

Individual 5

**From:** Paul Webbewood [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 18 April 2013 10:04  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Protecting the local press from unfair competition - consultation

**Attachments:** greenwich time 2013.doc

Please see attached

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16/05/2013



[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
16 April 2013

Dear [REDACTED]

### **Protecting the Independent Press from Unfair Competition**

1. Thank you for seeking views regarding local authority publications. I live in the Borough of Greenwich which is, I believe, one of only two local authorities still to publish a weekly newspaper.
2. I replied to your Department's previous consultation on this subject in October 2010. At that time I believed that local authorities should have freedom to determine the frequency of their publications subject to controls to promote impartiality. However I believe that the Council's paper *Greenwich Time* distorts the political debate in the Borough and does operate in a way which is detrimental to the local press and I would now support the **Secretary of State taking the power to stop councils acting contrary to the Code of Practice**. I think though that you should also consider legislation which would allow councils to save money by placing statutory notices on their website rather than having to pay to advertise in the local press.

### **Greenwich Time**

3. This paper trivialises political debate in Greenwich by its concentration on good news stories and refusal to allow in-depth discussion of local political issues. One example was when the Council's Planning Board was due to consider a controversial proposal to build a BMX cycle track on a local park. In the week before the meeting *Greenwich Time* published an article promoting the benefits of a track and suggesting that a decision to build it had already been made. The Planning Board then approved the application. Whatever the merits of the decision the article in *Greenwich Time* was badly mistimed and was possibly intended to taunt opponents.

4. In the last few days Greenwich Council has announced a scheme to provide temporary jobs for unemployed people in the Borough whose benefit entitlement may be affected by recent changes. This was announced on Monday and was heavily splashed in the edition of Greenwich Time published that day. The story was then taken up by national newspapers and television. The two local commercial papers circulating in Greenwich appear in midweek. Although they managed to include the story in this week's edition it had become a little cold and they were unable to make best use of it. I suspect that the timing of the announcement may have been deliberate to promote Greenwich Time over the local commercial papers.

5. Greenwich Council rightly claims that the circulation of the two commercial free papers in the Borough is rather patchy. It also claims that if Greenwich Time were to be discontinued it would have to buy space in both of them to place its statutory notices at a cost of over £1 million a year and that therefore the publication of a weekly council paper makes financial sense. I find this later argument hard to understand. I don't believe that Greenwich is in a unique position concerning commercial local paper distribution or that those Councils which comply with the Code of Practice are wantonly wasting money by advertising in commercial papers.

#### **Statutory Notices**

6. I do think though that the requirement to place statutory notices in a newspaper should be reviewed. I don't think many people seek out papers to read notices about planning application and road closures. People who do want such information could find it just as easily on a Council website. Estate agents seem to be the principal source of adverts in the two Greenwich local papers - the News Shopper and the Mercury - and statutory notices placed by next door Lewisham Council do not take up much space. If the national position is similar then local newspapers could manage without the income from local Council advert sting,

7. I hope these comments are helpful.

Yours sincerely

Paul Webbewood