

Press reporting on a death

Information for the public

About us and how we can help

We are IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation), the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspapers and magazines.

We protect people's rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press.

Website: www.ipso.co.uk

Email: inquiries@ipso.co.uk

If you need advice about the Editors' Code of Practice or are concerned about a story or a journalist's behaviour, you can contact us on 0300 123 2220. In an emergency after hours or at the weekend, you can also contact us using our emergency 24-hour advice service on 07799 903929.

Our staff are also able to help you to deal with urgent harassment issues. They will talk about your concerns, and can give practical advice and guidance. In some cases we can send out a notice, which will allow you to pass on a specific request to the industry (for example, to stop phoning you) or concerns about the future publication of material which might break the code.

If you want to make a complaint, you will need to do this in writing, either on our website (www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint) or by emailing inquiries@ipso.co.uk.

About this guidance

This guidance is for people who have suffered a recent loss of someone close to them. It gives information about what to expect when newspapers and magazines report a death or an inquest, as well as about how we can help.

The main points:

- Journalists are always allowed to go to inquests.
- Journalists are allowed to report anything which is said or given as evidence at an inquest.
- Journalists must follow the rules set by the Code.
- Journalists and editors are allowed to choose what information they want to report, and might not report everything which has been said at an inquest.
- Members of the public who are concerned about press coverage or the behaviour of a journalist should contact us for advice on 0300 123 2220 or through our website at www.ipso.co.uk.

Why do newspapers report deaths?

Newspapers regularly publish stories about a person's death, particularly if:

- the person has died in unusual circumstances
- the person has died unexpectedly
- the death has particularly affected a community.

Newspapers may publish information about someone's death as an obituary in their obituary section, or as a news story. How this is reported will depend on the circumstances and profile of the person who has died.

Many journalists think it is their responsibility to report inquests as part of the principle of 'open justice'. The purpose of open justice and reporting from inquests is to:

- make sure that the public understands the reasons why someone has died
- make sure that deaths are not kept secret;
- draw attention to circumstances which may lead to more deaths or injuries and to prevent this from happening
- clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death.

What rules must journalists follow when reporting that someone has died?

The press has a right to report the fact that someone has died, even if friends and family of the person who has died are unhappy with this. However, journalists must follow the rules in the Code.

Journalists must make sure that:

- they approach members of the public with sympathy and discretion
- they do not publish information that might cause any unnecessary upset to friends and family of the person who has died
- they do not break the news of a death to the immediate family
- reports about a death are accurate
- they do not harass people
- in cases where someone has died by suicide, they do not publish too much information about how they died.

Are journalists allowed to go to inquests and what are they allowed to report?

Sometimes families are surprised when there are journalists at an inquest. However, journalists are always allowed to go to inquests and have a legal right to do so.

Unless the coroner (or the sheriff in Scotland) puts a restriction on reporting, a journalist is allowed to report anything which is said during an inquest. However, journalists must make sure that what they publish is not insensitive and particularly that it is not unnecessarily graphic. They do not have to check the accuracy of evidence given, but must report what was said accurately.

Even if there is only one reporter at an inquest, a report from the inquest may appear in many different publications, including in national newspapers. This is because the reporter might work for an agency and might pass the story to more than one publication. In other cases, another newspaper might see the original story and also want to report the inquest.

Newspapers also use a range of other sources. This can also include information which is already available publicly from official sources such as the electoral roll and council tax registers. Journalists might also get information from news stories which the person has been involved in previously. The police or other emergency services might also give newspapers information.

What are the extra rules about reporting suicide?

A death by suicide causes particular difficulties for surviving family members, often including difficult decisions about what to tell friends and family about how a loved one died. Many families want to limit the number of people who know this highly sensitive information.

It is important to take into account that a report of an inquest will nearly always include the coroner's decision about the cause of death, including in cases of death by suicide. It is also likely that an inquest will hear evidence about the person's state of mind in the period leading up to their death. This may also include personal difficulties that would otherwise remain private.

