

Barnsley Chronicle Ltd Annual IPSO report April 2020

Introduction:

The Barnsley Chronicle is a weekly newspaper that has covered the geographical and municipal borough of Barnsley since 1858.

It is owned and operated by the Hewitt family and is part of the wider Acredula Group which has business interests in book publishing, B2B magazine production, public relations, graphic design and social media management.

The Chronicle is the largest-circulating weekly newspaper in Yorkshire and remains one of the biggest-selling weeklies in the UK.

The paper covers local news for the Barnsley audience – there is no regional content for South Yorkshire or the wider region.

As well as the Chronicle, the company also publishes the Holme Valley Review, a free monthly publication. Since our last report, publication of our weekly free newspaper - The Barnsley Independent - has been suspended due to the coronavirus outbreak. A decision on whether this publication will return will be made by the company in the next few months.

Our editorial standards:

The Barnsley Chronicle sets out to be an authoritative, trustworthy journal and takes an independent position on the material it carries.

Stories are verified as much as possible by the editorial team before publication.

Over the last few years, the newspaper has built up substantial audiences on social media (the Facebook page has approaching 50,000 likes while it has almost 20,000 followers on Twitter).

As with most media outlets, we use these extensive online connections to search out story ideas, follow up leads and make contact with people.

However, we have a strict policy that we do not publish a story obtained from social media sources without first checking its accuracy and authenticity

We do not share / re-tweet posts where we are unable to confirm authenticity.

When we follow up a story garnered from social media, our general procedure is to contact the original source and ask for their co-operation.

If that is not possible, we will then take alternative steps to check accuracy. These steps might include directly contacting other people mentioned in the original post, for example.

As in my last two reports, I can confirm that we still refuse to carry stories emanating from social media where we have not been able to confirm their accuracy.

I believe this is the responsible stance to take and do not envisage this changing while I remain as editor.

In simple terms. our policy is to treat social media leads as nothing more than tip-offs that may or not turn out to be true – much like the traditional ‘overheard conversation in a pub’

Dealing with social media – particularly users’ comments – has proved one of the most challenging aspects of the editorial department’s role in the last

couple of years.

We are grateful to IPSO for issuing guidance on the whole issue of social media last year and this guidance has proved particularly helpful.

It has given us something tangible to refer to and I believe our reporters feel much more confident in dealing with complaints about social media - in particular their use of it in news articles - than they did a couple of years ago.

In my last report, I mentioned that a significant percentage of complaints we receive actually related to users' comments on social media rather than the accuracy of the story.

Thankfully, this problem has eased over the last year. I think the message is slowly getting through to people that social media platforms offer a melting pot of contrasting opinions, consequently, the number of people getting in touch to say: "I don't like a comment on your Facebook page - can you remove it?" Have subsided greatly.

The Chronicle continues to cover things such as council meetings and public meetings in the traditional way – ie a reporter in attendance.

If the issues being discussed are contentious, it would be expected that our reporters would contact both sides to ensure a story is balanced.

If people choose not to speak to us, we always make it clear in the story that they have been offered the opportunity but chose not to take it rather than leave readers in any doubt.

Our responsible person(s):

As editor, the paper's nominated responsible person for IPSO compliance is Andrew Harrod. In the event of his absence, this responsibility would pass to the deputy editor, Josh Timlin. Please note this structure has changed since last year's report was compiled due to the departure of former deputy, Mike Cotton.

Our complaints handling process:

Any minor complaints will generally be dealt with initially by the reporter involved in preparing the original story. Our editorial staff are instructed not to shy away from making a correction where it is warranted.

Occasionally, a complainant may make contact via phone or in person and ask to speak to someone 'in charge'.

These calls would initially be dealt with by the news desk and the deputy editor who works on the news desk will often assess the seriousness of the complaint.

If it can be resolved promptly and amicably then he is empowered to draft and arrange publication of a suitable correction.

It is our aim to keep the complaints process as simple as possible.

Occasionally, a complainant may insist on speaking to the editor – bypassing the reporter and news desk – and our staff are not instructed to put anyone off contacting me directly.

My phone number and direct email address is on our website and if readers contact the switchboard, they are readily put through to me.

