

Essex Man Jailed After Offering UK Defence Minister's Details to Believed Russian Spies

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— Categories: Defence & Security



A 65-year-old man from Harlow, Essex, has been convicted under the National Security Act 2023 after attempting to assist individuals he believed to be Russian intelligence officers by offering them sensitive personal information about Defence Minister Grant Shapps.

Howard Phillips was found guilty at Winchester Crown Court of unlawfully disclosing Grant Shapps's home address, telephone number and the location of his private aircraft to undercover officers posing as foreign agents. The jury reached a unanimous verdict after four hours and four minutes of deliberation. Sentencing is due to take place at a later date in the autumn.

Prosecutors said Phillips was motivated by financial hardship and sought "easy money" rather than ideological support for Russia. He had applied to join the UK Border Force in October 2023 while pursuing Home Office security clearance, and led investigators to conclude his intentions combined daydreams of intelligence work with dangerous naivety.

Detective Chief Superintendent Helen Flanagan, Head of Operations for the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command, said: "Phillips was unemployed and his primary motivation for assisting the Russian Intelligence Service was financial reward. His conviction should serve as a stark warning to anyone who might consider aiding a hostile state." She added that the case demonstrated the value of the National Security Act in dealing with modern espionage threats.

Phillips's ex-wife told the court that he "would dream about being like James Bond" and was infatuated with spy stories. Evidence showed he had applied to MI5 in 2014 and 2024, written to multiple foreign embassies offering his services, and claimed he hoped to expose Russian agents to benefit Israel, a motive prosecutors labelled implausible and inconsistent with his behaviour.

Prosecutors and investigators noted Phillips had contacted dozens of foreign embassies, treated espionage as a personal mission, and viewed

it as an exciting pursuit for financial gain. They emphasised that even amateur or fantastical efforts pose a serious threat to national security and will be prosecuted accordingly under the law

This case is one of the first convictions brought under the National Security Act 2023 and underscores the persistent risk posed by individuals attempting to assist hostile states, even when they overestimate their competence.