

Charity regulator criticises Buddhist charity for putting students at risk of harm

An official inquiry has found misconduct and mismanagement at the London-based Buddhist charity, Rigpa Fellowship, where students were put at risk of harm as a result of serious safeguarding failures.

The Charity Commission [disqualified one former trustee](#) and [removed another trustee](#) during the course of its inquiry. Today's report heavily criticises institutional failings to provide a safe culture and environment.

The regulator opened a regulatory case into the charity when serious allegations of abuse towards its students by the charity's Spiritual Director, Sogyal Lakar, surfaced. An independent investigation (commissioned by Rigpa Fellowship and Rigpa Fellowship US) found that, on the balance of probabilities, some of Lakar's 'inner circle' were "subjected to serious physical, sexual and emotional abuse by him". The Commission's engagement escalated to a statutory inquiry after it found that the charity was not making sufficient progress in addressing the safeguarding concerns.

Trustees failed to take appropriate action

Former trustees, Patrick Gaffney and Susan Burrows, both failed to take appropriate action despite having knowledge of instances and allegations of improper acts and sexual and physical abuse against students.

During a meeting with the inquiry, Gaffney appeared unable or unwilling to recognise the serious nature of the allegations that had been made and the lack of appropriate action taken. Evidence seen by the inquiry also did not support claims from Burrows that she had no prior knowledge of instances of abuse involving Lakar.

The inquiry says that both former trustees "failed to recognise or sought to downplay" the seriousness of the allegations.

Investigators also found that the charity failed to report incidents relating to physical or sexual abuse to the Commission, as would have been expected.

Failure to provide a safe environment for students, staff and volunteers

The inquiry criticises safeguarding policies that the charity previously linked to on its website. It says that these blurred the distinction between consent and submission and placed too much responsibility for safeguarding on the student rather than the teacher. These policies were developed by the international Rigpa body – the inquiry found that the former trustees were insufficiently rigorous in their consideration and analysis of the policies and procedures produced by the international Rigpa body. The former trustees should have ensured that any international policies referred to were

sufficient for UK regulations and law.

The inquiry concluded that former trustees and senior management figures at the charity were responsible for mismanagement and misconduct, particularly around how former trustees responded to safeguarding concerns. The report says that their inability to create a safe culture within the charity exposed some beneficiaries to harm.

The current trustees have now implemented new safeguarding policies and procedures tailored specifically to the operations of the UK charity and have taken steps to sever the governance link between the UK charity and its international counterparts. The regulator expects the new trustees to comply fully with these safeguarding policies and procedures, and to monitor their effectiveness in protecting people.

Helen Stephenson CBE, Chief Executive of the Charity Commission, said:

Today's findings make for very difficult reading. The fact that students were subjected to abuse by somebody in a position of power is shameful, and I am appalled that this was able to happen in a charity where people should have felt safe. People were let down because senior figures not only failed to listen and act on concerns, but also failed to properly address the problems with the charity's safeguarding culture once these came to light.

I hope that our findings bring some comfort to those so badly affected by what went wrong at Rigpa Fellowship. The charity is now a safer place, and that must continue.

The Commission has repeatedly warned charities that safeguarding should be a governance priority. Earlier this year it [launched a new register of charities](#) which allows the public to see clearly whether a charity has safeguarding policies in place.

Helen Stephenson added:

Charities should be spaces in which all people are free from harm. This is not a tick box exercise. Having the right policies and procedures must be combined with the right cultures, vital to building trust, sending an important signal to everyone connected to a charity that it prioritises keeping people safe.

[Read the full report of the Commission's inquiry into Rigpa Fellowship.](#)

Ends.

Notes to editors:

1. [View the charity's entry on the register of charities.](#)

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2. The Charity Commission is the independent, non-ministerial government department that registers and regulates charities in England and Wales. Its purpose is to ensure charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society.