



Councillor 1

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Leader of the Conservative Group

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Council Conduct and Constitutions Team
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April 12th 2013

Dear [REDACTED]

Re: Publicity Code Consultation; East End Life

I am writing regarding the Publicity Code Consultation on behalf of the Conservative Group on Tower Hamlets Borough Council and the two Conservative Associations within the borough. Our wish is to express the firmest support for the proposal to provide the Secretary of State with powers to make directions requiring local authorities to comply with some or all of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity's (the "Publicity Code's") recommendations.

This will finally, in the context of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, permit the Secretary of State to implement the Recommended Code of Conduct of 2011 by ordering the cessation of publication of East End Life, a so called "newspaper" published by the council on a weekly basis.

Tower Hamlets was the first local authority to run a weekly newspaper and this organ, East End Life, has a deserved reputation of being a notorious, publicly funded propaganda sheet. The veneer of TV listings, restaurant reviews and the description of "community newspaper" on the inside cover is an attempt to conceal the blatant political propaganda that is East End Life.

In 2011 Parliament approved a Code of Practice which included guidelines to limit the frequency of council newspapers to a maximum of quarterly, prevent council newspapers from emulating commercial newspapers in style or content and limit content to information about business and amenities of the council or other providers.



2009-2010
Positive engagement of older people
2009-2010
Preventing and tackling child poverty
2003-2009
Winner of 7 previous
Beacon Awards



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

When the government guidelines were introduced the administration of Tower Hamlets led by the Executive Mayor, Lutfur Rahman initiated a "review" of East End Life. This was conducted by the council's highly paid Head of Communications, Takki Sulaiman, who is ultimately responsible for East End Life, and meets weekly with the Mayor to discuss what goes in it. It should be noted that as both the author and driving force of the review, he would be unlikely to facilitate a review that recommended scrapping most of the responsibilities associated with his own, highly paid position.

My group responded in the following terms:

- East End Life should be abolished as it is not a proper use of taxpayers money
- The Recommended Code of Practice indicated that EEL could not continue in its existing form
- A cheaper approach would be to buy advertising space in the local newspaper of record, the East London Advertiser, and to use alternative avenues for publicity (web, information at one stop shops, libraries etc)

On 8th June 2011, a report was brought to the meeting of the Mayoral Cabinet (papers attached - Agenda item 10.2: East End Life Review – CAB 006/112) which presented the review and its recommendations. This was approved by the Executive Mayor, who has reserved all decision making to himself and was then ratified on July 6th, after the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had asked the Mayor to re-consider his decision.

He made his July 6th decision in less than a minute, without publicly considering or responding to the concerns expressed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

As can be seen, the entire report is misleading and ignores public and stakeholder opinions. Also notable is the fact that the few solid answers that were gained from executing the review were not taken on board. East End Life under the guidance of the officer responsible for East End Life conducted its own survey of residents, via itself.

In conducting this survey 624 people responded, out of a population of 250,000 in the borough. 88% of those responding did so through either an online survey or an open response via the council. But these two methods were advertised only on the Council's own website and social media or through East End Life. Unsurprisingly there was a 64% positive view of the paper from this survey.

Residents who throw it straight in the bin are unlikely to notice the ad for the survey – or take part in it. However even this carefully managed sample indicated a 36% view to close the "paper"

In an attempt to manage the views of elected councillors, members attended a forum on the paper. Those attending made their views extremely clear. The review notes of this meeting stated "it was felt that EEL has had successful history publishing local news to the wider community, and has been especially successful at promoting the work of schools."

This is misrepresentation of a meeting where the recollection of those present is completely different to the comments published.

There are other serious errors of fact contained in the report.

The report claimed that to abolish East End Life would cost the council £2.1million, and that reductions in frequency would also involve (lower) net costs to the council. The £2.1 million figure comes from the difference the council estimates it would cost to put its statutory advertisements in the local press and the internal transfer cost of advertising in East End Life. There are three things wrong with this approach..

The administration estimated the cost as if advertising in a range of newspapers. The East End has one newspaper, the East London Advertiser that has been running for 145 years and is available every newsagent and supermarket in the borough and given away at major transport intersections. Placing official advertising to this newspaper would clearly result in lower costs

The report bases the cost of advertising in the local press entirely from its rate card. Conservative councillors had already confirmed, in public at council meetings and in the review meeting that the East London Advertiser would offer the council a loyalty rate of £150,000 per year and make available two pages a week for 52 weeks. The review did not take this into account – because no-one involved in it bothered to contact the Advertiser to check this out.

