

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Priorities and future of the Department, HC 116

Monday 21 October 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 October 2019.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Richard Burden; Chris Law; Mark Menzies; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Paul Scully; Mr Virendra Sharma; Henry Smith.

Questions 1 - 64

Witnesses

I: Rt hon. Alok Sharma MP, Secretary of State for International Development, and Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Department for International Development (DFID).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alok Sharma and Matthew Rycroft.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome, everyone. Welcome, Secretary of State, to your first appearance before the Select Committee. Permanent secretary, welcome back. We have a 90-minute evidence session, and we are seeking to cover a lot of ground. We are going to kick off with Syria and then move on to some general questions about the Department, 0.7% and those sorts of issues.

Q1 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Hello, Secretary of State. Nice to see you. What is the UK doing in response to the latest chapter of the humanitarian crisis in Syria? That is the broadest question I have to start with. I will caveat that with three things that I will be interested in.

One: what are we doing in terms of the repatriation of children? It looks like we are falling behind France, Germany and others, which have repatriated. We still seem to be floundering. On my visit, I had no problem finding and identifying a number of our children who are out there. I don't understand why the Government has been so useless at engaging with north-eastern Syria for the past two years, until it is too late. What are we doing now? It wasn't your fault, because you were not the Secretary of State, but what are we doing now?

Two: what are we doing in terms of the provision of humanitarian aid and support in the region? There have been reports about water supplies and about other shortages. What, concretely, are we able to do?

Three: on a slightly wider remit, what are we doing to try to ensure that the conflict doesn't become a hot conflict again and that the ceasefire lasts a bit longer? Are there particular things the Department can do, in terms of ensuring that people are providing things there, that people haven't all escaped, and that we are not just giving a free run for tanks to overrun the area? I would be interested to know about those three areas.

Alok Sharma: Thank you very much, Chairman. It is a pleasure to be here in front of your Committee. As a preface, I am sorry that we have not been able to meet earlier, for various reasons, but I look forward to a good, engaging discussion here and in the future.

On Syria, clearly all of us find what is happening tragic; there is a huge amount of sadness about what is happening. I can tell you from a top-line perspective that, of course, we have not been supportive of the Turkish action. The Prime Minister has spoken to Erdoğan and expressed our views on this and our grave concerns.

You raised three issues, Lloyd, which I will take not necessarily in turn. The first is the humanitarian aid issue. A few days ago, I spoke to Mark Lowcock, who is of course the UN emergency relief co-ordinator, about what is going on the ground. The feedback I got was that many of the NGOs have withdrawn their foreign staff, and I think that is continuing to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

happen. The UN, as I understand it, still have staff on the ground, and are trying to provide as much support as they can. The key issue for us is the safety of the staff and whether we are able to get humanitarian support through. I don't think it is an issue of whether we would be willing to provide additional support; that is not really the issue. The issue is, how certain can we be that support is getting through?

I think, for the moment, that there is some support getting through, but it is very volatile. I am not going to pretend to you that we have a complete understanding of precisely how it is happening. We obviously operate through partners on the ground. We have already committed £40 million of funding for the north-east region this year to address some of those acute needs, in terms of food, shelter, water and healthcare. Of course, we stand ready to provide additional support if that is what is required.

You spoke about the issue of water. Yes, we are very concerned about that, and I raised that issue in my discussions with Mark Lowcock. We are doing all we can with our partners to look at repairs and at alternative means of getting water to people, not just in the local communities, but in the IDP camps. That is work that is ongoing.

In relation to the repatriation of children, we know that there may be some British children in the IDP camps, and of course they are innocent victims of the conflict—we accept that. The policy has been to look at this on a case-by-case basis. The Foreign Secretary made a statement to the House last week about this. The reality is that it is a very, very challenging situation on the ground. Obviously, I am not able to give you a commentary on specific cases, but, as I said, we look at this very much on a case-by-case basis.

Your final comment was about what we are doing overall. Since 2012, we have committed almost £3 billion to the region, in terms of supporting countries that are hosting, and providing direct support to, refugees—people who have fled their homes. That support will continue. Of course, there has been the whole issue—at the UN as well—of attacks on hospitals and schools. There is a separate process running on that line. I will not sit here and say that we have all the answers to this, because it is a very confused story on the ground.

Matthew Rycroft: To add to what the Secretary of State said, in addition to our focus on the north-east, we are continuing to monitor, extremely carefully, the north-west and other parts of the country.

Q2 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Since the invasion of Turkish troops and the ceasefire, has the Department convened a discussion about how you could encourage international NGOs, and what support they might need, to be able to continue operating in the region? You have identified that they are leaving the region, but have you gathered together some of the top international NGOs—we all know who they are—to ask whether there is a plan we can come to, to be able to provide packages in the region, or are we waiting for someone else to co-ordinate?



Alok Sharma: We are having conversations. As I said, I have spoken to Mark Lowcock. We are having conversations, which, you will appreciate, I do not, at this stage, want to set out for the public. But we are aware that we need to be forward-leaning in this. That is something that we are discussing and talking to partners about.

- Q3 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** In terms of the IDP camps—assuming they remain secured and continue to exist, which is not a given—one problem I saw when I visited last month was that international NGOs were already struggling to operate there. That was partly due to reputational risk, and partly due to the difficulty of negotiating with the Syrian authorities and the north-eastern authorities. None of the IDPs or refugees, of which 30,000 are Iraqi and 10,000 are foreign, had been registered in any form of official UN system so that they could be tracked. Is there still work to be done to ensure that when things calm down—hopefully they will and it won't become a killing ground—we get in and track who is there, so that we can start to ensure the right aid gets to the right people? That did not seem to be happening.

Alok Sharma: Organisations such as the World Food Programme have done this in other regions. At this stage, given where we are, that is not the direction of travel. That may be where we can go with this, but right now it is about ensuring that we understand what is happening on the ground and trying to get that basic support to people who are suffering.

- Q4 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Finally, do you think that it was useful for the Government to couch their condemnation of the invasion in terms of understanding the threat that Turkey faces? The Secretary of State's condemnation in the Chamber said, "We condemn the invasion, but we understand that Turkey has legitimate security concerns." Does couching the condemnation in those terms weaken it and make it not as effective as it could be? Everyone has security concerns, don't they?

Alok Sharma: In the initial aftermath, the Foreign Secretary put out a statement. As I said, we have been clear that we don't support the Turkish action, and I don't think that suggests in any way that we are being mealy-mouthed. We have been very clear that we don't support this action.

- Q5 **Chair:** May I take us on to broader priorities in the Department? Looking at speeches and announcements over the three months since you took over, my sense is that a greater priority is now being given to climate change and the environment, economic development and girls' education. Am I correct in identifying those as your top three priorities? If not, what are your top three priorities?

