

Charity regulator issues Official Warning to Christ Church, Oxford

Christ Church has been involved in long and costly disputes involving its former Dean, who left his role earlier this year following a mediation process. In 2020 the Commission had told the parties to the dispute to enter into formal mediation.

The Commission has found that trustees failed to act on its previous advice, given between 2019-2020, to continue to have “close oversight of costs” in the dispute. In December 2021, the Commission asked the trustees to provide information about the costs of the actions connected to the former Dean and how these costs were being managed. The trustees were unable to provide the information in a timely manner. The Commission was later informed that the trustees had not set a fixed budget for the costs associated with the dispute, and instead that the full trustee body agreed expenditure retrospectively. Between August 2018 and late January 2022 the college had spent over £6.6m on legal and public relations fees in various actions related to the former Dean, of which over £5.3m appears to have been approved retrospectively.

The regulator is also critical of the trustees’ failure to ensure the college was accountable for its expenditure on legal and public relations fees during the dispute. The Commission has found that the charity’s published accounts (for years ending 2018-21) categorised costs associated with the charity’s actions involving the former Dean as “other direct costs – teaching, research and residential”. The Commission says that this has the potential to mislead the readers of the accounts. The trustees had been advised by the charity’s auditors to consider reporting on actions related to the dispute specifically, and to seek advice on its reporting.

The regulator has determined that these failures and omissions amount to misconduct and/or mismanagement in the charity’s administration.

The Official Warning sets out the actions that the Commission considers should be taken by the charity to rectify the misconduct and/or mismanagement and to address its concerns, including:

- Completing a full independent Governance Review and taking all reasonable steps to implement its recommendations. This work is already underway.
- Keeping the Commission informed of the progress and implementation of the Governance Review at key milestones.
- Ensuring that the charity’s accounts and Trustee Annual Report for the year ending 31 July 2022 comply with the legal requirement to ensure the charity is accountable.

Failure to take steps to remedy the misconduct and/or mismanagement may lead to further regulatory action being taken against the charity’s trustees.

Helen Earner, Director of Regulatory Services at the Charity Commission, said:

These long and protracted disputes risked undermining the reputation of Christ Church and harming wider trust in charities.

It is not for us as regulator to take sides in disputes. Our role is to ensure that charities are governed effectively and that charitable funds are properly accounted for. All trustees must demonstrate sound financial stewardship, regardless of the level of resources available to them.

We consider that the actions of the trustees at Christ Church amount to mismanagement and/or misconduct, after they failed to manage the charity's resources responsibly or ensure that the charity is accountable in the context of a costly dispute.

The Commission welcomes the fact that an independent governance review is now underway at the charity, led by the Rt Hon Dominic Grieve KC, and we expect the trustees to keep us updated on its progress.

Good governance should be a priority for all trustees, especially those involved in important national institutions such as Christ Church, Oxford”.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. The Official Warning is issued under section 75A of the Charities Act 2011.
2. Information about this power can be found in an [online Q&A](#).
3. 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.