

Response from the Royal Borough of Greenwich to the DCLG in relation to Greenwich Time

1. Background

- 1.1 Greenwich Time (GT) was first published in 1984 to provide news and information about the Council, and was distributed to all households in Greenwich twice monthly for 10 months of the year, and once in December and August. It is the only local paper which is intended for distribution to all 101,782 households in the Royal Borough of Greenwich and it is also available from 76 pick-up points. Independent back checks are carried out each week to check delivery rates. Between 10 June 2013 and 14 April 2014 a distribution rate of 98.9% was achieved.
- 1.2 In 2008, the Council started publishing the paper on a weekly basis having given due consideration to the then Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Accordingly, when the DCLG introduced a new Code on 31 March 2011, in spite of the House of Commons Select Committee finding “that there is little hard evidence to support the view of the commercial newspaper industry that council publications are, to any significant extent, competing unfairly with independent newspapers”, the Council’s Cabinet considered a full report on the guidance contained in the Code. As part of that process, it looked at possible alternative arrangements for publishing Greenwich Time content and Council advertising (*see Appendix 1*).
- 1.3 The rationale for the decision was based upon:
 - Minimising the cost for local taxpayers – as it has helped the Council to challenge an age old monopoly through which media outlets hiked up the costs local authorities had to pay to place statutory adverts in a printed publication
 - The borough wide coverage the Council achieves with GT compared to other newspapers
 - The mechanism it provides the Council to both inform and consult with local residents
- 1.4 The Council’s Cabinet agreed several changes to GT to bring it fully into line with the new Code – including removing TV listing pages and football match reports. It agreed that local authority publicity should be undertaken in line with the Code’s seven underlying principles, namely that it should be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed and appropriate, that it should have regard to equality and diversity and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity. These are principles that we strive to adhere to at all times.
- 1.5 To ensure they comply with the Code, all editions of GT go through a rigorous sign off process. Advice and guidance is sought from the Head of Law and Governance as required.

- 1.6 The Council recently demonstrated how it takes adherence to the Code seriously by standing down a freelance Contractor who worked on the paper after he sent a letter containing unfavourable political comments about the Mayor of London to local newspapers from an email address associated with GT.
- 1.7 The Council's Cabinet considered that issuing GT weekly to publish statutory and other notices was overwhelmingly more cost effective than using the local press to do so. It also considered at length the provisions of paragraph 28, but concluded that this paragraph was outweighed by the principle of cost effectiveness, and by equality and diversity considerations. Accordingly it decided there was a compelling case that Greenwich Time should continue to be published weekly.
- 1.8 Publishing GT on a weekly basis allows the Council to include statutory planning, highways and licensing notices, many of which require weekly publication. This also enabled the Council to address persistent complaints from local residents that statutory notices of this kind were not received by them.
- 1.9 In addition, the Council has utilised Greenwich Time to advertise Choice Based Lettings for Council housing, employment opportunities with the council and to provide notices of meetings, each of which it has sought to promote on a weekly basis. Additional services and opportunities are advertised for issues such as Foster Carers, Adoptions, community consultation etc.
- 1.10 The newspaper is written in a journalistic style, and since 2008 has placed a greater emphasis on community news and residents' opinions.
- 1.11 GT is the only local, weekly newspaper which is written by reporters based in the borough and which is focussed exclusively on Greenwich. In that respect, there is no other local, weekly paper as the other main papers in Greenwich cover several boroughs and are part of large newspaper groups.
- 1.12 The Council only started producing a weekly newspaper in 2008 after detailed meetings were held with the publishers of the main newspapers in the borough to request that they increase distribution across the whole borough. Further meetings took place in 2011 with local publishing groups at which they reiterated that they would be unable to deliver either their own papers carrying Council information, or GT, to every home in the borough. The meetings occurred when the Council reviewed its position against the new Code.
- 1.13 There are two other well-established local papers currently covering parts of the Royal Borough of Greenwich. Each bases its distribution policy on the basis of strictly defined marketing demographics. Neither serves more than around 30% of the borough's households. Even if the Council paid to advertise in both local newspapers, the publications would only be delivered to around 50-60% of the borough's households. Their distribution areas fail to entirely cover wards in the borough which are among the most deprived in the country including Woolwich Dockyard (SE18), Abbey Wood (SE2) and Thamesmead Moorings (SE28).

