

Summary of the IPCC
independent investigation
into the Essex and British
Transport Police search for
Natasha Coombs

Mr Gary Coombs made complaints against Essex Police and British Transport Police (BTP) which arose from a police operation to find Mr Coombs' 17 year old daughter, Natasha Coombs. This summary sets out the findings of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) investigation into those complaints.

Summary of Events

While walking along a railway line, between Manningtree Railway Station and Colchester, on the night of Friday 27 July 2007, Natasha Coombs was killed when she was struck by a train. Her body was deflected down an embankment. She was reported missing to Essex Police the following morning by her parents. Natasha's body was not found by police until 14 days later on Friday 10 August 2007.

On Friday 27 July 2007 Natasha had boarded a London bound train from Ipswich Railway Station at 22:42. The next stop for this train was Manningtree, Essex. Natasha had told her friends that she intended to visit her boyfriend who lived near Manningtree.

At 23:19 Natasha made a telephone call to her boyfriend's mother. Natasha explained that she was walking on a railway line and that if she did not receive a call back from her boyfriend then she would throw herself under the next train. Natasha stated that she was on the line between Ipswich and Manningtree. She immediately informed Mr and Mrs Coombs and explained that after speaking to Natasha she had seemed to calm down. Mr Coombs went out that night in an attempt to meet Natasha from her train and he drove around the area but was unable to find her. Mrs Coombs reported Natasha as missing the following morning on Saturday 28 July 2007.

Essex Police were unable to search the railway lines as only BTP Officers are trained and qualified to do so. On 28 July 2007, Essex Police told BTP that Natasha was missing and asked BTP to arrange with the railway company for train drivers to visually check the railway lines in the area as they drove through. During this telephone call, a BTP Communications Officer informed Essex Police that all trains were fitted with sensors which would alert a train driver to any strike against the train. This information was false. It affected Essex Police's perception of the likelihood of Natasha being on the railway lines. As a consequence other lines of enquiry were a higher priority than the organisation of a physical search of the railway lines.

On 29 July, Essex Police asked BTP to conduct a railway line search and to call out a BTP Police Search Adviser (POLSA) to liaise with Essex Police. BTP did not provide a POLSA and decided a visual search the railway line by train drivers would be sufficient. Essex Police did not challenge this decision until 1 August 2007. BTP began searches on foot along the railway lines on 2 August 2007 - six days into the missing person investigation. BTP carried out further foot searches on 7 August and 10 August but did not locate Natasha's body.

On Friday 10 August 2007 a train driver reported seeing a piece of material beside the railway track as he was approaching Manningtree from Colchester. Natasha's body was

subsequently found by officers from Essex Police and BTP down the railway embankment approximately 1800 metres from Manningtree Railway Station.

On 18 September 2007, Natasha's mother, Mrs Joanne Coombs, took her own life by lying across the railway line where Natasha had been found.

Complaints

Mr Coombs complained about the length of time it took Essex Police and BTP to find his daughter and that the delay in finding Natasha contributed to Mrs Coombs taking her own life. He also expressed concern about evidence given by Essex Police at Natasha's Inquest on 12 November 2007 and he alleged that inappropriate information was leaked to the media by an unofficial police source.

The complaints were referred to the IPCC by Essex Police and BTP in January 2008. The IPCC decided that all of the complaints would be examined in an Independent investigation. The IPCC investigation was lead by Deputy Senior Investigator Bill Stone, and overseen by Commissioner David Petch. The IPCC recovered the search, investigation and media material created by Essex Police and BTP. Some Family Liaison information was reviewed, material was obtained from HM Coroner, the Lowland Search and Rescue (SARA), the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) and O2. The IPCC also critically assessed a number of reviews undertaken by Essex Police into the missing person investigation. A large number of BTP and Essex Police Officers and staff, including retired and former officers, provided detailed accounts. All this material was used to create a chronological summary of the key events and to critically review the actions taken by Essex Police and BTP in searching for Natasha.

The IPCC substantiated the following complaints:

- *That Essex Police and British transport Police failed to conduct thorough and timely searches which led to a delay in finding the body of Natasha*

Natasha was not found sooner because the railway lines were not searched at the earliest opportunity. The intelligence available on 28 and 29 July indicated that the railway lines needed to be searched. On 29 July, BTP did not provide a POLSA to assist Essex Police and Essex Police failed to challenge this decision. The physical searches of the railway line did not begin until six days into the investigation.

