

PCC 2013 Complaints Statistics

Introduction

This document provides a public account of complaints dealt with by the PCC in 2013. Reports for previous years can be found at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/annualreports/annualreview.html>.

The Editors' Code of Practice can be read at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>.

If you have any questions about this information, please contact us on info@pcc.org.uk.

Total Complaints

12,763 - The PCC received over 12,000 complaints last year. It is important to note that a large number of these could not be taken forward, generally because they fell outside our remit (for example, complaints about adverts) or because the complainant did not provide sufficient detail about their concerns for the complaint to progress. This total figure also includes numerous cases in which the PCC issued a single ruling about a matter that was raised by a number of complainants.

2050 - The PCC issued rulings, or brokered agreed resolutions, in respect of 2050 cases. These rulings or brokered agreed resolutions are broken down further as follows:

- **103** – On 103 complaints, the Commission ruled that the Code had been breached and that the publication had offered or taken sufficient action to remedy the breach under the terms of the Code, even though an agreed settlement between the complainant and the publication could not be reached.
- **15** - In 15 cases, the Commission issued a critical public ruling (also known as an “upheld adjudication”) against titles that had breached the Code and had either failed to remedy the breach, or had breached the Code in such a serious manner that it could not be remedied. In each case, the publication was obliged to publish the text of the adverse adjudication in full and with agreed prominence. The cases can be found on our website at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html>.
- **461** - The PCC successfully mediated (resolved to the complainant's satisfaction) 461 cases in 2013. (The PCC's website has more information – which is searchable - about resolved cases. Please see <http://www.pcc.org.uk/case/resolved.html>.)
- **1455** – On 1455 occasions the Commission ruled that there had not been a breach of the Editors' Code. Most of these rulings were straightforward and did not reveal any new or important principle. The full details were communicated in full to the parties involved in the complaint.
- **16** – In 16 key cases, the Commission made no breach rulings public following a formal adjudication.

Pre-Publication

127 - The PCC issued advisory notices to assist members of the public with pre-publication concerns (about harassment, intrusion or inaccuracy) on 127 occasions. For more information about these

services, please see [here](#) and [here](#). The PCC also provides members of the public with pre-publication advice and responds to queries about potential complaints on a daily basis.

Other outcomes

Overall, the Press Complaints Commission received complaints from over 12,000 people last year, most of them by email. Some of those were multiple complaints about the same issue; and some were not concluded by the end of the year.

A record of all PCC decisions is published online in our monthly summaries of concluded complaints (Please see <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/monthlycomplaintssummaries.html>).

In 2013 there was only 1 case where no finding was possible because of an irreconcilable conflict of evidence.

A large number of complaints made related to matters that fell outside the Commission's remit (TV programmes and adverts for example) or were not followed up when we requested additional information from the complainant which was necessary for a proper assessment. In total, 2394 complaints were not pursued after initially being submitted. A further 603 fell outside the PCC's jurisdiction or related to matters of taste and decency not covered by the Code.

We also received a considerable number of complaints from people who were not directly connected to the matters under complaint. We deal with a great many cases about general matters of fact from anyone who wishes to express a concern. While it remains our firm policy that we should not examine a complaint from a third party where there is an obvious first party who could complain unless there is a public interest for doing so (it would be highly inappropriate, for instance, to examine and perhaps rule on a complaint about alleged invasion of privacy unless the person who experienced the apparent intrusion gave their consent), we regularly work proactively to make such individuals aware of our services so they can decide to complain if they so wish. In cases involving a possible accuracy issue, we can – and do – deal with a complaint from anyone. In 2013, the Commission ruled on 135 occasions that it could not consider a complaint without contact or consent from the person directly affected by the article in question.

The figures

1 – Complaints where no finding was possible

603 – Complaints outside the PCC's remit

2394 – Complaints not pursued

168 – Complaints raising matters of taste & offensiveness

135 – Complaints ruled out by the PCC as being from 3rd parties

6 – Complaints disallowed on grounds of delay

What do people complain about?

The major cause of complaint has, for many years, been inaccurate or misleading reporting. Please note that the percentages of complaints which were framed under the various clauses of the Code add up to a total *higher than 100 per cent*. This is because many complaints raise more than one issue under the Code, sometimes under more than Clause. For example, if a complaint is framed under Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 3 (Privacy), it is included in both categories.

Issues raised by complainants under the Editors' Code

89.9% - Accuracy & Opportunity to reply (Clauses 1 & 2)

43.5% - Privacy issues (Clauses 3 – 9 & 11)

2.4% - Subterfuge (Clause 10)

2.4% - Discrimination (Clause 12)

0.2% - Others (Clauses 13-16)

Investigated complaints by sector

This section refers to cases where an investigation by the PCC was warranted (i.e. the PCC requested a response from the relevant editor because the complaint appeared to raise a possible breach of the Code). In 2013, this broke down as follows:

53.8% – National newspapers

28.9% - Regional and local newspapers

10.1% - Scottish newspapers

2.5% - Irish newspapers

4.2% - Magazines

0% - Press agencies

0.1% - Publications not subscribing to the self-regulatory system

Speed of service

The PCC sets out to be 'fast, free and fair'. The speed with which complaints are dealt with is, therefore, crucial.