- 1.14 Indeed the latest audited circulation figures posted on the Newspaper Society website state that the Lewisham & Greenwich News Shopper Series was delivered to 51,718 households (Jan 2013 – Dec 2013). There are no figures available for each borough, but this equates to an average of 25,859 in each. In comparison, the Council aims to deliver to 101,782 households in the borough. The latest audited figures for the Lewisham Greenwich & Bexley Mercury Series posted on the Newspaper Society website state that it was delivered to 59,752 households (July 2012 – June 2013). Again no figures are available for each borough but this equates to an average of 19,917 copies for each. The Evening Standard, which the DCLG has suggested as an alternative publication for public notices, is available from less than ten pick up points in the borough.
- 1.15 The distribution of Greenwich Time therefore ensures disadvantaged communities have equal access to jobs and training opportunities and to Choice Based Lettings listings, whilst the content also promotes a huge range of initiatives often targeted at our more disadvantaged communities. This includes public health programmes as well as crime prevention, housing advice, library and literacy schemes, race relations, and equality, diversity and community issues. It helps to promote community cohesion.
- 1.16 Neither of the other main newspapers is understood to deliver to new and developing communities on the Greenwich Peninsula, or in the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich. Greenwich Time therefore helps to ensure they are informed of local matters and improves their integration within our existing community.
- 1.17 Directing the Council to cease the publication of GT would cause these communities to become disenfranchised – removing a valuable source of news and information concerning access to services and amenities provided by the Council and others in Greenwich.

2. Producing a weekly paper delivers value for money and supports newspaper groups

- 2.1 Publishing a weekly Council newspaper has enabled the Royal Borough of Greenwich to provide local taxpayers with value for money.
- 2.2 The net cost of producing the paper has fallen over the last ten years as the paper has been published more frequently, which in turn has allowed more advertising income to be accrued:

Year	Editions	Advertising Income	Net cost (per copy)
2004/5	20	£39,988.31	£468,802.95 (22.3p)
2007/8	20	£200,824.39	£257,408.77 (12.3p)

2008/9	46	£498,188.24	£243,537.50 (5.0p)
2013/14	50	£700,323.58	£92,883.48 (1.8p)

- 2.3 In addition, the Council has achieved this reduction in costs by entering innovative inter-authority agreements to secure print and distribution services, in line with the Government's National Procurement Strategy for Local Government.
- 2.4 Whilst this has driven down costs for local taxpayers it has also resulted in Trinity Mirror, one of the largest publishers of free local newspapers, securing an annual print contract worth around £250,000 from the Royal Borough of Greenwich.
- 2.5 Any move by the DCLG to prevent the Council from publishing a weekly newspaper would negate the need for this contract and would, in itself, financially penalise a publisher of local newspapers – the exact opposite of what the Government claims it is seeking to achieve.
- 2.6 It would have cost the Council an additional £2.0m in advertising costs during 2013/14, based upon rates advertised by both papers during the last financial year (see table below).

2013/14	News				
	GT	Mercury (M)	Shopper (S)	M+S	Extra Cost
Public Notices	£165,879.5 5	£196,106.40	£356,404.71	£552,511.11	£386,631.56
Run of Page	£263,458.6 7	£1,066,464.0 0	£313,794.34	£1,380,258.3 4	£1,116,799.6 7
Recruitment	£43,184.48	£108,019.80	£441,039.44	£549,059.24	£505,874.76
Totals £	£472,522.7 0	£1,370,590.2 0	£1,111,238.4 8	£2,481,828.6 8	£2,009,305.9 8

- 2.7 Even if the Council placed just its statutory notices in the other weekly newspapers, there would be a considerable increase in costs.
- 2.8 At the same time, the Council has further reduced costs by selling advertising space in GT to local advertisers, many of whom are small, local businesses who

have told us that they cannot afford to advertise in other newspapers. Ceasing GT would damage small local businesses and their ability to market their services effectively.

