

Statement by Barry Coppinger, Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, following the conclusion of an anonymous complaint against Chief Constable Mike Veale.

Mike Veale, who at the time was the Chief Constable of Wiltshire Police, was subject to a number of allegations made in an anonymous letter of complaint in November 23 2017.

Angus MacPherson, the Police & Crime Commissioner for Wiltshire, referred the complaint to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which has now been replaced by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). The IOPC considered the complaint letter and carried out an investigation into certain aspects.

The IOPC decided to investigate one single allegation, which was the suggestion that CC Veale deliberately destroyed his Wiltshire Police issue mobile phone.

A second part of the referral, concerning allegations Mr Veale had disclosed confidential information relating to 'Operation Conifer', was returned to the Wiltshire PCC in January to deal with in any manner he deemed appropriate, which was to take no further action.

Operation Conifer was an investigation into allegations of child sex abuse against the late Sir Edward Heath. Disclosures had been made by a number of people to a number of forces and in 2015 it was decided that Wiltshire Police would lead the investigation. Operation Conifer concluded that were Sir Edward Heath still alive, he would have been interviewed about seven of the disclosures under criminal caution.

In January 2018, Mike Veale was appointed Chief Constable of Cleveland. He was unaware of the IOPC investigation at that time and was only informed of the matter at the exact time when his appointment process was being completed, with the public confirmation process undertaken by the Cleveland Police & Crime Panel.

Since that time, as Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, I have taken over the role of 'appropriate authority' from Wiltshire's PCC.

I have been informed by the IOPC that, following a thorough investigation, they have found that Mr Veale has no case to answer with regard to the anonymous allegation that he deliberately destroyed his police issue mobile phone.

I accept their findings and agree with their conclusion that there is no case to answer.

Despite the enormous strain an unfounded allegation of this nature would place on anyone, CC Veale has conducted himself with the drive, energy and commitment required of him as Chief Constable of Cleveland. He was appointed to bring change and fresh thinking to Cleveland Police and he has not allowed this investigation to distract him from that course.

The investigation has found that the damage to the phone was caused accidentally and unintentionally when CC Veale struck his golf bag with a club during a round of golf with friends. The phone was in the bag. Mr Veale subsequently handed the phone into his force for replacement, stating it had been damaged by accident and asking that all data on the phone be retrieved.

During the investigation, CC Veale informed IOPC investigators that he gave a different account of how the damage to the phone had been caused to a small number of colleagues in Wiltshire. He told these colleagues that he had dropped the phone and it had been run over by a car. At the time he was operating under an immense amount of professional and personal pressure. He expressed regret and said he gave this differing account to colleagues to save embarrassment for Wiltshire Police and himself at a time when both were under intense scrutiny.

In March 2018, subsequent to his appointment as Chief Constable of Cleveland, CC Veale was informed by way of notice of investigation that the IOPC was investigating the fact that he gave this differing account to colleagues. This investigation has now concluded with the IOPC finding that there is a case to answer, albeit that the matter does not involve an operational allegation of misconduct. Whilst I have taken no pleasure in doing so, I have agreed.

I think it is important to deal with such matters in a way which is fair, frank and proportionate.

The police complaints process can be lengthy and complex – this case has been no different and has therefore taken some time to bring to a conclusion. We must remember that the process is designed to allow allegations to be raised by anyone – even anonymously – and even against officers of the most senior ranks, who are held to the very highest standards of professionalism.

Through the most recent stages of the legal process, I have proposed and the IOPC have, following a detailed consideration of my proposals, agreed that it is fair and proper to deal with this matter by management action. That has now been carried out and I have updated the Chair of the Police and Crime Panel and the Chair of the Joint Independent Audit Committee who are supportive of the overall course of action taken.

As a result of that action, Mike Veale has been candid with me, the public and with the officers and staff of Cleveland Police that he should have handled the situation differently. His honesty throughout with investigators is very much to his credit - as is his contrition and his offer of an apology to the public and to colleagues.

For many very good reasons, Chief Constables are under the most intense public and political scrutiny. It is important that as Police & Crime Commissioner I am seen to hold the Chief Constable to account if mistakes are made – but the public and all police personnel must have confidence that I will do so fairly, so that as well as making amends, learning can be taken from such situations.

Bearing in mind the clear messages I receive day in day out at my meetings with the public; feedback from police personnel and having now had the chance to witness the work of CC Veale at close hand for some months, there is no doubt in my mind that he is the right person to drive forward the process of transforming Cleveland Police so that our officers and staff can focus on their continuing programme of hard work and proudly keeping the public of Cleveland safe.