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Force paid nearly £400,000 to firms run by police officer's wife



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By Rob Waugh

THE wife of a senior North Yorkshire Police officer received nearly £400,000 from the force in payments to her training companies, a damning audit report has revealed.

Peta Ackerley is married to the officer who was in charge of the force's training, Supt Paul Ackerley, and her company Northern Lights had previously been revealed as receiving just under £204,000.

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But it has now emerged that her involvement with a second training company – Ackerley Associates – actually took the total payment between 2001 and last year to £385,438.

The figure is included in a damning audit report on the links between Supt Ackerley and his wife's companies, which often got work without going through proper procurement processes.

It can also be revealed that Supt Ackerley will escape disciplinary action from the force after his application to retire was accepted by Chief Constable Grahame Maxwell.

In June, the Crown Prosecution Service decided there would be no charges against the officer following a police inquiry.

Supt Ackerley then faced three disciplinary charges for misconduct but will not have to answer them after Mr Maxwell decided to accept his application to retire after 30 years' service.

Although officers have the right to retire after 30 years, North Yorkshire Police could have insisted Supt Ackerley remained in post to face the charges but has decided against because of the potential six-figure cost of what could have become a lengthy disciplinary process.

Mr Maxwell will not comment on the findings of the report or the decision to allow retirement before he

addresses a special North Yorkshire Police Authority meeting next week.

The police authority would not comment on the substance of the report ahead of the meeting next Friday but Jeremy Holderness, the authority's chief executive, said: "It is a role of the Police Authority to identify areas of force activity where there is possibility that high standards of probity are not being demonstrated; to investigate, where appropriate with the Chief Constable, whether this is indeed the case, and where necessary, seek action from the Chief Constable to put things right. Our Internal Audit service is one of many mechanisms we have in place to do this. This is an example of this process in action. On 24th October, NYPA will consider the matter and whether the Chief Constable's actions are sufficient to resolve any deficiencies highlighted by the Auditor."

Jon Porter, director of North Yorkshire Police's human resources department and the civilian official with overall responsibility for training, resigned in the summer.

His role was also investigated during the police inquiry – carried out by North Yorkshire – but the CPS decided he would not face criminal charges.

Both men were suspended in April this year. Supt Ackerley, who is paid around £70,000 a year, will remain suspended on full pay until the end of the year when he will officially retire.

The audit report reveals a catalogue of shortcomings in the management of the lucrative contracts Supt Ackerley's wife was able to obtain from the force.

The investigation, compiled by West Yorkshire Police Authority auditor Michael George, did not probe whether the officer had influenced the amount of work his wife received but the report adds it has "encountered no suggestion that inappropriate influence was exercised".

Although it refers to Mrs Ackerley's payments since 2001, the report focuses on arrangements since 2005, when Supt Ackerley set up a selection system for the employment of external training consultants.

The level of Mrs Ackerley's influence was such that, within the force, she was seen as the first port of call if any problems arose.

The report adds: "Peta Ackerley has been called on regularly to undertake work, without proper procurement practices that would protect the Force from allegations of inappropriate influence being used."

The report says that Supt Ackerley did register his interest in his wife's company but that the conflict of interest was never properly addressed by North Yorkshire Police.

Phil Willis, Liberal Democrat MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough, said: "Hopefully this episode brings to an end a period when North Yorkshire Police had a cavalier attitude to accountability for public money.

"I compliment the chief constable for the thorough and open way he's dealt with a sensitive matter – it's a great pity that such a thorough approach was not applied when contracts were being handed out for training in earlier years."

Page 1 of 1

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