- 2.9 There is no evidence that GT has had any impact on local papers, and its advertising policy has been designed specifically to prevent this. GT does not target advertising from car dealers and estate agents, nor does it accept advertising from escort services, massage parlours and sex chat lines. Whilst GT has been produced for 30 years, this has not prevented a strong local newspaper market, with two new start-ups – SE9 and Greenwich Visitor – and existing commercial and community papers such as the Mercury, the News Shopper, the Guide, Meridian and Westcombe News. These show that there is a strong local newspaper sector– though unlike GT none of them cover more than a small geographic area of the borough.
- 2.10 The other papers in Greenwich are in fact part of regional or sub regional publishing groups and tend to draw their advertising from a much wider geographical area. The News Shopper is part of the Gannett Group which owns around 90 daily newspapers, 1,000 weekly newspapers and 23 TV stations in six countries. The Mercury is part of the Tindle Group which produces a large number of weekly newspapers across England and Wales. During the week beginning 7 April 2014, 97% of GT’s advertising space was booked by Greenwich businesses, compared to around 12% for the Mercury and 21% for the News Shopper.
- 2.11 In addition, the Council had become aware that the publishers of weekly newspapers published statutory notices at considerable cost to local authorities and their taxpayers.
- 2.12 Any move to make the Council advertise in external publications would therefore have a negative impact upon the Council’s finances at a time when it is being expected to find further budget savings. During an average week in 2013/14, the Council placed 1.2 pages of statutory adverts, 0.7 pages of job adverts and 6.5 pages of run of page adverts – including at least 4 pages promoting our Choice Based Lettings housing properties each week.
- 2.13 Publishing a weekly newspaper enabled the Council to make substantial savings in terms of producing stand-alone leaflets, as Council departments place adverts in GT instead ensuring that their service information was delivered direct to local households rather than running duplicate printing operations.
- 2.14 The savings the Council has made have been passed back to local taxpayers in the form of five consecutive council tax freezes since GT was produced on a weekly basis.

3. Even Handedness and Objectivity

- 3.1 GT plays a vital role in promoting news and information about the Council, community news and residents’ opinions.

- 3.2 To ensure all content complies with the Code, the Council has put in place a rigorous sign off process. Advice and guidance is sought from the Head of Law and Governance as required.
- 3.3 This approach was endorsed by the District Auditor as an appropriate safeguard to put in place, when asked to review the Council's decision to continue publishing GT on a weekly basis in September 2011. Having looked into the matter, the District Auditor ruled that she was "not minded to take any audit action" having "taken account of all the information available". This included advice from the Council's Chief Executive that "all editorial content during periods of heightened sensitivity was checked by the legal team to ensure it complied with legislation in place at that time". She also stated that she considered "review by the legal team to be an adequate control on editorial content" (*see Appendix 2*).
- 3.4 The newspaper promotes policies put forward by the Council, the Mayor of London, Government Ministers and local residents and community groups.
- 3.5 GT contains a letters page which promotes a range of views which both support and oppose the Council's actions. During 2013/14, GT published 146 letters (see examples in Appendix 3):

- 61 of them were critical of the Council or called for it to take action
- 60 were neutral or covered issues unrelated to the Council
- Only 25 were supportive of the Council's actions – including one from the Mayor of London

4. Coverage of Government Ministers and the Mayor of London

- 4.1 The Council has ensured that publicity relating to government policies and proposals is balanced and factually accurate. It has also given extensive coverage to the Mayor of London.
- 4.2 Examples include the following stories, many of which were not covered by other local newspapers (see Appendix 4):
- 4.3 When the local NHS Healthcare Trust went into administration, the Council ran a piece to reassure residents over local health services and included a quote from the then Secretary of State, Andrew Lansley MP, and set out the course of action the Government intended to take (17 July 2012) including the appointment of a Special Administrator.
- 4.4 GT then gave extensive coverage of the Special Administrator's proposals for the local NHS Trust and encouraged local people to attend consultation meetings over the issue (6 November 2012, 20 November 2012, 11 December 2012 and 15 January 2013).
- 4.5 When there were concerns about the implications of closing Lewisham Accident and Emergency Department upon local health provision in the Royal Borough of

Greenwich, GT ran a quote from the Department of Health setting out its position (5 February 2013).

