

# Hurry up Harry

The Sentebale case has been a PR disaster. What does it tell us about charity governance?

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**P**rince Harry's HIV and AIDS charity, Sentebale, hit the headlines earlier this year when several trustees left in a dispute with its chair, Dr Sophie Chandauka MBE, having requested her resignation. Those allegations, and counter-claims that she has been bullied and marginalised, have cast a significant PR shadow over the charity.

But like many organisations that have suffered catastrophic problems, Sentebale's current troubles appear to lie firmly rooted in the charity's governance.

Its accounting reference date was extended last year from August 2024 to December 2024, meaning that more recent information that might otherwise have been made available before now had not been published as I write. Nevertheless, we are able to tell a lot from what is in the public domain about how the charity has been governed – and to glean some insights into what may have contributed to the problems that the Charity Commission is now investigating.

## Look to the Code

Charity best practice is guided by the Charity Governance Code, and an analysis of what we know about Sentebale against the principles of the Code is informative.

First, the Code recommends that “the board is clear about the charity's aims and ensures that these are being delivered effectively and sustainably.” Sentebale had expanded its purpose considerably from its original 2006 mission of “supporting orphaned and vulnerable children in Lesotho” with an emphasis on the impact of HIV and AIDS on young people in the country. By 2023, its strategic objectives not only covered a wider remit

encompassing health and wellbeing, nurturing communities, youth advocacy, and education and livelihoods; it had also expanded its operations beyond Lesotho into Botswana.

While this mission creep might have been a sign of ambition, it could also signal a lack of clear focus. And for a charity where income fell year-on-year from £4.5m in 2022 to £3.4m in 2023, it is a reasonable assumption that the trustees would have been concerned about Sentebale's financial sustainability or its ability to maintain those increased activity levels.

The Code also advocates for every charity to be “headed by an effective board that provides strategic leadership in line with the charity's aims and values.” There were clear signs, however, that trustee board composition was not well managed, with more than half of all trustees since the charity's formation only serving their initial three-year term and in many cases not even lasting that long.

Of the remaining trustees, almost a quarter served in excess of the maximum *nine* years recommended in the Code. In fact two of the trustees who stepped down in protest at the Chair's refusal to resign in March 2025 had held office permanently since the charity was first formed 19 years ago. This points to concerning dysfunction in trustee composition.

It is hard to imagine, given trustee composition was inadequately refreshed and with signs that some trustees may have left prematurely, that the charity met the Code's requirement to have a board that “works as an effective team, using the appropriate balance of skills, experience, backgrounds and knowledge to make informed decisions.” The Code encourages a rigorous approach to trustee selection for good reason...

## Diversity or divergence?

Another of the Code's principles addresses integrity, and this is directly relevant to many of the allegations made public by Dr Chandauka, who had previously served on the trustee body from 2009 to 2015, and was reappointed to the board as its chair in July 2023. Her allegations related to poor governance, weak management, abuse of power, bullying, sexism and racism – and a cover-up in response to her whistleblowing.

The Code is clear that charity boards should support equality, diversity and inclusion, in their own practices as well as across wider operations. It is hard to square Dr Chandauka's complaints with a culture that positively embraces equity of opportunity and diversity of views. From her previous lengthy stint as a trustee, and given the

longevity of many trustees' appointments, upon her 2023 reappointment Dr Chandauka would have found herself surrounded by many familiar faces around the trustee board table; five of the nine other trustees had held office during her previous term.

It begs the question how, despite more than half of her fellow trustees being the same individuals she had previously worked with, the culture had, in her opinion, changed so disastrously in the intervening years. From Dr Chandauka's allegations, it certainly does not appear that the trustees met the expectations of the Code to create "a welcoming and supportive culture" or that trustees felt "safe to suggest, question and challenge ideas and address, rather than avoid, difficult topics."

Nor would it seem that the trustees had adopted "behaviours and policies in line with the [charity's] values and set aside any personal interests or loyalties." If Dr Chandauka's allegations are proved by the Charity Commission's review, the outgoing trustees (who, along with Prince Harry and his fellow patron, Prince Seeiso of Lesotho, robustly deny there is any truth in them) will have some tough questions to answer.

### Uber-influencers

There have also been claims that the Duke of Sussex exerted undue influence. Such assertions are somewhat at odds with other more recent accusations that he had lost interest in the charity. But what is clear is that, as one of the charity's patrons, Prince Harry did have the right under the charity's articles of association to attend trustee meetings (subject to the trustees' approval) and it is therefore entirely possible and legitimate that he and Prince Seeiso could have attended trustee meetings in a non-voting capacity.

It is to be hoped that the trustees would have been of sufficient calibre not to feel intimidated or cowed by their presence, notwithstanding their royal status, although for the longest-serving trustees, maintaining independence of thought would naturally have become more difficult and could have inflated the chances that the board missed obvious blind spots.

On any charity board, the Code requires the trustees to have good controls and management systems, and to conduct risk assessments. Sentebale's reporting on such controls, and on its wider governance arrangements (for example on its website and in its report and accounts), was, by any estimation, light touch. This raises concerns about how committed the charity trustees were to transparency and to adopting rigorous processes to protect the charity's

from risks and uncertainties. If such processes were in place, why did they not assure stakeholders of their strong governance arrangements by publishing details?

In its 2023 report and accounts, the charity trustees had identified three principal risks – safeguarding and safety of personnel; long-term sustainability; and reputational damage. The latter risk was well and truly crystallised when the scandal broke so publicly, and it is reasonable to assume that being in the news for all the wrong reasons will also negatively affect the future ability of the charity to raise funds, creating a knock-on sustainability impact.

So while we don't know precisely what happened at Sentebale, there are some signs that all may not have been well at the charity, with the financial pressures of falling incomes perhaps bringing them to a head.

What does seem to be apparent, however, is that governance best practices were not adhered to. The trustee board was not regularly refreshed, with some trustees apparently allowed to serve indefinitely, and external reporting lacking the transparency that you would certainly hope for from such a high-profile charity.

The lack of a professional and dedicated governance role is also a potential red flag, with the role of charity



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secretary performed by interim executive director, Carmel Gaillard, a child and youth care professional; and, before her, by the previous CEO, Richard Miller. Neither of these individuals seem to have particular, specific, professional governance expertise. This fits with a wider picture that is forming of a potentially relaxed approach to governance.

Whether or not the culture was toxic, as Dr Chandauka claims, is, as yet, impossible to assess. But the lessons for every organisation are clear: it pays to apply the spirit *and* the letter of the governance guidance.

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