However, the Code does limit the amount of detail that can be included in reports of suicides. The code says journalists must not include 'excessive detail' about how someone has died. This is because there is evidence that reporting this information can lead to other people copying the way that someone killed themselves. Suicide notes and personal letters are not normally read out in inquests, unless the coroner (or sheriff) decides it is important. If they are read out, journalists are free to report the contents.

What to expect from journalists and how to respond

In some cases, families and friends of the person who has died choose to get in touch with journalists. They hope to use media coverage to tell others about what has happened, pay tribute, and sometimes even to campaign to stop the same thing from happening again.

In other cases, some people who have been bereaved find themselves in a situation where they find it difficult to deal with media interest.

Journalists must make sure that the information they publish is accurate and may want to speak to friends and family of the person who has died to check the information they have collected is correct. Journalists may also ask friends or relatives if they would like to say anything about the person or to ask for photos. If you have lost someone close and there is some media interest, a journalist may contact you by phone, email, on social media or in person.

Under the Editors' code, once you have asked journalists not to contact you, they should not do so again unless there is a specific public interest in doing so.

Journalists might want to contact you for:

- details about the person who has died, such as their full name, age or occupation
- information about how the person died
- details about what the person was like and how they will be remembered
- details about any memorial service or commemoration
- photographs of the person who has died (journalists probably won't be able to guarantee that they can return any photos, so give them copies and not originals).

It is up to you how you would like to respond to any approaches from journalists. Some people like to pay tribute in a public way to the person who has died. You might find it helpful to write a tribute including all this information and make this available to journalists. This might help you to express yourself clearly and fully. You may also be able to direct journalists to the tribute, rather than answering any more questions yourself.

You might want to appoint someone you trust or a family member to deal with all the enquiries from journalists on your behalf. If you are struggling to deal with the media, there are some simple things you can do to help prevent any intrusion.

- Change your voicemail to say that you do not want to speak to journalists, as well as giving contact details for a family spokesperson.
- Pin a short note on your front door making it clear that you do not want to speak to any journalists.

If you need more guidance, you can contact us on 0300 123 2220. In an emergency after office hours or at the weekend, you can also contact us using our emergency 24-hour advice service on 07799 903929. In some cases, we can issue a notice, which will allow you to pass on a specific request to the industry

Can journalists use information and photos from social media?

Journalists may take information from social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as any other websites where someone might publish information about themselves. They might do this to find pictures of the person who has died, details about what they were like, or to see how friends and family are paying tribute.

In most cases, journalists are allowed to publish photos and comments posted on these websites if there are no privacy settings protecting the photos or comments and they do not show anything which might be private.

If you are worried about how journalists have used information from social media, you might find it helpful to read our guidance about this, which is available on our website.

Other helpful organisations

[Coroners' Courts Support Service \(www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk\)](http://www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk)

The Coroners' Courts Support Service is a registered charity whose volunteers give emotional and practical support to families and other witnesses going to inquests at coroners' courts.

[Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide \(uk-sobs.org.uk\)](http://uk-sobs.org.uk)

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide are a self-help organisation and aim to provide a safe, confidential environment in which bereaved people can share their experiences and feelings, giving and gaining support from each other.

[Cruse Bereavement Care \(www.cruse.org.uk\)](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Cruse Bereavement Care offer support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies, and work to improve how society cares for bereaved people.

Cruse offer support face-to-face, by phone, email and on their website. They have a Freephone national helpline (0808 808 1677) and local services, and a website (hopeagain.org.uk) specifically for children and young people.

[INQUEST \(www.inquest.org.uk\)](http://www.inquest.org.uk)

INQUEST provides a specialist, comprehensive advice service to bereaved people, lawyers, other advice and support agencies, the media, MPs and the wider public on deaths and their investigation.

[Papyrus \(www.papyrus-uk.org\)](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

Papyrus are a national charity for preventing young suicide. They provide confidential support on suicide through HOPELineUK (0800 068 41 41).

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[Samaritans \(www.samaritans.org\)](http://www.samaritans.org)

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and you can call them on 116 123.

[Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide \(uk-sobs.org.uk\)](http://uk-sobs.org.uk)

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