

Rochdale Online Ltd Annual IPSO Report May 2019

For the period 1 January 2018 – 31 December 2018

Introduction

Rochdale Online Ltd operates a 'hyperlocal' website at www.rochdaleonline.co.uk
The independent family-owned online news publication started in June 1998.

The website covers the borough of Rochdale and is visited by over 160,000 unique users each month (average monthly users in 2018).

From inception, Rochdale Online, based in Rochdale town centre, has strived to serve the community by providing an authoritative source of local news and by promoting local businesses, groups and organisations.

Our editorial standards

All our stories are published in line with guidance and law set out in the Editor's Code of Practice and McNae's Essential Law for Journalists.

All reporters have access to copies of the Editor's Code, Editor's Codebook, McNae's Essential Law (24th edition) and Knowles on Local Authority Meetings (8th edition).

We have provided the latest version of the Editors' Code and Codebook (issued on 1st January 2018) to staff.

We have also distributed to staff the IPSO blogs and guest blogs from the Samaritans on reporting suicide throughout 2018.

We do our best to ensure our stories are trustworthy and balanced.

Stories are verified as much as possible and our reporters are expected to contact all parties prior to publication.

If people choose not to speak to us or provide a comment, then we always include that information in the story for our readers.

Our responsible person

Editor Pauline Journeaux can be contacted on 01706 523583, by email news@rochdaleonline.co.uk, via the general contact form on our web site or via the complaints form on our web site.

Our complaints-handling process

We accept complaints by phone, email or letter. If someone contacts us via social media with a complaint, then they are directed by our social media manager to use one of these options.

When editorial staff receive complaints, they are reported to the editor.

Complaints are acted on immediately where it is appropriate to do so, such as correcting factual errors.

If a complaint requires further investigation there is the option of removing an article from publication pending completion of that process.

The complainant's details, nature of the complaint and our response are recorded by the editor along with copies of any source documents or reporter's notes.

We will always attempt to respond to a complaint within 24 hours.

The wording on our complaints page is as follows:

Making a Complaint

We can look into complaints about items we have published which are in our control. We are members of IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation) and we adhere to the Editors' Code of Practice. We can only deal with complaints which relate to an alleged breach of the standards set out in this Code: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/>

We can only deal with your complaint if you are:

- Personally and directly affected by an alleged breach of the Code.
- A representative group affected by an alleged breach of the Code, where there is public interest in your complaint.
- A third party seeking to ensure accuracy of published information.

You can submit your complaint to us using the [submission form below](#).

Alternatively you can submit your complaint in writing to us at the following address:

Address: 122 Yorkshire Street, Rochdale OL16 1LA

A complaints form can be downloaded in [PDF](#) or [MS Word](#) format.

We will acknowledge your complaint by email or in writing within seven calendar days and will normally respond to your complaint with a final decision letter within 21 calendar days. If we uphold your complaint, we will tell you the remedial actions we have taken.

Our training processes

In 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 that reporters are working on.

Reporters are required to have or obtain NCTJ qualifications. We have one member of staff currently studying for a NCTJ Level 3 Diploma in Journalism; she already has a Masters in Multimedia Journalism from Manchester Metropolitan University with distinctions awarded in Online, Law, Broadcast and Ethics.

We have another member of staff due to start the NCTJ Level 3 Certificate in Foundation Journalism in 2019.

There are no current plans for further training, though refresher courses are always a considered option.

Pre-publication guidance

In the period relevant to this report we have sought guidance from IPSO on one occasion.

This was in relation to an audio file that was sent to us. We followed the pre-publication guidance given by IPSO. No complaint was received in relation to the subsequently published article.

If we were unsure or needed legal guidance ahead of publication, we would contact IPSO for advice in the first instance.

Our record on compliance

In the period relevant to this report we had one complaint that we received guidance on from IPSO.

This was in relation to an article we published which included a quote from a school governor, given to our reporter at a school event. We followed the advice given by IPSO – to offer to include a comment from the school headteacher [to counter the governor’s comments]. This offer was not taken up by the headteacher and the headteacher did not pursue the matter further.

We also had one complaint referred to IPSO.

The complaint related to an article about increases in councillor allowances which was published in March 2018.

The complaint was not upheld.

I have attached the summary of the Complaints Committee.

