

10 January 2022

Julian Knight MP
Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee
House of Commons

Dear Mr Knight,

I am aware that your Committee will be meeting tomorrow to consider the process leading to my appointment as Chair of the Charity Commission, given my resignation shortly thereafter. The purpose of this letter, following on from my email to you of 21 December, is to provide an explanation, from my point of view, of what occurred, and to apologise to the Committee.

Apology

First, I am terribly sorry that you and your committee took the time to scrutinise me, only for me to resign a week later.

And I am also sorry that I made the mistake of thinking that I did not need to report an allegation made against me by an employee at a charity I had chaired. Having heard nothing from the charity in the months following its investigation of the allegation, I assumed I had been exonerated (see further below). I now understand that this was not entirely correct, and with hindsight I should have told the interview panel about the allegation and my assumption that it had been dealt with to the satisfaction of those involved.

I found out my assumption was wrong on 15 December. I spoke to DCMS on 17 December. They told me they viewed my failure to disclose that I did not know the outcome of the investigation, and my reliance on an assumption (that if I had not been exonerated I would have been told) as an error of judgement on a technical omission. They said they did not think there was any intention to mislead. I then resigned by mutual consent.

Bullying

In my role as a Chair, I have been accused of bullying. Bullying means improperly using power repeatedly and deliberately to hurt someone, physically or emotionally. I have never intentionally bullied anyone and I deeply regret that anyone could have construed my behaviour in that way. In the charity sector, allegations arising from workplace behaviour are on the increase. And the precautionary Serious Incident Reports they trigger are now being made on a routine basis - about 50% more each year than the year before. They can arise when disgruntled employees are not willing to accept what boards of trustees have legitimately decided to do. My criticism of a cultural shift towards more complaints and allegations was intended to be limited the charity sector, where so often boards of volunteer trustees are not properly equipped to deal with this.

What happened at Women for Women International (UK) (WfWI)

I want to explain my understanding of what happened at the charity WfWI, which I chaired (as an unpaid trustee) for some 5 years.

WfWI needed to merge the managements of its US and UK operations better to live within its means and become more efficient. That required some restructuring. An individual affected by this made a raft of allegations against the board and in particular two trustees, of whom I was one. It was said that I had been aggressive and inappropriate in tone in a phone call in Spring 2021, and that I had dealt improperly with a protected vulnerability. The complaint was accompanied by an offer to leave employment for a large sum of money.

An investigation was launched. The restructuring caused wider unhappiness within charity, with many people making accusations against others, some libellous. I felt that the organisation was imploding, and decided to resign. Before I was told what the findings were, or what the board had decided about the findings, I resigned. To be honest, I did not need the constant grief. It was an unpaid role (as have been all my roles in 14 charities spanning 30 years) and I decided that my contribution and efforts would be better off invested elsewhere. The Board wrote to me as follows: *"I am writing on behalf of the WfWI-UK Board to acknowledge and, with regret, accept your resignation as Chair. We understand and appreciate your decision that this is the right time for you to move on in your own life, and that this creates an opportunity for new leadership, at this important transitional point for the organisation. We are deeply thankful for your passion for our mission and commitment to the women we serve, and for all you have brought and given to Women for Women International UK and the wider organisation, under your stewardship of the last few years. Wishing you all the very best and with gratitude "*. I was never told the outcome of the investigation into the allegation (which I believe the board were aware of before they wrote to me as above. I knew that WfWI had made a serious incident report about the complaint (not just against me) to the Charity Commission, but heard nothing from the Commission subsequently, which I would have expected if any finding of substance had been made against me, given my role at a number of other charities. I understand that the restructuring of WfWI went through eventually, with the US and UK managements being merged and the most vocal critics of the restructuring having departed.

Fast forward to December 2021. A statement from WfWI in response to an enquiry by The Times implies that I resigned from WfWI because I knew the result of the investigation. In fact I did not. The chair of the charity called me on 15 December to tell me that it was not safe for me to assume that I had been 100% exonerated. This was the first and, to date, only communication to me from the charity about the matter since I left them. Even the slight expansion that there was a finding of no deliberate bullying but that certain aspects of my conduct were judged inappropriate I learnt only from what they told The Times. I have of course asked for details. Natural justice and basic fairness suggest that I be given an opportunity to defend myself against what appear to be being presented by some as serious findings against me. I have instructed solicitors to pursue this.

The photo from 2018 that appeared in The Times

To add colour to their story, The Times published a photo of me in December that, taken out of context, can be misinterpreted. These are the facts: WfWI helps women survivors of war. In 2018 it was offered a significant donation by Victoria's Secret. The US arm of the charity wanted to accept the donation. I was not sure – there were two sides to the argument. In the US, Victoria's Secret was viewed as merely a very large underwear firm. In the UK, by contrast, it was seen as sexualising and objectifying women - not perhaps the right partner for a charity which helps women escape sexual violence. I passed through an airport at the time of this debate was ongoing within WfWI, and took a photo of an item for sale in a Victoria's Secret store which I felt was a good way to illustrate that perspective. Instead of sending it to the charity CEO - who shared my reservations - I sent it in error to another female colleague. She knew there was no bad intent: she later explained, " ... in 2017

[the CEO] accidentally copied my phone number into her email signature when updating it, so a few contacts of hers occasionally call/text my work phone expecting it to be [the CEO] ..." and at the time messaged me on WhatsApp straightaway: "Hi Martin this is [x] from Women for Women International - I think you might have my number saved as [the CEO] in your phone?". I asked her to forward it to the intended recipient, which she did. The CEO told me she thought the photo made our point well. The charity went on to decline the donation. Months later a complaint was made and investigated under the charity's trustee code of conduct. The complaint was not upheld, the board deciding that there had been no improper conduct. I do not know how the photo ended up in the public domain, I certainly did not put it there, and I doubt that WfWI did so.

At no point in my career has anyone ever complained of any behaviour by me that has been sexual. I regret that the juxtaposition of The Times' headline and picture, and some of the media storm that has followed, suggests otherwise. It has been a very distressing time for me and my family.

The process

There has been some discussion about DCMS due diligence. I was or had been a trustee of 14 charities, so it would have been challenging for DCMS to have contacted all of them. A separate issue is whether they should cross-check with the Charity Commission itself.

In conclusion

I would like to underline my commitment to the charity sector. Its role in our country is vital. I am sad not to taking up the role at the Charity Commission, and will instead continue to work within charities themselves, as I have done for 30 years. I hope that the experience that I have outlined above will not deter others from putting themselves forward for the role of a charity trustee, or (more ambitiously) chair of the Commission. I offer best wishes for the reappointment process and to the next chair of the Charity Commission.

Yours sincerely

Martin Thomas