

**Meeting of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists**  
**4 December 2023 13:30-15:00**  
**Minutes**

**1. Welcome**

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, and Committee co-chair, Sir John Whittingdale MP, opened the meeting. He welcomed the appointment of the new Minister for Victims and Safeguarding, Laura Farris MP, as co-chair of the Committee, noting that unfortunately she was not able to attend today's meeting. Minister Whittingdale highlighted significant developments that have taken place over the last six months including the publication of the refreshed National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists (NAP), a successful Journalism Matters Week including a reception for journalists hosted by DCMS Secretary of State Lucy Frazer KC MP, and the launch of the SLAPPs Taskforce. An immediate outcome of the refreshed NAP has been the launch of an Employer Sub-Committee. Minister Whittingdale also welcomed guest speakers Dr Rebecca Whittington, Online Safety Editor at Reach PLC; Kanbar Hossein Bor, Deputy Director of Democratic Governance and Media Freedom Co-ordinator at the FCDO; and Ranjit Patel, Head of Police Vetting Policy at the Home Office. Minister Whittingdale also welcomed new Committee member, Superintendent Joanne McEwan, Police Scotland.

**2. Remarks from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Kanbar Hossein Bor (KHB), Deputy Director of Democratic Governance and Media Freedom Co-ordinator provided an update on the FCDO's engagement on safety issues internationally. He thanked Minister Whittingdale for meeting the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Representative on Freedom of the Media during a recent visit to the UK and noted other countries are following the UK's example of protecting journalists. KHB also noted FCDO, DCMS and Ministry of Justice officials' participation in the recent launch of the Council of Europe's Campaign for the Safety of Journalists. KHB described FCDO work to combat internet shutdowns, the Oxford Conference and statement recognised the importance of connectivity for access to information required for safety in conflicts and FCDO work to combat online violence against women journalists. He also confirmed that FCDO engagement with international structures including the Media Freedom Coalition and UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund is ongoing.

Ivor Gaber, UK representative, UNESCO Communications Sector, also noted the UK's ongoing engagement with the UN.

**3. Remarks from the Home Office**

Ranjit Patel (RP), Police Integrity Unit, provided a brief update on the priorities of the newly appointed Minister for Victims and Safeguarding, noting strong support for the issues of this committee. A meeting between Minister Farris and the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) is anticipated in the new year to discuss delivery of the commitments from police forces in the NAP. Minister Whittingdale highlighted the importance of ensuring that officers on the ground are aware of this work and can enable it operationally.

#### **4. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**

Janis Makarewich-Hall (JMH), Deputy Director of Radio, Advertising, and Press at DCMS, gave an update on the SLAPPs Taskforce. This was launched in September and sits within the framework of the NCSJ to coordinate a non-legislative response to SLAPPs faced by journalists. JMH thanked NCSJ members who are part of the Taskforce, noting it is working at pace and has already met twice, and has convened a sub-group of journalists directly affected by SLAPPs to inform its outputs. JMH briefly outlined the workplan that is being developed by the Taskforce and is expected to address four workstreams: understanding and monitoring the prevalence and nature of SLAPPs; guidance for journalists; legal services ethics; and awareness raising. JMH also noted that the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act recently received Royal Assent and includes legislative measures to tackle SLAPPs linked to economic crime.

#### **5. Employer Sub-Committee**

Dr Rebecca Whittington (RW), Online Safety Editor at Reach PLC, provided an update on the Employer Sub-Committee attended by publishers and broadcasters to discuss experiences of tackling safety issues, which recently held its first meeting. It was noted that tackling online abuse faced by journalists and supporting their psychological safety will be a valuable area of focus of the Sub-Committee, including understanding how to support freelancers. The Sub-Committee also discussed the importance of a consistent response from the police and platforms in addressing safety issues.

Superintendent Joanne McEwan, Police Scotland, and Dawn Alford, Executive Director, Society of Editors, offered to discuss opportunities to engage with and support the Sub-Committee's work.

Michelle Stanistreet (MS), General Secretary, National Union of Journalists (NUJ), highlighted the Committee's important role in encouraging online platforms to address online abuse of journalists.

JMH noted the importance of the Sub-Committee understanding the different measures taken by publishers and broadcasters to identify the most effective approach to protecting journalists.

#### **6. Online data-gathering tool**

MS provided an update on the first phase of the NUJ's work to deliver an online tool to enable data-gathering on safety issues taking place in the UK, expected to be launched by Autumn 2024. MS noted that enabling real-time reporting will be critical to identifying key trends related to journalist safety. MS confirmed that all journalists will be encouraged to report safety concerns via the tool. She also noted the tool will collect data on the whole spectrum of journalist safety incidents, including SLAPPs, other lawfare, online harassment, and physical threats.

#### **7. AOB**

KHB noted that 2024 will mark the fifth anniversary of the Media Freedom Coalition and offered the FCDO's support to amplify Committee members' work at relevant events.

Fiona O'Brien (FO), UK Bureau Director of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), provided an update on RSF's work documenting transnational threats to Iranian journalists operating in the UK, noting how this interacts with wider work to tackle online threats made against journalists. FO also noted the importance of police engagement on this issue.

Rozita Lofti (RL), Head of BBC Persian, BBC World Service, confirmed that staff continue to face safety concerns.

### **8. Wrap up and date of next meeting**

Minister Whittingdale thanked the committee for the significant work that had taken place over the previous six months. It was noted that Minister Lopez (for whom Minister Whittingdale is currently providing maternity cover) will soon resume her post and the next meeting is likely to be chaired by Minister Farris.