

Witness Name: **Catherine Crawford**

Statement no: **First**

Exhibits: **CC10**

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THE LEVESON INQUIRY

Exhibit CC10 to the
Witness Statement of **Catherine Crawford**

Metropolitan Police Authority: Website archive

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MPA scrutiny of MPS media and communications

Introduction

1. Members of the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) have become increasingly concerned about the approach taken by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to managing communications and the media particularly during the so-called 'Forest Gate' incident in June 2006. As a result, Members agreed to conduct a short scrutiny of the approach taken by the MPS in this area.

2. The terms of reference, agreed by committee, included:

- establishing the current strategies, staffing and structures in place within DPA and its relationship with other parts of the MPS with regards services and support;
- assess how DPA engages with other parts of the MPS to manage communication to the media, Londoners and stakeholders, particularly during sensitive operations, and how DPA strategies are influenced or controlled internally or externally; and
- identify the media and PR needs of senior officers and others as seen appropriate and identify any gaps in current delivery or ways in which its services could be more effective.

3. A panel of Members, chaired by Len Duvall (Chair of the MPA), was convened. This panel heard evidence from a number of senior MPS officers including the Director of DPA. Members also heard from a Partner of a large PR firm, who has extensive experience of managing large media functions within politically sensitive public sector organisations. MPA officers also sought evidence from other stakeholders including a number of journalists who have regular contact with the MPS. "How the MPS Communicates" was the focus item at the September 2006 meeting of the MPA Equal Opportunity and Diversity Board (EODB). This focused specifically on how the MPS communicates with its diverse stakeholders. The information provided by the MPS and the minutes of the subsequent discussion, were used by the Panel in its deliberations.

Summary of findings

4. There is no doubt that the MPS faces significant challenges when it comes to managing media and communications. The demands of news organisations operating 24 hours a day have to be balanced against the need to maintain public trust and confidence in the police service and to protect the rights of individuals who may be involved in particular incidents.

5. Our scrutiny found an organisation that is, for the most part, committed to an open and transparent relationship with the public and the media. However, we also found an organisation that tends to react to external factors, rather than one that proactively manages its external image. Whilst the organisation inevitably needs to be able to react quickly and positively to events, we have concluded that there is more the MPS can do to ensure correct information is being used by the media.

6. We also heard about the changing nature of the media with the increased use of eye-witness sources, the development of the internet and the increasing need for media organisation to meet the demands of 24 hour news scheduling. The MPS will need to

reflect on these developments and consider how it can respond more effectively. A key challenge will be how they develop their current media monitoring function in order to monitor and analyse coverage of the MPS and react appropriately.

7. We also found that there is a reluctance in some parts of the organisation to share information with the media. While there may be good reasons for this, an unwillingness to communicate openly within the organisation could be harmful in the longer term.

8. The MPS has a network of communications resources available to it, but it is our view that best use is not being made of these. We have recommended a number of structural changes that should enable a more consistent and comprehensive approach to managing internal and external communications.

9. We considered the Forest Gate incident in detail. We recognise that this presented a unique set of circumstances for the MPS. We found that although significant thought had been given to how the communications element of this operation should be managed (including some innovations to standard practice that will be adopted nationally), the service struggled to respond appropriately to circumstances that had not been anticipated. We have also concluded that there could have been better community engagement at the beginning of the incident.

10. The panel considered a number of examples of (what the MPA considered) poor reputational management. Many of these included the repeated use of information that was untrue or misleading by the media. We found that the MPS does not routinely refute or rebut stories in these circumstances. It is our view that this approach should be revised.

11. Many MPS officers are invited to comment on events in the national press, often as a result of involvement in national organisations. There is scope to improve the guidance to these officers about how these instances should be managed.

Recommendations

As a result of our investigations, we recommend that the MPS:

1. **Brings all media and communication resources under the professional direction of the Director of Public Affairs.**
2. **Revises media policies to reflect:**
 - Protocols for counter-terrorism activity
 - Officers speaking in non-MPS capacity
 - Use of 'not prepared to discuss'
3. **Develops more comprehensive media monitoring facilities.**
4. **Develops a more robust approach to rebutting misleading or untrue stories.**
5. **Develops proactive management of the reputation of the MPS.**
6. **Develops mechanism to provide regular reminders to staff about their obligations under the MPS media policy.**
7. **Considers mechanisms for sanctioning officers who fail to comply with MPS media policy.**
8. **Develops the use of a 'talking head' during extended critical incidents.**
9. **Updates the media training provided to all senior officers to improve awareness of the political sensitivities surrounding the MPS and to provide advice and guidance on how to deal with such issues.**

