

Case 6 | Issue 40 – Abuse of Power for Sexual Purpose (APSP)

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Special Constable's use of Snapchat

Officer's use of Snapchat, raising issues about:

- *Contacting young people*
- *Maintaining professional boundaries*
- *Use of social media*
- *Social media policy*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

Neighbourhood policing



Professional standards



Overview of incident

Two special constables, SC A and SC B, were on a 7pm to 3am shift and were on patrol in a police car. They were tasked with looking out for anti-social behaviour type incidents.

SC A was acting as SC B's mentor, and this was the first time they had gone out on duty together. Special constables are volunteers, who have the same powers as police officers.

The officers pulled into a car park close to some shops, which was a known spot for anti-social behaviour. They made their way over to a group of teenagers aged between 14 and 16 who were congregated around one of the shops.

As the officers approached, CCTV shows the group splitting into two, with one engaging the two officers in conversation. The officers asked the teenagers what they were doing, where they had been, what their plans were to move on, and what time they were leaving.

SC A spoke to a few of the girls in the group. They asked what time they needed to be home and how far away they lived.

At one point one of the girls asked if they could take a photo with the officers. SC A agreed but asked the girls not to put the photos on social media. One of the girls asked SC A whether he had Snapchat. He said yes but would not provide his Snapchat details.

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After leaving the group the officers went to a nearby fast food restaurant to use the bathroom. Neither officer bought food and several of the teenagers went into the restaurant with them. One of the teenagers asked SC A to buy them food. SC A refused. The two officers then returned to their vehicle and continued with the rest of their shift.

Later that evening one of the girls posted one of the photos to her “Snapchat story” with the text “handcuff me” on the photo. The photo was visible to any Snapchat user that she was connected to for a period of 24 hours.

The next day the girl who posted the photo received a Snapchat message from someone who had sent her a friend request a couple of months previously. The message appeared to have been sent by SC A and included a topless photo of the officer. The message was sent as a “red message” which automatically deletes after a short period of time. However, the girl took a screenshot of it before it disappeared.

SC A messaged the girl to ask which one she was in the photo. She replied to say “it doesn’t matter” before blocking SC A. She informed her father who subsequently reported the matter to the force.

Two of the other girls in the group were also found to have SC A in their friends list.

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

Findings and recommendations

1. No organisational learning recommendations were issued during this investigation.

Outcomes for officers and staff

SC A

1. SC A was found to have a case to answer for gross misconduct in relation to the allegations that he sent a Snapchat message and topless photo of himself to a 14 year old girl he had met during the course of his duties as a special constable.
2. SC A resigned prior to the hearing taking place.
3. A gross misconduct hearing took place in public and the conduct level was proved.
4. SC A was added to the barred list.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

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1. Does your force give officers clear guidance around use of social media, including whether they are allowed to use this to contact members of the public?