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Press release

Investigation leads to improvements in safeguarding at Jehovah's Witnesses charity

The charity regulator reports on its investigation into Manchester New Moston Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses.

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The Charity Commission (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>)



CHARITY COMMISSION
FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

A Charity Commission investigation has led to improvements in safeguarding at a Jehovah's Witnesses charity, according to a report published today (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/manchester-new-moston-congregation-of-jehovahs-witnesses-inquiry-report>) (26 July 2017). The report also makes findings of misconduct and mismanagement against the charity's trustees.

The Commission concludes that trustees of the Manchester New Moston Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses did not deal adequately with allegations of child abuse made against one of the trustees in 2012 and 2013. The individual was subsequently convicted of 2 counts of indecent assault.

The report details the findings of the regulator's statutory inquiry into the charity, which opened in May 2014 to investigate the charity's handling of safeguarding matters, including the potential risks to the charity and its beneficiaries relating to this individual.

The report also acknowledges that, since the inquiry was opened, the charity has improved its child safeguarding policy and its procedures for handling misconduct allegations.

The regulator's detailed report highlights that the trustees did not identify one allegation as potential child abuse, dismissing it as 'a matter between 2 teenagers'. The report also finds the trustees did not:

- fully enforce the restrictions they decided to place on the individual's activities at the charity
- adequately consider and deal with potential conflicts of loyalty within the trustee body

- keep an adequate written record of the decision-making process used to manage the potential risks posed by the individual to the beneficiaries of the charity

The regulator's report examines the events surrounding an internal disciplinary procedure, held to determine whether the abuser should be allowed to continue as a member of the congregation. The Commission finds that the victims of abuse were 'effectively required' to attend a hearing at which they had to repeat their allegations in the presence of the abuser, and the abuser was permitted to question the alleged victims. The trustees had argued that they were not responsible for the procedure and that the victims took part in the hearing voluntarily. The Commission accepts that the trustees did not themselves conduct the disciplinary procedure, but concludes that they carry ultimate responsibility and must be held accountable for the impact it had on the victims.

The report also criticises the charity for failing to cooperate openly and transparently with the Commission, stating that the trustees 'did not provide accurate and complete answers' about issues under investigation.

Harvey Grenville, Head of Investigations and Enforcement at the Charity Commission, said:

As our report makes clear, the victims of abuse were badly let down by the charity. The trustees should have made the victims' welfare their first priority. Instead, their actions and omissions, both in response to allegations of abuse, and in their attitude towards our investigation, fell short of what the public would expect of those running a charity in a modern society. Our report rightly holds the trustees of the Manchester New Moston congregation to account. I hope that it therefore provides some comfort and reassurance to those affected by the circumstances we have investigated.

Our investigation has helped ensure that the charity has improved its procedures around the handling of child safeguarding concerns and its internal disciplinary process. Most importantly, the charity's policy and procedures now make clear that victims of child sexual abuse are not required to make their allegations in the presence of the alleged abuser. They also state that protective restrictions must be put in place to protect the charity's members from people found guilty of child sexual abuse by the criminal courts. We welcome these changes.

I would like to thank all those who came forward to provide us with information and intelligence throughout the investigation.

The Commission's inquiry into another Jehovah's Witnesses charity (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-commission-investigates-jehovahs-witnesses-charities>), the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain, is ongoing. This inquiry is examining the child safeguarding policy and procedures further, as they are common to all Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in England and Wales.

The Commission encourages people who have been affected by safeguarding in congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in England and Wales to make contact with the investigations team at IAEInvestigationsCRM@charitycommission.gsi.gov.uk.

Ends

PR 55/17

Notes to editors

1. The Charity Commission (<http://www.gov.uk/charity-commission>) is the independent regulator of charities in England and Wales. To find out more about our work, see our annual report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-commission-annual-report-and-accounts-2016-to-2017>).

2. Search for charities on our online register
(<http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/showcharity/registerofcharities/RegisterHomePage.aspx>).
3. The Commission's inquiry into Manchester New Moston Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses opened on 27 May 2014 and concluded with the publication of the report on 26 July 2017.
4. The Commission has faced continued challenge in the Tribunal against its decision to open the investigation into the charity. In April, the regulator welcomed an Upper Tribunal judgment dismissing an appeal against its decision to investigate the charity.
5. Section 46 of the Charities Act 2011 gives the Commission the power to institute inquiries. The opening of an inquiry gives the Commission access to a range of investigative, protective and remedial legal powers.
6. The Commission is not a safeguarding authority and its inquiries do not investigate allegations of abuse or actual incidents of abuse, whether historic or recent. Its concern is with the proper regulation of charities. Anyone with concerns about specific incidents of alleged abuses, whether historic or recent, for any charity, should report their concerns to the police and the relevant safeguarding authorities.

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