

1st July 2013

Dear PCC,

Thank you for your e-mail of 26th June conveying [the Mail's] e-mail of 24th June. Naturally, I am happy that the Daily Mail has indicated its willingness to resolve my complaint and has offered a form of words to clarify its error. However, I am a little unclear as to what is being offered. In your email you say that the Mail has offered to publish the clarification both in print on and online. However, it does not appear that the newspaper has offered to withdraw its article. I have unsuccessfully attempted to contact you by phone to check my understanding, but have decided to respond now in order to avoid delay.

I feel that the clarification offered by the Mail does not satisfactorily clarify the position; that it is important that the Mail should take down the online version of the article; and that the newspaper should commit to taking note of the content of our correspondence to ensure that the errors I have pointed out are not repeated. I imagine that this will mean that the complaint will need to be passed to the Commission to resolve.

Inadequate Clarification

I do not feel that the clarification is adequate because, especially if posted alongside the article online, it preserves the implication that a very large amount of household recycling is simply dumped. In particular I would point out:

- “In common with other newspapers...” I have searched unsuccessfully for examples of other newspapers that reported that millions of tonnes of recycling were being dumped overseas. A number of news websites reported the Mail's claims. I could find none that had printed this claim independently, but am happy to concede this point if the Mail could indicate which papers it has in mind.
- The 12 million tonnes figure relates is from 2006 and relates to material from both household and commercial sources (more than 60% being scrap metal)
- While it is not known what proportion of the recycling that is exported is ultimately reprocessed, I have provided a clear rationale for the view that the proportion must be small. The most simple and compelling is the fact that UK companies receive an income for the recycling they export. This is inexplicable unless a substantial majority of the material exported is actually useful to its buyers. This is also the view stated by Defra in its response to the Mail's article.

I would suggest that a clarification along the following lines is required:

“An article on 6th April 2013, widely repeated in other news sources, said that millions of tonnes of household waste is being dumped abroad. We are happy to clarify that:

- *Much of the recycling collected from households is reprocessed in the UK*
- *In the last year for which data is available (2006) 12 million tonnes of ‘green list’ recycling, much of it scrap metal and derived from both households and businesses, was exported for reprocessing.*

- *Although there are not clear records of the fate of each shipment, there is good reason to think that the great majority of the exported recycling was reprocessed back into raw materials.*

We apologise for any confusion caused."

I believe this expanded clarification is required in order to properly counter the damaging impact of the unsubstantiated claims made by the Mail in its article.

Withdrawing the Article

I remain convinced that part of the correct outcome from this complaint is for the online edition of the article to be withdrawn. It is now common ground between the Daily Mail and me that there is no factual basis for the headline claim of the article under discussion. I believe that it would therefore be peculiar for the online version of the article to remain on display on the Mail's website together with a 'clarification' that essentially states "the central claim of this article is not true".

However, it is not just the headline claim that is incorrect. Since the correspondence on this complaint is now rather voluminous, I have decided to summarise the errors that have emerged.

Paragraph	Error type	Notes
Headline	Major inaccuracy	Millions of tonnes / 12 million tonnes claim - this is based on (1) a 2006 export tonnage figure that relates to all recyclable material, not just household; (2) a flawed interpretation of a survey of UK reprocessors regarding their attitudes to around a third of household recycling (collected commingled, rather than separated), mistakenly applied to foreign reprocessors in regard to all exported recyclate
Standfirst	Misleading use of language	A government consultation is not exactly a vow; and the consultation on transfrontier shipment of waste is about all illegal waste exports, not just (or even primarily) green list waste The Agency has not issued an "order" to local authorities. In January it published some good practice guidance. http://a0768b4a8a31e106d8b0-50dc802554eb38a24458b98ff72d550b.r19.cf3.rackcdn.com/167_12_d ea8e5.pdf
1	Major inaccuracy	Millions of tonnes claim (see above)
2	Major inaccuracy	"Much of it ends up in landfill" - this appears to be based on the flawed interpretation of the UK reprocessors survey, and is implausible since foreign reprocessors pay UK waste companies for our recyclate
3	Misleading use of language	Erroneously refers to "Green" waste instead of "Green List". Misleading in that it is hardly surprising that the UK Government does not control what happens in other countries!
4	Minor error of fact, misleading use of	Mistakenly associates the rise in recycling exports with the use of private contractors. Unclear what is meant by "compulsory" recycling schemes, as there are no penalties for not recycling