Detailed findings

Resources, structure and function

12. The MPS has a Directorate of Public Affairs that has primary responsibility for communications within the organisation. It is budgeted to employ 67 staff, across four functions – corporate press office, news branch, internal communication and e-communications and publicity branch.
13. For the purposes of the scrutiny, the panel were particularly interested in the role of the news branch. The news branch is structured to provide support to the operational business groups such as territorial policing, specialist crime and special operations. It also provides a limited media monitoring function. The news branch responds to media enquiries, provides professional advice and support to the rest of the MPS including through membership of gold groups, and using information from the business groups, drafts press lines to be used in response to requests from the media for information. They also provide specialist support to Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) officers. They provide 24-hour cover. DPA also has four regional offices that provide support to the boroughs.
14. The structure of the news branch has varied in the last few years, reflecting wider organisational changes, although some changes have had to be made in order to meet year-to-year budget reductions. The panel heard the current structure remains appropriate but there are gaps, particularly in supporting the organisation in meeting the Citizen Focus agenda and in working with the increasing diversity of news organisations in London. Another significant gap is the ability to monitor and respond to the 24 hour news agenda. These are issues that need to be addressed. The Panel is particularly concerned about the lack of capacity to monitor and respond effectively to the news agenda and the impact this has on the MPS's ability to protect its reputation and retain the trust and confidence of Londoners.
15. Given the current financial climate and the limited opportunities for growth, careful thought needs to be given as to how this could be achieved. This should include consideration of whether DPA currently undertakes activity that could be discontinued, reduced or delivered differently, and a full assessment of the impact of the work of the different parts of the directorate and their value to the MPS.
16. DPA's budgeted workforce is currently 67 full time equivalents, a number that has steadily reduced over time, as the directorate has had to contribute to service wide budget reductions. At the same time, the media environment has changed significantly, increasing the level of demand on DPA from the media, with the rise of 24 hour rolling news, increased Internet based news, the use of 'blogs' and the increased use of 'citizen' journalists and eye-witnesses. A further challenge is the development of a huge number of minority media organisations, catering for distinct communities in London with whom the MPS needs to communicate. In this context we would caution against any further budget reductions.
17. There are considerable communication resources within the organisation, which have no direct links with DPA, including borough press officers and specialist teams supporting various parts of the organisation, such as the property team in the resources directorate and the safer neighbourhoods team in territorial policing. Most of these teams have been developed in response to local need that could not be met by DPA. Although DPA have tried to support the development of these resources through the creation of template job descriptions, provision of information about the competences required and involvement in the recruitment process, these are not always used. Furthermore, once these resources are established there are limited mechanisms in place to ensure that local activity supports corporate policies.
18. The MPA accepts the rationale for having this network across the MPS and we are aware of the good work they do in many cases but we believe that current arrangements present a risk to the organisation. It is our view that links between DPA

and local communications functions need formalising and that the director of DPA must have professional responsibility (if not day to day line management) for all communications resources. The external stakeholders we consulted during this process, told us they found the current arrangements confusing, and would support this move to consolidate resources.

19. We also recommend that mechanisms are established to allow performance management and quality assurance of these resources so that consistent standards are developed and maintained across the service.

20. There is a formal communications strategy in place and DPA have published policies and standard operating procedures. An annual business plan is also produced. Whilst this is positive, it is our view that the strategy is not sufficiently proactive or focused on building and managing the reputation of the organisation. We believe this could be achieved in part with the development of a forward plan of activity (linked to key milestones such as the implementation of key operational initiatives, and the external environment) which both seek to promote the good work of the MPS and influence key stakeholders.

21. The MPS media policies are influenced by the ACPO media policy, but there are a number of areas that are not covered by this policy, for example counter-terrorism and officers speaking to the media on behalf of staff associations or in a private capacity.

22. DPA's role is to provide professional advice and support to the rest of the organisation but ultimately, in respect of policing operations, it is the senior investigating officer who decides what information is put into the public domain. In order for this relationship to work, operational officers need to have trust in DPA. The panel probed the culture within the organisation in this respect and found a mixed picture. There is an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of communications and the impact they can have on an operation, but there is in some parts of the organisation, a reluctance to share information. It was suggested that this is partly historical, but also in part due to a widespread nervousness that the operation will be compromised. Clear leadership is needed from MPS management board to challenge this reluctance.

