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Surrey Police roots out non-PC conduct

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There is a culture of “sexualised conversations” within a Surrey Police training group, an officer’s gross misconduct hearing panel heard.

PC Adam Watkins was found culpable of making sexually inappropriate comments and gestures to a female colleague and then also during the ‘end of training’ celebration evening on 7 October 2022.

Inappropriate comments included PC Watkins asking his colleague, anonymised as ‘Officer A’, if she had ‘christened’ her new house with her boyfriend (i.e whether they had had sex in it yet).

Watkins also asked Officer A how big her boyfriend’s penis is, gesturing with his hands and asking her to stop when he gestured the correct size, then commenting that Officer A would need crutches because of the size.

CCTV footage from a pub also showed Watkins approaching Officer A holding his drink to her face and that she had backed away. He then approached her from behind and pressed his groin against her buttock.

Watkins accepted that he had been drinking throughout the evening and noted that he was unsteady on his feet.

Officer A said, in a written statement on 9 October 2022, that “she turned around and saw [the former officer] right behind [her] swaying his pelvis from side to side. [Her] heart started racing when [she] noticed it was him and [she] felt a bit afraid.”

Officer A’s statement after the event said: “It was an extremely creepy and uncomfortable experience and it shocked me that he would behave in this way. Most times I talk about this experience, I start crying.”

Separate observations from some of the witness statements led the panel to note there “appeared to be a culture of ‘sexualised conversations’ within the training group” at large. Surrey Police have since said that the “overwhelming majority” of their officers and staff are professional .

A police misconduct hearing into Watkins’ conduct was held at Surrey Police Headquarters on 29th and 30th January and was heard by an independent panel.

Watkins had resigned during the investigation and prior to the hearing on 12 May 2023. The panel found that the officer’s actions amounted to gross misconduct and he would have been dismissed if he had not ceased to be a member of the police force.

Watkins argued his comments were made within the context of the culture of the team. Both Watkins and Officer A had instigated conversations of a sexual nature on occasions, the report read.

The misconduct report advised that Surrey Police Force may wish to review the training provided to new officers with the standards of professional conduct, as well as respect to equality and diversity to ensure the content is adequate.

It added training provided to the Police and Crime training team leaders should be revised to ensure unacceptable standards of conduct are quickly identified and resolved.

Head of Surrey Police’s Professional Standards Department, Superintendent Andy Rundle, said: “We have invested in a comprehensive programme of cultural change towards challenging, reporting and tackling unethical or unprofessional behaviour. This included every officer and staff member under-taking mandatory training and plenary sessions in abuse of position for a sexual purpose, gender, and racial bias.”

Noting Officer A’s presentation at the hearing, the panel felt she remained “significantly affected” by the former officer’s actions.

The panel found Watkins “displayed a lack of awareness about his actions”. The former officer claimed “he was just being a bit silly”.

Watkins relied on Officer A to point out that his conduct was unacceptable instead of taking responsibility for his own conduct, the panel observed.

According to the misconduct panel, Watkins “attempted to minimise his involvement by maintaining that he was only joking” when he made the comments to Officer A.

The report said: “We found the former officer’s view – that it was Officer A’s responsibility to tell him that his conduct was unacceptable – to be concerning.”

It added: “The public rightly expects a police officer to maintain the highest standards of behaviour.”

Watkins disputed the allegation that, whilst [Officer A] was discussing what she was going to wear on the ‘end of training’

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celebration with her colleague, he said “are you going to get your tits out?”.

Instead, he believed that he said “Are you going to get the girls out” and clarified that by “girls” he meant breasts. Accordingly, the panel considered that whether the words “girls” or “tits” were said by Watkins, the difference was not significantly material.

Accepting his behaviour amounted to misconduct, Watkins denied that it reached the Gross Misconduct threshold as he had not intended to cause harm or distress to Officer A.

The panel concluded it had “no doubt” that the former officer’s actions is likely to cause “reputational harm” to the police service and undermine public confidence in policing, This is particularly the case given the increasing societal concerns regarding acts of violence against women and girls, the hearing heard.

Superintendent Rundle added: “This is a very concerning case where PC Watkins displayed completely inappropriate behaviour towards a fellow colleague and displayed a total lack of respect for her.

“This is simply not acceptable, and we are very sorry that she was subjected to this in the workplace; a place where she should feel safe and respected by all colleagues.

“We recognise the impact this case will have both on the Surrey public and our own officers and staff, particularly with the current focus on standards. Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of our officers and staff are professional and a credit to the force, however, it is essential that we continue to root out those colleagues who do not meet our demanding standards and ethics.”

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