

House of Commons: Written Statement (HCWS337)

Department for Communities and Local Government

Written Statement made by: **Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Kris Hopkins)** on 03 Mar 2015.

Royal Borough of Greenwich

On 29 January 2015 I explained to the House (*Official Report*, Column 28WS) the Coalition Government's commitment to protecting an independent free local press, and how the Government was seeking to take action on the practice by a small number of local authorities to publish local authority newspapers, which given their frequency of publication, can push out and undermine that independent press. I also explained that each case would be considered on its merits, and that on this basis the Secretary of State had given the Royal Borough of Greenwich notice of a direction that he proposed to give requiring that Council to comply with the provisions in the March 2011 Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity which restrict the frequency of publication of the Council's newspaper.

Within the period of 14 days following the notice, as statute provides, Greenwich Council has made a number of representations. These included that in the Council's view there is no evidence that its weekly newspaper has an impact on the local independent press in the area, that the proposed direction would be ultra vires, irrational, and procedurally unfair, and that in any event the Council would not be able to comply with such a direction by the proposed date of 31 March 2015.

I can now tell the House that the Secretary of State has carefully considered these representations, together with other information available about the Council's publicity, the responses received to the Government's 2013 consultation 'Protecting the Independent Press from Unfair Competition', and the Government's response to that consultation. He has also had careful regard to the Department's Equality Statement on enforcing the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, and has considered afresh earlier representations that the Council had made about proposals to direct its compliance with the Code to restrict the frequency of publication of its newspaper. The Secretary of State has concluded that it would be lawful and appropriate in all the circumstances of Greenwich for him now to issue the direction as he had proposed.

Accordingly, the Secretary of State, in accordance with his powers under section 4A(1), (2) and (3) of the Local Government Act 1986, has today directed the Royal Borough of Greenwich Council, in order to secure the Council's compliance with the requirements of the Code, as follows:

- to commission or publish no more than four issues of "Greenwich Time", or any equivalent newsletter, newsheet or similar communication, in the period of one year commencing 31 March 2015, and in subsequent years; and
- to ensure that the executive of the Council within 14 days of the date of the direction will take the necessary decisions in order that the Council will be in a position to comply with the requirement on publication from 31 March 2015 onwards.

With this direction not only must the Council cease to publish its weekly newspaper, 'Greenwich Time', but it is also barred from outsourcing or contracting for the publication of any weekly newsletter, newsheet or similar communication by a third party to whom the Council may make

payment.

I will be placing in the Library of the House copies of the direction, a letter to the Council setting out the Secretary of State's reasons, the Equality Statement, and the representations of the Council.