

**THE DEFENCE & SECURITY MEDIA ADVISORY
COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES OF A MEETING HELD IN THE MINISTRY OF
DEFENCE**

AT 6PM ON THURSDAY 16 MAY 2019

D/DSMA/3/2/1

The following were present:

Mr Dominic Wilson (Chair)
Mr Hamish Falconer (FCO)
Mr Paul Wyatt (MOD)

Mr John Battle (Joint Vice-Chair)
Mr Ian Murray (Joint Vice-Chair)
Mr Joe Fay
Mr James Green
Mr David Higgerson
Mr Michael Jermey
Mr John McLellan
Ms Sarah Whitehead
Mr Robert Winnett

Brigadier Geoffrey Dodds
Air Commodore David Adams
Group Captain John Alexander

Secretary
First Deputy Secretary
Second Deputy Secretary

1. There were apologies from Laura Adams, Madeleine Alessandri (Cabinet Office), Jess Brammar, Peter Clifton, Charles Garside, David Jordan, Mr Rod Latham (Home Office), Owen Meredith, Charlie Redmayne, Simon Shercliff (FCO) and Craig Tregurtha.
2. The Chairman opened the meeting by welcoming one new Committee member: Robert Winnett, Deputy Editor, The Daily Telegraph, and one representative: Hamish Falconer (representing Simon Shercliff, FCO)

**Agenda Item 1 – Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 November
2018**

3. The minutes of the meeting were approved by the Committee as an accurate record.

Agenda Item 2 – Matters Arising from the Previous Meeting

4. There were 3 matters arising from the 8 November meeting:

- a. **Para 11.** The Media Side would welcome the opportunity to view the new DSMA website before it went live. This would be covered under Item 3.
- b. **Paras 13.** In the pursuit of new digital-only Committee members, the emphasis should be placed on digital publications rather than social media. This would be covered under Item 5.
- c. **Para 17.** The Committee should return to the subject of the DSMA Twitter account at the next meeting and in the meantime ensure that the account pointed enquiries to the new DSMA website. This would be covered under Item 6.

Agenda Item 3 – Secretary's Report

5. **Overview.** During the last 6-month period the DSMA secretariat received 80 enquiries and requests for DSMA Notice advice which represented a small increase over the previous period's low (69) but still below the historical average (114). There had been an increase in the number of books reviewed.

6. **DSMA Notices to All Editors.** On 21 December 2018, one UK media member tweeted live commentary on an SF night operation against a stricken maritime vessel in the Thames estuary. The purpose of the operation was to secure the crew's safety from a group of illegal immigrants. Such live *before and after* reporting runs counter to the advice offered under DSMA standing notice 03. The tweeter was reminded of the implications of such reporting at the time. The Secretary subsequently wrote to all Committee members at the request of the Secretary of State for Defence to invite them to remind the wider UK media community, at an appropriate opportunity, of the dangers of live and *before and after* reporting of such operations.

7. One supplementary DSMA notice to all editors was issued on 15 January 2019 in connection with the identity of a single SF member based in East Africa. At the time of issuing the notice, the UK media had held the line and it was not until 17 January that a US media organization published an unpixelated photograph of the individual concerned. There were no noted instances where this was repeated by UK media organisations.

8. **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)**. The Secretary had been called at short notice to give oral evidence on behalf of the Committee to the IICSA as part of the Westminster line of inquiry on 8 March 2019. The Secretary was satisfied that the evidence had been well received and, at this stage, did not expect further investigation.

9. **The Redeveloped DSMA Website**. The redeveloped DSMA website went live on 13 January after members had been given the opportunity to comment on the format and content. Google Analytics had been collecting usage data since 20 January. For the period to 29 April 2019 this showed that on average:

- a. The website had 24 users per day. 91% of these were new.
- b. 82% of users were located in the UK.
- c. Over 7,000 pages were viewed in some 2,600 sessions.
- d. Sessions lasted nearly 2 minutes during which 3 pages were viewed.
- e. High usage occurred over the periods:
 - i. 228 users over the weekend 27/28 Jan (114 users per day).
 - ii. 42 users visited the site on the day of the DSMA Committee's oral evidence to the IICSA (8 Mar).
 - iii. 485 users over the 4-day period 20-23 Apr (121 users per day). The period covered the Easter weekend and the activities of *Extinction Rebellion* which may have had some bearing on these figures.

10. The Committee thanked the Secretary for his comprehensive report and for the way he had handled the IICSA evidence session. The Chairman said that these sessions were never easy and that he was very grateful to the Secretary for the way in which he had handled this sensitive issue.

