

**A Strategic Plan for the Press Council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman 2020-2022**

**Introduction**

The Press Council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman were established in 2008 by the press industry as an independent body to provide a complaints handling process which would enable members of the public to seek redress if something was published in an Irish newspaper, magazine or online news publication which breached the Code of Practice of the Press Council of Ireland.

The Office of the Press Ombudsman accepts and considers complaints, without charge, from members of the public of possible breaches by member publications of the Press Council’s Code of Practice. Over its 12 years of operation the Office of the Press Ombudsman has received more than 4,000 complaints and has issued decisions on more than 400 complaints, with over 250 complaints being resolved through the Office’s conciliation service.

The Press Council is charged with upholding press freedom and the wider right of freedom of expression. The Council is also responsible, in conjunction with the Code Committee, for the regular review of the Code of Practice. The Council is committed to ensuring that the functions of the Press Ombudsman and the Press Council are fully independent of government, the press industry and all vested interests.

In their operations, policies and in their application of the Principles of the Code of Practice, the Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman are independent both of the press industry and of government. The independence of the Press Council is underpinned by its status as a Designated Activity Company under the Company Acts, its statutory recognition for the purposes of the Defamation Act and by the appointment of 7 of its 13 of its directors, including the Chairman and Deputy Chairman, as independent directors following a public, open competition. Five directors are nominated by the press industry and one by the National Union of Journalists. The Press Council appoints the Press Ombudsman following a public, open competition.

**Vision**

A free, independent and thriving press operating to the highest professional and ethical standards. The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman will safeguard and promote professional and ethical standards in Irish newspapers, magazines and online news publications.

**Mission Statement**

The mission of the Press Council is to uphold the freedom and independence of the press in Ireland and to ensure that its member publications maintain the highest professional ethical standards in accordance with the Press Council’s Code of Practice. The mission of the Press Ombudsman is to provide redress to anyone who believes that those ethical standards have been breached.

**The Work of the Press Council and the Press Ombudsman**

The Press Council oversees the professional principles embodied in the Code of Practice and is responsible for upholding the freedom of the press. It operates with the support and cooperation of member publications and journalists. It decides on appeals from decisions of the Press Ombudsman and on complaints referred to it directly by the Press Ombudsman. The Press Council has considered over 100 appeals since it was established in 2008.

The Press Ombudsman acknowledges the right of everyone to his or her good name and his or her right to privacy including to a private and family life as set out in the Code of Practice. The Press Ombudsman safeguards the right of the public to complain about unfair or unjust treatment or unwarranted infringements by the press which may present a breach of the Code of Practice. The Office of the Press Ombudsman receives complaints from members of the public and in the first instance seeks to resolve them by conciliation or mediation to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. Where conciliation or mediation is not possible the Press Ombudsman will make a decision on a complaint based on the Code of Practice.

The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman are funded by member publications through levies based on circulation.

The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman work closely with national and international equivalent bodies. The Press Council is a member of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe. The Office of the Press Ombudsman is a member of the Ombudsman Association and the International Ombudsman Institute.

The Press Council is a member of the European Union “Media Councils in the Digital Age” project which is working towards the promotion of quality journalism through shared research, training and common websites.

**Strategic Objectives 2020 – 2022**

1. **Continue to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Office of the Press Ombudsman as the independent regulatory body for the press industry in Ireland.**

* Subject to funding, the Office of the Press Ombudsman will commission market research to establish a benchmark for the public’s knowledge and understanding of the services of the Press Ombudsman and Press Council.
* Based on the results of that survey we will establish what action, if any, is required (a) to improve those services and (b) to improve the promotion of those services to the general public.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will participate in the peer review mechanism being developed by the Ombudsman Association.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will establish a feed-back mechanism for complainants in line with best practice.

1. **Ensure that member publications maintain the highest professional standards in accordance with the Code of the Practice of the Press Council and protect the public interest by ensuring ethical, accurate and truthful reporting by the press.**

* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will continue to offer non-binding pre-publication advice to editors and journalists relating to the Code of Practice if they have concerns about articles prior to publication. It will also continue its advisory notice service drawing editors’ attention to occasions when the Office has been contacted by a person or family who find themselves in circumstances where they have suddenly and unexpectedly become the subject of intense media interest but have no wish to have any contact from the press.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will continue its conciliation and mediation service to assist editors in resolving any complaints received in an effective and speedy manner. It will keep its complaints procedures under continued review so as to ensure that through the process, editors listen to the concerns of their readers and where necessary, correct errors and address complaints as appropriate.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will continue to provide training seminars and guidance for editors and staff of member publications, including guidance on how the Code of Practice is applied in individual cases and how editors can handle and resolve complaints speedily and effectively. It will continue to liaise and work with groups interested in the reporting of particular issues affecting minority communities, and the use of language in such reporting.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will cooperate with the NUJ in their professional training programmes.
* The Office of the Press Ombudsman will offer its training services on an annual basis to all colleges where journalism and media studies are taught.

1. **Uphold the rights of members of the press to freedom of expression and the freedom to inform in accordance with the Code of Practice, and to maintain the independence of the press.**

* The Press Council will continue to bring pressure to bear on all relevant parties to complete the review of the Defamation Act 2009 with a view to reform of the defamation regime and the reduction of the threat that defamation costs pose to the freedom and independence of the press in Ireland.
* The Press Council will make its voice heard when freedom of expression is unlawfully or unfairly curtailed, such as when journalists are threatened or subject to unreasonable pressure, or when judicial decisions impact on matters relating to press freedom.
* The Press Council will actively recruit new member publications. In that regard it will consider (a) the fee structure, and any effect it may have on the recruitment or otherwise of new member publications, (b) the promotional material that is used to encourage new members and (c) in the light of the findings of (a) and (b) develop a targeted campaign to identify and approach all potential new member publications.

* The Press Council recognises the growing importance of social media in informing the public and providing a platform for public debate. The Press Council shall play its part in ensuring that standards that apply to other platforms also apply to social media.

1. **Promote and publicise the operations of the Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman.**

* To increase public recognition of the role and functions of the Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman the Press Council and Office will, on an annual basis, ask member publications to carry advertising for their services. They will also continue to seek out new opportunities to address organisations, interest and lobby groups and colleges to promote the services of the Council and the Office.
* The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman will circulate all decisions of the Press Ombudsman and Press Council to editors of member publications and via press release to the media in general so as to ensure that editors are aware of precedents in relation to the application of the Code of Practice and to encourage the press to report on same.

* The Press Council will, on an annual basis, organise and fund a Students’ Bursary Awards to promote excellence in media training in universities and colleges.
* The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman will increase public awareness of their services by continuing its presence on social media.
* The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman will review their website on an annual basis so as to ensure that its content remains accurate and accessible.

1. **Observe the highest standards of Corporate Governance.**

* The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman commit to upholding the highest standards of corporate governance in the conduct of their business.
* The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman will adopt a recognised code of governance and ensure adherence to its principles over the lifetime of this strategy.

**Implementation and Review of this Strategy**

The Press Council and Office of the Press Ombudsman commit to an annual review of this strategy.

**Seán Donlon, Chairman, Press Council of Ireland**

**Peter Feeney, Press Ombudsman**

**1 January 2020**