- 4.6 The paper promoted the visit of Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, when he visited Greenwich to speak to beneficiaries of the Government's Families First (Troubled Families) scheme. His visit was featured in a photo story on pages 1, 4 and 5 (17 September 2013). A further mention of the scheme and the Secretary of State was made in a later edition on 3 December 2013.
- 4.7 A visit from the then Minister of State for Transport, Theresa Villiers, to check on progress of the construction of the Crossrail station in Woolwich was featured as a photo story (19 June 2012).
- 4.8 The London riots in August 2011 had a significant impact on the borough. The weekly publication of Greenwich Time proved extremely valuable to the Metropolitan Police as the paper was able to publish the CCTV images of suspects. It also played a vital role in promoting community cohesion. No other publisher or method could prove as effective a mechanism for getting these images into every household in the borough and helping to catch and convict the perpetrators. No other local publication gave as extensive coverage to the community's reaction to the events in Woolwich town centre which helped to restore a sense of calm and to demonstrate community leadership. The Leader of the Council used GT to highlight the visit of Minister Bob Neill to Woolwich in order to announce details of the Government's assistance scheme (23 August 2011). Further reference was made to the Government's scheme on numerous occasions over the following months.
- 4.9 A photo story featured and quoted the Mayor of London following a visit to Woolwich after the riots (30 August 2011).
- 4.10 When the Council promoted the Mayor of London's proposals to review policing arrangements in London, GT carried a quote from Deputy Mayor, Stephen Greenhalgh, calling for people to have their say (26 Feb 2013).
- 4.11 GT promoted the fact the Mayor of London had announced a £3.2m investment package in transport projects in the borough (8 January 2013).
- 4.12 When Her Majesty the Queen bestowed the honour of Royal Borough status on Greenwich, GT carried a quote from the Mayor of London welcoming the decision (7 February 2012).
- 4.13 GT credited the Mayor of London's Help a London Park scheme for funding multi-use games areas in the borough, as part of the Olympic and Paralympic legacy (17 May 2011).
- 4.14 The Prime Minister, David Cameron, has been quoted in GT in relation to our efforts to set up a digital hub, in line with Government policy (15 November 2011 and referenced on 29 November 2011).

- 4.15 Energy Minister Michael Fallon's visit to a local, innovative, plastics recycling firm was reported in a photo story (11 March 2014).
- 4.16 Health Minister Norman Lamb's visit to our pioneering integrated health and social care scheme was covered in a photo story (5 November 2013) in which the Minister was quoted.
- 4.17 The then International Development Minister Andrew Mitchell was quoted in an article in encouraging local residents to support a fundraising appeal by Action Against Hunger.
- 4.18 A campaign to encourage more entitled families to apply for free school meals – and the Government's intention to widen the scheme to all under 7s – was featured in GT (17 December 2013).
- 4.19 A photo story featured the Mayor of London at the opening of the Greenwich University Technical College which was sponsored by the Council, TfL, the University of Greenwich and Waites.