Responding to critical incidents

23. As noted above, this scrutiny was convened in response to concerns raised by members about how the MPS had managed the media during the Forest Gate incident and as such we have used this as a probe. We recognise that this incident provides a unique set of circumstances, however in our view it provides an acute example of the changing nature of policing operations in London ('the new normality') and highlights a number of issues to which the MPS will need to respond.

24. On 2nd June 2006, the MPS entered two adjoining properties in the London suburb of Forest Gate to execute a search warrant, in response to 'specific and credible' intelligence indicating that there was a chemical explosive device at this location. During the execution of the warrant, one of the residents was shot and injured. Two residents were arrested and held for a number of days. No chemical device was found during the search. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) was called in to investigate the shooting shortly after it happened. [1]

25. The press interest in this story was considerable for a number of reasons:

- the speculation about the type of device allegedly hidden in the house and that subsequently, nothing was found
- the shooting of one of the residents
- the number of officers involved in the search
- the use of CRBN [2] trained officers

- the size of the cordon around the houses and the potential need to evacuate up to 200 houses in the immediate vicinity
- the willingness of the lawyers involved in the case to speak to the media.

26. This operation was mounted within a very short timeframe, but nevertheless, a sophisticated communication strategy was developed, informed by a full risk assessment. The MPS recognised the potential impact this operation could have on the local community and the interest the operation would receive from the media, and as a result two strands of work were developed to ensure effective responses to both. A briefing for key local stakeholders was arranged for the morning of the operation and a leaflet was prepared, to be delivered to residents affected by the activity. In the event however, there were delays in getting the leaflet cleared, which led to unnecessary anxiety for many Forest Gate residents. The MPS recognise it missed an opportunity in this respect.

27. During any police operation, care needs to be taken about the information that is put into the public domain. When deciding what information can be shared, officers need to consider the consequences this may have for future criminal proceedings. There are also sound reasons for not publicising operational tactics. However, in the case of counter-terror operations, the tendency is to say as little as possible, a strategy that was used during Forest Gate. A series of press lines were developed by DPA in conjunction with the gold group, [3] but it was agreed that there would be no comment in response to many of the issues arising. In making decisions about what information is shared with the public, particularly in these sorts of situations, senior investigating officers have to balance the needs of the investigation with the long-term impact such operations can have on local communities.

28. The operation attracted significant media interest both nationally and locally, fuelled by eye-witness reports, speculation about the alleged device, the large number of police deployed and because of the shooting. The reluctance of the MPS to engage with the media and to share any information, created an information vacuum, which was subsequently filled with rumour, much of which was untrue, but damaging to the MPS. The ACPO media protocol notes that "to offer 'no comment' surrenders the opportunity to influence media coverage".

29. As noted above, there was considerable speculation during the raid about the tactics used by the police. Such raids occur in very difficult circumstances. Officers enter premises with very limited knowledge of what they will find, and as events elsewhere have shown, [4] this can be at great personal danger. The tactics used are tried and tested but in high profile incidents, it may be appropriate to better explain why they are used, so that public confidence isn't undermined. For example, there were media reports over a number of days that 250 officers entered the house, which were very damaging to the MPS.

30. The MPA recognises the challenge faced by the MPS, we are also aware that being too quick to put information into the public domain can be just as problematic. However, we do believe that in circumstances such as these, it is imperative that the MPS is aggressive and quick to challenge incorrect information because the long term consequences for the MPS's reputation in the local community (and wider) can be significant and damaging. We recommend that regular press briefings are held, in order to respond to the rumours and where possible to explain the approach being taken. This would help counter incorrect speculation provided to the media by 'experts', which can be equally damaging to the MPS's reputation. It is our view that the MPS should provide a 'talking head' of sufficient rank and appropriate authority who can provide information to the media at regular intervals, challenge untrue assertions and respond to media queries.

31. There was a view that MPS officers or others close to the investigation were doing 'off the record' briefings to journalists during Forest Gate. Although this hasn't been

substantiated, our scrutiny found that there were weakness in protocol, including ensuring that all officers involved (either directly in the investigation, manning cordons or providing community reassurance) are clear about what information can be shared. This could include for example ensuring all officers are provided with the press lines (notwithstanding the conclusions in the paragraphs above). Providing officers with examples of 'holding responses' could also be considered.

