

# The Chronicle Series

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

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Proprietors: Heads (Congleton) Ltd.  
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## Ipsos Annual report, May 2022.

**From:** Jem Condliffe, chairman and editor, and responsible person in terms of Ipsos.

### Complaints in the year.

Complaints seem to be down, probably because we still have fewer staff in this post-pandemic world and the computer system we adopted for lockdown means I get to see every story at least once before it goes near a page. I don't take out many howlers - usually it's names being wrong or facts not being right.

At the time of last year's report, we had a pending complaint, from a man who wrote in hostile letters using fake names and then complained when the victim of his attacks wrote a signed and hostile letter back about him. Ipsos did not uphold his complaint.

The complainant has continued to write letters using fake names since, all but one of which we have spotted and not used. One did get printed, after I emailed his fake email account, and his fake persona gave me assurances he was real and gave a fake address. He then accidentally sent his next letter from his real email account.

We had a complaint from a man who wrote a letter and asked me to factcheck our MP's declarations of earnings. (Fiona Bruce, one of the top-claiming MPs). When I did write about it but found she was generally above criticism, he complained that his own letter was defamatory to himself, and made him look stupid. I referred him to Ipsos. This complaint did not progress.

The Insolvency Service posted a notice on the London Gazette saying a local businessman had been declared bankrupt. We reported it and it turned out he had not - it was an error on their part and they had to print a correction. He was very annoyed and threatening legal action, saying we had ruined his good name. (He had been due in the county court over but presumably paid at the last minute). The Sun came to our rescue: he was ordered to pay an insurance company after being involved in a scam involving a Lexus shunting into the back of an Alfa Romeo on the A50, when it had actually been rammed by a van. And insurers found a tracker device in the van showed the crash took place on a garage forecourt owned by our man's brother, so our legally safe NIB became trivial.

The most serious error we logged was over a hedge, a warning to trainees everywhere. Man complained about hedge, council said contact with the hedgeowner had been made but hedge was fine, hedge owner was not in but our reporter failed to leave a card so she could contact him. She complained, and said the hedge-moaner was a neighbour with a vendetta. It was bad practice on our part, although we did have a quote from the council saying her hedge was fine. We offered her the right of reply via a letter, but she never communicated further.

Court cases have produced the usual entertaining litany of complaints, ranging from "it's an infringement of my human rights" to "it's not me and I wasn't there". We also received a complaint from a woman whose husband had downloaded images of children, and who said she'd had a negative reaction from her neighbours. Such complaints are harder to deal with.

Most of the other complaints are minor - wrong names, quotes ascribed to wrong person - and many complaints are about us not printing reports or letters people have sent in. ("You're all robots!" screamed one complainant via email this week).

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.

Ipsos asks how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made to it. The answer as always 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 produce a different outcome to what we do voluntarily.

## **Letters**

I have continued to be rigorous in fact-checking letters. Rather than withhold letters that contain factual errors I factcheck underneath them. This has proved popular and entertaining (and it entertains me). Brexit and Tommy Robinson are no longer discussed, with the hot topics now being Boris Johnson, the trans issue and the pandemic being a hoax. People unsure of facts regularly write "but the editor can factcheck this". The lone local representative of Nigel Farage's current party regular says factchecks are part of mainstream media's attempt to silence the truth even though, as I have pointed out, we print all his letters.

## **The company**

We are a 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 2012). We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We cover council meetings and magistrates' courts. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial.

## **Standards**

We adhere to the editor's code of conduct. 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 myself my 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. I closely follow 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 had a formal complaints system, as stated in an information panel we print every week, which has not been used once since Ipso required these reports and I have since abandoned. 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 me.

As the old and now politically incorrect 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. 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, although few stories go on the web. Any 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.

**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. 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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jem Condliffe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small mark above the 'i' in "Condliffe".

Jem Condliffe  
Chairman  
Responsible person