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1 GENERAL
As a public institution the BBC must account to the public for all its dealings.

We have to monitor and respond to public concerns, whether these concerns arise in letters, phone calls or e-mails, are raised through the press or other media, or through more formal means. It is also important to have opportunities for the public to express opinions about programmes both on-air and online. We should try and ensure that every experience of dealing with the BBC is a positive one.

Most of the unsolicited contacts the BBC attracts are from people stimulated by, and supportive of, our programme making. They want more information about something which interests them.

Members of the public make no distinction between programmes made by BBC “in house” and those made by independent production companies. The BBC is accountable for all of them. Independent productions must make adequate arrangements for follow up enquiries or complaints.

2 DEALING WITH ENQUIRIES
Letters, phone calls and e-mails from the public are an important source of information and the BBC aims to respond quickly and courteously to comments and questions.

In the first instance unsolicited enquiries from the public are dealt with by the BBC’s Information Centre in Belfast (or the Scottish and Welsh BBC Information teams), who will then liaise with the relevant department about enquiries that require a more detailed response. Where appropriate, factual information can be provided about programmes in advance to BBC Information, to help them deal with enquiries.

The telephone number for BBC Information should not be trailed on-air. Programme makers who wish to solicit contacts from audiences should use the BBC’s Audience Lines based in Glasgow (see Chapter 32: Phone-Ins and Telephone Services in Programmes).

Where practicable, we should answer all letters, particularly when viewers or listeners raise important questions and complaints, as soon as possible. Where a reply cannot be sent promptly, a holding letter or e-mail should be sent, explaining the reasons for the delay. Replies should be courteous and
sensitive. Where there has been a genuine error it is best to make a frank admission and offer an apology if appropriate.

If viewers’ and listeners’ letters, phone calls or emails are to be quoted on-air, permission to broadcast them should be asked for. The selection of extracts for broadcasting and voices to read them needs to be done with care, to avoid charges of trivialising or patronising the audience.

In the World Service, most letters and e-mails about programmes which require answers are dealt with by International Audience Correspondence who also deal with telephone enquiries.

**Sometimes requests are made for BBC programme material both transmitted and untransmitted. For detailed guidance on these issues consult Chapter 17: Confidentiality and Release of Programme Material.**

3  **COMPLAINTS**

Complaints warrant a well-judged and prompt reply. We should ask whether a point made is reasonable. If it is, we should do something about it. If it is not, we should reject it – courteously.

Remember that viewers and listeners have a right to expect our programmes to have been made in accordance with these Producers’ Guidelines. If we have departed from them we will need to explain the reasons why.

The BBC’s Programme Complaints Unit deals with serious complaints (see Chapter 42). Before referring a member of the public to the PCU, the Unit should be contacted to establish whether the complaint is within its remit.

It is important to alert BBC lawyers, through Heads of Department or Commissioning Executives, to enquiries which threaten legal action.

4  **KEEPING PROGRAMMES**

The BBC and other broadcasters are obliged by law to keep recordings of all programmes broadcast. Television recordings have to be kept for 90 days from broadcast; radio recordings for 42 days. When a programme is repeated the period starts from the day of the repeat.
These recordings are called for to meet the needs of the Broadcasting Standards Commission when they consider complaints (see Chapter 43) and also to satisfy the requirements of the law on obscene publications and on racially inflammatory material.

5 RELATIONS WITH THE PRESS

5.1 General
The press is a major source of information to the public about the BBC. The press and media also provide the BBC with information about its’ audiences’ opinions and attitudes. Good relations are obviously important. All our dealings with the media should adhere to high standards of integrity. Statements, information and publicity material, must uphold BBC values such as fairness, accuracy and impartiality (see section 5.3).

5.2 BBC Publicity Departments
Publicity departments provide a specialist link between programme makers and the press and media. They help producers win attention for their programmes. They also have expertise in dealing with sensitive issues. It is sensible to involve publicity people at an early stage, either in publicising a programme or coping with interest on a controversial matter.

5.3 Publicity Material
The BBC often puts out advance press releases and publicity material to publicise its own programmes. This is an important part of drawing the audience’s attention to BBC programmes. However it is important that in rightly trying to sell our own programmes we do not do so in a way which either unfairly distorts or over-simplifies the content of the programme. The impact of a programme over which a great deal of careful judgement has been exercised, in getting the emphasis and tone of the programme just right, can be negated or obscured by a careless or over-hyped press release. BBC publicity material must adhere to the same principles of fairness and impartiality as the programmes which such material publicises.

In particular, care should be taken to ensure that in publicity material:

• quotes from contributors are used in a way which takes account of the context in which they are used in the programme
• where important elements of context have been included in the programme this is also reflected in the press release

• in programmes with a long lead time it may sometimes be necessary to remind contributors that publicity material about the programme may be released in advance of the programme

• any reporting of the results of polls and surveys in press releases meets the Producers’ Guidelines on the reporting of polls (see Chapter 35: Opinion Polls).

Programme and publicity teams should also be aware that press releases can sometimes raise as many legal issues as the programme itself. Programme Legal Advice should be asked to look at any publicity material about a programme which has required legal clearance.

5.4 The Corporate Press Office
The Corporate Press Office deals with the media on all corporate matters and also handles general queries from newspapers.

Outside normal office hours, and up to 11 p.m. every night, the Corporate Press Office acts as the spokesman for all matters relating to the BBC’s activities. The Press Office should be informed of developments in any running BBC story so that comments made to the media on behalf of the Corporation are well informed and up to date.