Alok Sharma: You are right, Chair. Those are three priorities. I have also announced that we will be focusing on ending preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children by 2030, so that is the fourth priority, if I can put it like that. That does not mean that we suddenly de-prioritise everything else, but you will have seen that, in the Queen's Speech, particular reference was made by the Prime Minister to tackling climate change and girls' education.



Q6 Chair: So there is an element of a zero-sum game with the 0.7%, isn't there? Unless the economy grows dramatically, if there is extra money for climate change and girls' education, there may be areas that you have to reduce. You know that we have exchanged correspondence on some rumours that were going around, suggesting that human development funding or aspects of it might be cut back. Are you able to put my mind at rest that that is not under consideration by the Department?

Alok Sharma: Exactly as you say, we have seen the economy grow year after year, and I very much hope that that will continue so the 0.7% grows in absolute terms. Secondly, if we are putting more money into climate action, for instance, it does not necessarily mean that we are cutting other things. You may keep things at a base level, and in terms of the ICF, that is over a five-year period. I know you wrote to me on these issues, and I replied to you on what we are doing on nutrition and health. I can put your mind at rest in the sense that we have made no decisions on de-prioritising anything at this stage, but, clearly, we have a spending review coming up and we will have to look and see what we are doing. As part of that we will look at priorities, but at this stage we are not de-prioritising anything.

Q7 Richard Burden: Previous Secretaries of State and Ministers who have appeared before us have given us a number of assurances that DFID will remain an independent Department of State, headed by a Cabinet Minister. Are you able to give the same assurance?

Alok Sharma: There are two points that are always raised: first, the 0.7%, and, secondly, whether DFID is an independent entity. On the 0.7%, I think you have seen that commitment to 0.7% in the spending round and in the documentation supporting the Queen's Speech. As far as I am concerned, the 0.7% is a given. In terms of whether or not DFID should continue as an independent entity, the first thing I want to say is that, having worked there for three months, I rate the staff very highly. That is the first thing, and it is not just me; when you go out and talk to external people, they rate the staff highly.

The second thing to say is that, normally, a change of machinery in Government happens when there is a change of Government or a reshuffle. I was appointed three months ago, and we remain an independent body. The third thing I would say is that I spent a year in the Foreign Office as a junior Minister, and coming into DFID I was agnostic about this whole issue. But, having spent some months here—this is not necessarily what the staff have been saying—when you talk to external parties, they are very clear that DFID, as an independent organisation with a seat at the Cabinet, adds a lot of value in terms of our credibility. If you are asking me, my personal view is very much that it should continue as an independent Department.

Q8 Richard Burden: It is good to hear you say that. I guess what we have constantly going over in our minds—a number of other people do as well—is what the Prime Minister himself said to the *Financial Times* in January this year: "If 'Global Britain' is going to achieve its full and massive



HOUSE OF COMMONS

potential then we must bring back DfID to the FCO. We can't keep spending huge sums of British taxpayers' money as though we were some independent Scandinavian NGO". He wasn't Prime Minister then, but have you discussed the matter with the Prime Minister?

Alok Sharma: I have certainly raised the 0.7% with him, and he is supportive—I am not saying anything that is not already in the public domain. The issue here, rather than getting fixated on whether DFID is independent or not—I have said to you clearly that it should continue as an independent Department—is how we work across Government to deliver on ODA. We now have joint Ministers: we have Zac Goldsmith, who sits in DEFRA as well as with us and who has a lot of focus on climate action, and we have joint Ministers with the FCO. For me, what is really important is how we work with other Government Departments to ensure that ODA is delivered effectively and that it is done in a value-for-money way. That is a priority from my perspective in terms of governance and how we go forward, but my view is very clear that 0.7% is something that the Government support, and DFID's continuing as an independent Department is certainly something that I support.

Q9 **Richard Burden:** Let's hope you are able to convince the Prime Minister in his current role of that same view. Moving on to the 0.7%, it is good to hear you say that you are committed to that figure, which is, of course, enshrined in law. Could I just press you a bit more? Are you talking about a commitment to 0.7% as defined in the consensus agreed within the OECD DAC?

Alok Sharma: Yes.

Q10 **Richard Burden:** Finally, in some of your statements, you have referred to aid paving the way for future trade deals.

Alok Sharma: I don't think I've ever said that aid will pave the way for future trade deals. I gave an interview to *The Daily Telegraph* some months ago, and I was clear that I do not want aid to be tied. The primary objective of aid should always be to alleviate poverty, but I also want to ensure that we help countries to become self-sustaining. If, as a by-product of that, we create future markets for the UK, that is a perfectly reasonable thing to be doing.

Q11 **Richard Burden:** Would you see that as being a beneficial by-product of using aid money to combat global poverty, or would it be an aim of UK aid strategy?

Alok Sharma: There can be semantics around this, but we are committed—this is our primary aim—to help those countries to which we provide support, helping to make sure that we eliminate poverty. When I talk to people in the Governments of those countries, they say that they want to be self-sustaining. To me, that is self-evident in terms of what they want and what we want. If a by-product of that is that we create relationships and a potential future market for the UK, I would say that is a good thing.

Q12 **Chair:** Potentially, an issue arises if the trade starts to influence the choice



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of where we are working—I think that’s where there is a concern.

Alok Sharma: I am clear that the key aim of aid is to alleviate poverty. We know the countries that we are focused on—we have an Africa strategy, for example—and that must be the starting point. When I visited Ethiopia and talked to members of the Government, from the Prime Minister down, they said the reason they have a good relationship with the UK and DFID is because we are there helping them to become self-sustaining, rather than providing aid with some other thought in mind.

Q13 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When DFID was set up, all UK aid spending was via DFID. Now, 25% of the UK’s aid budget is spent outside DFID. Apart from that looking a bit like a backdoor way of undermining the Department—you have reassured us that that is not the Government’s intention—the Public Accounts Committee recommended that DFID increase its involvement in the allocation of ODA in all Departments.

Your predecessor’s predecessor—so many have gone past—said that aid should be able to be spent “no better”. That was her mantra. There is significant concern that ODA spent outside DFID is not spent as well as when it is co-ordinated with DFID. We published that in a report on the issue, which also included a number of recommendations that I push you to consider. The spending review announced that extra resources would be given to support cross-Government capacity building—so part-way to our recommendations—but no specific numbers were provided. Are you now in a position to give us details on what numbers, in terms of cash, will be spent on that cross-departmental working? What kind of system does that involve? Is it advisory, or is it a requirement that other Departments will have to co-ordinate with you?

