

# Save the Children UK let down complainants and public over handling of allegations of workplace harassment

The Charity Commission has criticised failures in [Save the Children UK's](#) response to allegations of workplace harassment made by staff members against the charity's former chief executive.

In a report published today, the Commission (the regulator for charities in England and Wales) finds that there were weaknesses in the charity's workplace culture, and that Save the Children UK let down the complainants, its staff and the wider public. The charity's handling of the complaints was so poor in certain respects that it amounted to mismanagement. These allegations, and the way in which the charity responded, had a corrosive impact on its internal culture.

The report finds a wide range of failings

- the charity failed to consistently follow its own processes when staff members made allegations of inappropriate conduct against the charity's CEO in 2012 and 2015
- the decision to deal with those complaints informally, rather than to investigate them fully, ran counter to the charity's own disciplinary procedures
- the whole trustee body was not made aware of important issues as early as it should have been: the trustee body was not informed of allegations made against the charity's CEO in 2012, and did not receive a copy of the full findings of an external report on corporate culture in 2015

The Commission began investigating [The Save the Children Fund](#) (Save the Children UK) in 2018, when the charity came under public scrutiny over its record on staff culture and morale and its handling of complaints against two former senior staff members, including the former CEO. At that time, the regulator was concerned about the "accuracy and integrity" of statements the charity made to media and complainants about its past handling of incidents.

Today's report acknowledges the pressure Save the Children UK was under, but is also critical of the charity's public statements at the time, one of which was "not wholly accurate", and says the charity's overall approach was "unduly defensive", falling short of the high standards expected of charities.

The report is also critical of the charity's failure to identify the chief executive as the subject of harassment complaints when it made a serious incident report to the regulator in 2015. The Commission says this amounted to the omission of "material facts", and to mismanagement.

## **“Serious weaknesses in workplace culture”**

The charity itself instigated two separate reviews into culture and morale; in 2015, it instructed the Lewis Silkin law firm to, among other things, conduct an investigation into its workplace culture. That report stressed that there were significant employee engagement issues at the charity and noted that the “biggest behavioural cues” for staff come from what their leaders are seen to role model and to tolerate.

That report called on the charity’s trustees and senior executives to ensure the charity’s mission and values were consistently reflected in the behaviour of senior people, as internal culture and behaviours “directly affects public trust and confidence in the charity”.

## **Regulator acknowledges elements of good practice**

The inquiry acknowledges some aspects of good practice in the way the charity dealt with complaints. It finds the charity recognised the seriousness of the complaints made and says there is no evidence of deliberate attempts to brush complaints under the carpet; nor did the inquiry find evidence of inappropriate involvement in the handling of complaints by the charity’s then Chair. The regulator says the charity did the right thing in instigating two separate reviews of workplace culture – the Lewis Silkin review in 2015 and the Shale Review in 2018.

The Commission also recognises that the charity has since taken steps to improve the charity’s workplace culture and respond to the external reviews’ findings of significant problems around employee engagement.

## **Lessons for other charities to learn**

The regulator expects charities to manage employment matters themselves and it hopes the exceptional circumstances that prompted it to investigate Save the Children UK will not be repeated in other charities.

However, the inquiry notes that this case raises important lessons for all charities, notably on the crucial role of the behaviour of senior leaders in creating appropriate workplace cultures that meet wider expectations of charity.

## **Helen Stephenson, Chief Executive of the Charity Commission, says:**

Charities should be distinct from other types of organisations in their attitude and behaviour, in their motivations and methods. The public rightly expect that; so do the majority of people working in charities, who deserve a workplace culture that is healthy, supportive, and safe.

Creating that culture is not just about putting the right systems and processes in place; it also requires leaders who model the

highest standards of behaviour and conduct, and who are held to account properly and consistently when they fall short.

This responsibility is especially pronounced in large, household name charities: their leaders are powerful, and highly respected. The impact of failures in leadership in such charities can also have implications for public trust and confidence beyond the charity itself. So they must use that power responsibly, and in a way that reflects legitimate expectations of charity.

Save the Children UK let complainants and the public down. It must work hard now to rebuild its reputation.

Read the [full report, setting out all the detail of the inquiry's findings and conclusions](#).

