

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.

Financial pressures brought about by the pandemic mean that our weekly free newspaper – the Barnsley Independent – is no longer being published.

The company may decide to re-launch it at some point in the future and, were we to do so, we would naturally ensure it complied with all the IPSO regulations.

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 60,000 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However, we have a strict policy that we do not publish a story obtained from social media sources without first checking its accuracy and authenticity.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 reports for the last three years, 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’

Once again, dealing with social media – particularly users’ comments – has proved

one of the most challenging aspects of the editorial department’s role in the last year.

We are grateful to IPSO for issuing guidance on the whole issue of social media in 2019 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.

We are in discussions with Barnsley Council about being launch signatories on a new campaign which aims to tackle the issue of online trolling.

As the operator of two of the biggest Facebook presences in the town, it is only right that we play our part in stopping Facebook comments pages becoming disrespectful and upsetting to people whose stories appear on them.

This campaign is due to launch in May so I would anticipate being able to update IPSO on its implementation and hopefully success in next year’s report.

The Chronicle continues to cover things such as council meetings and public meetings in the traditional way – ie a reporter in attendance, whether that be in person or, has necessity has dictated during the last year via Zoom, Teams or other online platforms..

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.

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.

All copies of IPSO guidance booklets such as recent ones covering social media and dealing with children in the news are retained in the office and readily available for staff to refer to.

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.

While a considerable part of 2020 involved people working from home more, we took steps to ensure all reporters still had access to help and advice from me and other senior members of the editorial team.

We did this by creating a WhatsApp group where story ideas could be shared and any potential pitfalls could be discussed.

Throughout the pandemic, I was working largely in the office and all reporters knew I was easily contactable in the event of them having any concerns which needed a judgement call from me.

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

We have managed to maintain our weekly news conferences – either in person or online – and all editorial staff can mention potential legal issues for group discussion.

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 one matter referred to IPSO. The case reference for this matter was [REDACTED] and it was dealt with by Alice Gould.

Prior to framing my formal response to IPSO, I did seek informal guidance from Alice Gould who was very helpful.

Following the IPSO review – and a subsequent appeal by the complainant – the IPSO adjudication was that there had been no breach of the editors' code and so the case was not found proven.

The reporter had kept meticulous shorthand notes of the interview which, in accordance with our standard procedures, were quite quick to track down.

They subsequently came in very useful when it came to defending our position on the story at the centre of the complaint.

I would, however, like to draw attention

to one thing that I feel does need addressing in the IPSO complaints process.

We treated the complaint with the confidentiality expected by IPSO and it was disappointing to note that the complainant did not treat it in the same way.

There were a series of lengthy, bizarre emails from him, some of which made spurious and untrue accusations, with one in particular accusing me and my colleagues of having 'some sort of brain injury'.

There were also posts on his social media feeds where he alluded to the fact that IPSO had 'agreed' with his complaint - suggesting we had been in breach of the editors' code - when all that had actually happened was that IPSO had agreed to investigate his complaint.

I feel this confidentiality expectation needs to be emphasised to complainants from the outset – perhaps even warning them that failure to comply with this could lead to their complaint being rejected.

I did raise my concerns with Alice Gould and she promptly took action to remind the complainant of the potential breach in confidentiality – and for that I am grateful.

If I could, I would also like to pay tribute to the way in which Alice Gould dealt with the complaint which was quite protracted. She was very efficient and helpful throughout.

BARNSELEY CHRONICLE

If you have any questions relating to this report, please contact editor Andrew Harrod on 01226 734205 or email: editor@barnsley-chronicle.co.uk
