

Ese group fraud case

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It was for an article I wrote in January 2020 about a bunch of solar home energy cheats from Liverpool called ESE Group Limited - "one of Britain's largest suppliers of green energy solutions", according to its website.

In a previous article about this lot I'd told how the company, then called ESE Services, was found in breach of the Renewable Energy Consumer Code for sending junkmail and making cold calls that "misled consumers into thinking they needed to sign up to a health check of their existing solar PV systems, a maintenance package or to agree to new warranties".

Later, I heard from the son of an 89-year-old widow who had been contacted by ESE Group with the offer of a "free health check" for her home solar energy system.

So I forwarded a letter signed by Mr Cleave's mother giving ESE Group permission to discuss her complaint with the Mirror, but Fredson then accused me of attempting to "effectively make decisions on her behalf". He said that he'd complain to the Independent Press Standards Organisation, IPSO, even before the new article was published.

After it appeared, the firm's lawyer told IPSO that the Mirror should carry an apology because, among other things, I'd failed to give the company the chance to comment, despite the fact that I'd found it impossible to constructively engage with Fredson.

The company also claimed that I was wrong to state that the sales visit to Mrs Cleave came about following an unsolicited approach, saying that she was a customer and making contact with her was part of their contract.

That, I argued, was splitted hairs. How did that contract come about? In the words of ESE Group's own lawyer, Mrs Cleave's late husband "joined us as a maintenance customer in 2017 after a telephone call to discuss the service we offer."

What followed was 20 months of argument between the Mirror, an IPSO complaints officer, and ESE Group's solicitor Liz Goodwin. The latter is a former senior crown prosecution lawyer, according to ESE's website. As Mr Cleave told me, this "begs the question why would a reputable company require an in-house legal counsel if not to deal with the multitude of complaints. Forgive me for being a little sceptical."

The upshot of innumerable email exchanges over many months was that the Mirror was ordered to publish an apology running to almost 450 words, which we carried in September 2021. Not that I blame IPSO, they were up against a company that lies for a living.

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The answer to Mr Cleave's rhetorical question about ESE's need for a company lawyer with experience of criminal law might now have become apparent. I've heard from a trading standards department that ESE Group has since been prosecuted for exactly the sort of disgraceful behaviour described in my "inaccurate" article, and more besides.

The company pleaded guilty at Reading Crown Court to "knowingly or recklessly" breaking the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations with a string of deceptive tactics stretching over more than three years, from November 2017 to February 2021.

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