

Darryl Chamberlain - Greenwich Council scrutiny call-in - 30 August 2011

Mr Chairman, thank you for allowing me the chance to speak on this issue. I'm a journalist with 10 years of experience at the BBC, and possibly more importantly, a couple of years of experience in following events at this council and documenting them on my website, 853. I've also stood for the Green Party in the 2010 council election, although I'm no longer a member and this doesn't represent their views.

I don't want to duplicate the points Councillor Drury made, even though there are further points to be made on whether Greenwich Time offers value for money.

But what I'd like to concentrate on is objectivity and even-handedness. I think we can all agree, if we are being honest, that in the months before the 2010 election, Greenwich Time was anything but objective.

With a slogan of "the newspaper campaigning for an even greater Greenwich", supposed successes in council services were aggressively promoted. We were told the council was "making you much safer" (19 January 2010), sold a "big freeze" in the council tax (26 January 2010), and how Jonathan Edwards wished he'd had facilities like he'd found in the borough (2 March 2010). Once purdah kicked in, Greenwich Time settled down to the less overtly-political covers we're familiar with today, full of happy grannies and beaming kids.

Under the new code, can we be sure Greenwich Time will not return to such excesses? Recent evidence casts doubt on whether the council has the checks and balances in place to comply with the code.

As Councillor Drury mentioned earlier, the Hornfair Park BMX track edition was not the wisest of moves. With local people upset by the proposal to build the track, did they really appreciate their council tax being spent on a newspaper headlined "it's wheely great!" (24 May 2011) in the week the planning board gathered to make its decision? This isn't even-handed or objective in the slightest, and even Cllr Brooks admitted that "care needed to be taken with publicity" when questioned at a later meeting.

There has also been very little coverage of the effects of budget cuts. Closures of council facilities have gone unreported, while threats to services like the animal enclosure at Maryon Wilson Park have only had token acknowledgements in the letters page.

But just in the past 10 days, we've had further examples of Greenwich Time's editorial checks and balances failing. In the second edition after the Woolwich riot (23 August 2011), it carried an opinion column by the leader of the council.

We know that many local people were upset that Woolwich did not receive the coverage other riot-hit parts of London did. Some created a wall of messages expressing outrage and despair at what happened, and hope for the future. But these views did not appear in GT, despite being widely covered elsewhere.

Instead, we got Cllr Roberts railing against the media, criticising Sky News for interviewing Lewisham's looters on the Greenwich foreshore, and lambasting the BBC for not showing images of suspects on its big screen in Woolwich.

Where were the checks and balances then? If the leader of the council wants to rant about the media, he could always start a blog. Ask Steve Reed at Lambeth.

But there was also a mention of “a fixation with burnt-out buildings”. Who was he talking about? The creators of the wall, who succeeded in getting the media to recognise Woolwich’s trauma where the council failed?

It appears to me that Cllr Roberts was using his column to hit out at people without giving them a right of reply. Anyone with media experience would have spotted tell-take signs indicating that the column was rushed in at the last minute. Shouldn’t someone have stopped him?

Again, where were the checks and balances? Is this really objective and even-handed? Who has the last sign-off on Greenwich Time? The editor? The chief executive? The lawyer? Or the leader?

Indeed, today’s edition (30 August) contains fulsome praise for the leader from the New Wine Church. Is this objective and even-handed?

I’m well aware that the new code has not entirely been drawn up for the right reasons. And we all know that Greenwich, as a borough, is very poorly-served by a local media being bled dry by greedy or out-of-touch proprietors, despite the efforts of some talented reporters.

But this lack of media scrutiny means you, Mr Chairman, and your committee, have even more responsibility to ensure our money isn’t being wasted, our trust isn’t being abused, and that the only newspaper many people in the borough see each week complies with the code.

I would urge you to refer this decision back to the cabinet to consider how changes can be made to give council taxpayers confidence in Greenwich Time. Newspapers have an inglorious history of reflecting their proprietors views. But without a clear and unambiguous statement of who takes responsibility for the editorial processes at Greenwich Time, Greenwich Council is leaving itself wide open to legal challenge.