



Operational Case Report

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation (1123243)

About the charity

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation has general charitable objects enabling the trustees to decide from time to time what purposes the charity should carry out. It is not a religious organisation. The charity is unaffiliated and works with all those committed to peaceful co-existence, including those of faith and none. The charity's mission is to provide the practical support required to counter religious prejudice, conflict and extremism in order to promote open-minded and stable societies. Mr Blair is the charity's founder and patron.

Why the commission got involved

In August 2014, a newspaper article was published in which a former employee wrote critically about his five months working for the foundation. His criticism focused on the way in which the charity (and Mr Blair's office) operates and is managed (such as its sign-off procedure for documents) and the article suggested that the charity's independence was being compromised as a result of the patron's close involvement in the charity's affairs.

It is for trustees to decide how to run their charity; the commission is specifically precluded from acting in the administration of a charity. However, it is a fundamental principle of charity law that trustees must act solely in their charity's best interests and not in the interests of any other individual or organisation and thus preserve the charity's independence.

We therefore needed to test whether the trustees were able to make independent decisions.

The action we took

We engaged with the charity's trustees and senior staff and met the charity at its headquarters to establish whether the charity's systems and processes for decision making were sufficiently robust and its relationship with its patron appropriate. The trustees co-operated with us throughout.

What we found

We found no evidence of a lack of independent trustee decision making. The trustees were able to demonstrate that they were aware of and fulfilling their duty to uphold the charity's independence from the patron and other stakeholders, such as donors. For instance, the charity had agreed a memorandum with the patron, confirming the regulations governing the relationship between them. This document provides that the patron's role primarily is to promote the foundation and its activities. Although he (or his authorised representative) can attend trustee meetings (essentially as a non-voting observer) he does not regularly exercise this option.

The trustees and staff have little day-to-day direct contact with the patron, other than when accompanying him on visits to the charity's projects. He is sent the annual business plan and five-year strategic plan for comment after it has first been signed off by the trustees and may choose to discuss this with them.

The patron sometimes attends and speaks at events in a personal capacity, but donates his fee to the charity. The charity was able to demonstrate that it assessed the risks involved in such events, including by making clear that, aside from receiving the donation, it is not involved in the event.

While the charity was originally based in Mr Blair's personal offices, it moved to another office in 2012.

What we concluded

We found no improper interference by the patron in the affairs of the charity or any activities that would affect its status as a charity.

Lessons for others

Appointing a patron can help a charity raise its profile and credibility and generate funds. A patron's role can vary between charities so both the charity and the patron need to know what is expected, in order to avoid problems later if there are different expectations of the role. It is therefore important that a written agreement is in place. Depending on circumstances, this might take the form of a letter of appointment or, if the patron is high profile and is to have a special relationship with the charity (such as where the charity bears the name of the patron), it is likely to be a more formal document.

It is important that trustees recognise the importance of maintaining the independence of their charity, whether from funders, stakeholders, government or prominent individuals who are connected to the organisation. This is particularly important where there might be public perception that the trustees' decisions (or those of an individual trustee) are not made independently and in the interests of the charity.

Trustees should be open and transparent in all their dealings to demonstrate independent decision making. This will include ensuring that trustees' interests are fully declared and recorded, a conflicts of interest policy is in place and decisions are made in accordance with the principles for good decision making (set out in our guidance '[It's your decision: charity trustees and decision making](#)').