

Khaleel Desai
Assistant Solicitor to the Inquiry
The Leveson Inquiry
Royal Courts of Justice
Strand, London
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Dear Khaleel,

Many thanks for your letter, which I received via email on January 5. Please find enclosed my witness statement, as discussed. If you have any queries, do not hesitate to contact me.

Statement from Noel Doran.

(1) I was appointed as editor of the Irish News, a daily newspaper based in Belfast, in April, 1999, having been deputy editor for the previous six years. I began my journalistic career in 1978, working in the weekly newspaper sector with firstly the Antrim Guardian and then the Ballymena Observer. I then moved to the Belfast Telegraph, a daily newspaper, as a news reporter and later as local government correspondent, from 1984 to 1992, before spending two years as duty news editor with the commercial broadcaster Downtown Radio/Cool FM.

(2) As editor of the Irish News, I am ultimately responsible for the entire journalistic content of the paper. I work closely with senior colleagues to ensure that all our staff observe the highest possible standards of lawful, professional and ethical conduct. We fully endorse the Press Complaints Commission's code of practice at all times.

(3) As an independent, family-owned newspaper, we do not have our own specific corporate governance policies. However, I believe that the PCC's code of practice covers all the relevant issues and its importance has been stressed to our 50 staff journalists and our regular freelancers. This is a process in which I am actively involved.

(4) The implications of the PCC's code of practice are regularly discussed at our editorial conferences and, again, this is a process in which I play a central role. During my time as editor, the PCC has never ruled that we have been in breach of its code of practice.

(5) We have considered the implications of the phone-hacking scandal carefully, and I firmly believe, based on all the available evidence, that none of our journalists have ever been involved in such activity. If any evidence to the contrary emerges, it will be equally carefully considered. However, I cannot see a reason to review any of our procedures at this stage.

(6) As no two stories are identical, it is difficult to generalise about sources of information. However, all reporters are expected to check and double-check their facts, and any claim on an issue of public interest should normally have two sources before it is potentially considered for publication. Reporters file their material to the newsdesk staff, who look at all aspects of the story before accepting or rejecting it. A

final decision on publication is taken at the main editorial conference, which I normally chair and in my absence is chaired by either the deputy editor or the assistant editor. Our sub-editorial staff, answering to the chief sub editor, place the story in an agreed slot in the paper, as well as writing headlines, and are encouraged to query any matters arising along the way.

To provide an example as requested, I will look at the background to a p1 lead story from earlier this week of (January 10, enclosed). A staff reporter, Marie Louise McCrory, became aware of an incident involving an alleged serious assault in an area of Belfast known as the Village. She spoke to the victim, James Turley (18), making clear that he was aware that the conversation was on the record, and also interviewed his family members. She next contacted police, to establish the basic details of the incident and confirm that it was being treated as a sectarian assault. As it emerged that Mr Turley had been working as an extra on a film drama at the time, she also obtained a statement from the production company concerned. Ms McCrory then filed her story to the newsdesk, who went through the full background with her. The story was then submitted to the editorial conference, when, after further discussion, it was accepted for publication.

(7) The extent to which an editor is aware of the sources of the information which make up the central stories in a particular edition of the paper will vary. If I have a specific legal or other concern, it may be necessary for me to request that I am privately told the source of a story. However, a source may also insist that his or her identity is only known to the reporter in question. If I have full confidence in an experienced reporter, and I am satisfied that all information was obtained by valid means, I will not normally need to be personally briefed on the identity of a source.

(8) I feel that, again, the role of ethics in the print media is probably best defined by the PCC's code of practice. Its provisions are comprehensive, and, in my view, have proved very effective in the regional daily newspaper sector across the UK.

(9) All newspapers are subject to financial and commercial pressures to a greater or lesser extent. If a valid story is likely to increase our readership, it goes without saying that it may well influence the prominence it receives within the paper. However, there are also stories which we know from experience have a negative or at best neutral impact on sales but which we consider to be in the public interest. A good example of this would be our recent campaign over scandals within the National Health Service, which we pursued steadfastly even though it was not of any benefit to our circulation. We may also be approached by leading advertisers over ideas for editorial coverage, and our policy has always been to treat such proposals on their merits. I have regular discussions with our chairman and managing director on a range of matters, but I have never felt pressurised into taking a decision for financial and/or commercial reasons

(10) While the heads of managerial departments within the Irish News have received a Christmas bonus over recent years, I have never been offered or given a financial incentive for publishing exclusive stories.

(11) The Irish News has never been involved in any form of payments to or from private investigators, police officers or public officials in order to source stories or

information during my time as editor.

(12) See (11).

(13) See (11)

(14) See (11)

(15) Our journalists may occasionally entertain contacts to lunch, but it is not our policy to hand over cash for information. If we were asked to pay a relatively small sum in cash, up to a maximum of say £100, to cover the expenses of a contact, we would consider it. However, the final decision would lie with me and I have not authorised such a payment during my time as editor.

(16) See (15)

(17) As I have have said, we not published stories about anyone based on information obtained from paid sources during my time as editor.

In the course of our normal research, we would occasionally be told by individuals that they do not wish us to publish stories which name either them or their family members. We then have to decide whether we can justify publication in terms of the public interest. As a general rule, we would only run stories about suicide with the agreement of family members. However, if an individual dies in a road traffic accident, our policy is to name them whether or not we have the consent of their relatives. Our belief is that it is essentially a private matter if someone knowingly decides to take their own life without harming anyone else. If their relatives want to send out a public warning to parents about danger signs in relation to suicide among young people, we would take a different view. If someone dies in a road crash, we feel that public interest issues - which might include accident black-spots, a review of speed limits and the detection of mechanical defects, among other factors - are indeed involved. In those circumstances, our policy is that victims should be named.

Formal challenges to us over privacy issues are relatively rare, but we were involved in a recent case with the PCC in which an NHS executive argued that one of our stories represented a breach of his privacy. We submitted a lengthy response, and the PCC investigated the matter in considerable detail before ruling decisively in our favour. I have included copies of the relevant statements (enclosed).

(18) I am not aware of any other material relating to the Irish News which might directly assist the chairman of the inquiry, but I am more than willing to answer any questions arising to the best of my ability.

(19) I believe that I am the appropriate person to answer the above questions on behalf of the Irish News.

Finally, and for the record, I believe everything I have included in this statement to be true.

Noel Doran,
Editor