5.5 Controversial issues
BBC programmes can be controversial. This can be known in advance or anticipated; but it can also come without warning before or after transmission. Advance publicity can sometimes be damaging and must be calculated carefully.

Producers should make sure that publicity departments and BBC Information are fully informed about any actual or likely controversy and know who to get in touch with for further information. All contacts with the press on controversial matters – whether to do with BBC policy or programmes – should be handled through Press and Publicity. BBC contracts of employment are specific about relations with the press and media, particularly speaking to or writing for the press. Copies of programmes or of scripts should not be
released without approval. In an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment, information is valuable and should not be used carelessly. Inexperienced programme people should be forewarned against attempts to get information and material. Before speaking to the press or media, approval should be sought from Press and Publicity, who will consider, and advise on, the wider implications of commenting or making a statement.

5.6 Letters And Articles for Publication

BBC people intending to write letters and articles dealing with BBC issues should seek approval from their Head of Department (see also Chapter 10: Conflicts of Interest). Letters should also be cleared by Press and Publicity. Press officers can advise on style, tone and timing and help ensure that letters are published.
Viewers and listeners with serious complaints about what is broadcast by BBC licence fee funded services on television, radio and online may write to the Head of Programme Complaints, based in the BBC Secretary’s department. The Head of Programme Complaints is responsible for ensuring prompt investigation and reply. Programme makers are expected to co-operate fully with the Head of Programme Complaints’ enquiries.

The Programme Complaints Unit provides a clear route for complainants who wish to take it. However, the fact that complaints can ultimately be dealt with centrally does not lessen the need for programme makers to reply promptly and adequately to letters addressed to them. When complainants are dissatisfied with the programme maker’s response, it may be appropriate to refer them to the PCU – but always check with the Unit first, to establish whether the complaint is within its remit.

The PCU does not deal with complaints about World Service or the BBC’s commercial and international television services. Serious complaints about programmes broadcast by the World Service are dealt with by the Chief Executive, World Service. Complaints about the BBC’s commercial and international television services are dealt with by the Head of Programming, International Networks, BBC Worldwide.

The BBC’s Board of Governors publish a quarterly bulletin outlining complaints that have been upheld. Where a complaint is upheld the bulletin also shows what action is being taken as a result. The bulletin is a public document, which is available on the BBC’s public web site.

The Governors’ Programme Complaints Appeals Committee considers appeals from viewers and listeners who have complained about what we have broadcast and who are dissatisfied with the response from the Head of Programme Complaints or the relevant Directorate. Programme makers are expected to co-operate with the Committee’s proceedings. The point of contact is the Secretary to the Governors’ Complaints Appeals Committee in the BBC Secretary’s department.
The Broadcasting Standards Commission publishes guidance on programme matters and considers complaints from the public about programmes.

**Publication of codes**
Under the Broadcasting Act 1996, the Commission has a duty to publish a code relating to broadcasting standards, offering guidance on the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and general standards of taste and decency. All broadcasters in Britain are required to “reflect the general effect” of this code, and its provisions have been taken into account in the preparation of the BBC’s Producers’ Guidelines. The BSC also has a duty to draw up guidance on fairness and privacy, and it also commissions research and other studies.

**Complaints**
The Commission will consider complaints relating to

- unjust or unfair treatment in a programme
- unwarranted infringement of privacy in, or in connection with the obtaining of material included in, a programme
- the portrayal of violence or sexual conduct in programmes
- other matters of taste and decency.

**Who can complain?**

- **Fairness and infringement of privacy:**

  Complaints about unfair or unjust treatment and infringement of privacy are referred to as “fairness” complaints. These may be lodged only by, or on behalf of, a person or organisation “affected” by the programme concerned. However, complaints may be made on behalf of those affected – including those who have died within the preceding five years. The Commission may refuse to entertain a “fairness” complaint if it considers that the complainant has no “direct interest” in the matter, but it may interpret this latter phrase broadly.
Similarly, in considering “unwarranted infringement of privacy” the key word will be “unwarranted”. Secret recording, for instance, may or may not be considered justified according to the circumstances. It is also possible that programme material gathered in a public place may be challenged on the grounds of infringement of privacy. The way that programme makers act in gathering material may constitute breach of privacy even if the material is not transmitted.

The Commission cannot entertain a complaint if it is already the subject of court proceedings in the UK. However, complainants do not have to waive their legal rights in applying to the Commission and, because the line between unfairness and defamation is unclear, a complaint could be a rehearsal for a court action.

**Sex, violence and matters of taste and decency.**

Anyone may complain to the Commission about matters of taste and decency – “standards” complaints – within two months of the last transmission of a television programme and within three weeks of the transmission of a radio programme. The Commission has the power to extend these deadlines if it considers it appropriate to do so. The complainant does not need to have any direct interest other than to feel that the programme has breached standards of taste and decency.

**What happens if the complaint is upheld?**

If a complaint about fairness or standards is upheld, the Commission has the power to require broadcasters to publish a summary of the complaint and its findings on the complaint. The broadcaster may be required to publish the finding in the Press as well as on the air. The Commission normally requires publication for upheld “fairness” complaints, but it is very unusual for it to require publication for an upheld “standards” complaint.

**What other actions are taken?**

The Commission has no power to punish other than to require the broadcasting and/or publication of findings as set out above.

If it is proposed to re-broadcast a programme which has been the subject of a complaint upheld by the Commission, the Chief Executive, Broadcast should be consulted about what changes, if any, are appropriate in the light of the finding.
The contact point in the BBC for the cases before the Commission is The Head of Programme Complaints.