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**Dame Caroline Dinenage MP**  
**Chair, Culture, Media and Sport Committee**  
**By email**

29 May 2026

Dear Dame Caroline,

I am writing further to Dame Melanie Dawes' letter of 21 May 2026 about the BBC *Panorama* programme on the Channel 4 series *Married at First Sight UK*, to provide additional detail and respond to the Committee's questions.

As set out in our previous letter, the allegations raised by *Panorama* are shocking and deeply disturbing. They underline the importance of ensuring that all those who take part in television programmes are treated with care and properly supported.

Ofcom's work in this area is grounded in legislation passed by Parliament. We operate within a clear statutory framework which defines both our responsibilities and our powers. Under the Communications Act 2003, we must make sure that standards that protect people from unfair treatment and unwarranted infringements of privacy in programmes are maintained. The Broadcasting Act 1996 requires us to keep under review the rules and practices broadcasters must follow. It also requires Ofcom to consider and adjudicate on complaints made by any individuals who believe they have been unfairly treated or their privacy has been infringed.

Our primary role is to put these rules in place so that the right conditions exist from the outset to protect people who take part in programmes. The Broadcasting Code requires that broadcasters give careful consideration to the potential impact on participants, especially where programmes may involve challenging or sensitive situations. We strengthened these protections in 2021 following a [review of participant welfare](#). This introduced clearer expectations that broadcasters should take due care of contributors who may be at risk of significant harm. In practice, this means identifying risks early, putting safeguards in place, and ensuring people understand what they are agreeing to before they take part. These measures are designed to prevent harm and to ensure that participants are properly supported throughout the process, before, during and after filming.

Where participants believe that the protections in place have not been enough or have not worked as they should, handling and adjudicating on participants' complaints becomes an important part of our role. It provides people with a clear way to raise concerns and have them properly considered. Where people feel they have been treated unfairly or their privacy has been infringed, we assess those concerns carefully against our rules. Where a complaint outlines concerns which raise a case for a broadcaster to answer, we will investigate.

Complaints of this nature are often highly personal and can involve people who have experienced distressing circumstances. Protecting their wellbeing is our priority. For that reason, we treat such complaints in strict confidence and do not publicly confirm whether we have received a complaint from participants in a particular programme. This approach protects those involved, helps ensure that people feel able to come forward, and ensures that our processes remain fair and independent.

While we understand the Committee's and the public's interest in this matter, we are not able to share further details about any complaints in this case for the reasons set out above.

Following the concerns raised by *Panorama*, we have been in direct contact with Channel 4 and have made clear that we expect to be kept closely informed of its response. The broadcaster has commissioned two external reviews, one focused on the welfare of those involved during production and the other on what changes should be made going forward. We expect these reviews to be thorough and completed as quickly as possible. We will examine their findings carefully, alongside any steps taken by Channel 4, and will consider whether further regulatory action is required.

Alongside this, we are continuing our own work. We keep our rules and guidance under active review to ensure they remain effective as the broadcasting landscape evolves, particularly in areas such as reality programming where the potential impact on participants can be significant. As part of this, we are assessing whether the current framework continues to provide the right level of protection. If the evidence shows that more needs to be done to protect people, we will strengthen our approach and will keep the Committee informed.

I hope this is a clear and helpful response. I have addressed the Committee's questions in further detail in the annex below. My team and I remain available to provide any additional information the Committee may require.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cristina Nicolotti Squires', written in a cursive style.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires

## ANNEX

### 1. What powers does Ofcom have to investigate complaints about the treatment of participants on reality TV?

Ofcom's powers come from two pieces of legislation.

Under the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom has a general duty to secure, in the carrying out of its functions, the application of standards that provide adequate protection to members of the public and all other persons from both i) unfair treatment in programmes; and ii) unwarranted infringements of privacy.<sup>1</sup>

Under the Broadcasting Act 1996 Ofcom is required to draw up, and from time-to-time review, a code giving guidance as to principles to be observed, and practices to be followed in connection with the avoidance of:

- a) unjust or unfair treatment in programmes, or
- b) unwarranted infringement of privacy in, or in connection with the obtaining of material included, in such programmes.<sup>2</sup>

In order to fulfil our duties, Ofcom has set Rule 7.1 under Section Seven (Fairness) of the Broadcasting Code ("the Code"):

*"Broadcasters must avoid unjust or unfair treatment of individuals or organisations in programmes."*

In addition to this rule, Section Seven (Fairness) of the Code contains "Practices to be followed" by broadcasters when dealing with individuals or organisations participating in, or otherwise directly affected by, programmes, or in the making of programmes. Unlike a breach of a Rule, a failure to follow a Practice does not necessarily result in a breach of the Code. If a broadcaster does not follow the relevant Practice(s) during the production of a programme, the failure to do so will only constitute a breach of the Code where it results in unfairness to an individual or organisation in the programme.