Most astonishingly of all, the £2.1 million figure in the report did not include the savings that will be made by no longer writing, printing and distributing the paper. The council already costs this at £1.5 million. Consequently the £2.1m is the gross replacement cost (i.e. counting extra costs only) not the net replacement cost which would take these savings into account.

This report commissioned by the Executive Mayor, and approved by him in under a minute, despite overwhelming reservation from members, resulted in the continuation of a paper that is not wanted, needed or required by the residents of Tower Hamlets, and is a threat to the independent free press.

I enclose copies of East End Life with examples of how this paper is not all it purports to be. Whilst it does have information for residents, it also serves as the campaigning mouthpiece for the Executive Mayor, Lutfur Rahman.

You will note in the edition of 23-29 May 2011, there is a supplement on pages 20 and 21 described on the front page masthead "A look back at the Mayor's first six months in office". The heading of "achievements" on the pages is indicative of a highly selective and partisan description of his administration. One could add that there is no mention of the many column inches that have filled the independent media on the somewhat more colourful aspects of this period.

In the edition of 11-17 July 2011 there was a feature "Why East End Life is here to stay". This is again partisan and totally lacks any sense of objectivity.

Edition 952 is a highly partisan attack on what East End Life inaccurately describes as the Bedroom Tax, at which no opposite point of view is given credence.

None of these itemised features could meet any description of being even handed, objective or appropriate.

East End Life has no letters page; there are very few opportunities for non administration councillors to be featured in the wall to wall coverage of the Rahman administration. Indeed, in one infamous issue a national journalist counted more than ten different pictures of Lutfur Rahman and there are well documented accounts of administration members arguing for ever more photographs of themselves.

Local authorities are required by Section 4 (1) of the Local Government Act 1986 to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity in coming to any decision on publicity. A cursory examination of East End Life shows the council are ignoring the code, by continuing to publish on a weekly basis, giving the impression that this is a "newspaper" and acting as a propaganda vehicle for the administration.

East End Life continues as a crude propaganda sheet, sent out weekly which will damage the local, independent media and potentially contravene the electoral process as no political party can have regular access to campaign funds equal to those available to a local authority.

At the council's 2013 budget meeting held on March 6th 2013, the council voted by a two thirds majority to cancel East End Life to save money. Despite this decision, legally taken by a two thirds majority of the elected council, the Mayor has used his Executive Power by way of virements to direct funds from reserves into continuing East End Life. I attach the documentation of this Mayoral decision which was undertaken on 26th March 2013. This decision was called in for review by the overview and Scrutiny Committee, which voted overwhelmingly to request that the Mayor further reconsider this decision.

The council has form in other ways of misusing public funds for illegal political advertising. During 2012 complaints were made to Ofcom about council funded advertisements placed on specifically Bangladeshi local TV stations. On January 21st 2013 Ofcom delivered a blistering attack on the Tower Hamlets administration for placing political advertisements on favoured TV channels. Their conclusions stated, without reservation, that the Council had breached 'The Communications Act 2003', the 'UK Code of Broadcast Advertising' and the 'Code on local authority publicity'.

Ofcom explained exactly how the council was breaking the Local authority code in detail. This judgment is attached as an appendix.

As evidence, the council submitted a lengthy submission, in the name of the Head of Communications, Takki Sulaiman, but drafted by the council's legal officer which was identical to that always used to justify the continuation of East End Life, which, I would submit, contravenes the 'Code on local authority publicity' on a weekly basis.

We fully support the principle as outlined in the consultation and urge implementation of statutory provision of the Code of Practice to enable the Secretary of State to order the closure of this blatant misuse of public money, which by attempting to push the independent media effectively out of business has the malign effect of controlling news and the media to its own political purpose.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Peter Golds
Leader of the Conservative Opposition
London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Att.	Appendix 1:	Report Submitted to Cabinet on 8 th June 2011
	Appendix 2:	East End Life Issue 860
	Appendix 3:	East End Life Issue 867
	Appendix 4:	East End Life 952
	Appendix 5:	Executive Decision of March 26 th 2013
	Appendix 6:	Ofcom judgment, 21 st January 2013.

