

The Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee
Minutes of a Meeting Held in the Ministry of Defence
At 6pm on Thursday 5 November 2015

D/DPBAC/3/2/1

The following were present:

Mr Peter Watkins, Chair	Mr Simon Bucks, Vice-Chair
Mr Paul Lincoln (Home Office)	Mr John Battle
Mr Paddy McGuinness (Cabinet Office)	Mr Charles Garside
Mr Dominic Wilson (MOD)	Mr James Green
	Mr Jonathan Grun
	Mr David Higgerson
	Mr Michael Jermey
	Mr Paul Johnson
	Mr David Jordan
	Ursula Mackenzie
	Mr James MacManus
	Mr Geoff Martin
	Mr Owen Meredith
	Mr Bob Satchwell
	Mr Richard Walker
	Sarah Whitehead

Air Vice-Marshal Andrew Vallance	Secretary
Air Commodore David Adams	First Deputy Secretary
Brigadier Geoffrey Dodds	Second Deputy Secretary

1. There was an apology from Jonathan Allen (FCO).
2. The Chairman opened the meeting by welcoming Sarah Whitehead who was taking over from Simon Bucks as the Sky News representative and Dominic Wilson who was the new MOD representative.

Agenda Item 1 – Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 May 2015 and the DSMA Re-Launch meeting held on 30 June 2015

3. The minutes of both meetings were approved by the Committee as accurate records.

Agenda Item 2 – Matters Arising from the Previous Meetings

4. There were 4 matters arising from the 13 May 2015 meeting:

- a. Para 4a: Existing practice and current guidance on the public disclosure of personal security information about officials (to be covered under Item 3)
- b. Para 4b: Visit by DSMA Committee to GCHQ (to be covered under Item 3)
- c. Para 16: Briefing to the Metropolitan Police (to be covered under Item 3)
- d. Para 21: Review of the DA (now DSMA) Notices (to be covered under Item 4)

Agenda Item 3 – Secretary's Report

5. Day-to-Day Business. During the last 6-month period the DSMA Secretariat had received some 88 enquiries and requests for DA/DSMA Notice advice, averaging about 3.5 per week. This was a lower rate than that for the previous reporting period and historically the third lowest during the last 6 years. The Secretary saw no particular significance in this drop as the number of enquiries has always varied with domestic and World events.

6. DA/DSMA Notice 'Advisory' Letters to All Editors. The Secretariat had issued no so-called 'Advisories' to all UK editors during this reporting period, nor had it receive any requests to do so.

7. Main Areas of Enquiry. In common with the previous 3 reporting periods, requests by the media and officials for DA/DSMA Notice advice during the period had focussed on 3 major areas:

- The National Intelligence Agencies
- The Special Forces

- The DA/DSMA Notice System itself.

The Secretariat had also received a small number of requests for advice on recent military operations, nuclear security and defence equipment, as well as individual enquiries on a further range of peripheral subjects many of which fell outside the DA/DSMA Notice code.

8. The Intelligence Agencies. Some 12 of the occurrences and requests for DA/DSMA Notice advice during the period had involved the intelligence agencies, a further sharp fall from the 19 requests of the previous reporting period. Topics had included 'naming' of present and former agency members, 'whistle-blowers', the hiding of on-line identities, televised complaints of a former member of the Security Service suffering from PTSD, a very long (and largely fictional) book by Neil Ffrench-Blake - *'The Pol Pot Conspiracy'* about SIS operations in the Far East, the 'Echelon' signals intelligence arrangements and the employment contracts between the intelligence agencies and those who work for them. In every case, the DA/DSMA advice offered had been accepted, albeit in a few cases only after an extended discussion. One of the consequences of the greater visibility of the national Intelligence Agencies was that the media and the public challenge with increasing frequency any attempt to preserve the anonymity of Agency people.

9. Special Forces (SF). The last 6 months saw 24 occurrences and requests for DA/DSMA advice concerning the SF, 9 less than for the previous period. In every case, the DA/DSMA advice offered had been accepted, albeit often with a degree of negotiation.

10. The D/DA/DSMA Notice System Issues. During the last 6 months there had been some 37 enquiries and occurrences about the workings of the DA/DSMA Notice System, very slightly less than that for the previous reporting period. As usual, they came from a wide variety of sources: the media themselves, officials, academics, fringe organisations and members of the public. Concern continued that the DA/DSMA Notice System had been used by senior members of past governments to cover up crimes and abuses (particularly child abuse), to suppress reporting of some of the less prominent public protests and to 'gag' critical media comment on a number of issues. When presented with such

accusations, the Secretary had continued to be as transparent as possible, giving a clear, detailed and unambiguous refutation of each point made. However, even this approach had to be done with discretion, as 'official' denials (and critics continued to brand Secretariat advice as 'official') were often perversely portrayed by the conspiracy theorists as confirmation that their allegations were true. Finally, interest had continued throughout the period in the implementation of the recommendations of *The Independent Review of the DA Notice System and DPBAC*.

11. Current and Recent Military Operations. The period had included only one request on past and present British (non-SF) military operations.

12. Other Areas of Enquiry. The remaining 10 enquiries had covered a wide range of issues, including the terms of the HBOS sale, vCJD, the 2008 film '*The Bank Job*', Geo-Engineering and Land Registry failings. Such enquiries were normally caused by ignorance of the scope of the System.