Alok Sharma: The co-ordination process with other Departments has been running for a while. You are absolutely right; various independent organisations have identified DFID as the Department that is best able to spend ODA. That does not mean, as far as I am concerned, that other Departments, where they have projects that make sense, should not look to spend ODA. It is a question of making sure that they do it well. Some 160 staff from DFID are seconded to other Departments to support them on the whole process of how to spend ODA.

One of the things that your Committee reported last year was that you want the spending review process to include an evaluation of each Department’s capacity to administer ODA. The Government agreed, as I understand it, that that would be taken into account in the next SR period, and I would certainly support that.

This is a question of DFID providing support to other Departments to build capacity and understanding. That goes back to the point about how we work across Government. I see spending ODA as a one-Government effort rather than just a DFID effort. To take the example of ICF funding, it is entirely possible that Departments such as DEFRA and BEIS will have projects that they think we should put money towards.

Q14 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: So you are not able to give me an amount for the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

cross-departmental spending resource?

Alok Sharma: As I said, 160 people from DFID are seconded to other Departments. We got an uplift of around £20 million for our operating costs for 2021. An element of that will be used to provide further support to other Government Departments.

Q15 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Okay, so it will come out of the Department's uplift?

Alok Sharma: Yes, we got a £20 million uplift. We went from 3% to 3.4% of total operating costs—the percentage of total DFID spend.

Q16 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Are you convinced that ODA programmes administered outside the Department are adequately targeted towards poverty reduction, especially funds with dual aims, such as the prosperity fund?

Alok Sharma: Whether ODA is spent through DFID or another Department, you are subject to the same rules—the International Development Act and the DAC rules—so there is no difference whereby other Departments adhere to a different set of rules. To count as ODA, they will have to abide by those rules and if they are able to do that, of course the project will count as ODA. That checks and balances process is in place in Government.

Q17 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: So the check and balance is just that it needs to fulfil the accountancy tick box of the DAC rather than ICAI? ICAI says that other aid-spending Departments have not embraced "leave no one behind" and do not perform as well in terms of transparency. ICAI very often reports that it struggles to get those Departments to fully disclose the detail of their programmes. What gives you the confidence that other Departments are spending well when our very own aid assessment body says that there is no evidence?

Alok Sharma: Obviously, I am not here to speak on behalf of other Departments; I am here to speak on behalf of DFID. Under spending rules, other Government Departments are responsible for monitoring their own programmes. At some point, I am sure that you will have an opportunity to speak to some of those other Departments.

Q18 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Do you not chair the cross-departmental group that is meant to oversee all ODA spending?

Alok Sharma: You come to a very important point about governance, and I think that there is a case for strengthening and making that even more coherent than it is now. An ODA ministerial meeting is supposed to take place twice a year, but that has not happened during the three months that I have been in post. We have had the spending round so there have been discussions with other Secretaries of State and, of course, the Treasury.

The permanent secretary may want to talk about the senior officials group on ODA, which meets every quarter. The last time they met was, I think,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in September. I do not know if you want to comment a little bit on how that group works.

Matthew Rycroft: The Department continues to make available to all the other ODA-spending Departments our own expertise, resources and systems. It is up to each of them to choose the extent to which they buy into that.

Q19 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Do you have a list of which ones have taken that up?

Matthew Rycroft: Yes. Some have taken it up fully, others less so. As the Secretary of State said, during the next multi-year spending review, we will put forward some proposals to strengthen the governance further. I should just go back and say that it is not just that spending has to meet DAC rules—all spending needs to meet those rules for it to count as official development assistance—but that everything that any part of the British Government spends money on is part of a strategy. That is either a country strategy or a cross-cutting strategy like disability inclusion or climate action and so on.

Q20 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Are you able to share that list of which Departments have taken up that support?

Matthew Rycroft: We could certainly give you a breakdown by Department of where DFID staff are and the sort of discussions we have had with them about how they spend their own ODA.

Q21 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** That would be really helpful. Our recommendation, to repeat it—I am sure you have read it—is that, as Secretary of State, you should be responsible for all ODA spending and that your Department should divvy it out to other Departments when they are best placed to spend that money on your behalf, but the budget should be fully retained in your hands. We think that would be the best of both worlds and would allow you to do the oversight, ensuring that DFID co-ordinates the spending, and the other Departments to use their expertise.

However, the Government have not yet taken that suggestion up. Apart from last year, the trend has been for the percentage spent outside the Department to increase. Do you have a feeling of what the cap level of those increases should be? Should it increase no further? Or would you be quite happy with it increasing to 50% or 60%?

Alok Sharma: Again, I think this will be part of the discussion that we have in the spending review. As you have said very clearly, and as is widely acknowledged, DFID is good, in relative terms, compared to other Departments, at spending ODA. It is the case that, towards the end of a year, we will sometimes get underspend ODA back from other Departments, and then we deploy that capital.

The key things here, from a DFID perspective—I will be making this case at the spending review—are, first, on the governance aspect, because I very much have the view that we need to get better at governance, and secondly, how that funding is split. As I said, that is for the discussion for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the SR, but I recognise that we need to make sure that we work as one Government. That is probably about as much as I can say at this stage. However, I am obviously keen that we have a strong Department for International Development, and where we add value and do things well, we should continue to do that, and perhaps do more of it.

Q22 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I hope that you treat some of our reports on this issue as a useful tool for lobbying within Government, as well as our pushing you. I hope you take them in the spirit that they were intended—to give you a stronger hand in those discussions.

Alok Sharma: We are grateful for your support for the Department.

Q23 **Chair:** Permanent secretary, you said previously when you appeared before us that you feel that 75% to 25% is about right. Does that remain your view?

Matthew Rycroft: That was the outcome of the last spending round—for the next financial year. Perhaps the Secretary of State should say, but my advice to the Secretary of State will continue to be that 75% is a minimum that DFID should aim for.

Chair: That is reassuring. Thank you.

Q24 **Henry Smith:** Secretary of State, welcome. DFID's performance has come under some criticism from the likes of the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, particularly on how effectiveness is assessed. You will be aware that earlier this year *The Times* summarised a number of cases where DFID's claims on the impact that UK aid has had were found to be misleading. I appreciate that, as you say, you are just three months in, but how do you respond to the overall allegations that the Department has a habit of perhaps confusing aspirations with achievements?

Alok Sharma: The claims that were talked about in *The Times* reporting relate back to, I think, 2012-13. Even this year, we published a statement outlining our voluntary compliance with the code of practice for statistics, so that is out there. This was welcomed by the Office for Statistics Regulation. We are very transparent about the methodologies that we use in calculating the results that we have achieved. I think that is very important. All of this is transparently available on gov.uk, so it is not as if we are hiding anything.

