

Christopher Alder – press statement 27 March 06

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for attending.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission has today published the review commissioned in April 2004 by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett.

The review is an independent assessment of the various investigations surrounding the death of Christopher Alder in a Humberside Police custody suite on 1 April 1998.

May I first state clearly and unambiguously how sad I am to be here today. It is a tragedy for Christopher and his family that he died that night. I realise that nothing that I say and nothing that I do can bring him back or take away their grief at his loss.

The tragedy also cast a shadow across Humberside Police and the community we serve.

It is my firm belief that we owe it to Christopher and his family to learn the lessons from the incident.

Eight years have now elapsed since the events in question and I can reassure everyone that a significant number of changes have already been introduced not just in Humberside but across the police service generally. There are, however, recommendations in the report which are new and which I personally will take steps to implement locally and to support nationally.

Humberside Police have co-operated fully with the IPCC Review and we welcome the publication of the report today and its findings.

Turning now to the report itself.

Whilst I would like to be in a position to address in detail all issues raised in the report I am not able to do so. Like the family and the Press, I have only received my copy of the report today and I have had little time to read, assimilate and analyse what, at over 400 pages, is a very detailed and comprehensive report. Consequently, I will restrict my comments only on the main findings.

Specific issues for Humberside Police

In his report, the chairman of IPCC asks me to accept a number of what he refers to as 'simple truths'. I accept them all - without reservation.

- The acquittal of the officers in the trial and disciplinary hearings did **not** amount to an endorsement of their actions.

That is absolutely correct. Since my arrival as chief constable a year ago, I have never heard any suggestion to the contrary and the substantial changes in how we care for people in custody reflect the need to move away from the behaviours revealed in the report.

- Right minded people watching the video tape of Mr Alder's death are quite properly appalled by what they see.

I have personally seen 'Death on Camera' and the video tape of Christopher's death in the custody suite. As chief constable of Humberside Police I was, and continue to be, appalled by what I see there. I have no doubt that my feelings are replicated by others.

- Even if the officers did not cause the death of Mr Alder, their behaviour was not acceptable and fell seriously short of the standards that are expected of police officers.

The challenges police officers and staff confront in busy custody suites should not be underestimated. This is one of the most difficult jobs that my staff are required to undertake.

Nevertheless, I completely agree that the desired standard of compassion and care was not met on the night in question. This fact underpins the many improvements that have taken place in custody procedures in Humberside since 1998.

- The officers were not the victims in this case.

Christopher Alder was the only victim. That having been said, events that night had a significant impact on the lives of many others, including Christopher's family. It is not for me to speak on behalf of the police officers involved but they may wish to do so themselves presently.

- Humberside Police still owes the Alder family an apology.

I would like to address that issue directly.

Apologising to the family

As chief constable of Humberside Police I would welcome the opportunity to meet personally with the Alder family to listen to their thoughts and feelings on the death of Christopher.

I do know that my two predecessors as chief constable expressed their regret at what had happened. It seems wholly appropriate that my apology should now be formalised.

The time is, therefore, right for me publicly to apologise to Christopher Alder's family for our failure to treat Christopher with sufficient compassion and to the desired standard that night. I will of course put my apology into writing.

Unwitting racism

The report concludes that police officers displayed 'unwitting racism' towards Christopher Alder. On this point, one must put the incident into context.

In April 1998, issues surrounding race and the police service were highly topical and very controversial. It was the time of the MacPherson public inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence in London. The police service nationally was subsequently described as being institutionally racist and the definition of unwitting racism was defined by MacPherson. There is little surprise in the fact that, in considering the actions of the officers dealing with Christopher Alder in 1998 by that measure, the IPCC draw similar conclusions.

The police officers concerned have been criticised for failing to show sufficient care and compassion for Christopher that night. The failure of the officers to explain to the IPCC their actions, including noises recorded on the video before and after Christopher's arrival in the custody suite, appears to have contributed to the IPCC view regarding unwitting racism.

It is, however, fair to say that the evidence put before both the Inquest into the death of Christopher and the subsequent Crown Court trial of the five officers did not lead to any finding that the officers' conduct was overtly influenced by his ethnicity.

Nevertheless, I do accept the importance of the IPCC's conclusions on this matter, some of which will have already been addressed by Humberside Police. The others will be addresses as part of our work to implement the reports recommendations.

Allegations of violence towards Christopher Alder

Whilst the report focuses to a large extent on Christopher's treatment in the Custody Suite, I welcome confirmation of the fact that he was not assaulted by the officers at the hospital, en route to the police station or at any time.

The Police Disciplinary Process

The report passes comment on the handling by this force of the misconduct charges faced by the five officers in relation to Christopher's death.

The report takes issue with some decisions taken by the then deputy chief constable, Mr Gordon Clark.

I am aware that Mr Clark will be issuing his response to those criticisms. I do not propose myself to make any further comment on this aspect of the report. This is a matter between Mr Clark and the IPCC.

I would observe only that the police disciplinary procedures have changed substantially since 1998 and are now actively overseen by the IPCC.

Changes since 1998

At the start, I said how important I regarded it that we take all reasonable steps to reduce the risks of such incidents happening again in the future and to improve the care we provide to all persons coming into custody – we owe this to Christopher and his family.

I would therefore report that:

In 1998, there was only limited training given to custody officers and custodians. The position now, and for the last eight years, is that we have had a comprehensive training programme for custody officers.

Additionally, the CCTV system which provided such invaluable evidence for the inquest, the courts and the IPCC review has been upgraded and is a permanent feature of all our custody suites.

In 1998, there was limited first aid training for police officers and staff. The position now is that all our staff receive full first training with appropriate refresher training throughout their careers.

We have also introduced full time, qualified nurses in our two Hull based main custody suites. Negotiations are currently underway with Primary Care Trusts for this service to be extended to other force custody suites.

With regards to establishing protocols between the Force and local hospitals for the handling of patients released into the care of police, this is an issue nationally as well as for Humberside Police. I do know that work is in hand involving both the Home Office and Department for Health to establish a national framework but in the meantime we will look locally at what more needs to be done.

Since 1998, significant strides have been taken to ensure that diversity issues are tackled openly and robustly and, since becoming chief constable, I have taken personal responsibility for leading in this area.

Since 1998 we have appointed a Community and Race Relations officer and introduced a diversity unit. We have implemented the Race Equality Scheme and all our policies are currently being audited to ensure compliance with the scheme.

We have worked closely with the National Black Police Officers' Association, Her Majesty's Assistant Inspector for Race and Diversity and the Home Office Race and Equality Advisor in reviewing our work and ensuring that we build on good practice from elsewhere.

We also now have community based Independent Advisory Groups who advise us on relevant issues.

Support to the family

Over the last eight years, Janet Alder and Christopher's family have worked tirelessly in their search for a true understanding of what happened to him on the night of 1 April 1998.

Since arriving as chief constable, I have been seeking opportunities to assist the family in this regard. The publication of the report today now affords me that opportunity.

One of Janet Alder's principle concerns has been her having access to certain custody suite video tapes. I am now looking to move this matter forward in a positive and timely manner.

In conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that everyone concerned should welcome the IPCC report.

As I have explained, significant improvements have been made in the manner in which we care for people who come into police custody. Hard lessons have been learned in Humberside and we will continue to seek ways to improve things further locally and to contribute our experience to improvements at national level

For the sake of Christopher and his family, we must never be complacent about such issues.

Tim Hollis
Chief Constable
27 March 06