5. Coverage of Councillors

- 5.1 In the main, coverage of Councillors relates to the Leader and the Council's Cabinet as the paper focuses on the Council's polices and services. There is very little coverage of backbench Councillors generally. However there has been coverage of Opposition councillors on a number of occasions (see Appendix 5), for example:
 - 5.2 Cllr Dermot Poston appeared on the front page when he received an honour in The Queen's birthday list (25 June 2013).
 - 5.3 Former Cllr Peter King was featured in the paper in recognition of the fact he was awarded freedom of the borough for his outstanding service to the community (1 November 2011).
 - 5.4 Cllr Drury has appeared in the paper in relation to Remembrance Day activities and when Freedom of the Borough was awarded to Cllr Peter King (12 November 2013 and 1 November 2011).
 - 5.5 It was also reported in GT that Cllr Drury had co-signed a motion welcoming the conviction of two people involved in murdering Stephen Lawrence (31 January 2012).
 - 5.6 Cllr Matt Clare appeared in GT when he was part of a team helping to raise funds for the Mayor's charity (19 November 2013).
 - 5.7 It was reported that Cllr Nigel Fletcher had co-signed a motion to full council which led to the renaming of the borough after Her Majesty the Queen bestowed Royal Borough status on Greenwich (2 August 2011).
 - 5.8 Cllr Eileen Glover has also pitched a number of stories to GT – such as a local lunch club in her ward – which were covered in the paper.

6. Views of Local Residents

- 6.1 The Council notes the DCLG received just eight replies to its consultation on the Code from residents in our borough. According to the 2011 Census, the population of the Royal Borough is 264,000 meaning that less than 0.00003% of the local population took part.
- 6.2 The Council is concerned that they have been informed by the DCLG that opinion on whether GT is even handed and objective was simply based on the representations it received. This is particularly the case as half of the representations were made by people aligned with political parties and therefore the objectiveness of their submissions has to be questioned.
- 6.3 The Council also notes that many local residents and businesses enjoy reading GT and find it an informative publication. We have attached a number of letters from residents and businesses that are concerned by the possibility of the DCLG directing the Council to cease publication of GT (see Appendix 6).
- 6.4 For example Judy Smith MBE, who was recognised in 2009 for 30 years services in the voluntary sector. In her letter she states “Greenwich Time has served the residents of Greenwich for as long as I can remember and has played an absolutely essential role in getting community information out to people, in the sort of detail that is needed to ensure it really is understood... I am absolutely certain that no other local newspaper would run the kind of fact-based community editorial that Greenwich Time does. As I talk with local people, I find many, many more supporting Greenwich Time than wishing it stopped... Without Greenwich Time, I really do have serious fears about how local residents would hear about the services and projects available to them”.
- 6.5 Steve Nelson, Government Relations Director, South East London Chamber of Commerce said, “The South East London Chamber of Commerce was founded in Woolwich in 1889 and enjoys an excellent and mutually supportive partnership with the Royal Borough of Greenwich...Part of that partnership has been having access to the pages of Greenwich Time. The free paper has helped raise the profile of the Chamber throughout the Borough, enabling us to reach more companies and assist them in making their businesses more successful...Both the Chamber and I would be very sorry to see Greenwich Time forced to cease publication as it informs the community, including our members, and is a very cost effective way for local businesses to advertise”.
- 6.6 Mike Leader, Ecumenical Borough Dean in the Royal Borough of Greenwich said, “I was very concerned to hear of the criticism of ‘Greenwich Time’ and of the possibility that it might have to cease publication or be severely curtailed... No other free paper reaches every household...Many of the poorest members of the community do not have easy access to the internet and ‘Greenwich Time’ provides an easy way for them to access housing services”.
- 6.7 Dr Tariq Abbasi MBE, Director, Greenwich Islamic Centre said, “It saddens me to learn that the Secretary of State Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles has ordered the Borough to

cease the publication of Greenwich Time. Greenwich Time is the only local paper which is received by all households including our large Muslim Community, young and old, and it provides us very useful source of information for all residents on council services as well as other community activities. Greenwich Times played an important role in bringing news to the residents of Borough during Olympic Games and made it very exciting. (The) Fact that Greenwich Times is produced weekly has been particularly important during the times of potential community tension when the paper has been used to provide statements from all community and faith communities which has helped to reassure residents and build harmony between the different parts of community. I have been pleased to be part of that on behalf of the Muslim community in the Borough”.

