

# “The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle Alsager Chronicle Biddulph Chronicle Sandbach Chronicle

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Proprietors: Heads (Congleton) Ltd.  
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## **Ips0 Annual report, May 2020.**

### **Complaints**

I will start with the most relevant issue before dealing with the required sections.

This year we have seen several complaints made against us to Ips0. They were either not proceeded with or not upheld. We have not made any errors that breached the code of conduct.

Although we do not alert every complainant to the existence of the editor’s code, if we received a complaint that was a possible breach of the code, we would.

As for complaints, each year brings its own flavour, and the past 12 months that flavour has been planning applications.

All planning applications are of course public documents, as are any comments received. We receive a spreadsheet of applications albeit without names, due to our local council’s interpretation of GDPR. The names are on its website but not on the spreadsheet and so we have to get the names from the website - names and faces sell papers, as they say. Ironically, this withholding of names by the council means we now do more planning stories than we have ever done, because while we are on the website getting names, we see any comments made on applications.

The complaints vary widely: this week we have a person complaining a planning application is nothing to do with him, even though his name and address are on the application. (The error is the council’s).

We have had a number of complaints about plans this year, and two have gone to Ips0. One person complained that his neighbour told us his extension was ugly. The other complained that the neighbours commented unfavourably on their extension. Having been told by Ips0 that the story was legitimate, the latter then sent us a solicitor’s letter demanding compensation for alleged defamatory comments. Their solicitor was an expert in family law but not media, and had not heard of qualified privilege.

There has been the usual run of errors caused by human error. The owner of a local business assumed our reporter would know the history of her business (she’s the third owner in perhaps 50 years but the report implied she launched the business) so never made it clear. A shop whose owner told an armed robber to “piss off” then complained when we used her own description of herself - ■■■■■ - in the headline.

The severity of the error and the stress caused by the complainant often do not correlate. Some errors we make are relatively bad but the complainant is understanding and a humble apology the following week will suffice.

Some errors are not errors at all, just stories the complainant does not like. A person claiming to be a member of staff called repeatedly after we correctly reported on a business going into administration, even after we printed a clarification. The last we heard they were going to sue for damaging the business - a business that was already in administration, as reported in the London Gazette.

A round-up errors over the year shows that they range in seriousness, though – unlike some of our national colleague, and the politicians who require us to be accurate – there is never an intention to deceive.

For example, we have hygiene ratings emailed to us and in one list we gave a business a one-star hygiene rating, when it should have been three. We had a ghost in the machine and around the same time reprinted a letter complaining about a housing association that dated from 2017 and a preview of a what's on event from 2016.

There was the usual range of silly errors: names wrong in a caption, dates wrong, placing a church in the wrong deanery (it had only recently moved), failing to credit a freelance photographer and missing out the crucial word “not” from a letter.

We confused vicar the Rev Arch with archdeacon the Rev Bishop. We forgot a local councillor had lost his seat of some years by calling him Coun [REDACTED], perhaps rubbing salt in the wound.

The spirit of most complaints can be seen in a letter from a councillor we said was standing down because of frustration with the system. He told us: “I realise that you need to spice things up on a slow news week, but the headline does misrepresent my position.”

Ipsos asks how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made to it. The answer is, no differently to how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made by a reader. We answer to our readers and we do not treat reader complaints less seriously because Ipsos is not involved.

As we pointed out to one complainant, a negative ruling to Ipsos would not actually produce a different outcome to what we do voluntarily.

#### Letters

We have continued to be rigorous in fact-checking letters. Rather than withhold letters that contain factual errors we run a factcheck underneath them. This has proved quite popular and entertaining (and it entertains us). In the absence of Brexit, this year's factchecks have been more staid, with the exception of correspondents saying Tommy Robinson was being victimised. The topic of 5G prompted more restrained fact-checking, as the people who write in perpetuating some of the wilder claims are well meaning, as is (mostly) the case with people writing in about climate change. Some readers do not think it exists, others take a more nuanced view that it does exist but panic measures are not needed.