Clearly, there is always more that you can do, and we will continue to look at what we can do. There is another piece of this, which is the governance aspect and how well we are doing in terms of ensuring that our projects are delivering what we think at the outset they will deliver, and ensuring that there is even more ministerial oversight of that. That is something that I am giving very careful thought to.

Q25 **Henry Smith:** In that, more broadly, why do you think it is apparently so difficult to measure and express the impact of aid programmes? What challenges do you think can be overcome in that?

Alok Sharma: The numbers that we put out will be based on estimates and statistics by their very nature—that is what happens. The question is: is the methodology robust or not? The view, as far as I have seen, is that there has not been a challenge of that methodology in recent times. I don't know whether the permanent secretary wants to add anything on this.

Matthew Rycroft: The modelling point is important. We have to use models because we cannot go round the sort of environments that we are working in and count every single life saved, for instance. The second point I would like to make is that, by its nature, development activity tends to happen in extremely fragile places, and the intersection between fragility and poverty is increasing. By 2030, I think 80% of the extremely poor people in the world will be living in fragile or conflict-affected states. That is where, therefore, the Department's activity will need to be focused, as it is now.

We have a target to make sure that 50% of our spending is in those places, and we more than meet that at the moment. It just means that it is very difficult in those circumstances to measure results accurately, which is why we are extremely grateful for the advice of the Committee, ICAI and others in helping us do that. I wanted to explain why it can be very difficult.

Chair: Let's move to Brexit now.

Q26 **Mark Menzies:** Our favourite subject—not. For those of us who hoped that it would have been done by now, it is frustrating that we are still stuck in this place, but anyway. Secretary of State, is there any Brexit scenario in which the sudden withdrawal of UK funding would, even on a temporary basis, halt or significantly diminish the provision of humanitarian relief to people in need where the EU is currently the principal funding channel?

Alok Sharma: Around 10% of all ODA goes through the EU. Clearly, if we have a deal—which, like you, Mark, I very much hope we do—in terms of the settlement, that is set out: we would continue until the end of 2020, and then there would be a tail in terms of the funding. Obviously, if we leave on no deal, there will be money available much more quickly, and we would have to see how we spent that money. In terms of our future relationship—we are leaving the European Union; it is a question of whether we do it with or without a deal—whatever happens, we want to continue to have a constructive relationship with the EU. But it is the case that once we have left we will have additional funds available, which we will be able to decide for ourselves how we deploy.

Q27 **Mark Menzies:** Good. In relation to that, in the longer term, what plans do you have to redistribute the £1.4 billion of ODA currently channelled via the EU?

Alok Sharma: If we went into a no-deal scenario, obviously, we are developing plans as to what, in a more immediate timeline, we would do in terms of funds that were not channelled through the EU. There is work



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going on in terms of programmes—that has been going on for a little while actually—and what we can scale up in terms of humanitarian support. There are additional programmes that we can deploy. Then the question is—I think this goes back to the point the Chairman raised—if there are certain things that you are doing more of, what happens? If we have, if I can describe it as such, a Brexit dividend available to us, there is more that we could do on a bilateral basis.

Mark Menzies: Absolutely right.

Q28 Chair: The multilateral development review, which was under Priti Patel, actually rated the European Commission very highly as a multilateral body. I absolutely accept that there is a potential dividend, but can you assure us that there could be circumstances where we nevertheless choose to continue to fund via European bodies, if that is the best way to achieve our aid strategy?

Alok Sharma: On a case-by-case basis, there may be a case where there is a particular humanitarian crisis that is ongoing and we decide that the best way to channel money in is perhaps through some sort of European grouping. I am certainly not closed to that. At the end of the day, we are there to help people in the developing world to alleviate poverty, so of course we would look at that. Our starting point, however, is to say, “There is this money that is not going down this channel. How do we deploy it?”

Q29 Chris Law: It was reported last December that 600 civil servants in DFID might be redeployed elsewhere in Whitehall. In January, it was reported that up to 4,000 civil servants from five Departments may move to new roles to prepare for a no-deal Brexit. Given that there has been an uptick in investment in a no-deal Brexit, how many staff have been taken from your Department to advance the Government’s policy on leaving the EU?

Alok Sharma: You are absolutely right, Chris, in terms of the 600. If I can break down the 600, what we have said is that we are talking about 200 from London, 200 from our joint head office in Scotland and 200 from overseas posts. Right now, just under 200 overall have either already deployed or are in the process of deploying to other Government Departments.

Obviously, that has an impact in terms of our work, but we are very keen to make sure that we continue to prioritise our existing programmes to make sure that we keep to the 0.7% limit. Where we have slowed or paused work, it will be—how can I put it?—on longer-term policy development work or perhaps not attending as many meetings across Whitehall or elsewhere as we were doing before. We have been very keen to be forward-leaning in helping other Government Departments, because actually, as I said at the beginning, we have experienced staff who are valued across Government, but at the same time, I want to ensure that we are continuing to do the core of what DFID is about.

Q30 Chris Law: I want to ask another question, which is not directly related but nevertheless relates to Brexit. International Alert opened an office in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Hague earlier this month. The head of fundraising, Debbie Ball, said, "if it wasn't for Brexit, then we wouldn't have done it." She said that was key—"That's definitely the driver". She went on to say, "I've probably spoken to about 10 different organisations considering opening up new offices". Isn't Brexit, under any guise, a disaster for many NGOs, given that it ends freedom of movement and capital, and paralyses many strong and free-flowing networks?

Alok Sharma: I do not think it is a disaster. Let us look at the two scenarios. If there is a deal scenario, clearly UK NGOs will be able to bid for EU money up to the point at which we exit. What we have also ensured is that we have set up an assurance facility, so we are asking UK NGOs that are getting funding at the moment from the EU, where that funding may be at risk or may stop, to tell us. We are very keen to hear that by the end of this month, so that we can support them if that funding ends. In terms of the idea that, somehow, there will be a disaster, I do not think that is the case. We are ensuring that we are providing support for any of our NGOs that are currently getting money from the EU that stops as a result of us leaving the European Union.

Q31 **Chris Law:** The point I was trying to raise is that UK NGOs are looking to open offices in Europe, so there is going to be a duplication of offices and staffing and, of course, costs. How do they mitigate that? Apart from the flow of capital and freedom of movement of people, there is an additional burden. What are the considerations about that going forward, post Brexit?

Alok Sharma: Of course, we have had meetings with suppliers and NGOs as well. It depends on individual NGOs, as I said. From the perspective of the UK Government and DFID, British NGOs will continue to be able to bid for funding from DFID. That is not going to change. As I said, we will replace funding that they are currently getting from the EU, if that is what is required in terms of current projects. I am not sure that this is quite the problem that is perhaps being suggested.