## **Summary timeline – full details in inquiry report**

### **2012**

- Staff member raises complaint with HR about the behaviour of the then CEO towards her. In agreement with complainant, charity deals with matter informally – counter to its own disciplinary procedures. No investigation into the complaints takes place and therefore the facts are never established. Complainant receives handwritten apology from then CEO and is assured that the matter is recorded on his HR file.
- Complainant is satisfied on this basis – her main concern is for the inappropriate behaviour to stop.

### **March 2015**

- Following staff focus group sessions, two staff members make complaints about the conduct of the then CEO in past years. One states that the then CEO's behaviour during a recent trip abroad made her uncomfortable, and prompted her to distance herself from him.
- The charity seeks external legal advice, but it appears the advice was not properly understood or actioned or fully shared with the trustees.
- The complaints are, again, dealt with informally: a meeting takes place between the complainants, the then CEO, the Vice-Chair of the charity and an HR representative; the former CEO apologises about any distress his behaviour has caused.
- No further action is taken with regard to the then CEO.

### **August 2015**

- The 2012 complainant becomes aware of the 2015 complaints and is upset to know that similar behaviour was alleged to have been repeated.
- She raises a grievance about the way her complaint had been dealt with.
- The charity trustees commission an external review to examine how it handled the complaints made in both 2012 and 2015. The Commission considers that the trustees acted properly in commissioning this review. It is around this time the full Board of Trustees is informed that

complaints were against the CEO.

- The review finds various faults with the way the charity dealt with the complaints in both 2012 and 2015.
- Following the resignation of the CEO and the conduct of the Lewis Silkin review the 2015 complainant was by November 2015 satisfied that her grievance had been dealt with; however, the charity interpreted this as her grievance having been 'withdrawn', which implies retracted. That misunderstanding causes the 2012 complainant further frustration and concern when it is repeated in the press in 2018.
- Serious concerns are raised about a separate senior leader at the charity, the Director of Policy and Advocacy. The charity recognises the alleged behaviour as a disciplinary matter and instigates formal investigation against the individual.

### **September 2015**

- A disciplinary hearing for the Director of Policy and Advocacy is scheduled for September; however he resigns before a hearing can take place.
- The charity makes a serious incident report to the Commission, and later follows that up with a further update, which notes that allegations were made against another senior staff member; however the report does not note that the individual referred to in the update was the charity's CEO. The Commission did not learn it was the CEO until it was suggested in media coverage in November 2015. Nor were the full trustee board initially notified of this crucial point – the Commission considers this amounts to mismanagement. The full board of Save the Children UK does not appear to have been notified until around the time that the Lewis Silkin review was commissioned in August 2015.

### **December 2015**

- The former CEO moves on to another organisation; the then Chair receives a request for a reference. He provides a personal verbal reference over the phone (it is not exactly clear when this took place). While the charity has since taken steps to prevent the provision of personal verbal references, the inquiry notes that even if Save the Children UK had been formally approached for a reference, it would have been limited in what it could tell any third-party employer. There had been no formal disciplinary procedures and no formal action had been taken

### **2018**

- In the wake of wider scrutiny of charities, a newspaper article is published revealing concerns about the former CEO's conduct at Save the Children UK. The charity faces significant media interest, and considers that among the allegations being put to its press office are those that are inaccurate and misleading. The charity considers it needs to address these inaccuracies to protect complainants and the charity's reputation.
- However, the content of the statements prompts the Commission to write to the charity's trustees to remind them that "Public and media lines must not conflict with findings of any of your internal investigations

or reports.". The Commission's inquiry later finds that aspects of a statement issued on 20 February 2018 were not wholly correct. In particular, the statement refers to the charity having carried out "investigations", instead they oversaw the handling of the complaints which resulted in an informal resolution.

- The Commission's inquiry opens in April 2018.

Ends

## **Notes to editors**

1. The matters under investigation related exclusively to issues around staff conduct towards other staff members and workplace culture; none of the Commission's findings call into question the Save the Children UK's charitable work.
2. As part of its inquiry, the Commission conducted formal interviews with around 40 individuals, and examined over 15,000 documents relating to the charity's processes and conduct of internal staffing investigations.