

P Ashford
16 September 2011
1st

IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PAUL ASHFORD

I, **PAUL ASHFORD**, Group Editorial Director of The Northern & Shell Building, Number 10 Lower Thames Street, London EC3R 6EN, **WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:**

- A. I am the Group Editorial Director of the Northern & Shell Group of Companies ("Northern & Shell") which includes Express Newspapers. I voluntarily make this statement to assist the Leveson Inquiry (the "Inquiry"), having considered some of the questions asked of others at Express Newspapers.
- B. I confirm that all matters in this statement are true and, unless I specify to the contrary, are based upon my own knowledge and a review of the relevant documents. Where matters are not within my own knowledge, I state the source and believe the same to be true.
- C. For convenience, I have reproduced as subheadings the questions to which I am responding.

Question 1: Who you are and a brief summary of your career history in the media.

1. I am the Board Director in charge of the creative functions of Northern & Shell (including Express Newspapers), a role which I have held for at least the last 20 years. I was

employed by Northern & Shell in the spring of 1979, having worked on local papers in the Midlands prior to that.

Question 2: How you understand the system of financial governance to work in principle and in practice at the newspapers owned by your company with particular emphasis on systems to ensure that the newspapers funds are not used to pay bribes or to fund the gathering of information by illegal methods.

2. The system of financial governance at Express Newspapers, in relation to editorial costs, is as follows: department heads and commissioning editors will commission editorial content. At the end of each month a list of all payments is signed by Ian Parrott, Group Managing Editor, and me. Ian Parrott and I will query any item which looks out of the ordinary. This query will be dealt with by the department heads or commissioning editors who will justify the payment. The list goes to the accounts department. As an additional check, Martin Ellice, the Group Joint Managing Director, will look at a sample of payments and make his own enquiries as necessary. Rob Sanderson, the Group Finance Director also reviews and approves the payments. The other part of the policing payments for editorial content is a bi-weekly meeting with Editors, during which we discuss, amongst other things, anything innovatory or out of the ordinary in any aspect of the newspapers, including editorial. In addition, I see the editorial go to press every night, and crucially, each night I talk to the Editors about the content. During that informal chat, I will discuss with the Editor where any particularly interesting or surprising story has come from. I also approve the expenses claim by Editorial staff. At the end of each month, Ian Parrott, will authorise each individual expense claim and query anything that may fall outside of our expenses policy or anything unusual. The claims then go to the account department which produces a report which both Ian Parrott and I sign. The report goes to Martin Ellice, together with the individual claims documentation. Martin Ellice signs all of the individual claims if he does not have any queries. Finally, the report and claims documentation go to Robert Sanderson.
3. In relation to newspapers, I think that the question that is most important to ask is, 'How did we get that story?'. I regularly pose this question not just in the interests of governance but also because it is my role to look behind a story to see if it has relevance or application to other publications in our group which could extend or promote it. I

believe that I would pick up on hints if there were inappropriate practices. If individuals were defensive about the sources of editorial this would also raise concerns. The payment system in place at Express Newspapers and my informal conversations with the editors, plus the tightness and inclusiveness of our management team which includes the editors themselves, means that I am confident that I would know if anything were amiss.

4. Where there is going to be a significant cost, I would be informed prior to that cost being incurred. For example, I would approve in advance any extraordinary travel or hotel expenses. If editors wish to stretch their budget by hiring a research company for a particular purpose, such as for example a poll, I would approve that in advance. Frequently editors will seek me out to discuss whether we both believe a particular expenditure is likely to repay itself in terms of editorial quality and reader interest. When I sign off such payments they go to Martin Ellice, Rob Sanderson or Richard Desmond for final oversight and for their sign off (they are the only authorised signatories for Express Newspapers). If a journalist makes a cash payment, they have to reclaim it on expenses. Ian Parrott queries all such payments. I understand that they are rare and for relatively small sums.

Question 3: Whether the financial governance policies and practice (to the extent that they relate to anti-bribery measures and the prevention of funding illegal information gathering activities) are adhered to in practice, to the best of your knowledge.

