

PCC rules on accuracy complaint against local newspaper

The Press Complaints Commission has ruled that a front-page correction and apology published by the Swindon Advertiser constituted sufficient remedial action to a complaint made under Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complainant was a local primary school headteacher who had been convicted of sexual offences against a child. His complaint was two-fold: firstly, the articles inaccurately reported that he had admitted eleven charges of rape (in fact, he had been convicted of indecent assault, but had pleaded not guilty to, and not been convicted of, rape); and secondly, that the newspaper's front page had misleadingly suggested that the offences had been committed while he was serving as a headteacher, or were related to the school in some way. In fact, the offences had occurred around thirty years previously.

The newspaper had immediately accepted that the reference to rape charges was in error. This information had been obtained from the local court and other sources in good faith. It had arranged to publish a front-page correction and apology and removed the original online article. The Commission judged that it was right for the newspaper to correct the errors related to the complainant's conviction in this way, "promptly and with due prominence", as required by the Code.

In regard to the second aspect of the complaint, the Commission ruled that the original front page did have "the potential to mislead" readers. The newspaper could have done more, it said, "to make clear on the front page the full context of the situation: that the offences had been committed by the complainant many years earlier". However, information about the time period in which the offences were committed had been included in the inside coverage (to which readers were directed from the front page), while the front page correction also made reference to this timeframe. Combined with the clear relevance of the complainant's profession to the story (he had been prosecuted and convicted while a serving headteacher), these factors satisfied the Commission that "any misleading impression about the complainant's offences would have been satisfactorily corrected". As such, no further action was required of the newspaper.

Stephen Abell, Director of the PCC, commented: "The newspaper was fully entitled to report the outcome of the court case, which was an important local issue, and to highlight the complainant's profession as a headteacher. However, it also had a responsibility under the Editors' Code to take care to ensure that the information it presented was not significantly inaccurate or misleading. The steps taken by the newspaper to remedy the inaccuracies - in particular, the front page correction and apology - satisfactorily corrected any misleading impression readers might have had".

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. To read the adjudication, please [click here](#).
2. For more information, please contact Catherine Speller on catherine.speller@pcc.org.uk or 020 7831 0022.

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