ITEM 4 – DSMA ARCHIVING POLICY

11. The Chairman asked the Second Deputy Secretary to introduce this item.

12. The Second Deputy Secretary said that the DSMA Committee's archiving policy was not straightforward. It had been developed at various Committee meetings in the 1980s and 1990s and needed to be reviewed in the light of the reduction from the 30 to the 20-year rule. Key points were:

- a. There was no legal requirement to archive any documents in The National Archives (TNA) as the DSMA Committee (a non-public body) is not listed in the Public Records Act.
- b. The Committee had agreed in 1983 to release files to the Public Records Office (now TNA) as a means of demonstrating the Committee's transparency but it appeared that none had been released until 1995, when the Committee had agreed to release registered (official files) to TNA and to retain the unregistered (unofficial) files containing confidential advice to the media.
- c. In light of the reduction from the 30 to the 20-year rule, it was for the Committee to decide whether to release any unregistered files to the TNA where there was a clear public interest, and bearing in mind that such releases could only take place after the media organisation concerned had given its permission.
- d. Files concerning security and intelligence agency or SF activity should be retained in accordance with the Lord Chancellor's Retention Instruments.

13. In a wide-ranging discussion, it was agreed that the Committee did need a clearer policy on the handling of paper files and increasingly electronic ones. The Chairman said that there was a particular need to avoid inconsistencies in the handling of unregistered files. The Second Deputy Secretary had made a number of recommendations in the light of which the following were agreed:

- a. Registered files were to be released under normal MOD procedures to the TNA treating them in the spirit of openness as public records, subject to the continued consent of the Keeper of Public Records (CEO TNA).
- b. All unregistered files would be kept but not released.

14. The Chairman said that before confirming this as a basis on which to proceed we needed to confirm two points. First that the Committee could not be compelled to release unregistered files stored online using software or servers using foreign legislation; and second, that there were no implications for GDPR. The Media Side raised some concerns about the security of on-line storage of electronic records. The Secretary agreed to investigate.

Action: The Secretary

15. In conclusion, the Chairman raised the question of transparency. He said that the decision to release taken in 1995 had been partially driven by a desire to be more transparent. He suggested that there might be a case for some form of annual report, summarising the work of the Committee during the year. After some discussion, it was agreed that a better way might be to return to the submission of a more detailed Secretary's report in the minutes as had been the case a few years ago. The Secretary agreed to review earlier minutes and to report back.

Action: The Secretary

ITEM 5 – INCREASING THE DIGITAL MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE

16. The Chairman asked the Secretary to report. Not much progress had been made during the past 6 months. Unfortunately,

Janine Gibson, the then editor of BuzzFeed had resigned from the Committee on her appointment to the FT. Her successor had been approached but was yet to respond. Also some renewed interest from Google had come to nothing. The Secretary concluded by saying that he would be grateful if the Media Side could give some further thought to names.

ITEM 6 – USE OF THE DSMA TWITTER ACCOUNT

17. The Chairman asked the Second Deputy Secretary to introduce this item. The Second Deputy Secretary said that following the discussions at the last meeting, the DSMA Twitter account [@DSMA_Sec](#) now had a pinned tweet which points to the redeveloped DSMA website. He pointed out that the DSMA Secretariat does not have the resources to monitor and contribute to a corporate Twitter account. Furthermore, he recommended that it would be inappropriate to get involved in discussions concerning media advice that had been offered in confidence. He showed a number of examples of recent tweets questioning the DSMA system. In particular, there had been a number suggesting, incorrectly, that DSMA notices had been issued to restrict reporting on the Gilets Jaunes protests in France and the veterans' marches in support of soldier F in the UK.

18. In discussion, the Chairman said there were two points to consider. First, do we maintain the account and second, if we do, do we respond. The Vice Chairman said that it was important to have an account for monitoring purposes but that the Media Side view was we should not respond. The Chairman asked whether the pinned tweet should be amended to say that the Secretary would respond but only via email. The Media Side said that this could lead to unproductive exchanges and that any silences would be misinterpreted. A further suggestion was to consider using the Twitter account to announce changes to the Notices and the publication of minutes. It was agreed that this was not necessary and all that was required was the pinned tweet giving a brief explanation of the system together with a pointer to the website.

ITEM 7 – ANY OTHER BUSINESS

19. There were no formal items of other business.

20. The Chairman wished a temporary farewell to the Second Deputy Secretary, Group Captain John Alexander, who was to be mobilised as an RAF Reserve to deploy to Afghanistan as MA to the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in the summer. This meant that he would be absent from DSMA duty from mid-July until mid-March 2020. The Committee wished him well.

21. Finally, the Chairman reminded the Committee that the annual DSMA reception, usually held in Admiralty House in November, would in future be held in March. The next reception would be held on 26 March 2020.

ITEM 8 NEXT MEETING

22. The next DSMA Committee meeting was planned to take place at 6pm on Thursday 7 November 2019 in MOD Main Building. It would be preceded immediately by the Media-side pre-meeting, which would begin as usual at 5pm. The meeting would be followed by the annual Committee dinner at the RAF Club.

Geoffrey Dodds
Brigadier
Secretary
Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee 20 May 2019

Distribution

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The DSMA Website