

Probe into religious community accused of caning children concludes due to 'insufficient evidence'

By [Mid Devon Gazette](#) | Posted: May 29, 2014

Stentwood Farm in Dunkeswell, near Cullompton, where the Twelve Tribes sect is based

Comments (0)

A police and council probe into whether children have been beaten with canes at a religious community near Mid Devon has concluded due to “insufficient evidence”.

In October officers started working with Devon County Council to “thoroughly review” information received about the Twelve Tribes community, which runs the Common Loaf Bakery at Dunkeswell.

A team of council officers visited the commune on a number of occasions and spent a day with the families and the children alone.

The information gathered led officers to conclude that there was insufficient evidence to take matters any further at this time.

The investigation followed concerns raised to officials at the county council's Children's Services by the NSPCC.

The children's charity approached the council after the community's belief in their right to use the cane as a form of punishment was highlighted in a national newspaper report.

The article followed the removal of 40 children from two communities at Klosterzimmern and Wornitz in Germany, following an investigation by an undercover reporter.

The community near Honiton is one of several across the world belonging to the Christian organisation, which was founded in the US.

It follows teachings in the old and new testaments of the Christian Bible as “God's direct word” and says its vision is “to form a new nation – the 12 tribe nation of Israel”.

On its website, the organisation explained “because we love them (our children) we spank them”, with a “small reed-like rod which only inflicts pain not damage”.

It continued: “We have seen from experience that discipline keeps a child from becoming mean-spirited and disrespectful of authority.”

A Devon County Council spokesperson confirmed that a team of officers had been tasked with “looking very carefully” into the case.

A Devon and Cornwall Police spokesperson said because the issue was a safeguarding matter the council remains the lead agency, and therefore they would not be commenting further.

In October, police confirmed that no allegations had been received and there was no formal investigation.

A member of the group, which call themselves the Community at Stentwood Farm, previously said he had no comment to make on the issue.

At the time, Tony McCollum, manager of Honiton Market, where the group has a bread stall where leaflets about them are available, said the revelations about the police investigation came as a surprise to him.

He added: "You couldn't ask for nicer people.

"They seem very family orientated – I find it hard to believe they would mistreat their children."

At the time, Phillip Noyes, director of Strategy and Development at the NSPCC, said: "Caning of children or the threat of caning is a completely unacceptable method of disciplinary action to take with any child."

A council spokesperson added: "The council takes all allegations of abuse extremely seriously.

"A team of trained and experienced children's officers have looked very thoroughly into allegations of child abuse at the community and have found insufficient evidence to take further action at this time.

"If any further allegations are made to us, we will look into them."