

■ 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, 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.

■ 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 substantially increased its audiences on social media (the Facebook page is approaching 50,000 likes, and we have more than 20,000 followers on Twitter) by posting daily links to stories on our website.

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However, we have a strict policy that we do not publish a story obtained from social media sources without first checking its accuracy and authenticity - we do not copy and paste comments made on Facebook/Twitter and insist on speaking to the person who made the post over the phone or in person.

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 it is not granted, we don't use their information and instead seek to make the story 'stand up' via alternative sources such as councillors, police contacts or others.

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

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 - continues to be one of the most time-consuming aspects of the editorial department's out-of-hours role in the last year as we attract a large following and often use debate-worthy stories online.

If the issues being discussed are contentious, it is expected that our reporters contact both sides to ensure a story is balanced and fair and whether it's Barnsley Council, South Yorkshire Police or Barnsley Hospital, a right of reply will

always be included.

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

In previous reports to IPSO, I have highlighted the difficulties we face in dealing with comments on social media and the fact that these had become one of the major sources of frustrations for our readers - and complaints to us.

Although there is no quick fix to the issue of complaints arising from inflammatory comments on social media feeds, given how easy it is for banned users to create new profiles and resume their activities, we take immediate action if either a reporter sees or someone alerts us to a comment.

■ 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 and to discuss any issues with the complainant.

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 newsdesk and the deputy editor who works on the newsdesk 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 so occasionally, a complainant may insist on speaking to the editor - bypassing the reporter and newsdesk - and our staff are not instructed to put anyone off contacting me directly.

My phone number and direct email address are both 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 are retained in the office and readily available for staff to refer to. We also circulate the regular IPSO newsletters among the editorial team and these have proved useful.

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, 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.

We all work in an open-plan newsroom and I sit among the reporters so we have regular discussions about legal and ethical issues as I find this can be more helpful and easier for reporters to understand and absorb the a text box or sitting in a classroom.

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.

Transparency:

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.

Matters arising since my last report:

One of our young reporters was subjected to a brief – but very intense – period of intimidation by someone who then went on to register a formal complaint with IPSO following a story that was published in the Chronicle in March 2022.

The article reported on a short film and contained an interview with the film's writer.

It described the writer as being 'a domestic abuse survivor' who, it said, had 'fled domestic abuse' and also as the mother of 'two autistic sons' – something which the complaint alleged was not for publication.

The complaint was concluded by IPSO in July 2022 and a mutually agreed clarification was subsequently printed in the Chronicle.

I had been intending to contest the validity of the claim as it is my belief the complainant simply expected our story to be more of an advert for her film than a fea-

ture about the reasons for her creating it.

However, the aggressive manner in which the complaint pursued her grievance with the reporter resulted in the journalist concerned tendering her resignation and there seemed little point in contesting the matter once the reporter had ended her employment with us.

Undoubtedly, the vitriol from the complainant played a major part in the decision of the relatively inexperienced reporter to leave after less than a year in the job.

As well as pestering the journalist repeatedly during the weekend after the story was published in the paper, the complainant also sent connection requests via social media to myself that weekend – and it was plainly obvious her sole purpose in sending these was to vent her anger.

She also repeatedly called and messaged my former colleague – indeed had we subjected the complainant to the same kind of treatment in pursuit of a story, I have no

doubt that she would have been accused of harassment.

I have raised this worrying development in my previous IPSO reports as the behaviour of complainants is getting more and more aggressive and inflammatory.

I believe it is important that people who register complaints with IPSO should now be asked to agree to a code of conduct themselves before their complaint is investigated.

This should, perhaps, include:

■ **Not discussing the matter on social media until the investigation is completed.**

■ **Accepting not to persist on contacting the journalist once the IPSO complaint has been logged to allow a 'cooling off' period where both sides can have time to reflect and see if a suitable way forward can be agreed without the need for IPSO to proceed to a full investigation and adjudication.**