

BBC is asked to foot bill for causing £14K bomb scare

A police commissioner has vowed to bill the BBC for the cost of a bomb alert sparked by a suspicious package posted by one Panorama journalist to another.



The BBC's MediaCity studios in Salford.

By Rosa Silverman

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Tony Lloyd, police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, criticised the “stupidity” of the current affairs programme after the journalist sent a home-made spy camera from Belfast to Salford inside a plastic bottle of drink.

When the package was scanned at Swiss Post near the BBC's MediaCity studios on Wednesday, the picture that came up resembled a “classic improvised explosive device,” a source said.

Staff at the postal service raised the alarm and a security operation thought to have cost up to £14,000 in total was scrambled.

Workers were evacuated, bomb squad officers called and hospitals put on standby.

Five specialist hazard response teams from the North West Ambulance Service were deployed, at a cost of between £3,000 and £4,000, while fire crews, including three pumps, two station managers

and a specialist support unit, were also put on standby, costing about £5,300.

But just as a controlled explosion was about to be carried out, a member of staff at the BBC stepped in and assured emergency services the package was not a bomb.

A police source said: "The package was sent from Belfast and when it was put through the X-ray at the sorting office it immediately aroused suspicion because there was a device in a plastic bottle, which had all hallmarks of an IED.

"It was initially treated as a serious threat or a hoax, so all the usual protocols were followed."

Mr Lloyd described the false alarm as an "irresponsible" diversion of resources and said the BBC's Director General would receive a letter asking him to cover the cost.

He said: "Whatever has happened here, whether a deliberate hoax or a stupid mistake, it caused severe disruption to the emergency services and the local community in Salford.

"The cost of this operation to the police alone is likely to be around about £5,000 and I will be sending the bill to the BBC's Director General. It's not right that the people of Greater Manchester should have to pick up the tab for Panorama's stupidity.

"There is a police investigation ongoing and it needs to run its course, but I will also be writing to James Harding, the new Director of News at the corporation, as I expect him to carry out a full review of the circumstances.

"The BBC owes it to the people of Greater Manchester to explain how Panorama caused this farce to happen, and what they will do to avoid a repeat of it."

The BBC insisted everyone had acted in "good faith" and said the corporation had discussed the incident in detail with the police afterwards.

A spokesman confirmed the camera was to be used for a Panorama investigation and denied suggestions the package had been sent to test security procedures.

"The package contained filming equipment and had been sent from BBC Northern Ireland by Royal Mail because it was needed in Salford the following day," he said.

"This was categorically not part of an investigation testing security procedures.

"There was a stamp on the outside of the package that showed it had been sent by BBC Northern Ireland and it was addressed to a producer at BBC Salford. The package was referred to the police as it was believed it looked suspicious."

A spokesman for Greater Manchester Police said: “We’ve investigated the matter and cannot establish any criminal intent.”

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