media recently?

**Tanya Wood:** I do not think we defended them. We said that there had to be careful use of them. We put out the guidance that we looked into. We did a call-out for stories. We looked at the various ways in which they are being used. We do not think that they should ever be used for misconduct or in PSEAH; however, the qualifier that we have used and that was quoted yesterday is that, if it is there to protect a victim or survivor, we have to keep that open for the protection of the victim or survivor. We absolutely do not think they should ever be used in misconduct or PSEAH cases.

Q97 **Chair:** The Women and Equalities Committee held a very good inquiry into NDAs and, like you, felt that they should never be used in misconduct or to cover up sexual abuse. Could you give an example of when you would say that they could be used? You said if they were to protect a victim or a survivor, but at whose instigation would that be?

**Tanya Wood:** The victim or the survivor, never by the organisation. We put out the guidance in order to put this in the context that this is about the cover-up of power abuses. They can never, ever be used to cover up power abuses. They can only be used if it right for the victim or the survivor.

Q98 **Chair:** Sarah and Pierre, if you were aware that one of the organisations that you were auditing was using NDAs in cases of misconduct or to try to cover up sexual abuse or intimidation, what would your response be?

**Sarah Blakemore:** They would fail the audit. Based on a quite detailed risk assessment and further conversations, we would decide if we wanted to report it further, for example to other donors or any other relevant authorities. We would make that decision based on a careful risk assessment. We would not want to cause further harm to victims or survivors, for example.

Q99 **Chair:** By their very nature, Sarah, how would you find out if they have been used?

**Sarah Blakemore:** Some of our auditing may uncover that. Victims or survivors may tell us that. It has not happened, but they may tell us that. If they did, we would take it very seriously. We are always very careful when we do our audits and our other work around accountability; that is exactly the sort of thing we would report. We are careful about confidentiality but, if we found something that breached our standards and ethics, we would, with the right process and the right risk



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assessment, report it in the appropriate way and work with that organisation as much as we could.

Q100 **Chair:** Pierre, what would you do if you found they were being used? Is the use of them within the aid sector ever appropriate, or does it stifle people coming forward with concerns?

**Pierre Hauselmann:** I completely support what Tanya said, not only personally but also because it is guidance that is provided by the CHS Alliance and with which we have to abide. It is part of our way of assessing. If we discover something, we would first of all hear about it and enquire whether this is founded. We had a case recently, where we interviewed whistleblowers and other people who may have had NDAs in the organisation, and looked at what had happened and what was in the NDA itself. Because of the confidentiality of the audit, the auditors have access to all documentation that they require access to. Also, when interviewing people, whether beneficiaries or victims, their identity is very carefully protected and we make sure that there is no possibility of retaliation because of what we hear.

If we confirm that, indeed, the NDA is to hide illegal activities—because we are talking about illegal activities—there is absolutely no doubt that this would seriously jeopardise the certificate. It would exclude the possibility of the certificate.

**Chair:** Thank you all for your clarity on that. Thank you, witnesses, for your contributions today. It has been very heartening to hear what you have been saying. Thank you very much to Committee members, too. This concludes our second evidence session in our ongoing inquiry into sexual abuse within the aid sector. I have some optimism, from what we have heard from witnesses, that this cycle that we have been seeing of scandal and then a reaction, and then everything going quiet until the next scandal, is starting to be broken down. I very much agree with what Sarah Blakemore said: we need to be viewing this as risk assessments in every situation that we find it, and—this is key—involving all participants, including the aid workers, the organisational structure and the beneficiaries, in creating the structure to prevent any abuse or exploitation happening.

I am very mindful of what the first panel said—that safeguarding should be embedded into all organisations, as health and safety and financial auditing are, and that funders need to recognise and fund this as a core part of an organisation's work, not as a bolt-on.

I hope that, as we go forward in this inquiry, we will be able to find more examples of good practice. If people who are watching this want to come in with their observations on that, we would appreciate people's experience. Thank you very much to all of you. Thank you very much again to Committee members.