

Libel law change threatens our paper



Editor Matt Ramsden. Right, previous editions of the Sheerness Times Guardian

If you value the freedom of the press, please add your voice

by Matt Ramsden
Editor

In a little over a month's time The Sheerness Times Guardian will turn 159.

Over the course of almost sixteen decades, we've reported on all matters of local life and faced many challenges.

But we have come through them, stronger, wiser and fiercely proud of the role we play in this community.

However, as we prepare to enter 2017, I have to report that your 'local' is facing a threat like no other.

A proposed new law could see us – and hundreds of papers nationwide – cease to exist.

Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act could see us liable for legal costs in libel and some privacy actions whether we win the case or not.

Just imagine that for a second: you're sued by someone and have to foot the bill even though the court finds in your favour.

Would you stand for that?

This means somebody could take exception to something we



have written fairly and we would face costs which could put us out of business.

The nature of news means that on a regular basis you are going to upset people with your coverage.

Hardly a week goes by without us facing complaints about a variety of issues – mainly court related.

But in everything we do, we strive to uphold the highest standards and report fairly and accurately.

We are regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organi-

sation and happily follow its code of conduct.

I am afraid if this law goes through, newspapers will become risk averse and levels of coverage will fall.

And therefore our democracy will be poorer for it.

The new law follows a time of great upheaval for British newspapers.

The actions of a small minority of national tabloid journalists have unfairly tarnished the reputation of all in our industry.

I have always believed the Times Guardian "isn't the story"

– we don't take curtain calls or hog the headlines.

Our job is simple: whatever the issue, report the facts impartially and champion all the good that is done on the Island.

However, I do want to take this opportunity to shout about the work we do here.

Every year we publish thousands of articles, photos and letters all about the Island.

In conjunction with the KM Charity Team, we support good causes and help raise hundreds of thousands of pounds.

We attend meetings and court cases and hold authority to account. No story is too big to handle or small to matter.

I will freely admit we don't always get it right. But when we're wrong, we work to correct it.

We do all this at a time of great change. Facebook and Google have moved into the news business in a major way and remain entirely unregulated.

This whole situation is like being forced to play a highly-financed football team but only you face the sanction of yellow and red cards.

If you value freedom of the press and, like us, believe Section 40 is unfair, please take the time to add your voice.

You can take part in a consultation by visiting www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-leveson-inquiry-and-its-implementation

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