- 6.8 Arthritis Care, who have advertised their workshops in GT said, “In the past we have had problems with creating awareness of our workshops via the papers especially to the people within the Borough of Greenwich but ever since we started using the Greenwich Time there’s been an impressive turn around...99.5% of our participants on Greenwich workshop saw our advert in the Greenwich Time”.
- 6.9 Star Day Nursery has also advertised in GT for some months. They said, “The outcome of adverts has been fantastic...the price for adverts is good and the coverage is excellent”.
- 6.10 Total Wellness Centre said, “I was very concerned to hear about the government plans to shut down the local council newspapers like Greenwich Time...Greenwich Time is a fantastic platform for everyday people to find out about local initiatives, people and businesses behind them and about everything going on in the community”.
- 6.11 R + P Car Sales said they “get a good response from the paper, and if the paper was to cease trading, it would surely affect our Car Business”.
- 6.12 Kumon Woolwich Study Centre said, “This method of advertising has worked for our business and we’re sure many others too...Overall, GT newspaper benefits communities, business and residents. It will be unfortunate to see its closure as it provides Value for Money”.
- 6.13 The Guru Sales said, “We gained an excellent response from our advertising within the paper and our launch was a great success due to the coverage we received”.
- 6.14 Toulouse Plant Hire Limited said, “We have advertised in the Greenwich Time for many years and I would just like to say what a good service Toulouse Plant Hire Limited has received. It would be a great loss if this service is no longer available to us”.
- 6.15 BBVS said, “I have to say that I was extremely surprised and disappointed to hear that there is a possibility of Greenwich Time being closed. Can this really be on the agenda! We have always considered (it), especially with regard to our client London City Airport, an irreplaceable way of communicating a detailed message to the Greenwich community”.

7. Submissions to DCLG

Mr Chris Smith – former Chair of the Liberal Democrats in Greenwich

- 7.1 Mr Chris Smith, the former Chair of the Liberal Democrats in Greenwich, admits that his position means that “of course I myself and my party are biased against it, as I am sure all non-Labour political groups in Greenwich borough are”. Mr Smith makes a claim that GT carries “numerous pictures of Labour Councillors – not all of which are justified by their work as Councillors” but provides no evidence to back this assertion up. The Council therefore believe it should be discounted.
- 7.2 He also states that the paper contains “heavily politically biased and controversial content”. But as the Council has evidenced, all editorial content is checked prior to publication to make sure it complies with the Code. This fact was borne out by the District Auditor’s report.
- 7.3 Mr Smith claims that the “letters page should be used by a comedy TV show, so effusive are most of the letters in praising the Labour Council”. Yet the Council has provided evidence that the 61 of the 146 letters printed in 2013/14 were actually critical of the council – or called for it to take action – and only 25 were supportive.
- 7.4 Mr Smith also quotes a cost of £600,000 to produce GT, but this is based upon supposition, not fact. As the Council has evidenced, it cost just £92,883.48 in 2013/14 or 1.8p a copy in 2013/14.

Anthony Durham – 2014 Liberal Democrat Candidate, Council Elections

- 7.5 Mr Anthony Durham, is a Liberal Democrat candidate in this year’s local elections and has stood in many local elections for his party. He states that “south-east London was served for many decades by a conventional (paid for) local newspaper, which would be happy to print several pages-worth of adverts for the council, at what must infallibly be a lower cost than the council’s effort”.
- 7.6 The Council assumes that Mr Durham is referring to the South London Press which is not readily available in our borough. The Mercury and News Shopper are the two free newspapers which are each distributed to around a third of the borough. As the Council has evidenced, it would actually cost the Council a significant amount of extra money to advertise in either paper.
- 7.7 He also states that “public information is nowadays presented on the internet and the council’s resources would be far better spent improving their data, and its availability to people without the skills or money to use the internet easily”. Mr Durham appears to be unaware that the Council has a legal duty to place its statutory notices in a printed newspaper. The Council agrees with the need to bridge the digital divide and that it why it has invested in improved IT systems and additional computer terminals in our public libraries. However, we do not accept we are anywhere near close to a community in which a solely electronic form of communication could work.