Q32 **Chair:** We are now going to move to a number of questions that follow up previous pieces of the Committee's work. I will start with the issues around sexual exploitation and abuse, as we are around the anniversary of the summit that Penny Mordaunt hosted.

As you will be aware, last week we published our follow-up report, and you published a number of documents. Are you able to assure us that you will retain the laser-like focus on this that we felt Penny Mordaunt had when she was Secretary of State?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I think I can assure you of that. Where issues have come up, even during my tenure, I can assure you that I have been very proactive on them. Regarding your report, I want to put on record once again our thanks for all the work that the Committee does on this area—Pauline and all of you have done so much work on this. That has been very helpful for us.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Two points were raised. One is whether the change of Ministers has had an impact. Self-evidently, if you have three Secretaries of State in six months, you are on a learning curve. Other Ministers have been in place. Baroness Sugg has been focused on this, as have the officials. In terms of tangible actions, we put out a written ministerial statement and I also wrote to you, Chair, on this issue.

I can give you three very concrete examples of what we have done. The first is the misconduct disclosure scheme, which has been set up. There have been around 1,500 requests coming in for information as a result. At least 10 people have been prevented from being hired in the NGO system. That is something that is very positive.

The second is the resource and support hub, which is aimed at smaller NGOs. The procurement process for that has now completed, so very shortly we will announce who is going to run that. We will have regional hubs up and running before the end of this year.

The third is the money that has been made available to Interpol. That is effectively a JV between DFID, Interpol and ACRO. That is focused on ensuring that we do much better criminal checks on people in the sector. We have already got some NGOs starting to generate some criminal analysis reports. I hope that, next year, we will be able to take some concrete action against individuals if they have been identified. That is just to give you some examples.

Q33 Chair: Thank you for those three categories; that is encouraging. We expressed a number of criticisms in our report, not simply of the Government but of the sector. We do acknowledge the progress that you have outlined and that there has been in the sector.

One particular issue that I want to probe is the idea of an international aid ombudsman. I got the sense that the Department and the Government are cooling on that. Am I right in saying that the Government are less keen on this than we thought around the time of the summit a year ago?

Alok Sharma: I will ask the permanent secretary to comment, as he would have been around at the time. My sense of it, from talking to officials, is that there is a mixed view among donor Governments on this, and there is no real consensus. Even if you had that, what is the mechanism, effectively, for dealing with individuals who are identified?

We have gone down the track of the work we are doing on a national basis. The work with Interpol, for instance, is on an international basis, but I don't sense that, right now, there is the appetite internationally for us to be setting up this international ombudsman. Do you want to comment on that, permanent secretary?

Matthew Rycroft: To add to what the Secretary of State said, we have been working with the Dutch, who originally put forward the idea, to come up with some pilots for national and local accountability, given that there doesn't appear to be the consensus among the community to create a supranational body. Those who put forward the proposals for an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ombudsperson did so because they wanted to make it easier for individuals to report cases, they wanted there to be better support for survivors and victims, they wanted the voices of those people to better inform action and policy making, and they wanted increased accountability. We agree with all those things, and we think we can achieve those results without having to create the supranational body.

Q34 **Chair:** Are the Dutch still pursuing this, or has it been dropped completely?

Matthew Rycroft: No, I think the Dutch continue to be interested in it. All credit to them for the energy that they, too, have put into our collective efforts. Our judgment is that there is not going to be a consensus on it, so it is better to channel the energy into national and local procedures for accountability.

Q35 **Chair:** I understand the pragmatism of that, but I hope that we wouldn't give up on the idea, particularly if a close ally and friend like the Dutch are still pursuing it. Yes, we should pursue other local and national options as well, but, certainly, where we came from, based on the evidence from our inquiry, was that self-regulation had failed. There was a sense from those who had been through this system that, when everything else failed, they ultimately wanted there to be somewhere they could go. That is where the idea of an ombudsman came from.

Matthew Rycroft: Rest assured, Chairman, that we will continue to be as ambitious as possible. We just need to balance the ambition with the realism of what is actually achievable, given the need for consensus on some of these issues.

Q36 **Henry Smith:** It was very welcome that, at the UN General Assembly recently, the Prime Minister pledged £515 million to get over 12 million children into education—half of them, of course, will be girls. Is it possible to break that figure down a bit, in terms of the channels that will be receiving that funding, such as the Girls' Education Challenge, ECW and other mechanisms and bilateral country programmes that the announcement provides for?

Alok Sharma: At the G7 in Biarritz, the Prime Minister also announced £90 million, of which £85 million was for Education Cannot Wait and education emergencies in the Sahel and other places. Of the £515 million that was announced, about £300 million was for the international education facility that is being set up. The aim is to leverage that up four to one to get more funding. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to stay—I had to come back because there was a Supreme Court ruling during the event that took place at UNGA. This is something that Gordon Brown was very much involved in. Chair, you may have spoken to Gordon Brown about it. The additional about £200 million was for other programmes in Africa. I am happy to write to you in case I am wrong on this, but I think Tanzania was one of the big elements of this.

Matthew Rycroft: The Secretary of State is right: it is £215 million for the Girls' Education Challenge, which is the bilateral programmes,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and then £300 million for the International Finance Facility for Education, divided into £200 million of guarantees and £100 million of grants.

Q37 **Chair:** Is there a specific part of the pot that is going to Tanzania on a bilateral basis?

Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q38 **Chair:** Is there a value for that?

Matthew Rycroft: We will have to write to you.

Q39 **Henry Smith:** The Committee's 2017 report on global education called for more to be done in terms of early years support. What focus has the Department been giving that in the intervening couple of years since the Committee's report?

Alok Sharma: By "early years" we are talking about primary, I assume.

Chair: I think pre-primary.

Alok Sharma: Okay. I will give an example of a project that I saw on a visit to Nigeria. I went to Kaduna State, and they had an issue where the teachers that were in place weren't able themselves to pass the exams that they were supposed to be teaching primary school kids to pass. The Governor, with our support, has replaced many thousands of teachers. I went to a school where, a couple of years ago, half the kids were at the school. The roll has doubled. Over half the children now are girls, which is, again, very positive.

For me, this was a very clear example of where we were providing support in the earlier years to make sure that these children were getting a decent education. Again, going back to the point about the Prime Minister's commitment to 12 years of decent education for girls, it was very pleasing, for me at least, that over half the children in the school now were girls. Was there anything else that you wanted to add, permanent secretary, on early years?