Ofcom has a further statutory duty to consider and adjudicate on complaints which are made to it under Section Seven (Fairness) and Eight (Privacy) of the Code.<sup>3</sup> If Ofcom finds that a broadcaster has seriously, deliberately, repeatedly or recklessly breached the Code, Ofcom has the power to impose sanctions on the broadcaster. The sanctions available to Ofcom include a direction not to repeat a programme, a direction to broadcast a summary of Ofcom's findings and/or a financial penalty.

#### Background to Protections for participants in programmes under Section Seven (Fairness) of the Code

In 2019, in response to public concern about the welfare of contributors, Ofcom launched a review of our protections for participants in programmes. The core aim of the review was to make sure people who take part in television and radio programmes are protected from harm.

As a result of the review and public consultation, a further Practice (7.15) was added into the Code:

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<sup>1</sup> Section 3(2)(f) Communications Act 2003 ("CA03")

<sup>2</sup> Section 107 Broadcasting Act (as amended) ("BA96")

<sup>3</sup> Section 110(1) BA96, and subject to the remaining provisions of Part V of the BA96.

*“Broadcasters should take due care over the welfare of a contributor who might be at risk of significant harm as a result of taking part in a programme, except where the subject matter is trivial or their participation minor.”<sup>4</sup>*

This new Practice came into force for all programmes that began production on or after 5 April 2021.

This Practice creates a clear expectation for broadcasters to identify and mitigate the risk of significant harm to participants in their programmes. A contributor might be regarded as being at risk of significant harm for reasons including (but not limited to) the following:

- they are considered a vulnerable person;
- they are not used to being in the public eye;
- the programme involves being filmed in an artificial or constructed environment;
- the programme is likely to attract a high level of press, media and social media interest;
- key editorial elements of the programme include potential confrontation, conflict, emotionally challenging situations; or
- the programme requires them to discuss, reveal, or engage with sensitive, life changing or private aspects of their lives.

At the same time, Ofcom amended Practice 7.3 to improve the information given to participants prior to their participation in a programme to ensure that their informed consent is obtained:

*“Where a person is invited to make a contribution to a programme (except when the subject matter is trivial or their participation minor) they should normally, at an appropriate stage:*

- be informed about potential risks arising from their participation in the programme which may affect their welfare (insofar as these can be reasonably anticipated at the time) and any steps the broadcaster and/or programme maker intends to take to mitigate these”.

In addition, we provided broadcasters with detailed guidance on how to comply with Practice 7.15. This explains that the level of care required for participants will depend on the circumstances of each case. The guidance makes clear that programme makers are responsible for identifying the potential risks to the contributor and to assess and take any reasonable steps to manage or mitigate those risks. The guidance advises that a risk assessment should be considered at the earliest stage in the production process, and it sets out “best practice” to follow regarding compliance guidelines, procedures, record keeping, the use of independent experts to provide specialist advice at different stages of the production, and the provision of care during production and post-production.

#### Background to Protections for viewers under Section Two (Harm and Offence) of the Code

In addition to the fairness and privacy requirements under the Broadcasting Act 1996, Ofcom also has duties to set standards for the content of television and radio programmes to secure the standards objectives set by Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

In 2021, following our consultation, Ofcom also introduced additional wording to Rule 2.3 in Section Two (Harm and Offence) of the Code to make it clear that material which may cause offence

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<sup>4</sup> Practice 7.15, Section Seven (Fairness) of the Code

<sup>5</sup> The ‘standards objectives’ are set out in section 319(2) CA03. Further, section 319(4) sets out particular matters to which Ofcom must have regard in setting or revising its standards code, including the degree of harm or offence likely to be caused by the inclusion of any particular sort of material in programmes generally, or in programmes of a particular description.

to viewers includes the treatment of people who appear to be put at risk of significant harm as a result of their taking part in a programmes.

## **2. What steps do you take to make reality TV participants aware of what Ofcom can and cannot do in relation to complaints?**

We believe it is important that participants have knowledge of these protections. Ofcom continues to highlight the protections afforded to participants by publishing information to the public ahead of the broadcast of popular reality shows.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, our procedures for considering complaints under the Fairness and Privacy aspects of the Code can be found on our website.<sup>7</sup> These procedures set out, amongst other things, who may make a complaint and the process by which Ofcom considers and adjudicates on complaints. Our procedures describe the possible outcomes that are available to complainants who pursue a complaint through Ofcom's complaints processes.

When we receive a complaint which raises fairness issues which Ofcom can investigate, we make direct contact with a complainant and provide information to them which explains Ofcom's remit and the possible outcomes of the process. If an individual complains to us that they were harmed and treated unfairly in any of these programmes, we will take this very seriously and will investigate it as a matter of priority, if the relevant statutory criteria for Ofcom to investigate are met.<sup>8</sup> When we investigate a fairness complaint, Ofcom keeps in regular contact with the complainant and provides them with information about each stage of the process.