The railway line searches, once begun, were slow to progress as they were detailed in nature and because only two to three hours of search time was available each day as trains continued to run. This investigation has identified that a "hasty search", meaning an initial walk along the railway lines, should have been carried out. Natasha's body would probably have been found considerably earlier if the railway lines had been walked in the same manner as carried out by police officers on the day that Natasha's body was found.

- *That there was a failure to properly check and act upon investigation material held by Essex Police*

Essex Police conducted a large number of enquiries, however, they failed to properly check and act upon material which would have focussed the investigation on the railway lines at an earlier stage.

The initial information from Mr and Mrs Coombs indicated that Natasha should have been classified as 'High Risk' from the outset. The assessment of Natasha as 'Medium Risk' meant that obtaining cell site data, deploying a dedicated Essex POLSA and early oversight by a Silver Commander were delayed by up to 24 hours. The CCTV of Ipswich Railway Station and other railway stations was not used to its full potential. The CCTV collection and viewing was not initially co-ordinated and documented. BTP did not provide Essex Police with railway company contact details or full information about the CCTV on railway infrastructure.

Essex Police did not obtain CCTV from the level crossing or external forward facing footage from trains – these are likely to have assisted in narrowing the search parameters. Despite being informed about the external forward facing footage on trains on 6 August by the rail company, Essex Police did not make immediate efforts to collect and view the material. It was only examined after Natasha's body had been found. This footage from the front of a train had captured Natasha walking along the railway line between Manningtree and Colchester.

Furthermore, the unwieldy nature of Essex Police's electronic Command and Control System (STORM) hampered the force in properly understanding what material they held, what they had extracted from it and what material they required to further the investigation. These shortcomings in STORM prevented those leading the investigation from establishing quickly that they needed to concentrate on searching the railway line.

- *That search opportunities were lost due to Essex Police failing to assert themselves in leading searches*

Essex Police could not lead the searches on the railway line as they were not trained to do so and railway searches fall within the jurisdiction of BTP. However, the force could have asserted themselves to ensure BTP conducted the searches at the earliest opportunity and provided a POLSA to assist in planning searches. BTP did not search until 2 August 2007; this was 6 days into the investigation by which point the chance to find Natasha at the earliest opportunity had clearly gone.

- *That information was passed to the media, including both the Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror, allegedly from a confidential police source that was inappropriate or confidential, and inaccurate*

This investigation has identified that information was passed by a police source after Mrs Coomb's death, as is acknowledged by the Mirror Group of Newspapers. Consequent to Mr Coombs complaints to the Press Complaints Commission. MGN has acknowledged that not all facts published were accurate and therefore appropriate. Mr Coombs has received apologies from MGN. However, this investigation has not been able to identify the individual or individuals quoted in the newspaper articles because MGN refused to reveal its sources of information.

The IPCC found the following complaints to be unsubstantiated:

- *That there was a failure to properly check and act upon information provided by the Coombs family*

Mr Coombs maintains that he handed a sketch plan to an Essex officer during the first week of the investigation indicating where he wished officers to search along the railway lines. Essex Police do not recall seeing or being handed this plan. Nevertheless, Essex Police were aware of Mr Coombs views on the importance of searching the railway lines as he had discussed this with them on various occasions. However, Essex Police were under no obligation to search where Mr Coombs suggested. Mr Coombs was kept informed but the search strategy was rightly determined by the Police Search Trained Officers and the Senior Investigating Officer. Furthermore, the search strategy prepared by Essex Police covered an area of 2km around Manningtree Railway Station and therefore included the areas of railway line that Mr Coombs wanted searching.

- *That failures of the police investigation contributed to Joanne Coombs taking her own life*

In their own review Essex Police have stated:

“As a professional organisation we (Essex Police) must accept the responsibility that our delay in respect of searching the rail track, whilst not affecting the outcome of Natasha’s actions, has caused some degree of additional anguish to her family and friends”.

Given the above and the IPCC’s own investigation, it is agreed that the delay in finding Natasha caused the Coombs family additional distress and anxiety. However, this investigation is not qualified or equipped to examine Joanne Coombs’s mental state at the time. The evidence that she committed suicide because of the death of her daughter is strong. Essex Police have acknowledged that its delays caused the family additional stress and anxiety. What we cannot determine from this investigation is whether the delay in finding Natasha’s body was the crucial factor, or indeed a factor of any importance, in her decision to commit suicide.

- *That a team of volunteers were not used to search areas around the railway lines because BTP had “pulled rank” on Essex Police*

Decisions regarding whether to utilise the group of volunteers were not made by BTP. The volunteers would never have been allowed to search on or near railway lines because of Health and Safety legislation.