Matthew Rycroft: Obviously, we have to seek a balance within our education portfolio between pre-primary, primary, secondary and, indeed, a little bit of tertiary education, but the main commitment that the Prime Minister has made is to 12 years of quality education, bearing in mind not only the education benefits but the other benefits, particularly of keeping girls at school throughout those secondary years.

Chair: We have Andrew Stephenson next week giving evidence to us on some of his Africa responsibilities and on education.

Q40 **Mr Virendra Sharma:** During our recent inquiry into DFID's work on disability-inclusive development, both Mr Rory Stewart and Baroness Sugg reiterated the Department's commitment on progress in this area. Does disability inclusion remain a priority for DFID?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alok Sharma: Yes, absolutely. It remains a priority for us both in terms of meeting the standards for our programmes and changing the way we do business. Probably the best way of explaining what we are doing is to give you a statistic on the progress that we have made. If you look at the number of programmes that are classed as disability inclusive—this is based on the OECD DAC policy marker—two years ago, in November 2017, 19% of our programmes were marked at disability inclusive; that figure is now 31%. We are making progress. Of course, you can always do these things faster, but disability is very much at the heart of how we look at the work that we do in terms of organising the Department and in terms of the programmes. That is very important for us.

Q41 Mr Virendra Sharma: I know that you have only been in post for three months, so it is very early days for you to express the vision, but you have a vision of that and agree that it's still a priority. Can you say anything else that you will do to ensure continued leadership and commitment to the disability portfolio, as communicated across DFID?

Alok Sharma: Thank you for that. I am someone who is very focused on metrics, and making sure that when we do things we are able to evidence them and demonstrate that what we are doing is actually working. Going to the point about the number of programmes that are disability inclusive, I would want us to be driving that figure up significantly over the coming months and years. For me, that would be a very clear marker of the progress that we are making.

Matthew Rycroft: Just to add one thing, we are seeking to double that figure by 2023.

Q42 Chris Law: The Government's recent announcement of their intention to double the UK's total international climate finance to at least £11.6 billion over the five years from 2021 to 2026 is obviously very welcome. Can I ask specifically what that additional money will be focused on, because it is a significant increase, or is it a bit too early to ask that?

Alok Sharma: I do not think it is too early to ask that. If you look at the sorts of projects that we have already put this funding into, it is issues such as green-resilient infrastructure and nature-based solutions that we are looking at. However, those are examples of the sorts of projects that we already have. I was at the World Bank meetings last week, and one issue that I raised is that the replenishment for IDA19 will take place shortly, and one thing I said we want to see, from a World Bank perspective, is that the projects that they are also investing in are green and climate resilient. From our perspective, this is a key focus for us on a bilateral basis, but we think it should certainly also be a focus for the organisations that we fund on a multilateral basis.

Q43 Chris Law: How are you going to ensure that an adequate proportion of the additional funding will reach and benefit the poorest and most vulnerable of those most affected by the impacts of climate change?

Alok Sharma: That is part of the work we are doing. Obviously, we are already starting to design programmes that will deliver across these



HOUSE OF COMMONS

metrics. Perhaps the best way of doing that is to explain some of the programmes that we already have going on. There are programmes that support lower-carbon growth, with support for renewable energy. There are programmes supporting forestry, land use and climate-sensitive agriculture. Work is ongoing on insurance mechanisms so that, if there is a shock, people can get support early on. I was with the Gates Foundation a few weeks ago, looking at the joint working that we are doing on developing drought-resistant crops. We are doing a whole range of things. Ultimately, all this will be focused on supporting the communities that are most vulnerable to climate shocks.

Q44 Chris Law: That was really helpful and covered quite a lot of broad topics. You mentioned one that we have not heard of before: setting up an insurance scheme. Is that particularly for loss and damage as a result of a catastrophe or something sudden?

Alok Sharma: Yes. When disasters strike, including in the UK, if you have an issue, you turn to insurance companies to compensate. Those insurance products and markets are not developed in many of these countries, so part of the work is to consider how we can help to build those sorts of markets. This goes back to the point that you were making about economic development, Chairman.

One thing that I have done is to set up an infrastructure commission. About \$140 billion a year goes on development spend from Governments around the world, but the UN itself estimates that \$2.5 trillion a year is required. How do you fill the gap? You fill it through private sector money alongside Government money, and also by looking at mechanisms that ultimately will enable countries and individuals to help themselves. It goes back to the point about people being self-sustaining.

Q45 Chris Law: My only thought on that is that the poorest and most vulnerable will not be able to pay for these policies. Will they be national Government-paid policies, or will there be a social scheme that brings them about? I am interested in the detail.

Alok Sharma: I am happy to share with you some of the previous thoughts we have had on any of our programmes. However, clearly any insurance scheme that you put together ultimately needs to be set where it can be self-sustaining, if I may put it like that. So yes, of course this is about people taking on insurance, but the support we provide as part of that transition is clearly what we will have to look at.

Q46 Chris Law: Would it be possible to put that in writing?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to write to you about our work on insurance mechanisms.

Chris Law: That would be appreciated.

Q47 Chair: We have Zac Goldsmith on Wednesday talking about the climate as well.

Alok Sharma: We will make sure that he is briefed.



Q48 Chris Law: I have one last question. It is reported that the Prime Minister will chair a new Cabinet Sub-Committee on climate change. Will you be involved in that, or is it simply on domestic UK policy?

Alok Sharma: No, I believe that I will be involved. That was literally announced just a few days ago. I think the intention is that it is a cross-cutting, cross-Government Committee where there is representation from both international and domestic Departments. The Foreign Secretary will also sit on it, of course.

Q49 Richard Burden: We will move on to the SDGs and the UK's performance in particular. It is an area on which we submitted a report, which got a Government response a little while ago. Your predecessor suggested that, looking ahead to the future, a Government that took the SDGs seriously would put a really "pumped up function" into the Cabinet Office to pull together responsibility for implementing the SDGs and, presumably, preparing for future reviews. Perhaps an alternative to that is to follow the Scottish example of frameworks or to look at the Welsh experience, where they have used legislation. What is your view on how we can build on what has already been done and be more effective in pulling the whole SDG process together? Should DFID be the lead Department, or should it move over to the Cabinet Office, as we recommended in our report?

Alok Sharma: SDGs will be reflected, where appropriate, in departmental plans. You will have to ask the Cabinet Office about their thoughts on this; I am just giving you my own pragmatic and practical view. We aim to work with other Departments on a joint endeavour in terms of ODA spend, and part of that, of course, is delivering on the SDGs. You have just had a prime example of a mechanism been set up in Government, with the climate Cabinet Sub-Committee. I am sure that will give an opportunity to press some of these issues on a cross-Government basis.