#### The company

We are family-owned paid-for weekly whose titles date back to 1893. In an earlier form, we go back further, and a similar business has operated from our address for at least 250 years. We publish four titles. The Congleton Chronicle is our flagship title. We also publish the Biddulph Chronicle, Sandbach Chronicle (est 1944) and the Alsager Chronicle (est 2014).

We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We cover most council meetings and all magistrates' courts. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial. In the lockdown, we have lost councils but readers' letters are up to seven pages a week.

#### Standards

Our minimum standard is the editor's code of conduct. We also adhere to the US Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics. Editorial staff are furnished with copies of the code and guidance, and these are regularly referred to.

All our stories are verified. We speak to both sides of any story. The only times this fails is with new trainees, when they are learning on the job. We have a standard footnote for stories for which we have not received a comment: “X was contacted for a comment but had not replied by the time we went to press”. We do sometimes get complaints from people who comment at 3pm on a Wednesday – we aim to have the paper done by around 5pm – and whose comments do not go in. In these cases, we offer them a follow-up story the following week.

### **Checking**

All stories are checked on the page by the editor or his deputy, and any stories that do not appear fair are pulled from that page, though this is rare.

We are a small company so adherence to standards is perhaps different to larger news centres. The editor closely follows the news list for the week and will speak to a reporter if a possible risk can be seen. Stories are checked on the page, as stated above.

### **Complaints**

In theory, we have a formal complaints procedure, in practice it is rarely used. We have a formal complaints system, as stated in the information panel we print every week, which has not been used once since Ipsos required these reports.

We are accessible to readers, particularly via social media, and most readers communicate via email. Most of our staff live in the area. We have amicable relationships with local groups and societies.

Complaints arrive in a variety of ways: social media, the telephone, email, being stopped in the street, via family members. Any that concern factual errors or “proper” errors are recorded and investigated.

Complaints are channelled according to their seriousness. Most are dealt with by the reporters and more serious ones by our deputy editor. He may consult the editor.

As the old saying has it: “The man who never made a mistake never made anything”; mistakes go with the job. We have no problem printing corrections and apologies. We see apologies as a way of maintaining our standing in the community, and not as something to hide. If we make a mistake, we admit to it and people appreciate this.

Complaints where we have made a factual error, or error of judgement that warrants an apology, are logged in a book.

More serious emailed / Facebooked complaints are saved digitally. We investigate the causes and if appropriate, issue a clarification / apology / correction, depending on the circumstance. If the error is more than a simple mistake, we will consult the staff member who is responsible, to avoid the mistake happening again.

### **Traceability**

No stories go on the web that have not been in the paper. All excerpts of hard news stories that go on social media are subbed and have been in the paper. Some community news and police alerts will go on social media before being in the paper but have full traceability.

We are a training ground for reporters and our IT was designed with this in mind. We keep copies of all stories in the raw and subbed forms. This was to allow reporters to access copies of their original stories and subbed stories for their logbooks, but it means we have copies of everything as it goes into the system. We keep copies of all type in the original form it was emailed to us, copies after pre-subbing processing has occurred and copies of the final stories. Anything posted on social media will have its source saved.

Training: we take on trainees who leave once they have passed the NCE. We do not have a separate training system for mistakes – training is an integral part of our system.

### **Letters**

We have noted Ipsos’s rulings on the need for factual accuracy in letters. We print between four (a quiet week) and eight (busy) pages of opinion a week, usually five or six, and are very tolerant of outspoken views and comments. Freedom of speech is only free when it offends. The fact-check is only used when there are one or two factual errors – usually these errors are beliefs that are widespread to some degree, so it is important to flag them as false and not simply delete them. If there are a number of errors, we will edit them out.

### **Positioning**

All corrections go on the letters page. We have noted Ipso rulings on letters pages, but our letters pages are the best-read part of the paper, so we are in no sense “burying” corrections.

We run a corrections panel in the same position in the letters section, whether or not we have corrections to make. We do not use page templates or run identical lay-outs each week, so it is hard to run the corrections section on the same page each week.

If the complaint was about a front-page story (or any other prominent page lead) the correction would go there if we/the complainant felt this was necessary.

Jeremy Condliffe

Chairman

Responsible person