

U.K.: Sexual abuse by aid contractors may be going under the radar, experts warn

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Critics call for private firms employed to deliver aid programmes to face same level of scrutiny as charities

Private contractors working on UK-funded aid projects with some of the world's most vulnerable people must face the same level of scrutiny over sexual abuse claims as charities, experts have warned.

[Charities](#) have been heavily criticised over their failure to tackle sexual misconduct and exploitation, with MPs demanding a culture change within the sector. But aid figures say the growing use of private contractors to deliver aid and other programmes has not been placed under equal scrutiny.

While charities must report all serious incidents, actual or alleged, to the Charity Commission, there are fewer requirements for private partners to disclose concerns. Contractors are only obliged to report incidents that relate to a UK-funded project, with some only reporting claims they have substantiated.

Between January and August this year, at least 18 safeguarding incidents were reported by private contractors to the [Department for International Development \(DfID\)](#). There was confusion over the total number of cases due to a lack of consistency in what contractors were reporting. DfID did not have dates for all of the 18 incidents on its records.

Pauline Latham, a member of the international development committee, said requirements for private companies should be tightened. "They are much less likely to report anything because there isn't the same requirement from the Charity Commission. If they can say it [an incident] wasn't related to DfID funding they can probably get away with it," said the Conservative MP.

DfID does not have a fixed definition for identifying safeguarding risks, and instead deals with incidents on a case-by-case basis.

So far this year 1,152 serious incidents have been reported by charities to the Charity Commission, prompted by the Oxfam scandal. Of these reported incidents, 298 occurred at charities supported by UK aid funding.

Charities are required to report any incidents that risk significant harm to the charity's work, beneficiaries or reputation, or to the charity's finances or property.

The amount of foreign aid spent on contractors has surged in recent years, from £540m in 2010-11 to £1.34bn in 2015-16. Private contractors now account for more than a fifth of DfID's bilateral spending.

"Increasingly, a lot of aid dollars also go through private contractors and it's essential they receive

the same levels of scrutiny,” said Alex Thier, executive director of the Overseas Development Institute.

The Charity Commission provides extra scrutiny for charities, he said: “The question is if that additional layer of oversight and protection has been beneficial for the charity sector then we would have to ask what is the equivalent for the private sector.”

One of DfID’s biggest contractors, Adam Smith International, said it is taking numerous steps to improve safeguarding, including revising its background checks and reference request processes. It has identified fewer than 20 historic safeguarding incidents, half of which were substantiated, and reported seven incidents to DfID this year.

The aid firm added that it had not identified cases of sex or child abuse, and no substantiated cases of prostitution.

Another major contractor, Palladium, which is responsible for DfID’s humanitarian and stabilisation operations team, said it has reported a number of investigations to DfID, of which four were substantiated. The firm added that it requires all staff to undertake training on issues such as child protection, and also runs a confidential whistleblowing hotline.

Last year, a [report by the international development select committee](#) warned that DfID needed a more robust approach to regulating private contractors.

Ed Lewis, an aid campaigner at Global Justice Now, said there is a clear imbalance in reporting requirements for private companies compared with charities. “Current figures show that on a wide range of measures – not least poverty reduction outcomes – the monitoring standards of private contractors fall a long way short. It is right to hold charities to high standards, but there must be equal treatment for all recipients of public funds,” he said.

DfID said in a statement that it is committed to driving up standards across the aid sector: “Before any private sector organisation is shortlisted in our tender processes they must demonstrate they have adequate safeguarding policies and procedures in place. Our updated code of conduct for all suppliers also sets high, legally enforceable standards to safeguard against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.”

DfID also requires that all suppliers have a whistleblowing hotline for workers to report misconduct.

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The Guardian

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