Again, I regard myself as someone who is very pragmatic and, rather than setting up lots of mechanisms, it is better to work through mechanisms that already exist or have been set up with the sole purpose of delivering on particular aims—climate action in terms of the climate Sub-Committee. That will clearly deliver on a number of the SDGs as well.

Q50 Richard Burden: The Government response to our report said there would be a commitment to review ministerial and official-level structures and what mechanisms should exist to pull the UK's SDG work together. That work is being led by the Cabinet Office. Can you give us an idea of what that work consists of, what has happened and what the next stage is?

Matthew Rycroft: First of all, I very much thank the Committee for your contributions to our voluntary national review of our implementation of the sustainable development goals, which the Secretary of State's predecessor delivered to the UN in July at the high-level political forum. That was just a staging post; it was not the end point but the beginning of what the UN is calling a decade of delivery between 2020 and 2030, given that the SDGs are really off track. We—both DFID and the Cabinet Office, working hand



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in hand—will continue to press for the implementation of all the SDGs in this country and, through our development work, around the world.

As the Secretary of State has said, the single departmental plan is the way that each Department does that. In ours, we have now got around the five Ps of the SDGs: people, planet, prosperity, partnership and peace. Those are the five headings of our single departmental plan.

In the next phases we will continue to work very closely with the Cabinet Office on governance. I do not think there will be a change of governance—at least until the spending review negotiation, which we hope will take place over the coming months.

Q51 Chair: Matthew, how high a priority do you think the SDGs are for permanent secretaries in other Departments?

Matthew Rycroft: Well, they certainly know how high a priority they are for me. I think I have persuaded at least some of them that this is a good way of thinking about a framework for the whole of public policy. As you were saying, we have looked at the Scottish and Welsh models for how to have an outcomes-based framework for public policy, and the SDGs are one of the ways in which that can be done. I think that all permanent secretaries are interested in that.

Q52 Mr Virendra Sharma: Secretary of State, the UK puts a high priority on global health. That is the implication of the UK being the second largest donor to global health after the US. Do you agree that DFID should have a global health strategy, in the same way as it has a global education strategy, that articulates the UK's global health priorities and ensures systematic co-ordination on global health across DFID programmes and the UK Government?

Alok Sharma: Thank you for that. As I said in response to the Chairman at the start, one of the things that I have set out as a commitment for the Department is to end preventable deaths of mothers, babies and young children. Effectively, that feeds into a lot of the work that we already do in terms of health. One of the things that I set out at the UN was our wish to see universal health coverage in other countries in the developing world.

One of the things that I certainly want us to do is to articulate in more detail how we are going to reach that particular deliverable of ending preventable deaths by 2030. A large element of that is obviously going to be the work and the spending that we are doing on family planning, but also the support we provide to the Global Fund and to GAVI. I was in Lyon a few days ago and we reiterated our commitment to £1.4 billion. The other thing that we were able to announce is that £200 million of that was going to be match-funded, where we needed the private sector to come in with £100 million, for a specific malaria fund. We were able to get that match funding.

Of course, we also have the GAVI replenishment conference coming up next year, which we are leading. I certainly agree that having a strategy for how we get to the point of ending preventable deaths is something that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we are very much developing, but that clearly encompasses a lot of the health work that we are already doing and the health support that we are providing.

Q53 Mr Virendra Sharma: The Department of Health and Social Care increased its ODA spending on global health in 2018. What is DFID doing in practical terms to co-ordinate efforts with the DHSC and ensure the value for money of ODA spent outside DFID?

Alok Sharma: The permanent secretary can come in specifically on the DHSC stuff, but to preface that, where we work with other Departments—that is something I am keen to do—where they add value. For instance, even on education there is quite a lot of expertise that we have sitting in the UK that we can deploy, so I want to do that. I agree, however, that the key issue is that that is done on a value-for-money basis. That is absolutely important.

Matthew Rycroft: On how we do it, there is a thing called the global health oversight group, which is a cross-Government group chaired at DG level by one of my DGs and a colleague from the Department of Health and Social Care. That meets every quarter to look at all the global health issues. I think it is an area where DFID works extremely effectively with domestic Departments. There is a lot of overlap on specific diseases such as Ebola and malaria, and on antimicrobial resistance. We also work together on the strengthening of health systems around the world. There is a good interflow of staff between the Departments. There are a lot of health experts in the Department for International Development. The new chief medical adviser was formerly a chief scientist at DFID, for instance, so there is a very close relationship between the two Departments.

Q54 Chair: What is your thinking at the moment about the timing of the UK's pledge on GAVI? I thought it was very welcome that on the Global Fund and on Education Cannot Wait the UK pledged early, which set a positive example. Particularly with us hosting GAVI, is the plan to pledge early again?

Alok Sharma: We are a little way away from GAVI actually taking place, but I can certainly see the logic of encouraging others by perhaps setting out our views. Having said that, at the Global Fund, which was hosted by France, President Macron did not set out the French number until the end. We will have to give some thought to what the best timing is, but clearly you are right, Chairman, that we need to do this in a way that we are likely to achieve maximum impact in terms of encouraging others.

Q55 Chair: Has a decision been made about where GAVI will be hosted?

Alok Sharma: It will be in London, but there will also be an event prior to that in Liverpool.

Chair: But the main replenishment will be in London.

Q56 Paul Scully: Secretary of State, may I welcome you to your new role and thank you for the extra funding for the Rohingya situation? It was announced shortly after I left the camps, when I was there in Bangladesh



HOUSE OF COMMONS

with Anne Main. The three things that you raised in your letter—education, the host communities and the future for the people being relocated—which you are going to put the money to, were actually the three big things that people in the camps were telling me, so it's great that that chimes.

We are waiting to hear evidence from Baroness Sugg and Heather Wheeler next month. In the meantime, can you tell us whether the UK has revised its five-point plan in the face of Myanmar's practical steps to make it impossible for the Rohingya to return effectively, and Bangladesh's avowed policy that the Rohingya are not going to stay?

Alok Sharma: First, can I thank you for your personal interest in this, because I know that it is a long-standing personal commitment? I really appreciate that. Of course, when you were out there we had a text exchange on this, so thank you for that. You are absolutely right that we provided extra funding. In fact, Baroness Sugg was out in the region and announced another £30 million last week or the week before last. We have been very clear that the funding is both to support the refugees and to support the host communities.

On the issue of repatriation, we are very clear that until and unless the UN believes that it is safe for people either to return or move to anywhere else, certain criteria have to be met. Those criteria do not currently exist. In all our communication with the Bangladeshi Government, we are very clear on that. People should only move when they feel safe and the conditions are right.

