

How the PCC responds to a major incident

This explanatory note sets out what action the Press Complaints Commission takes following a major incident (such as an accident, natural disaster, attack on human life) in which media attention on those affected is likely to be intense.

As soon as it becomes clear that sustained media attention is likely to follow a news story, the PCC will act immediately, attempting to contact the subjects or victims of the incident. Where appropriate, it makes contact directly. However, for practical reasons, in most cases it contacts an intermediary and requests that a message is passed on. Examples of intermediaries include:

- the local police force (usually via the press office);
- the Coroner or Coroner's Officer (or the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland);
- the MP or other elected representative;
- the hospital(s) and/or NHS authorities dealing with the injured;
- a solicitor or agent, if one is named;
- the local religious or other community leader(s);
- any other representative whose name has been made public.

In the case of particularly large-scale incidents which are likely to involve the full range of emergency services, the PCC contacts the regional COI (Central Office of Information) group, a government body which runs a series of Regional Media Emergency Forums co-ordinating the response to such incidents.

Generally speaking, initial contact is made on the telephone, with a follow up email then sent. The PCC explains how it can help vulnerable individuals in the following ways:

1. **If someone does not wish to speak to the media:** the PCC can send a private advisory note to editors, making clear an individual does not wish to comment publicly on their situation. This can help to prevent any unwanted media approaches being made at all;
2. **If someone is being harassed by a journalist or photographer:** the PCC can issue a private 'desist notice' which requests journalists and photographers cease their approaches with immediate effect. This can be sent either to an individual publication if the concern relates to a specific title, or to the industry more widely if the concern is more general or appears to involve multiple publications;
3. **If someone is concerned about a story that has already been published:** the PCC can deal with a formal complaint under the Editors' Code of Practice (see <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>).

The PCC ensures that all of its contact details are made available at this time (including the 24-hour emergency number), and that the individual or their representative is aware of the relevant parts of the Code. It also points people in the direction of any relevant guidance notes which may be helpful, for example on dealing with media attention in the aftermath of a death (which has recently been revised), or the rules on reporting inquests. An offer to send printed copies of literature will also be made at this stage.

A copy of a tailored briefing on how the Commission can help in major incidents is then sent. The PCC representative always explains that, in sensitive situations, its advice is confidential.

Deaths or incidents abroad

If the incident or death has happened abroad and British nationals are affected, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is responsible for co-ordinating the help they receive. If the

incident involves a large number of people, or is otherwise significant, the PCC can contact the FCO to offer its assistance in managing any problems with media attention. We point out that journalists working for foreign titles do not fall under our remit, but that journalists working abroad for British titles are expected to abide by the terms of the Code. In some circumstances, the PCC can pass on concerns about journalists' behaviour to other press councils, if one operates in the country in question.

The PCC has worked with the FCO to arrange for information about its services to be included in the FCO's [Guide for bereaved families](#)², a copy of which is given to families who suffer the death of a family member outside the UK.

Follow-up work

The PCC continues to stay in contact with the officials involved throughout the duration of the incident and its aftermath. PCC staff are always willing to speak on an out-of-hours basis.

The PCC promptly responds to any concerns raised either by people directly affected by the incident or by third parties. It considers, as far as possible, comments about the incident made in the press or on social media by those involved.

Continuing work

The PCC regularly works with emergency service providers, so that those supporting the vulnerable know how it can help even before something happens. Some examples of this work (which the PCC is always looking to expand and improve) include:

- liaising with DCMS to publish information in its ['Humanitarian Assistance in Emergencies'](#)³ guidance;
- liaising with the Ministry of Justice to publish information in its ['Charter for bereaved people'](#)⁴;
- running training seminars for police press and family liaison officers throughout the UK;
- contacting the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), the Association of Police Public Relations Officers (APPRO) and the National Executive Board for Family Liaison to offer information;
- maintaining contact with various parts of the NHS (for example, Strategic Health Authorities and specialist hospitals) in order to ensure that those representing vulnerable individuals understand the protection offered by the Code of Practice;
- sending targeted briefing notes and literature to key emergency service contacts, and offering talks to explain the PCC's work.

² Foreign and Commonwealth Office: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/bereaved-families>

³ Department for Culture, Media and Sport: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/132796/hac_guidance.pdf

⁴ Ministry of Justice: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/charter-bereaved-reformed-coroner-system.pdf>

Contact details

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020 7831 0022 (within office hours: Monday – Friday 9am – 5.30pm)

07659 152656 (emergency number for use outside office hours, primarily in cases of harassment by journalists or for pre-publication advice).