## **3. The researchers on whose work the Panorama documentary is based identified limitations with Ofcom's processes for dealing with complaints about breaches of the broadcasting code in relation to reality TV. Their data suggests that Ofcom would find it difficult to adjudicate whether "due care" had been followed during production. Is that an accurate assessment? If so, do you need additional powers or are there steps you could take within your existing powers to address these limitations?**

We have yet to see the data gathered by researchers from Aston University about the welfare of participants in reality TV programmes and *Married at First Sight UK* in particular. We have written to them directly to request more detailed information on their findings. When we receive this, we will consider it carefully.

As mentioned above, we consulted on and revised Section Seven (Fairness) and Section Two (Harm and offence) of the Code in 2021. We periodically review our Code and related guidance to ensure that our rules and regulatory processes remain effective. We will continue to review any evidence made available to us, including the findings of Channel 4's external reviews into contributor care on *Married at First Sight UK*. We have made clear to Channel 4's management that we expect to be kept informed of the progress of these reviews and for them to be expedited as a matter of priority. We will examine their findings closely, as well as any action Channel 4 takes in response. We will

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<sup>6</sup> For example, [Protecting people taking part in reality shows](#) and [Sun, sea and support for Islanders](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Procedures for the consideration and adjudication of Fairness and Privacy complaints](#), and, [Procedures for the consideration and adjudication of Fairness and Privacy complaints on BBC broadcasting services and BBC on demand programme services](#)

<sup>8</sup> Section 114(2) BA96 sets out instances where Ofcom must not entertain or proceed with consideration of a fairness complaint, such as if the matter complained of is the subject of legal proceedings; the person affected has a legal remedy and it's not appropriate for Ofcom to consider the complaint; or the complaint is "frivolous"; or for any other reason it would be inappropriate for Ofcom to entertain or proceed with consideration of the complaint.

conduct a timely review of our rules and guidance and will not hesitate to strengthen these if we need to.

We commit to writing back to the Committee to make clear if following our review, any additional legislative powers are required to ensure participants are protected. .

**4. The researchers have said that some reality TV participants have been told by Ofcom that their complaints were “not entertained”. When you reach these findings, what steps do you take to direct complaints to other sources of advice?**

As detailed above, it is essential that Ofcom maintains the confidentiality of these complainants. Therefore, we are unable to provide further detail to the Committee on the nature of any complaints we have received and assessed.

We sometimes direct complainants to other organisations who may be able to help or advise them such as the police or the ICO. Occasionally, we may also suggest they seek legal advice. We decide this based on the details of each individual case and the issues they raise.

Ofcom can only “entertain” a fairness complaint if the relevant statutory criteria are met.<sup>9</sup> When we do “entertain” a fairness complaint, Ofcom keeps in regular contact with the complainant and provides them with information about each stage of the process.

**5. When were concerns about the treatment of contestants on *Married at First Sight* first raised with you?**

Complaints about unfair treatment from the participants in programmes

It is our longstanding policy for complaints made under our fairness and privacy rules – where individuals believe they have been unfairly treated in a programme – to keep these confidential while we investigate, because of their sensitive and personal nature and to protect complainants’ privacy.

Complaints from viewers about a programme

As referred to in our answer to Question 1, viewers can also complain to Ofcom about what they have seen on a programme, under rules which concern “generally accepted standards” in programme content – these are referred to as “standards complaints”.

Ofcom has received standards complaints from viewers about *Married at First Sight UK* since the first series of the programme in 2015. Some of these complaints relate to concerns around harmful and offensive behaviours displayed by participants, as shown in the broadcast programmes.

Reality television is a format that many viewers value. At the same time, it is not unusual for Ofcom to receive high numbers of complaints about particular broadcast scenes. However, the volume of complaints we receive from members of the public does not automatically trigger an investigation, nor does it mean a broadcaster has necessarily breached our Code. Each standards complaint we receive from viewers of *Married at First Sight UK* is carefully assessed in line with our Code and published procedures; as part of that assessment, we take into account the full context and audiences expectations with regards to a particular programme’s established format.

After careful assessment, Ofcom did not consider that any of the standards complaints we received from viewers about *Married at First Sight UK* have raised potentially substantive issues which warranted investigation.

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 8.

**6. According to BBC reports you have said you are waiting for Channel 4 to complete its investigation before taking further action. Given the seriousness of the issues raised, why can you not launch your own investigation in the meantime?**

We take the allegations raised in the recent BBC *Panorama* documentary very seriously.

If an individual complains to us that they were harmed and treated unfairly in any reality programme, we will investigate it as a matter of priority, if appropriate. However, as explained above, we keep these confidential while we investigate, because of their sensitive and personal nature and to protect complainants' privacy.

Channel 4 has told Ofcom that the external reviews will be expedited. We have asked Channel 4 to provide us with an advance copy, and we will urgently review the findings to determine whether any regulatory action is necessary.

I hope this provides a clear response to your questions and demonstrates how seriously Ofcom is taking these matters and the steps we are taking at this stage.

I would be happy to answer any further questions that the Committee may have.