Q57 **Paul Scully:** Thank you very much. The accommodation on the island of Bhasan Char has been more or less completed. In the lead-up to that, we have obviously taken a bit of a dim view on just relocating everyone to a silt island somewhere else—I know that previous Secretaries of State did in those early days as well. I was just wondering what your, and the Government's, position is now on the intention to move up to 400,000 Rohingya to that site?

Alok Sharma: I remember discussing the issue around this island back in 2016-17 when I was with the Foreign Office, and going out there and having a discussion with Sheikh Hasina and the Foreign Minister at the time. I do not think our position has changed: any relocation, whether to the island, to Rakhine province or wherever it is, has to be done in a safe way, it has to be dignified and, ultimately, it has to be underpinned by international humanitarian principles. If that is not the case, we would not support it.

Q58 **Chair:** Can I move us to north-east Nigeria? We have been in touch informally, and I raised at DFID questions the issues related to certain INGOs in north-east Nigeria and the Government's efforts to enable that activity to continue in the best interests of local communities. Are you able to update us on the current situation?

Alok Sharma: Yes. Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the exchange. I think it was very useful to put that on the record during our oral session. You are right: the current position is still that the offices of Action Against



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Hunger and Mercy Corps are closed. They are not open. I reiterate once again that we would like that to be reversed. These organisations provide humanitarian support to many hundreds of thousands of people in the region.

When I was in Washington on Friday, I had an opportunity to speak to the Nigerian Finance Minister. Obviously, she is not responsible for this, but I wanted to take the opportunity to communicate to her our concerns over this issue, which she registered and will pass on. There is a board of inquiry currently taking place, as I understand, and we await feedback on that. A new Minister has been appointed for humanitarian affairs, as I understand it, and the intention is for that Department to convene a workshop in early November in the north-east around the humanitarian issues. We will of course work closely with that Department. However, ultimately, all the messaging we have done to the Nigerian Government is that this needs to be resolved, and in a way that ultimately provides support to those who are losing out as a result of these offices closing.

Q59 Chair: Thank you. On to Pakistan now. We have corresponded on this issue, which arises from a report in the *Financial Times* in August that made some serious allegations about the safety of more than 1,200 classrooms delivered under DFID projects in Pakistan. Are you able to update us on the progress of the independent safety analysis that the Department asked University College London to undertake?

Alok Sharma: I can certainly do that. The first thing to say is that, as soon as I became aware of this, I very quickly ensured that we had a conversation with IMC. I spoke to the chief executive, Gavin English, about this, and I made a number of points. First, we had to make sure of the safety of the children. We had to make sure that there were the alternative buildings or tents or whatever was required to be provided for the children, because we did not want to see them at risk. Secondly, I wanted a clear programme of how quickly these issues would be fixed. Thirdly, I made it very clear that the British taxpayer was not going to pick up the cost of retrofitting or fixing this issue, which arose as a result of IMC.

I also initiated two reviews. One was an internal review of the whole management of the IMC programme. That work is ongoing. The other is into how we, as a Department, manage risk. We can write to you separately on where we have got to once we have concluded both of those.

On the specific aspects of the work that the independent auditors from UCL are doing, we expect that the initial audit work will be finished by the end of this month. We already know that 261 schools will definitely need work done to them. The way the assessment has been working is by assessing designs. Different schools have been designed in different ways, and they are looking at the designs that are most likely, first of all, to be risky. We will see what comes out at the end of this month, and whether further work needs to be done.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Sugg, who I know you are meeting shortly on this, has also had more recent discussions with Gavin English, and we have been told that they expect their retrofitting work to be completed before the end of February next year.

Q60 **Chair:** Okay. You mentioned that the initial findings from UCL are expected by the end of the month. Might they be in a form that you can share with the Committee—even, perhaps, on a confidential basis?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to be as open as I possibly can without breaching any confidentiality rules. For me, this is a very important issue, and as you know, Chair, I am always very happy, on these sorts of issues—even if we do it on a confidential basis—to try to share information with you.

Q61 **Chair:** Thank you. Similarly, on that internal review of DFID's management of this issue and of risk more generally, would you be able to share the outcome of that with us in an appropriate way at the time?

Alok Sharma: Absolutely. I do not want to prejudge the outcome, but certainly, once both those reviews are completed, I will share with you the outcomes and what I plan to do to make sure that this does not happen again.

Q62 **Chair:** You mentioned that the retrofitting is expected to be done by the end of February. What are the arrangements in the meantime for the children to receive an education?

Alok Sharma: The arrangements in the meantime are that there is a provision of existing school buildings, and also of tents that have been provided. Sample checks have been done by the DFID team in Pakistan to ensure that children are not in the affected classrooms and that the support is being provided in terms of alternative accommodation. The feedback that we have had is that we are pretty comfortable that that is happening. Clearly, there may be the odd school where things are missed, but we will keep on working on that.

Q63 **Chair:** Finally on this, in its response, IMC told us that the particular masonry technique in question—the Chinese bond technique—has also been used in a DFID-funded project in India, which is also in an earthquake-prone area. Is that something you are aware of? If so, what steps have been taken to address that?

Alok Sharma: Obviously, IMC is running a number of projects for us in a number of countries, so we have made sure that we are checking on a monthly basis with the SROs responsible for those projects to ensure that there are no issues and that if there are, those are coming forward quickly. So far, we have not identified issues, but clearly if we do, we will have to deal with them.

Q64 **Chair:** If I may, I will finish with a broader general question taking us back to one of your answers earlier. You said that you arrived in the Department as an agnostic. If I can put words in your mouth, I think you have demonstrated today that you are an enthusiast. What changed your



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mind?

Alok Sharma: Well, I think I was agnostic in terms of whether the Department should continue—I am certainly not agnostic about the 0.7%. I think that what changed my mind was that even in the three months, I have managed to do trips to Nigeria and Ethiopia; I have been to the DRC-Uganda border to see the support we are providing in terms of preventing Ebola across borders; I have been to see multilateral organisations in Rome that we work with; I have been to Washington for the World Bank; and I have been to Lyon for the Global Fund replenishment summit—I have been to a range of places—and I have always made an effort to ask people what they think about DFID, not in a public forum like this, but on a one-to-one basis. Invariably, the feedback that I have had is that DFID as an independent organisation is very respected because we are not tying—our primary function is to alleviate poverty—and we are able to get access into parts of other Governments that perhaps some other Departments would not be able to get.

Chair: Interesting.

Alok Sharma: That is why I can say I have become a positive champion—whatever the phrase is. It is based on evidence. I am not just waving the flag for the sake of it. It is based on what I have heard directly from external parties, not just the Department.

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming to give evidence to us today. We look forward to seeing you again soon.

Alok Sharma: A pleasure.