

Ms Laura Moffatt MP v Chat

Clauses noted: 16

Ms Laura Moffatt MP complained to the Press Complaints Commission under Clause 16 (Payment to criminals) of the Code that a convicted criminal may have been paid by Chat magazine for an article published on 23 March 2006 headlined "Why I slept with my own son".

The complaint was upheld.

The article was the story of Sylvia Payne, who had been convicted of unlawful sex with a member of her own family after sleeping with her teenage son.

The complainant wrote to the PCC, concerned that an article on this subject had been published at all. She also questioned whether Ms Payne had been paid for the story.

The magazine admitted to paying an agency, which in turn had paid Sylvia Payne and her son, for the story. It said that the information was in the public domain through coverage elsewhere, but accepted that payment should not have been made. It indicated that it would be apologising to the two readers who had written expressing concern about the article and that steps would be taken to ensure that the error would not be repeated in future.

Adjudication

This was the first occasion on which the Commission has had to adjudicate a complaint under Clause 16 since the rules on payments to criminals changed in 2004.

The Code now says that payment should not be made to convicted criminals or their associates for stories that 'exploit a particular crime'. This article described and seemed to try to justify a criminal act. Ms Payne was quoted in the piece saying that the only thing she regretted about the crime was getting caught. While she had a right to express this view, paying her was a clear breach of the Code on the part of the magazine. There was no conceivable public interest justification for the payment.

The magazine's conduct in not having regard to the Code was unacceptable. The Commission expects the editor, following receipt of this adjudication, to inform it what steps she has taken to ensure that similar breaches of the Code do not occur in future.

Adjudication issued 28/04/2006