A copy of our complaints procedure is on the website

and also appears regularly in the newspaper on the letters page.

The IPSO compliance artwork features both in-print and online.

The wording for such is:

At the Barnsley Chronicle, we try to get things right but occasionally, we make mistakes.

If you have a complaint about a story featured in our newspaper or on our website, please contact the news desk on Barnsley 734262 or email editorial@barnsley-chronicle.co.uk.

If we are unable to resolve your complaint to your satisfaction, the matter can be referred to the Independent Press Standards Organisation of which we are a member.

We abide by the Editors' Code of Practice as demanded by IPSO.

For details on the code and what you should do should you be unsatisfied with the way we handle your complaint, please visit their website – www.ipso.co.uk.

We accept complaints in most formats – phone, letter, email or in person.

By virtue of its public nature, if a complaint is posted on one of our social media channels, we would normally request direct contact details so we can investigate the matter further.

Our training process:

All staff have been briefed on our policy regarding complaints handling. A copy of the Code of Editors has been included in the handbook given to all members of the editorial team on their first day.

A copy is posted on the office notice board and a fresh copy is distributed to every member of the team when they join the company.

Copies of the IPSO guidance booklets 'Journalism: Children's rights' and 'Dealing with the press if you're involved in a major incident' have been circulated among the staff so they can get an appreciation of issues as they may affect our readers. I think this has been a valuable exercise.

A recent churn of staff means we now have quite an inexperienced team of journalists - although they have all completed NCTJ-approved training courses.

Consequently, they already have a good understanding of the 'theory' of media law, privacy and ethics etc - but we work with them constantly to ensure they quickly grasp how all this theory translates into the working world.

This will only improve over time.

During the period relevant to this report, we have not organised any formal training on the IPSO code but our compliance with it is often discussed in relation to stories the news team are working on.

We work in an open plan office and I frequently ask reporters dealing with stories that have the potential to generate a complaint to consider the code's impact on their conduct while both preparing and then, subsequently, their writing of a story.

For example, one reporter recently filed quite a graphic account of an inquest into a road accident death.

His initial story was, I believed, compliant with the Editors' Code in the strictest sense but, in my opinion, included too much detail of the injuries suffered by the victim which would probably have caused some unnecessary distress to the family and were too gratuitous to add any real value to the reader's understanding of the story.

The keen reporter argued the case for the copy to remain as it had been written - but I then asked them to look at the story from a different perspective and ask themselves: "Does the story really lose any of its significance by simply toning down the detail of the horrific injuries - and how would they react if such harsh - albeit accurate - words were used to describe the circumstances of the death of someone they knew?"

I find this approach works far better when it comes to getting reporters to understand the implications of the words they write rather than leaving them to adopt a 'publish now, worry later' approach which often ends up with them having to explain to a heartbroken relative that it was said in open court and therefore, they had every right to print it...

That, however, is a skill that comes with experience and is not, sadly, a common sense approach that, I believe, ought to be taught to more would-be journalists studying in our colleges and universities.

Any legal advice we receive from bodies such as the NMA is shared with colleagues, as are updated versions to the Editors' Code etc.

There is a weekly news conference involving all editorial staff and here, any potential legal issues can be raised, discussed and resolved.

This practice works well and gives the reporters a

chance to ask any questions they may have in an open, relaxed environment.

We still see shorthand as one of the most valuable skills our reporters have and they are instructed to be methodical when it comes to taking notes in shorthand. Secure cabinets are provided where reporters' notebooks and any other relevant material can be stored for reference and are used solely for that purpose.

As part of our general recruitment and conduct guidelines, all editorial staff are asked to divulge any involvement with external organisations which could compromise their integrity and impartiality.

Since introducing this policy, no-one has declared any interests which, in my opinion, could expose our newspapers to any conflict in this regard.

In the period relevant to this report, we have not had cause to seek pre-publication guidance from IPSO advisors. However, all staff are aware that such guidance is available.

I would normally expect that approach to IPSO to be made by either myself or the deputy editor although reporting staff would not be discouraged from making such an approach themselves if it was felt necessary.

During the period this report covers, we have had no reader complaints lodged with IPSO.