- *That an Essex Police Officer gave false evidence at the inquest of Natasha regarding their proximity to, and their ability to detect, Natasha’s body*

A transcript of the audio recordings of the inquests was obtained from HM Coroner to establish exactly what was said. The information given was reviewed and found to be accurate. It was corroborated by other independent witnesses and photographs of the scene.

- *That the evidence at the inquest was given to defend Essex Police's search strategy and was part of a calculated cover-up to avoid disclosure of the incompetence of searches*

This investigation has found no evidence of a calculated cover-up by Essex Police in order to defend their search strategy. Essex Police reviews accept that Natasha should have been found sooner.

- *That specific media releases were made following the inquests in order to defend police actions and were also part of the calculated cover-up over failing in searching for Natasha*

Essex Police's media release issued after the Inquests correctly describe some of the search actions that the police undertook in order to find Natasha and outline the difficulties of locating her given the steep embankment upon which she was found. There is no evidence that these media releases were designed to mislead.

- *That the BTP Police officers attending the inquest behaved inappropriately by giggling and talking in a manner which was disrespectful and insensitive towards him and his family*

According to HM Coroner and the Coroners Officers the inquests ran smoothly. They did not recall any "inappropriate" behaviour by the police. There was insufficient evidence to substantiate this complaint.

The IPCC also made other key findings, including:

- That BTP did not provide Essex Police with adequate information/advice regarding the availability of CCTV on trains, railway property and railway infrastructure. Essex Police therefore lacked an understanding of what CCTV opportunities were available to them within the rail and train infrastructure.
- That the requests made by Essex Police for search assistance and contact with a BTP POLSA could have been better facilitated and directed by BTP.
- That there appeared to be no consideration within the search strategy of the effects of a glancing blow from a train and the motion or movement of a body hit in this way. This was only given consideration after Natasha had been found and through subsequent reviews of the missing person investigation.
- That a hasty search (meaning an initial walk of the railway lines) be considered as part of a search strategy in all future searches involving railway lines, especially where dense vegetation or any other factor limits the potential for Air Support to view or detect a body or other objects.

- That given their knowledge of her previous history Essex Police should have classified Natasha as a High Risk missing person from the outset rather than Medium Risk. Natasha was classified as Medium Risk for the first 24 hours.
- That the experience and expertise of the Air Support Unit in searching for missing persons was not fully utilised. Mapping produced by the ASU was not exploited and records relating to areas searched by the ASU were not immediately available to others in a co-ordination role. The capabilities and restrictions of the ASU were not fully understood which led to unrealistic expectations of the ASU searches.

Findings regarding the BTP Communications Officer

The IPCC produced a separate report on the actions of the BTP Communications Officer who gave misleading information to Essex Police regarding sensors on trains. The report was sent to BTP Professional Standards Department (PSD). The Communications Officer admitted he lied to an Essex Police Officer, initially telling IPCC officers that he did so to end the call which would allow him to get on with his job, and that he actually had no knowledge of train sensors. BTP recommended that he face a full powers disciplinary hearing in respect of gross misconduct. The IPCC accepted this recommendation. However, on being informed of this, the Communications Officer immediately resigned. The IPCC maintains that there can be no excuse for the Communications Officer giving this false information.

Other Police Officers and Police Staff

Throughout this investigation the conduct of the other police officers and police staff has been regularly reviewed. There has been no evidence to indicate that a criminal offence may have been committed nor that any police officer or police staff committed an act of misconduct.

Recommendations

The investigation made a number of recommendations to Essex Police, BTP and in terms of policing on a national level. These included recommendations that:

- Essex Police ensure that all officers, and in particular supervisors, are familiar with the force's policy in respect of missing persons, the assessment and grading of risk of the individual, the factors affecting this grading, the importance of recording rationale in support of a risk assessment and the need to review and challenge risk assessments.
- That police search techniques be reviewed nationally regarding dealing with the possibility of a glancing blow injury or fatality, and that advice be circulated to those with search responsibilities, especially where railway lines regularly feature.

- That the police search method referred to as “hasty search” be reviewed from a national perspective and advice and guidance be circulated to those with search responsibilities, especially where railway lines regularly feature.
- That a hasty search be considered as part of a search strategy in all future searches involving railway lines, especially where dense vegetation or any other factor limits the potential for air support to view or detect a body or other objects.
- That the use of STORM is reviewed nationally to consider whether it should be used for the management and control of missing person enquiries.

David Petch
Commissioner

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