Paragraph	Error type	Notes
	language	
5	Minor error of fact	Defra does not admit that in some countries household recycling is "simply dumped", as they make clear in their response to the Mail's article. They did state in the Transfrontier Shipment consultation that there is public concern about media stories regarding waste being dumped abroad. Waste that is dumped is more typically toxic material and waste electronics, which is expensive to treat in the UK: not recycling, which is valuable. See for example: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/dumped-in-africa-britain8217s-toxic-waste-1624869.html
6	Misleading use of language	Poorly worded. Erroneously refers to "Green" waste, when "green list" is intended. Implies that the trade in "green list" waste is illegal, when it is in fact perfectly lawful. The consultation concerns measures to clamp down on all illegal waste shipments (e.g. waste electronics, hazardous waste), including some mixed waste it is feared may be getting passed off as green list waste.
7	Major inaccuracy	The Mail's "revelations" regarding regarding recycling being sent to landfill are based on a misinterpretation of a survey of UK reproprocessors regarding their attitudes to a particular small share of household recycling
8	Major inaccuracy	Defra has not conceded that household waste or recycling is being dumped abroad in the way that the Mail implies. The points regarding waste electronics are reasonable - but completely separate
9	Misleading use of language	It is wholly unclear which development Doretta Cocks is shocked by, but since most of the "developments" reported in the article thus far are untrue, her views on them (no doubt accurately reported) are perhaps cast into a different light.
10	Accurate	I assume that the Mail has quoted Doretta Cocks' speculation about what "most people" think correctly. A significant amount of the UK's recycling is reprocessed in the UK
11	Unclear	Unclear which "revelation" is being referred to; no real revelations have been made in the article thus far
12	Irrelevant	Straightforward quotation from Defra - again, relating to all illegal waste export, not just material derived from household recycling
13-16	Misleading use of quotations	Consist largely of quotations from Environment Agency documents and website. Note that these indicate only that many illegal waste exports <i>include</i> waste derived from "poorly performing" household recycling systems - the implication being that waste from other sources is also included, and that better performing local authorities are not giving rise to the problem. These points undermine the Mail's central claim that all waste exported goes to landfill.

Paragraph	Error type	Notes
17	Major inaccuracy	The claim that (any significant amount of) household waste is being dumped overseas has not been substantiated
18	Major inaccuracy	This repeats the flawed interpretation of a survey of UK reprocessors regarding their attitudes to around a third of household recycling (collected commingled, rather than separated)
19	Misleading use of language	I assume that the Mail has quoted Defra correctly here. However, while the drive to increase recycling rates may originate in EC targets, this does not invalidate the point that it reduces landfill and incineration, and that it reduces GHG emissions.
20	Major inaccuracy	Error of cause and effect. Fortnightly collections are typically introduced because they are consistently shown to push up recycling rates due to the restricted space available for general waste. The Mail implies that recycling has been introduced only so as to allow fortnightly collection, which is incorrect.
21-22	Accurate	Direct quotations from Mrs Cocks, which I assume are accurate
Picture story	Misleading and works against the Mail's argument	The infamous Newcastle Under Lyme 9 bags and bins... Note that one is a food caddy for use in the kitchen, so that food waste can then be transferred to the larger food caddy; and some of the bags are for less commonly occurring waste (e.g. the red and white sack is for textiles). Newcastle Under Lyme is a poor choice of authority to mention in the context of waste exports. By ensuring that waste is carefully separated, it is able to use UK reprocessors and gives excellent information about where materials go. See for example here: http://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/environment_content.asp?id=SXD1BE-A7812775&cat=1349
23	Irrelevant	Accurate statement, but relates to an entirely separate Defra consultation
24	Accurate	Accurate quote from Defra
25-28	Irrelevant	Concern the separate topic of plastic bag charges and litter

The article errs in almost every paragraph, with the exception of some direct quotations and paragraphs not directly related to the question of the export of household recycling. The Mail has already agreed that its headline claim and therefore the paragraphs that purport to explain it) is not based on fact. In the course of the correspondence regarding my complaint, the sources of other important errors in the argument have emerged, such as the claim that “most” recycling is discarded. I have also shown that even the rather more peripheral statements and quotations are worded in inaccurate or misleading ways, or describe reactions to claims that are not true. The few paragraphs that are not erroneous are either direct quotations, or relate to entirely separate topics.

The article therefore cannot be readily edited so as to make it accurate. If it remains in place unedited, its inaccuracies will continue to mislead the public regarding recycling. It is essential that it should be removed from the website without further delay.

Learning from the Errors

The Mail's article is one of several published by the newspaper in recent years denigrating recycling, many of them being based on misinterpretations that have been brought to light in the correspondence about this complaint. I am concerned that the Mail should take on board the information I have provided that corrects its mistaken views so as to ensure that they are not further repeated. The Mail has not as yet undertaken to add my corrections to its erroneous notes regarding recycling, and I therefore believe that it would be appropriate for the Commission to state that they must do so if the risk of further misleading stories is to be avoided.

I hope that this matter can now be put to the Commission for a final view on the matter, and look forward to a speedy resolution. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch,

Yours sincerely

Peter Jones