32. In their report to the MPA full authority at the end of June 2006, the MPS recognised that there were a number of shortcomings in the approach they took during this operation, particularly in the way that they engaged with the wider community. We were also told during our panel meetings that although there had been extensive planning, the involvement of the IPCC had not been anticipated and the MPS were unable to react to these changing circumstances. We were told that although they had developed a strategy for not finding the device in their planning process, they felt unable to provide some of the context they might otherwise have provided, had the IPCC not been involved. We were also told there had been a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities as events developed and they were not revisited and revised at regular intervals. We are aware that a protocol has been developed as a result of the learning from Forest Gate, and we welcome this initiative.

33. In the weeks following the Forest Gate incident, neither the MPS or the IPCC were willing to comment on the increasingly fevered speculation in the press and in the community about the circumstances surrounding the shooting. Whilst we accept the constraints facing both organisations in ensuring a full and proper investigation was carried out, and the potential consequences should this not happen, we are also concerned about the long-term impact this has on the confidence of the local and wider community. It is our view that many of the myths that have developed in relation to the Forest Gate incident are as a result of the reluctance of both the MPS and IPCC to challenge the inaccurate information that was in the public domain. We believe it is possible to do this without pre-empting (or jeopardising) the findings of any investigation. We acknowledge that a protocol has now been developed between the IPCC and the MPS. Should such circumstances arise again, we would urge both organisations to recognise the importance of reassuring communities in the aftermath of an incident.

34. In considering a number of other incidents that became long-running media stories, the panel believes the MPS would benefit from more robust scenario planning, so if events do take an unexpected turn, the organisation is better placed to react quickly and appropriately.

Reputational management

35. The reputation of the MPS has come under considerable pressure in the last eighteen months because of incidents such as Stockwell and Forest Gate. A number of news stories have also developed as a result of malicious leaks.

36. One theme that rose during the hearings was the lack of awareness within the MPS of the political sensitivities of some of these stories. We would therefore recommend the media training provided to all senior officers is updated to improve awareness of this dimension. We were also told the MPS is sometimes caught unawares by these stories, suggesting more effective scanning processes are necessary. DPA need to be prepared to respond to stories, even if the media does not pick them up, rather than reacting after the event as is the case now.

37. As noted above the panel was concerned many of the misleading and untrue comments made in connection to Forest Gate were not denied or rebutted by the MPS. We found during our investigations this is indicative of a wider reluctance to deny or refute stories. We were told a decision is made on a case by case basis, but in general there is an unwillingness to challenge the stories. We also found when the decision is

taken to refute speculation, it is often taken too late. In our view this is damaging and cumulative impact for the organisation will be significant for the reputation of the MPS.

38. We found relationships with the media are generally good and the journalists we spoke to as part of this scrutiny recognised the MPS does provide a responsive press service, compared to other police forces. There are regular meetings with the Crime Reporters Association, providing an opportunity to discuss current issues and influence stories in the news. There were concerns about the lack of press facilities at New Scotland Yard, but we recognise that recent changes to security mitigate against reopening the press room.

39. The panel considered about how the media gets its information. We were told unless it comes through official channels, it is very difficult to identify who is responsible and therefore to take action. Nevertheless the MPA recommends there is more proactive promotion of the MPS media policy which states officers may not speak to the press about spheres of operation that are outside their personal responsibility or which represents gossip or rumour.

Communicating with London's diverse communities

40. London is the most diverse city in the UK, and home to half of England's minority ethnic population. It is important for public sector organisations to develop communications channels that respond to these developments. The MPS also has a responsibility to make information accessible and to provide it in appropriate formats where possible.

41. We were told much of the engagement happens at a local level, which may well be appropriate, but there is a need to ensure there is consistency in the messages being disseminated centrally and locally.

42. DPA with the diversity and citizen focus directorate, has been developing relationships with the black Asian and minority ethnic media. The MPA welcomes this development but recognises there is a significant challenge ahead, given the number of media outlets across the city and beyond. The MPS also recognises the need to expand this exercise to consider how it communicates with all minority media consistently and appropriately.

43. The learning from the Forest Gate operation indicated the need to use existing community links, for example, local independent advisory groups and local community groups to provide advice and support at the planning stage of operations, and then as events develop to ensure the messages are getting through to the relevant audiences. This will represent a challenge for the organisation but is one that the MPA endorses.

Next steps

44. As a result of our deliberations, we have made a number of recommendations. We shall monitor the implementation of these through our Co-ordination and Policing Committee on a regular basis.

Footnotes

1. This is standard practice. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Officers trained and equipped to detect Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear devices/substances. [\[Back\]](#)
3. i.e. the senior officers managing the operation. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Such as the death of DC Stephen Oake in Manchester in January 2003 during a counter-terrorism operation. [\[Back\]](#)