Paul Webbewood – former Lib Dem Councillor and 2014 Candidate

- 7.8 Mr Paul Webbewood is a former Liberal Democrat Councillor and a candidate in this year's local election. He also questions the validity of some of the editorial content featured in GT. The Council has evidenced that all editorial content is checked prior to publication and this fact was borne out by the District Auditor's report.
- 7.9 He made a specific claim that the timing of an announcement relating to "a scheme to provide temporary jobs for unemployed people in the Borough whose benefit" may have "been deliberate to promote Greenwich Time over the local commercial newspapers". Nothing could be further from the truth. The Council invited local, regional and national media to a press conference announcing the scheme. This is evidenced by Mr Webbewood himself who notes that "the story was taken up by national newspapers and television".
- 7.10 Mr Webbewood also claims that he found it hard to understand how publishing a weekly paper "makes financial sense". However the Council has evidenced to the strong financial case which underpins the production of GT and how the associated print contract also supports a local newspaper group.

Cllr Spencer Drury – Leader of the Opposition, Royal Borough of Greenwich

- 7.11 Cllr Drury claims that "Greenwich cross subsidises Greenwich Time by advertising in it with different parts of the Council". The Council makes no apology for the fact that it places its advertising in GT, for as it has evidenced it would cost the Council a significant amount of extra money to advertise in alternative local papers.
- 7.12 Cllr Drury also claims that there are many examples of the Code not being met in Greenwich Time. Indeed Cllr Drury referred the paper to the District Auditor in September 2011. As evidenced earlier, having looked into the matter, the District Auditor ruled that she was "not minded to take any audit action" having "taken account of all the information available." This included advice from the Council's Chief Executive that "all editorial content during periods of heightened sensitivity was checked by the legal team to ensure it complied with legislation in place at that time". She also stated that she considered "review by the legal team to be an adequate control on editorial content" (*see Appendix 2*).
- 7.13 Furthermore the case that Cllr Drury highlights shows that the Council has responded to concerns over content that have been raised with it and will put appropriate safeguards in place. The Council's Chief Executive wrote to Cllr Drury making clear that whilst the story concerned was "factually correct and presents the Council's decision....I intend to ask that the GT Team 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".
- 7.14 He goes on to state that the Council "according to a local magazine (SE9) undercuts independent publications by poaching their advertisers and offering a lower rate". The Council refutes this statement and has never deliberately sought

to “poach” advertisers from any other publication. It does, however, speak to local businesses across the borough in order to make them aware of the benefits of advertising in GT.

7.15 The Council also notes that Greenwich Time has been produced for 30 years. Its publication has not prevented numerous other publications starting up during that time – including SE9 and Greenwich Visitor. Whilst the Council cannot dictate the rates that other publications charge, it would argue that by selling in the benefits of advertising it would encourage local businesses to consider alternative options open to them.

Adam Pollock

7.16 Mr Pollock claims that “publications like Greenwich Time are illegal under the 2011 code of conduct”.

7.17 The Council would like to set the record straight on this comment as it is not illegal for the Council to publish GT. The Council has stated on numerous occasions that it complies with the law in relation to its publicity and will continue to do so in future.

7.18 The Council also notes that Mr Pollock sent in a letter to GT in November 2013, in response to an article he had read, which the Council duly published.

Norma Lynch, Joe Lynch and Tom Phillips

7.19 Ms Lynch, Mr Lynch and Mr Phillips all make similar points that GT is a waste of money and prints biased content.

7.20 The Council refutes both these points – having evidenced that it actually cheaper for the Council to produce GT than it would be to place its advertising in either alternative local newspaper. It has also evidenced how it ensures that it complies with the Code.

8. Conclusion

8.1 We fully support an independent local press and believe it is essential for local democracy that journalists scrutinise the workings of councils and help hold elected representatives to account.

8.2 However, the numbers of free weekly local and regional titles and newspaper circulations have been in decline for some time as more and more people source their news from the internet and via social media. This is not the fault of council publications.

8.3 The local newspaper industry is largely owned by national or indeed international newspaper groups and this often means that ‘local’ reporters are often based outside of the local area they report on. More often than not, local newspapers no longer send reporters to council meetings – thus negating their role of holding local councils to account.