13. Official Privacy. At its previous meeting, the Committee had tasked the Secretary to survey the existing practice and current guidance on the public disclosure of personal security information about officials. This had followed on from the differing perspectives between the Official and Media sides of the Committee on a related matter at an earlier meeting. The Secretary had concluded that guidance varied between Government Departments. This in turn made it difficult to provide clear-cut guidance to the Secretariat on which officials and service people should be protected from the public disclosure of their personal security information.

14. Administration and Review Implementation. Although activity in the core business of providing DA/DSMA Notice advice had been relatively low during the reporting period, the Secretariat had been involved in a great deal of extra administrative work to implement the accepted recommendations of *The Independent Review of the DA Notice System and DPBAC*. This included creating and populating a new website, establishing a new email address, preparing media releases, coordinating the DSMA-launch press conference, informing the media and government departments of the changes being made and coordinating media articles and interviews. This work was now complete. In early

October, after nearly 11 years, the Secretariat's part-time PA had left to take up a full-time appointment nearer home and to date had not been replaced. This was imposing a significant additional burden on the Secretariat.

15. Promotion of the DA Notice System. During the period the Secretary had continued to place a high priority on promoting a better understanding of the DA/DSMA Notice System. As part of the re-launch efforts, the Chairman had held a press conference in MOD on 30 July, and on the following day the Secretary had been interviewed on the BBC Radio 4 'Today' programme. The interview had covered the nature of the System, its re-launching under the DSMA banner and allegations of 'D-Notice' involvement in the cover-up of child abuse by those in high places. This was an opportunity to reach a far wider audience than the Secretary could have achieved through his normal lecturing programme. That said this programme had continued, and during the period the Secretary had given the following lectures/seminars:

- 17 July – Metropolitan Police (assisted by Bob Satchwell who presented the Media side view)
- 29 October – Warwick University, School of Journalism
- Also on 29 October, Geoffrey Dodds – together with Ian Cobbain from The Guardian and Chris Hughes from the Daily Mirror – had participated in a Media Forum on 'Reporting on the Secret State' at Goldsmith's College, University of London.
- A visit by the DSMA Committee to GCHQ was being organised for the coming weeks.

16. Books. During the last 6 months, DA/DSMA Notice advice had been provided on the following 3 books:

- 'The Pol Pot Conspiracy' – Neil Ffrench-Blake
- 'The Regiment – 15 Years in the SAS' – Rusty Firmin
- 'Brother in Arms' – A Memoir of War and Friendship in the SAS' - Sekonaia Takavesi

Discussion

17. The Chairman thanked the Secretary for his comprehensive report. There was some discussion about the lower rate of business during the period; the Committee shared the Secretary's view that it was too early to draw any conclusions. On the

disclosure of personal security information, the Media Side felt that the Secretary's survey confirmed their view that there were inconsistencies in practice. The Official Side noted that, while it was understandable that departments tended to have their own policies and had different perspectives, it would be worth reflecting on the conclusions of the Secretary's survey. The Chairman of the Media Side said that another aspect of the Secretary's survey worth following-up was whether the apparently growing phenomenon of "self-outing" was at heart an issue of internal discipline or one of policy limitations.

Action: The Secretary

Agenda Item 4 – Review of the DSMA Notices

18. The Chairman asked the Second Deputy Secretary to update the Committee on progress. He reported that consensus had been achieved with the Cabinet Office, the FCO, the Home Office and the MOD. The re-drafted notices were now with the Media Side for comment, hopefully by the end of November. The Media Side Chairman said that this was too tight but agreed to report back by mid-January once a small sub-committee had considered the proposals. The Second Deputy Secretary said that the government departments felt that there was a degree of overlap between DSMA Notices 3, 4 and 5. How did the Committee wish him to proceed? It was agreed to follow a two-step approach: the re-drafting process, with a remit to achieve greater clarity, should be completed first; consideration should then be given to restructuring, with the aim of eliminating duplication.

Action: The Second Deputy Secretary

Agenda Item 5 – Any Other Business

19. There was one item of Any Other Business raised by the Media Side Chairman. He had been working with the First Deputy Secretary on the review remit to increase digital representation on the Committee. Some progress had been made and some useful contacts established. Owen Meredith had agreed to take this work forward on behalf of the Media Side.

Action: The First Deputy Secretary

Owen Meredith

Farewells

20. This would be Richard Walker's last meeting after 4 years' service with the Committee as he would shortly be retiring as editor of the Sunday Herald. The Chairman asked for the Committee's thanks to Richard Walker to be put on record.

21. This would also be the last meeting for Simon Bucks who had served the Committee for 13 years of which 8 years was as Committee Vice-Chairman and Chairman of the Media Side. The Chairman thanked Simon Bucks for the very constructive role he had played during this time.

Next Meeting

22. The next DSMA Committee Meeting would take place at 1800 on Thursday 5 May 2016. It would be preceded by the Media Side pre-meeting which would begin as usual at 1700.

Andrew Vallance

Andrew Vallance
AVM
Secretary, DSMA Committee

23 November 2015

Distribution

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The '*dsma.uk*' Website