In 2013, the average time between a complaint being lodged and it being concluded was - in respect of investigated complaints (that is, those where we wrote to the relevant editor for a response to the case) – 49.3 working days.

Prominence

Newspapers and magazines should not “bury” corrections and apologies. In 2013, 94 per cent of PCC-negotiated corrections were published no later than five pages further back than the material complained of or in a dedicated corrections column.

The PCC has put much time and effort into working towards ensuring that corrective action is published with the “due prominence” required by the Editors’ Code, and this is something we have monitored since 2005. In that year, 59 per cent of corrections and apologies negotiated by the PCC were published on the same page or further forward than the material under complaint. In 2013, the figure had risen to 60 per cent. This excludes, in some cases, corrections that appeared in designated corrections columns.

Of course, “due prominence” does not mean necessarily that corrections must appear on a set page. An apology for a serious error might properly be published closer to the front of a newspaper than the original article appeared. A clarification of less significance might - on rare occasions - reasonably be published further back. And some people prefer to have a correction on a particular page - the letters page for example. Each case is assessed, and judged, on its merits.

The figures

48% - Further forward

12% - Same page as original

13% - Designated corrections page

21% - Within 5 pages of original

6% - More than 5 pages from original

Desist Requests and Pre-Publication Advice

"Desist Requests"

In 2013 the PCC continued its vital role in assisting those who find themselves at the centre of a media story, usually through no fault of their own. We never assume that such people ought not to speak to journalists or do not wish to - but if they decide they want to avoid approaches from reporters and photographers we will, where appropriate, do everything we reasonably can to ensure that editors are aware of their wishes.

We do this by distributing a private advisory notice - usually an email from the individual concerned (or their nominated representative) - to our contact list of editorial and legal executives across the UK newspaper and magazine industry. We can also send such requests to certain news agencies and, in some circumstances, to broadcasters too, as they have also agreed voluntarily to participate in the system we have developed. The aim of these requests is to reduce the volume of physical media

attention from journalists and photographers. Although there may be rare occasions when it is legitimate for a journalist to approach an individual even after a “desist request” has been issued (on public interest grounds), it is exceedingly unusual for editors to permit further contact in these circumstances.

Of course, the PCC will use the “desist request” system only when it is appropriate and genuinely necessary.

The PCC’s anti-harassment service is regularly commended by those individuals and families who use it; and our regular follow-up contacts demonstrate that it is extremely effective in the vast majority of cases.

Pre-Publication Assistance

As well as dealing with concerns about harassment, the PCC regularly offers pre-publication advice and assistance - both to complainants who are worried about material they believe will appear, and also to editors who require guidance on the practical implications of the requirements of the Code of Practice. The decision whether or not to publish a story will always remain with the editor, but editors can benefit from speaking to one of the PCC’s experienced complaints officers to discuss previous cases which may be relevant to their deliberations about the best way to treat sensitive editorial material.

This work, which by its nature tends to remain unseen by the public, is vital. It reflects a long-held recognition on the part of the PCC that it is better to try to avoid problems arising in the first place, than to seek remedies afterwards. Countless stories never appear - or appear in a considerably different format - as the result of this little-known part of the service offered by the PCC.

Proactive approaches

Although the PCC does not routinely monitor the press for potential breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice, there are some occasions when it becomes clear that an individual or individuals are facing a wholly unexpected level of media interest - often in the aftermath of a shocking accident or other high-profile incident. In these situations, we believe it is important that people who are unused to dealing with the media should be aware of the PCC's services. As a result, we will aim to send information about our work to the person in question - either directly or via an appropriate representative such as a local MP or the police. This builds on established and constructive relationships we have with intermediaries such as Coroners, police family liaison officers, solicitors and support organisations, all of whom have a role to play in advising individuals during times when they are at their most vulnerable.

The figures

93 – Desist requests sent and/or Pre-publication assistance given. This involves PCC staff advising someone who was concerned about something yet to be published, and assisting them by passing on their concerns (on a private, not-for-publication basis) to the relevant editor or newsdesk, or to the whole industry.

Please note that this figure does not include general advice about the PCC’s services which is given every day to members of the public who contact us.

34 - Proactive approaches

Complainant feedback

The PCC surveys all those who receive a ruling under the terms of the Code or whose complaint is settled by mediation. We also request feedback from all individuals whose cases were investigated (meaning that we wrote to the editor because the complaint appeared to have merit) even if they did not ultimately pursue their complaints.

In 2013, 451 people responded to our survey, which is carried out anonymously. Results were overwhelmingly positive; especially when it is considered that over half of those who sent us their feedback did not have their complaints upheld by the PCC.

The figures

73% - who express an opinion said that, in terms of thoroughness, their complaint had been dealt with satisfactorily, well or very well

66% - of respondents said the time it took to deal with their complaints was 'about right'

82% - of respondents thought the PCC staff who dealt with their complaint were helpful or very helpful

71% - of respondents felt that taking everything into account about the service provided by the PCC that their case had been handled satisfactorily, well or very well.

(NB: All of the above feedback results include people surveyed whose complaints were found by the Commission not to raise a breach of the Editors' Code of Practice)

January 2014