

Rob Wilson MP
House of Commons
Westminster
London
SW1A 0AA

23rd October 2012

Dear Mr. Wilson,

Thank you for your letter about the allegations of sexual abuse and paedophilia concerning the late Jimmy Savile. Can I say at the outset that I regard these allegations as exceptionally grave. They suggest that Jimmy Savile perpetrated a series of horrific crimes over many years, some of which took place during his employment at the BBC. Like everyone else, I have been appalled by what I have read and heard in recent weeks and can only imagine the sufferings that these crimes have caused to the victims. You ask whether I have been contacted by the review into the Newsnight investigation which is being conducted by Nick Pollard and asked to give evidence. I have not but, as soon as the review was announced, I contacted the BBC to tell them I would be happy to help Nick and his enquiry in any way I could. It is clearly important that the facts around the Newsnight investigation are established once and for all.

You further ask whether I would be prepared to appear before the Commons CMS Select Committee should they wish to call me as a witness either in this matter or more broadly in relation to the Jimmy Savile affair. I have not yet been invited but of course, if invited, I would be very happy to attend. The same will be true of any other inquiry into this matter.

You then turn to a series of specific questions about my role in relation to the Newsnight item. Let me begin with some context. Although the Director-General is Editor-in-Chief of the BBC, there are several reasons which the DG does not generally become involved in investigations before transmission:

1. The DG and the BBC's Editorial Complaints Unit form the first 'appeal' stage of the BBC's complaints process. If the DG becomes personally involved in the decision to broadcast or not to broadcast a given programme, they risk short-circuiting the first and second stages of the complaints process and forcing members of the public to go straight to the final stage, the BBC Trust.

2. Given the many hundreds of investigations the BBC does every year, the personal involvement of the DG in a given investigation would inevitably be unusual and noteworthy and could therefore have a distorting or chilling effect on the journalism involved. Particular care not to directly involve the DG is taken when investigations may involve the BBC itself, to avoid the risk of a conflict of interest or the perception of one. It is worth noting, however, that I did not know at the time or for the remainder of my period in office whether the Newsnight Savile investigation included allegations related to the BBC and whether it therefore fell into this category, or not.

3. The BBC's editorial tradition is one of delegation with Editors fully responsible for their programmes but senior management up to an Executive Director of the BBC available in each division to support and advise them. The tradition is that decisions are only 'referred up' to the Director-General when strictly necessary and when the case for doing so outweighs the disadvantages and risks I have noted above. During my time, a small number of investigations were referred up in this way. On other occasions (for instance the Panorama investigation into FIFA), I became involved because I was needed to defend the BBC's journalism against external

attempts to put pressure on the programme-makers. On still further occasions, I was briefed in general terms on the eve of transmission about a programme that might prove particularly contentious. But such referrals are rare and the DG is not routinely briefed on forthcoming investigations before they are broadcast for the reasons I have stated.

In that context, let me now turn to your questions about the Newsnight investigation. I was never

formally notified about the Newsnight investigation and was not briefed about the allegations they were examining and to what extent, if at all, those allegations related to Savile's work at the BBC. For the reasons I have set out above, the fact that I was not briefed is not itself surprising. There is a list which is compiled by the BBC's Editorial Policy department of potentially sensitive programmes, but this list is not intended to be exhaustive and, in particular, often does not include investigative segments being prepared by general news and current affairs programmes like Today and Newsnight. As Director General, I saw this list regularly. I do not believe that the Savile investigation was included in it.

Certainly I do not recall seeing it there.

What did happen is that, at a drinks reception late last year, a journalist mentioned to me the existence of the investigation and said words to the effect of "you must be worried about the Newsnight investigation?" This was the first I had heard of the investigation. I believe that this is the incident to which the Sunday Times is referring. I did not respond at the time, nor did the journalist set out what allegations Newsnight were investigating or had been investigating. Shortly thereafter I mentioned this conversation to the senior management of BBC News and asked them whether there was a problem with the investigation. They told me that there had been an investigation but that the programme had decided not to proceed with it on journalistic grounds. I took this to mean that the decision not to carry on with the investigation had been taken by Peter Rippon, the editor of the programme. None of this – an investigation being begun but not completed for editorial reasons and the judgement-call being made by the programme editor – was in any way unusual.

You quote me as saying: "During my time as director general of the BBC, I never heard any allegations or received any complaints about Jimmy Savile." Both of these statements are true to the very best of my knowledge – indeed, other than the brief conversations I have set out in the preceding paragraph, his name scarcely came up at all during my years as DG. I had a long career in the BBC, but never worked with Jimmy Savile or, to the best of my knowledge, worked

on any programme or in any department where he had worked. Indeed I don't believe I ever met him. I understand that some people claim to have known about these allegations. I never heard them or indeed any allegations of anything either criminal or anti-social that he was said to have done. If I had, I would have raised them with senior colleagues and contacted the police.

You ask about the tribute programmes which were broadcast about Jimmy Savile. Although I recall hearing at the time of his death that BBC Television might do something about Jimmy Savile in due course, again I had not been briefed about the programmes themselves. I assume they were commissioned and broadcast by BBC Vision, the BBC's television arm, in the usual way. I think it best if you contact the BBC directly about the procedures and controls that are in place to ensure that allegations of impropriety are promptly and effectively brought to the attention of managers. I can assure you that such procedures and controls exist and that they include anonymous whistleblowing procedures as well as multiple other ways for concerned members of staff to bring their concerns to the attention of managers. In the matter of the Newsnight investigation, I had no reason to believe that anyone in the BBC was withholding controversial or incriminating material. In the broader matter of Jimmy Savile's alleged wrongdoing, I have no knowledge of any complaints or queries about him or his behaviour during my time as DG (2004-2012), nor in my previous long period as a BBC manager.

Obviously I am not in a position to answer this question in relation to other periods, including the decades before I joined the Corporation.

With all best wishes,
Mark Thompson