

THE DEFENCE & SECURITY MEDIA ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF A MEETING HELD IN THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
AT 6PM ON THURSDAY 17 MAY 2018**

The following were present:

Mr Peter Watkins (Chairman)
Mr Graeme Biggar (Home Office)
Mr Richard Westlake (Cabinet Office)
Mr Dominic Wilson (MOD)

Mr Ian Murray (Vice-Chairman)
Mr John Battle
Mr Peter Clifton
Mr Charles Garside
Mr James Green
Mr Michael Jermey
Mr David Jordan
Mr John McLellan
Mr James MacManus
Mr Craig Tregurtha

Brigadier Geoffrey Dodds
Air Commodore David Adams
Group Captain John Alexander

Secretary
First Deputy Secretary
Second Deputy Secretary

1. There were apologies from Mr Simon Shercliff (FCO), Ms Laura Adams, Mr Joe Fay, Mr David Higgerson, Mr Paul Johnson, Mr Owen Meredith, Mr Charlie Redmayne and Ms Sarah Whitehead.

2. The Chairman opened the meeting by congratulating the two recently elected joint Vice Chairmen, Ian Murray and John Battle, who took over from Jonathan Grun on the 8th May. The Chairman then welcomed three new Committee members: Simon Shercliff (Director of National Security at the FCO but not in attendance) who was replacing Lewis Neal; Peter Clifton (Editor of the Press Association) who was replacing Jonathan Grun and Craig Tregurtha (Group Managing Editor The Times and The Sunday Times) who was replacing James MacManus. The Chairman also welcomed Richard Westlake from the Cabinet Office.

Agenda Item 1 – Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 November 2017

3. The minutes of the meeting were approved by the Committee as an accurate record.

Agenda Item 2 – Matters Arising from the Previous Meeting

4. There were no matters arising from the 9 November 2017 meeting.

Agenda Item 3 – Secretary’s Report

5. Overview. During the last 6-month period the DSMA Secretariat had received some 131 enquiries and requests for DSMA Notice advice, averaging just over 5 per week. This was a higher level of activity than in the previous reporting period (92) and 10% above the historical average (118). Significantly, over half of these requests for advice were made within the last 2 months which covered, in the main, two major events: the Salisbury incident including the associated expulsion of Russian and UK diplomats and second, the air operation to degrade the Syrian chemical warfare capability. Requests for advice in connection with the Salisbury event continued; in the main from conspiracy theorists and authors of books containing related subject matter.

6. DSMA Notices to All Editors. Six advisory notices (general DSMA guidance to all UK editors) were sent out during the period. This was a significantly higher number than issued in the previous 6-month period (2). Four notices covered Sensitive Personal Information (SPI) issues, one covered both SPI and current military operations and finally, one covered military operations:

7. Main Areas of Inquiry. Requests by the media and officials for DSMA Notice advice during the period had been focussed on 2 areas:

a. The Intelligence Agencies (50). In the main, SPI issues relating to the Salisbury incident and related events.

b. Special Forces (37). Mainly SPI issues, book publishing (3) and one operational issue.

There had also been an interest in cyber. This was the first time the Secretariat had given advice on how the DSMA Notice system could be used in conjunction with cyber-related issues. The Secretariat was developing plans to follow this up with GCHQ. The Secretary would deliver a briefing and seminar on 21 June at Cheltenham. The Secretary would now consider incorporating a reference to cyber in the DSMA Notices.

8. Twitter and Blogs. From mid-late March, there had been an upward trend in the number of comments on Twitter and on blogs, speculating on the Skripal poisoning and suggesting that the UK Government had prevented mainstream reporting of the matter by using the DSMA Notice System, citing a tweet by a British journalist that a DSMA Notice had been issued to prevent Skripal’s British handler being named.

8. Increasing the Digital Membership of the Committee. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) had approached the Secretary in late March, offering to put the DSMA Secretariat in contact with digital publishers including the so-called tech giants. Sadly, this offer had since been delayed (but not stopped) by the Cambridge Analytica revelations and

subsequent inquiry into *facebook's* use of personal data. The Secretariat would pursue this initiative in due course. The Vice Chairman and the Press Association representative also offered to facilitate meetings with digital outlets.

Action: The Secretary

9. Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). Following the Committee's formal submission of evidence to the IICSA last October, the Secretariat had had no further contact with the Inquiry. The Secretary remained on standby for the submission of oral evidence should that be required.

10. Promotion of the DSMA Notice System. During the period the Secretariat had continued to do as much as possible to promote a better understanding of the DSMA Notice System. This effort had focussed on the delivery of presentations to universities and media organisations.

12. Administration. The DSMA Secretariat had submitted three business cases, all of which had been authorised but still awaited approval to procure:

- a. Access to Online Newspapers and Magazines.
- b. Redevelopment of DSMA website.
- c. Replacement office IT (computer, printer, security, software).

13. Discussion. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman thanked the Secretary for his comprehensive report. The Committee had a brief discussion about the applicability of some of the DSMA Notices which had been issued, noting that the Secretariat had withdrawn one Notice some 4 hours after it had been issued (as soon as it became apparent that the information had become widely available in the public domain). It was agreed:

- a. That due regard should always be given as to the extent that information was already in the public domain.
- b. That there was little point in trying to sustain an unsustainable position and the Secretariat should be commended for its swift action.

14. The Chairman suggested that the upward trend in references to the DSMA System on Twitter and Blogs would merit further investigation. Referring to the Secretary's comments about cyber, the Chairman agreed that we should consider how to incorporate cyber either into the existing notices or a new DSMA 6. The Chairman concluded the discussion in thanking the Secretariat for their efforts during a particularly busy period.

Action: The Secretary

Agenda Item 4 - Any Other Business

15. There was no other business.

Farewells

16. The Chairman offered thanks to two longstanding Media Side members who were leaving the Committee. Jonathan Grun who had been a member for some 20 years and Vice Chairman for the last three, and James MacManus who had been a member for 12 years.

17. The Chairman said that he would be moving on later in the year and that this could therefore be his last meeting. The Media Side asked to put on record their thanks and appreciation for the contribution that Peter Watkins had made during his time as chairman. The next chairman would be confirmed in due course.

Next Meeting

18. The next DSMA Committee Meeting would take place at 1800 on Thursday 8 November 2018. It would be preceded by the Media Side pre-meeting which would begin as usual at 1700. The meeting would be followed by the Annual Dinner which would be held in the RAF Club, 128 Piccadilly.

Geoffrey Dodds

Geoffrey Dodds
Brigadier
Secretary, DSMA Committee

1 June 2018

Distribution

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The '*dsma.uk*' Website