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Rt Hon Greg Clarke MP
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18th May 2016

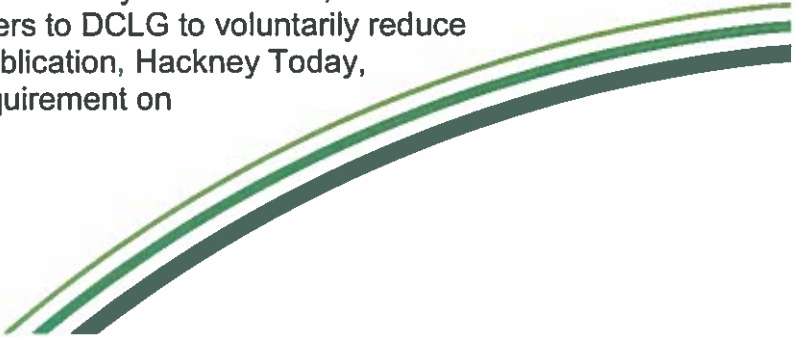
Dear Greg

Thank you for your letter of 19th April.

It was good to see you the other evening, also to have the opportunity of discussing briefly some of the headlines of this issue and, not least, being able to express personally my regret at having to write to you about the matter.

The last correspondence that we received from the Department regarding the publication of Hackney Today was more than a year ago, on 27th March 2015. That letter, from Paul Rowsell, advised that the then Secretary of State did not 'anticipate taking any decisions in the immediate future in relation to your authority on matters relating to the Publicity Code'. Whilst it was also stated that we should not draw any inferences from this, I certainly would have expected the issue to be raised sooner were this a matter which justified urgent attention, indeed any attention whatsoever. Certainly, if it was felt that it required an intervention so serious as directing a council to take action which, by DCLG's own admission, could result in that council increasing its advertising and publicity spend, whilst potentially disadvantaging its own most vulnerable citizens, I would have expected to hear from the department very much sooner than now.

Certainly, none of the material facts of our case have changed since we last corresponded with DCLG. As I said the other night, I can only assume from the content of your letter that officials who drafted the letter have failed to appraise you of the volumes of correspondence, spanning 5 years, that has already passed between my authority and the Department on this matter. If they had done so, it would have been made clear that I have made repeated offers to DCLG to voluntarily reduce the frequency of our fortnightly Council publication, Hackney Today, when DCLG remove the anachronistic requirement on

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councils to publish statutory notices in a fortnightly newspaper. By publishing our statutory

notices in Hackney Today, we ensure that they reach 96,000 homes and businesses. If we did not publish so frequently, we would need to pay at least £175,000 a year to place them in the Hackney Gazette, a title which has a circulation of around 5,000 copies.

Your letter states, in its primary point, that any failure to comply with the Code 'risks a waste of taxpayers' resources and poor value for money' and goes on to say that 'it is essential that we avoid any such risks'. Hackney Council has outlined to DCLG in formal correspondence exactly why Code compliance on the frequency issue would cost this council more money and provide far less value for money for our residents. I will not repeat those arguments here, but enclose the relevant correspondence for your ease of reference. However, it is worth noting that your predecessor accepted that forcing the Council to publish statutory notices in other local media 'could' cost more and reach fewer people. I find it staggering that, having accepted this, DCLG officials or other "advisers" think it is still appropriate for the Secretary of State to write to us again rehearsing the same issues.

Hackney Council has an unmatched record nationally for financial efficiency, freezing council tax for a full decade whilst making some of the highest efficiency savings, managing the second highest level of RSG cuts in the country and protecting front line services. If the Government is "striving for a smaller state", I respectfully suggest that it begins with those paid from the public purse in Whitehall who have the time on their hands to waste on this nonsense.

Moreover, it ill behoves DCLG officials or "advisers" to suggest to the Secretary of State that Hackney needs to be reminded on how it is "essential" that we avoid the risk of wasting taxpayers' money and providing poor value for money, at the same as they seem quite happy to force up our publicity spend.

DCLG has also accepted in previous correspondence with us that some protected groups will have less ready access to information about public services, if the frequency of Hackney Today is reduced to quarterly. This is a risk that we take extremely seriously in the light of our public sector equalities duty and our commitment to our most vulnerable residents. Your predecessor repeatedly refused to engage with any of the points we made about value for money, about equalities or about our duty to our residents. Repeatedly we were told that these concerns were overridden by DCLG's desire to protect local newspapers from unfair competition. Repeatedly we have asked for evidence that council newspapers in general damage the local press, or for evidence that Hackney Today in particular has damaged Hackney's local media. In fact we have provided considerable evidence to the contrary. Indeed, even former editor and journalism professor Roy Greenslade, an arch critic of council publications, had to admit when appearing before the CLG select committee that there was in fact no evidence to support his contention that such publications damaged the local press – presaging the overall conclusion of the committee on the matter. Every response we have had from DCLG to date has been essentially formulaic, has wilfully ignored all evidence and sensible debate, and can be boiled down to the phrase "because we say so".

I would sincerely hope that you are prepared to take a different approach to your predecessor, to listen genuinely and respond to the points and concerns we have raised. As a former journalist, I hugely value the contribution that a free and independent press makes to our democracy at both a local and national level, but I am not prepared to take steps that I know would damage our residents' interests, both in terms of value for money and access to services, without any evidence that doing so would have a genuine and measurably positive impact.

We will make further representations if and when any formal notice of a proposed direction is issued, but our current view is that any direction would be not only misguided but unlawful, for reasons similar to those rehearsed in earlier correspondence.

However, I would be very happy to meet with you to discuss this matter in the hope that we can reach a mutual understanding and finally bring this matter to a close.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jules Pipe'.

Jules Pipe
Mayor of Hackney