- 8.4 We therefore believe it is legitimate for councils to communicate directly with residents about decisions and services – and we understand that local newspaper groups do not have the same obligation to do so.
- 8.5 In conclusion, GT plays a vital role in our local community in the following ways:
- 8.6 **The weekly publication of Greenwich Time has played a key role in promoting community cohesion in our borough over recent years** – providing reassurance to our local community after extremely disturbing local events (See Appendix 7 – hard copy only).
- 8.7 **The weekly publication of Greenwich Time is invaluable in relaying information about large events in London, as shown during the London 2012 Games and around the London Marathon** – playing a valuable role in minimising disruption and ensuring local residents and visitors to the borough had a largely positive impression of the events.
- 8.8 **The weekly publication of Greenwich Time actually helps to support newspaper groups in line with the DCLG’s aim** – Trinity Mirror, one of the UK’s largest publishers of local newspapers, secured an annual print contract worth around £250,000 which is under threat if the Council is directed to cease publication of GT.
- 8.9 **Greenwich Time supports and helps to deliver the government’s localism agenda** – promoting community services and activities and signposting residents to local services.
- 8.10 **We directly see the positive impact of making council and service information available on a weekly basis** – publishing our Choice Based Lettings on a weekly basis and delivering to every household in the borough has helped us to reduce the number void properties in the borough.
- 8.11 **Greenwich achieved the highest number of households signing up to the Big London Energy Switch of any London Borough and customer feedback told us the majority of respondents signed up to our scheme after reading about it in our newspaper.**
- 8.12 **Weekly publication of Greenwich Time allows our residents the best possible access to information about local health services and local activities**, allowing the Council to promote this essential information in the most cost effective manner to improve the health, well-being and lives of the people of the borough.
- 8.13 **The weekly publication of Greenwich Time has delivered savings of around £1.5m per annum, since the paper was produced on a weekly basis, which has been returned to local taxpayers in the form of consecutive council tax freezes.**
- 8.14 **Of the eight local respondents to the DCLG consultation over the new Code, half are active in local politics.** Indeed one even states that “of course I myself and my party are biased against it”. The Council therefore asserts that their views do not necessarily represent the opinions of the majority of local residents – many of

whom welcome the production of Greenwich Time and the role it plays in our local community. We have provided statements from community, business and faith leaders in the extremely limited time available to us.

- 8.15 We note that in the same week as we received the notification from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Trinity Mirror announced the closure of The Fulham and Hammersmith Chronicle in a borough which produces a quarterly publication and which has not been highlighted as being non-compliant with the Code.
- 8.16 Trinity Mirror's decision adds further weight to the findings of the DCLG Select Committee which stated "that there is little hard evidence to support the view of the commercial newspaper industry that council publications are, to any significant extent, competing unfairly with independent newspapers".
- 8.17 It also arrived in the week that one other local newspaper felt that the most pressing local issue, deserving of its front page, was a story about a transgender former soldier and prison inmate, 65, who claimed she had three corsets and four suspender belts stolen by an alcoholic lodger. Greenwich Time, meanwhile, promoted the fact the NHS was due to invest £2m to improve a local health centre. The following week, the same paper has carried a disturbing picture showing extensive injuries to a 94 year old woman on its front page.
- 8.18 We would therefore urge the Secretary of State to reconsider his decision to direct the Council to comply with the totality of the Code, which would mean ceasing to publish GT in its current format.
- 8.19 Should he decide to push ahead with his intention to issue a direction, the Council, would be required to give a notice period to exit the associated print and distribution contracts.
- 8.20 If replicated across all the other four Councils approached by the DCLG, who also source their print from Trinity Mirror, this could have a devastating financial impact upon the operations of this newspaper group. The Council would therefore want to ensure that it gave due notice to the newspaper group in order to allow them to try and source other means of income in order to soften any potential impact upon their finances as a result of this decision by a single Minister, based upon the representations of 8 people out of a borough population of 264,000. This is all the more important given reports that the Secretary of State is minded to review the requirement to print statutory notices in newspapers – and so newspaper groups may also be set to lose another stream of income from councils up and down the country in the near future.