Additional information

Decision of the Complaints Committee

02514-18 Rochdale Borough Council v Rochdale Online

Summary of complaint

1. Rochdale Borough Council complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation that Rochdale Online breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice in an article headlined, "Councillors' allowances will top one million," published on 19 March 2018.
2. The article reported that a Freedom of Information request had shown that Councillors' allowances for Rochdale Borough Council now totalled £75,000 a month or £900,000 per year, and would total over £1 million once National Insurance contributions were added. It stated that this revealed the impact of the increase in councillor allowances that had come into force in December 2016. It stated that "Councillor Allen Brett, now the leader of the Council...promised not to take the increase, but then accepted it." It went on to state that Councillor Brett had not responded to an invitation to comments, but included a number of statements from other council members who had not taken the allowance increase, including one council member who thanked the member of the public who put in the Freedom of Information request, "for uncovering this spending as we approach the May Council elections, Usually, figures are published in June, a month after local elections."
3. The complainant said that the predicted spend on Councillor's Allowances for 2017/18 was £883,000. Therefore, he said it was inaccurate to report that Councillor's allowances would be more than £1 million. He also said it was inaccurate for the article to report that Councillor Brett refused all increases in his allowance, but then accepted it. It said that there were two separate Councillor Allowances that had been increased, both the basic allowance and special responsibility allowance. Councillor Brett had said that he would not accept the increase for his special allowance for his role as deputy leader of the Council, and he did not take this.
4. The complainant also raised concern that the publication had approached several Council members for comment, but had not put these claims, including the projected cost of Councillor Allowances to the

Council's communications team. It said that Councillors had made the Council aware that they had been approached for comment on this matter, and the Council had provided a statement to the publication. The Council said that omitting this statement from the article, was misleading, as the Council should have been given a right to reply to these claims. He also said the article was misleading, as he believed the statement from a Councillor, claiming the figures were normally published in June, suggested the Council were trying to hide this information.

5. The publication did not accept that it had breached the Code. It provided the information supplied in response to a Freedom of Information request to the Council, which showed that Councillor Allowances in February 2018 totalled £75,009.53. It said that extrapolating this for 12 months, gave a figure of just over £900,000 as reported in the article. It said adding national insurance contributions, it was accurate to state that the total cost for 2018 would be more than £1 million. It said requests for comment were sent directly to the Councillors concerned, as it was a political point about the specific action of these Councillors. It said it was not appropriate or necessary, in these circumstances, to contact the Communications department for comment. Regardless, following direct correspondence with the complainant, it included the Council's statement in the article.
6. When contacted by the complainant, the publication also clarified that Councillor Brett had "promised not to take all the increase, but accepted the increased basic allowance." It said that reporting that he had promised not to take any of the increase, and then had taken all of it, was not significantly inaccurate, as this was Councillor Brett's position in 2017, however in 2018, when he became leader of the Council, the FOI request showed that in this new role, he had accepted the increase in both basic and special responsibility allowance.

Relevant Code Provisions

7. Clause 1 (Accuracy)

- i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.
- ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.

Findings of the Committee

8. The Freedom of Information request had shown that the total amount spent on Councillor's Allowances in February 2018 was just over £75,000. The newspaper had extrapolated this figure to calculate the projected total spend on Councillor Allowances for 2018. This information was based on information provided by the Council and there was no basis to believe the monthly figures given were not representative of average spend. There was no subsequent requirement on the publication to approach the Council's communication team for comment. In these circumstances, the publication had taken care over the accuracy of this claim and there was no breach of Clause 1 (i).
9. The complainant maintained that the total spend for 2017/2018 would be less than £1 million. However, as the article made clear, it was reporting the total spend for 2018, after the increase in Councillor Allowances had been brought in, not the financial year 2017/18. The article accurately reported this projected spend, and there was no breach of Clause 1 (ii).
10. As deputy leader of the Council, Councillor Brett had stated that he would not take an increase in his special allowance for his role as Deputy Leader. However, it was accepted that several months later, when his role changed to Leader of the Council he had accepted the increased basic and special responsibility allowance. The publication had also gone to Councillor Brett prior to publication for comment on this. In these circumstances the publication had taken care over the accuracy of the claim that Councillor Brett had "promised not to take the increase, but then accepted it". There was no failure to take care over the accuracy of this information, and reporting this did not represent a significant inaccuracy. There was no breach of Clause 1 on this point.
11. The article had accurately reported the timing of the release of figures by the Council. There was no breach of Clause 1 on this point.

Conclusions

12. The complaint was not upheld.

Remedial Action Required