

Councillor 3

[REDACTED]
From: Spencer Drury [REDACTED] [m]
Sent: 06 May 2013 16:14
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Publicity Code consultation 2013
Attachments: Response_form_-_Publicity_Code_Consultation SD.doc
Dear [REDACTED],

Please see my response to the consultation.

Spence

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Spencer Drury
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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16/05/2013

Response form

Publicity Code Consultation 2013

About you

i) Your details

Name:	Spencer Drury
Position (if applicable)	Leader of the Opposition
Name of Organisation (if applicable)	Greenwich Council
Address:	[REDACTED]
e mail:	[REDACTED]
Telephone Number:	[REDACTED]

ii) Are the views expressed on this consultation an official's response from the organisation you represent or your own personal views?

Organisational response

☒

Personal views

☐

iii) Please tick the box which best describes you or your organisation:

District council	
Metropolitan district council	
London borough council	
Unitary authority/county council/county borough council	x
Parish council	
Membership organisation	
Newspaper proprietor	
Newspaper staff	
Business	
Councillor	
Member of the public	
Other	

(please comment):	As Greenwich Council publishes Greenwich Time
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	weekly, it could also be described as a newspaper proprietor.
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Questions:

1. Views on the proposed legislation are invited, and in particular do consultees see the proposals as fully delivering the commitment to give greater force to the Publicity Code by putting compliance on a statutory basis?

The Code still seems to contain all of the mistakes which allowed Greenwich Council to ignore the Guidance when it was issued (as shown here <http://committees.greenwich.gov.uk/documents/s15974/04%20-%20Appendix%20A%20-%20Cabinet%20Report%20on%20Code%20of%20Practice%20-%20Greenwich%20Time.pdf>). In particular, the fact Greenwich cross subsidises Greenwich Time by advertising in it with different parts of the Council and according the a local magazine (SE9) undercuts independent publications by poaching their advertisers and offering a lower rate, means that Greenwich Time may appear profitable when in fact it is nothing of the sort.

2. If there is alternative to the power of direction, how will this meet the aim of improved enforcement of the code?

The power of direction is absolutely essential if Councils publishing weekly newspapers are to be made to stop. Without this I fully expect that Greenwich would continue to publish Greenwich Time.

3. This consultation invites evidence of the circumstances where the code was not met and the implications of this on competition in local media

There are many examples of the code not being met in Greenwich Time, but I will provide you with the latest which I complained to the Chief Executive about.

In an email to the Chief Executive on 21st March I wrote:

"I write to complain once again about the level of political bias in Greenwich Time. .

In the March 12th edition I note on page 3 a report on the police motion proposed at the full Council meeting at the start of this month. We opposed it completely and suggested a much better alternative wording (in my opinion) so I find it astonishing that the debate, amendment and the alternative case was not mentioned in Greenwich Time. Instead we have a completely one

sided report with a quote from the Cabinet Member who did not seem to be in full command of the facts during the debate.

I cannot accept that this level of political bias is acceptable and would appreciate a commitment that this will not happen again."

To which the reply I received was:

"Thank you for your e-mail concerning the 12th March Greenwich Time.

I have tracked back as far as I can to see how this was cleared as I cannot immediately recall it. The piece on police station closures is factually correct and presents the Council's decision. However, with hindsight, I do agree that it should have been reported differently.

It is unusual for Greenwich Time to report 'Motions for Debate' because they can have a political dimension. I have looked back over clearance of GT that week to see how this appeared.

I think it was a filler column after a number of stories had been moved around. I was certainly sent the page by e-mail on Friday evening in the context of clearing the page 1/3 Tall Ships story. Unfortunately, there were problems with the Blackberry Server that weekend and I could not access and reply to the e-mail until 9pm on Saturday. I should have noticed the police station column at that point. My apologies that I did not.

I intend to ask that the GT Team to be instructed not to report routinely on 'Council Motions for Debate' unless requested by me and that the text is cleared by me and the Head of Law and Governance. I hope that this will provide the safeguard needed.

Again, my apologies for oversight on this occasion."

Now while I absolutely accept that the Chief Executive is acting in good faith, this particular exchange reveals the problems of having a civil servant acting as an editor of a paper. In this case, a long-term Labour Council has journalists on its staff who are charged with producing Council supporting press releases most of the time, but are supposed to be unbiased in relation to newspaper articles. This flies in the face of common sense.

In terms of the effect on the local press, can I suggest that you contact Mark Wall at SE9 for his opinion. He submitted a written response to a call-in that was held in Greenwich regarding the Code when it was published. The call-in can be found at

<http://committees.greenwich.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=141&MId=2720&Ver=4>

SE9 reported quite clearly that firms advertising with it had been phoned by the Council and asked to transfer their business to Greenwich Time. It was suggested that this was being done at a much lower rate than normal. Clearly

the net effect of this behaviour is that it is much harder for local publications to survive.