

**THE DEFENCE AND SECURITY MEDIA ADVISORY
COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES OF A MEETING HELD IN THE MINISTRY OF
DEFENCE IN HISTORIC ROOM 13 AT 6PM ON THURSDAY
25 APRIL 2024**

D/DSMA/3/2/1

The following were present:

Mr Paul Wyatt (Chairman)
Ms Catrin Thomas (FCDO)
Ms Elizabeth Wright (Home Office)
Mr Gareth Martin (MoD)

Mr John Battle (Vice-Chairman)
Ms Dawn Alford
Mr Ian Brunskill
Mr Peter Clifton
Mr Joe Fay
Mr David Jordan
Mr Michael Jermy
Ms Lisa Mitchell
Ms Sayra Tekin
Ms Sarah Whitehead
Ms Joy Yates

Brigadier Geoffrey Dodds (Retired) Secretary
Captain Jon Perkins RN (Retired) First Deputy Secretary
Lt Cdr Stephen Dudley RN (Retired) Second Deputy Secretary

Apologies had been received from:

Ms Natasha Anku, Mr David Dillon, Mr James Green, Mr David Higgerson, Mr Paul Kunert, Mr John McLellan, Mr Charles Redmayne, Ms Eilidh Wilson and Mr Robert Winnett.

Mr Ben Lowry, Editor of the Belfast News Letter, newly appointed to the Committee, was delayed in travel from Belfast that afternoon.

Note: As the Chairman was delayed in a previous meeting, Mr Gareth Martin stood in as Acting Chairman until his arrival.

As the Vice Chairman had to leave early for a subsequent meeting, the normal agenda running order had been revised to ensure that the most important item (incorporation of counter-terrorism policing) was taken first. Mr David Jordan then stood in as Acting Vice Chairman for the remainder of the meeting.

Agenda Item 1 – Incorporation of Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP) into the DSMA Notice System

1. The Vice Chairman summarised for the full Committee the private Media Side discussions held in the Media Side pre-meeting.

2. The time taken to discuss this issue reflected the importance attached to it. The longest-serving members could not recall an issue which had attracted more debate.

3. Following further evidence presented at the Autumn 2023 meeting, the Media side agreed that a salient case had been made, and an extraordinary MS working group had convened out of committee to craft possible draft text last Autumn.

4. The proposed changes in the standing notices to include the national security aspects of CTP in terms of equipment and techniques and sensitive personal information in the protection provided to IA and SF colleagues with whom they worked, were very minor in textual terms, but extremely significant in nuance.

5. These had been very carefully drafted and thoroughly thought through and were offered with the following important caveats:

- Nothing should be allowed to prejudice the media's strong relationship with individual constabularies, and the NCA, and the customary reporting of crime.
- The creation of a channel between the Secretary and CTP Command was purely to provide timely Subject Matter expert (SME) advice within an extremely narrow focus.
- It was expected that this new provision would be used sparingly.
- Only threats to national security or danger to life were in scope.
- The operation of this new provision would be at the discretion of the Secretary, would remain open to review and, if approved by the full Committee should appear as a standing agenda item at future meetings.

6. The Vice Chairman further stated that the Secretary would provide a note detailing both the proposed amendments and the safeguards which the Media Side considered essential for consideration by the Official side. If agreed, it was hoped that these could be approved at the Autumn 2024 meeting.

Action: Secretary/Vice Chairman

Agenda Item 2 – Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 25 April 2024

7. The minutes of the Autumn Meeting were approved.

Agenda Item 3 – Matters arising from Previous Meeting

8. Matters arising would be addressed under their own heading below.

Agenda Item 4 – Secretary's Report: 18 Oct 2023 – 16 Apr 2024

9. The Secretary presented his report covering the period 18 Oct 2023 – 16 Apr 2024

10. Noting that the period covered the war in Gaza and the associated attacks on civilian shipping in the Red Sea, two supplementary notices had been issued during this period. Both were concerned with Special Forces operations including details of tactics, techniques and procedures and present a good example of how sensitive information can be protected without disrupting news of significant public interest.

11. The total number of Requests for Advice (70) showed a substantial increase over the previous six months, were up to pre-pandemic levels, and included some extremely sensitive issues with significant potential to put lives at risk and cause harm to national security.

12. The Committee approved the 'digest' of the Secretary's report for publication on the website.

13. Three examples of the system in action were presented:

- *A disgruntled inspector had published inaccurate data about Border Force inspections of general aviation flights at one airport, extrapolating this incorrectly to others. Claiming to be whistleblowers was often a tactic employed by individuals attempting to bolster their case at Employment Tribunal.*

Balanced reporting which included both the inspector's allegations and the Border Force's different interpretation of the verified figures had met the significant public interest in the issue yet not revealed information which might provide encouragement or assistance to those contemplating illegal action.

- *A report had been received of the failure of a depth gauge in a running SSBN of the continuous at sea nuclear deterrent. This had been quickly spotted by engineering staff in the propulsion team using information from other sensors.*

Although the incident was of widespread public interest, the actual depths involved would have added little to the understanding of the general public but might have been extremely valuable to an adversary who might have gleaned

intelligence about the operating techniques and vulnerabilities of the UK's nuclear deterrent. Such information was not disclosed.

- The online and local newspaper recruitment campaign to fill a routine stores position at a military facility in Hereford had inadvertently not only highlighted the vetting status and thus the possible opportunity to any potential adversary, but also included Sensitive Personal Information, (including the name and telephone number of the supervisor, a serving soldier) in the job advertisement. Open and transparent recruiting was sometimes at odds with prudent precautions within the national security community. While scanning the news media, the secretariat had spotted this and advised the appropriate authorities.*

Agenda Item 5 – Any Other Business

14. The Chairman apologised for his delayed arrival, but expressed satisfaction that progress on the incorporation of counter-terrorism policing was being made, and said he looked forward to seeing the proposed amendments to the standing notices.

15. He also noted that it was apposite that his over-running previous meeting had involved a terrorist question, and that the state of international affairs remained both dangerous and volatile.

16. The Secretary highlighted the forthcoming visit of two Australian academics looking to learn from the experience of the Committee in writing a paper intended to begin the process of reviving the Australian D-notice system which had fallen into disuse following the erosion of mutual trust between media and government officials on that Continent. Prof Peter Greste and Dr Rebecca Ananian-Welsh of Macquarie University, Queensland would be in the UK between 20 and 29 May and the Secretary was in the process of drafting a programme to include discussions with some committee members on 21 and 23 May in MOD Main Building.

17. Reception. The First Deputy Secretary briefed the Committee that the annual reception would be held at 1830 at Admiralty House on Wednesday 12 June. He highlighted the value of informal discussions between the media and colleagues across departments in the national security space. He hoped as many members of the committee as possible would attend, and bring with them a more junior colleague who might learn from the experience of discussing the disclosure of national security matters with both media and Government personnel. Formal invitations would be sent out shortly.

Afternote. The Permanent Under Secretary of State from the Ministry of Defence Mr David Williams intends to attend the event.

Agenda Item 6 – Date of Next Meeting

18. The next DSMA Committee meeting is planned to take place at 1800 on Tuesday 5 November 2024. It will be preceded immediately by the media-side pre-meeting, which will begin at the usual time of 1700 and be followed by the annual dinner at the RAF Club.

Geoffrey Dodds
Brigadier (Retired), Secretary
Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee

9 May 2024

Distribution:

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