

Four further claims against Cleveland Police to follow £500,000 payout to lawyer

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By Neil Hunter

A POLICE force which paid out more than £500,000 to a solicitor who was wrongfully arrested is being sued by more people linked to the case.

The Northern Echo can today reveal that the final legal bill could dwarf the figure awarded to Middlesbrough law firm partner James Watson last week.

We have learned that four others involved in a high-profile [Hartlepool](#) kidnap and blackmail case from a decade ago are seeking damages from Cleveland Police.

Mr Watson was arrested four years ago on suspicion of conspiring to pervert the course of justice - accused of asking witnesses to change their evidence.

The force - then under the stewardship of sacked chief constable Sean Price and his disgraced deputy Derek Bonnard - has since apologised to the lawyer.

Last night, officials admitted that two other people have lodged formal claims, while solicitors acting for a further two have written with intentions to sue.

Other than confirm how many actions are pending for misfeasance and/or wrongful arrest linked to the same case, the force would not discuss the matter.

The newly-elected Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, Barry Coppinger, said in a statement that it was "impossible" to go into details of the damages claims.

"I hope that the Independent Police Complaints Commission will publish the report which will give a greater public understanding about what has happened," he said.

"I am aware of the interest in this issue but understand that legal proceedings have commenced therefore it is impossible to comment at this time."

Yesterday, the Echo reported that he was having weekly meetings with the new chief constable, Jacqui Cheer, to get an oversight into the work of the force.

He said a review of procedures had taken place, and safeguards had been put in place to prevent a repeat of the scandal - which could cost more than £1.5m.

Mr Watson, a prominent defence solicitor and senior partner in the law firm Watson Woodhouse, was held for almost 30 hours after his arrest in 2009.

His wife and children were unable to leave their home for seven hours while it was searched, and boxes of sensitive legal documents were removed from his office.

There was no evidence found against him and he was never charged as a result of his arrest - but had to wait for months before learning that would happen.

Following an investigation by West Yorkshire Police, the Independent Police Complaints Commission recommended that the officer in charge should be suspended.

However, Chief Inspector Anthony Riordon - whose last post before leaving was as head of Hartlepool CID - was allowed to retire on a full pension instead.

The officer was accused of "pursuing a bizarre conspiracy theory" after the collapse of the kidnap trial involving Mr Watson's client Bronson Tyers and others.

In a statement, he said: "I strongly refute any allegation I acted with anything other than professionalism and integrity in connection with the arrest of Mr Watson."

Mr Watson's £550,000 payout includes £80,000 in exemplary damages - the maximum possible amount - and is likely to be added to by a £1m legal bill.

On top of that, if the other claims are successful, it is thought the total cost to the taxpayer for the four-year wrangle could easily surpass £2m.

A source close to the investigation described the unpublished report as "dynamite" and said: "It is the most damning document I have ever seen."

The embattled force was already facing a huge rise in settlements this year after ex-officer Sultan Alam was awarded £800,000 in damages for malicious prosecution.

The former traffic cop successfully sued the force following a 17-year fight for justice after being wrongly sacked and jailed for a crime he did not commit.

Figures from last year showed the force paid out more than £470,000 after legal action was taken by crime suspects, members of the public and its own officers.

The statistics revealed 136 allegations of false imprisonment, assault and motor liability claims following crashes involving police cars were lodged between April 2011 and March 2012.

Legal action taken by employees who were injured at work included incidents of "exposure to excessive noise", failure of equipment and a tripping accident.

One claimant won their court case while another 65 settled out of court. The force successfully defended two actions and 66 claims were withdrawn.

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