5. I believe that our policies and practices are always adhered to. Certainly, nothing has brought my attention to the contrary.

Question 4: Whether these practices or policies have changed, either recently as a result of anti-bribery laws, phone hacking media interest, or prior to that point, and if so, what were the changes and the reasons for them.

6. I am not aware of our practices having changed since the phone hacking media interest, or even prior to that point. As for anti-bribery laws, we are in the process of introducing an anti-bribery and corruption policy to make sure that we are complying with all new legislation.

Question 5: The extent to which you, as the Group Editorial Director, felt any financial and/or commercial pressure from the proprietors of your newspapers, the editors or anyone else, and whether any such pressure affected any of the decisions you made in relation to the use of newspaper's funds to secure information for news stories.

7. I have never had any financial and/or commercial pressure from the proprietor of the newspapers, the editors or anyone else, to use the newspapers' funds to secure information for news stories in any way that infringes the law or the kind of guidelines issued by the PCC and the Society of Editors.

Question 6: Whether, to the best of your knowledge, the newspapers owned by your company used, paid or had any connection with private investigators in order to source stories or information and/or paid or received payments in kind for such information from the police, public officials, mobile phone companies or others with access to the same: if so, please provide details of the numbers of occasions on which such investigators or other external providers of information were used and of the amounts paid to them (NB. You are not required to identify individuals, either within your newspaper or otherwise).

Please see the answer to question 7 below.

Question 7: What your role was in instructing, paying or having any other contact with such private investigators and/or other external providers of information.

8. For convenience, I deal with questions 7 and 8 together. The only instance I personally recall that could be relevant is that I arranged the use of an ex-police chief constable to try and locate Madeleine McCann in Portugal. However, I cannot recollect ever using a private investigator. Having spoken to some of the editors, I am aware that search agencies have been used in the past to find the telephone number or address of the subject (or connected person) of a story. When an editor has used an agency to obtain these kinds of contact details I would not be involved and my approval would not be required because the cost of the service is usually quite low. However, if it was a large matter I would have been involved.

9. Other than I have stated above, I am not aware of any person within the newspapers owned by our company having paid or having any connection with private investigators in order to source stories or information and/or paying for or receiving payment in kind for such information from the police, public officials, mobile phone companies or others with access to the same.

Question 8: If such investigators or other external providers of information were used, what policy/protocol, if any, was used to facilitate the use of such investigators or other external providers of information (for example, in relation to how they were identified, how they were chosen, how they were paid, their remit, how they were told to check sources, what methods they were told to or permitted to employ in order to obtain the information and so on).

10. The policy/protocol that would apply to any external providers of information is the one routinely applied to freelance journalists of whom we use a multitude. We check track records and use industry contacts to confirm references to ensure people we use are reliable, trustworthy, and capable of producing accurate work of the requisite standards and quality. The usual system would have to be followed with the payment being approved by myself and the payment being signed as described in paragraph 2 above. If the payment was paid in cash (which is very unusual) it would be reclaimed through expenses and subject to the checks as described in paragraph 4 above.

Question 9: The extent to which you are aware of protocols or policies operating at your newspaper in relation to expenses or remuneration paid to other external sources of information (whether actually commissioned by your newspaper or not). There is no need for you to cover 'official' sources, such as the Press Association.

11. In general we hire journalists to bring in stories. However, on the occasions when freelancers and/or tipsters bring us stories we will pay them a small fee if the story is used. The source is named, listed and paid. The procedure is the same as the procedure for freelance journalists unless paid for in cash (which is very unusual).

12. By and large the editors decide on the content of the papers. However, we are a team and I believe that I provide a sounding board of the Company's attitude and so an editor may speak to me about a particular story to get my view; but he or she has the ultimate decision.

Question 10: Whether you, or your newspaper (to the best of your knowledge) ever used or commissioned anyone who used 'computer hacking' in order to source stories, or for any other reason.

13. I have never, and to the best of my knowledge, the newspapers have never, used or commissioned anyone who used 'computer hacking' in order to source stories, or for any other reason.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this Witness Statement are true.

[Redacted Signature Box]

PAUL ASHFORD

Dated: 16 September 2011

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