

## **BBC News online: 7 April 2017 School compensation claim story**

### **Original Complaint (sent 7 April 2017)**

Summary: Inaccurate journalism and basic statistical errors

Full Complaint: The news story uses false comparisons, selective use of figures and basic arithmetical errors to create a highly misleading picture about the sums paid out for compensation claims in schools. It contains at least 3 major inaccuracies, errors and distortions (detailed below). Taken together, they are clear evidence of a story that manipulates the facts to fit a predetermined narrative. They cannot reasonably be seen as isolated minor errors or put down to journalistic licence or differences in interpretation.

1) The story takes a total amount that Local Education Authorities have paid out over three years, and compares it to the basic salary cost of 320 of new teachers for a single year, implying that the first could pay for the second. The only justification for this nonsensical piece of arithmetic is that it allows the piece to make an attention-grabbing comparison that grossly inflates the scale of the problem.

2) The figures combine payouts for accidents with those for child abuse, conflating two very different issues and leading to an exaggerated sense of the problem of 'pupil mishaps' (the main focus for the story).

3) The statement about an "apparent doubling in school payouts" between 2014 and 2016 is highly misleading, given that the increase is entirely the result of a single payout for a rare, catastrophic accident. Even though the facts about this payout are mentioned later in the piece, the statement was, as quoted, unhelpful and added to the overall misleading narrative.

### **Response from the BBC (received 12 May 2017)**

[Received after a phone call to chase up. In its response, the BBC erroneously stated that a reply had been sent on 4 April.]

*Dear Mr Gill*

*Thank you for getting in touch about our article reporting that pupil mishaps including a blindfolded child running into a goalpost and pupil hit by a cricket ball have cost schools £7m in three years, it has emerged.*

*(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-39351183>)*

*I discussed your concerns with the team responsible for the piece and the first point to make is that the teachers figure was included both because it is correct at NQT rate and does give an indication of how much is paid out in compensation.*

*We do not say the latter could fund the former and it is intended to answer a question - is the number a big one?*

*In terms of the inclusion of sexual abuse in schools within these figures, this is because they were a key and growing portion of the compensation payouts reported back to us by local education authorities. Indeed they were included*

*in the FOI responses in and amongst and the range of accidents/mishaps and so we reported them accordingly.*

*In terms of the increase of these payouts, the numbers have risen year on year from £1.7m in 2014 to £2.1m in 2015 to £3.5m in 2016 - and we are very clear about the Essex payout skewing the figures. (With the county council paying £1.2m of the £1.9 sum) Even without it, the figures have still risen.*

*We'd only add in closing that we believe it's well within the public interest to inform our audience of the kind of compensation claims being made in schools which are being settled with public money.*

*We don't suggest there is an epidemic, but believe we explored both sides of the issue in a measured way, looking at the reasons for compensation claims rather than the size of the compensation payouts, which some people would suggest were for run-of-the-mill playground activity.*

*Thank you once again for taking the time and trouble to get in touch with your views.*

**My new complaint in reply to the BBC response (sent 15 May 2017)**

Thank you for responding to my complaint. I am not satisfied with it, as it fails to adequately respond to my reasons for stating that the piece manipulated figures to exaggerate the problem.

To pick up my first and strongest criticism, your reply fails to justify a key figure from the piece, comparing the cost of claims over 3 years with the cost of teacher salaries over a single year. Please explain why the time period of 3 years was chosen, and not 1 year. My criticism is that the only reasonable comparison would be to use the same time period – namely 1 year - for each figure. So why choose 3 years?

Your reply says “we do not say the latter could fund the former.” This is untrue. The piece states “the total sum paid out [...] was £7.25m over three years, enough to fund the annual salaries of more than 320 newly qualified teachers for a year.”

Your reply also states that the comparison “is intended to answer a question - is the number a big one?” I agree it is helpful to give readers a sense of what figures like these mean. But by tripling the annual figure spent on claims, the comparison will only serve to make readers think the problem is bigger than it is.

I am also not entirely satisfied with your response around the inclusion of claims for child sexual abuse. However, in the interest of making progress, I am not going to pursue this further.

I look forward to your reply.