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EXTERNAL SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

23 November 2021

HILLINGDON
LONDON

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge

Committee Members Present:

Councillors Nick Denys (Chairman), Nicola Brightman (In place of Simon Arnold), Heena Makwana, Peter Money (Opposition Lead) and June Nelson

Also Present:

Joshua Neicho, Freelance Journalist, OnLondon
Rachel Sharp, Senior Lecturer - Journalism, Brunel University

LBH Officers Present:

Emma Gilbertson (Head of Communications) and Nikki O'Halloran (Democratic Services Manager)

	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO REPORT THE PRESENCE OF ANY SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS <i>(Agenda Item 1)</i></p> <p>Apologies had been received from Councillors Simon Arnold (Councillor Nicola Brightman was present as his substitute), Darran Davies and Devi Radia.</p>
32.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING <i>(Agenda Item 2)</i></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest in matters coming before this meeting.</p>
34.	<p>EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC <i>(Agenda Item 3)</i></p> <p>RESOLVED: That all items of business be considered in public.</p>
35.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 7 OCTOBER 2021 <i>(Agenda Item 4)</i></p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2021 be agreed as a correct record.</p>
36.	<p>JOURNALISM AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY <i>(Agenda Item 5)</i></p> <p>The Chairman welcomed those present to the meeting.</p> <p>Mrs Rachel Sharp advised that she was a senior lecturer at Brunel University, the Head of the undergraduate journalism course and editor of Hillingdon Herald. She had started her career as a reporter at the Hillingdon Times, then became editor of the publication and then became group editor for seven titles across West London.</p> <p>After six years of working at Brunel University, Mrs Sharp had achieved her ambition of launching a local paper in Hillingdon: the Hillingdon Herald. Given the huge decline in local news coverage, it was thought that there was a demand for printed news that was</p>

not being met and the Hillingdon Herald aimed to address this. It was acknowledged that, currently, the Hillingdon Herald had the luxury of not being reliant on advertising revenue.

Currently, the Hillingdon Herald news team included 15 Masters students who worked as Section Editors. There were also around 25 third year students, 20 second year students and 20 first year students. The work undertaken by the undergraduates varied depending on the amount of time they had been on the course. A number of politics students had also asked to write for the paper but had been advised that they would not be permitted to do opinion pieces.

Distribution of the Hillingdon Herald had started with 14,000 copies for the first issue in October and had risen to 20,000 for the second. Mrs Sharp advised that the Christmas issue was likely to be a 20,000 print run. Copies of the first issue had been delivered door to door using a random distribution of postcodes. New stands had now been sourced for libraries across the Borough and copies had been distributed to various faith venues. It was suggested that Members could be used to help with the distribution in target areas.

As a senior lecturer, Mrs Sharp taught her journalism students about a range of issues including defamation and contempt. She also taught a number of units directly related to local government as councils were thought to be the bread and butter of local journalism. These units included capital and revenue expenditure, the different council structures, electoral processes, roles and responsibilities.

As students were often unaware of the role of Councillors, it was important that they gained an understanding so that they could then pass this on to the general public. The majority of Hillingdon Herald readers were either residents, worked in the Borough or had children who went to school in Hillingdon and therefore wanted to know what was going on in the Borough.

The second edition of Hillingdon Herald had been published in November 2021 and continued to be well received by the public. Mrs Sharp hoped that this publication would mark the start of a resurgence of proper local reporting which went down to a very local level. That said, she was aware that even within the Borough, the challenges varied from ward to ward.

Mrs Sharp advised that journalists used to receive hard copies of agendas through the post and there would be competition to see who would get to go to which meeting. However, over time there had been a reduction in funding, journalists had not been replaced when they had left the newspaper and a reduced number of meetings were then covered.

Click bait journalism had been on the increase and Mrs Sharp noted that, given the lack of local newspapers, this was the only type of journalism that some of her students had been exposed to. She taught them the two source rule and impressed on them the need to check every fact. The students had welcomed the opportunity to write 'proper' local news.

Although it was thought that the Council broadcasting its meeting was excellent in terms of engaging with residents, it was thought not so helpful for journalism as it tended to breed laziness if it was easy to find out what happened without having to attend. However, Mrs Sharp advised that building relationships and gaining trust was a large part of journalism and this could not be done so readily when sat behind a

computer screen.

Given that the students were learning the theory whilst also getting practical experience, they were under some pressure. However, Mrs Sharp was teaching students the correct way of doing things and getting out and about to find out what was happening in the Borough was teaching them real world skills.

It was suggested that being a journalist was a little like being a Councillor as they were both dealing with things that mattered to residents. The External Services Select Committee regularly looked at interesting issues and the Council routinely released information about a range of topics. However, journalists were able to publicise these issues to residents in a potentially more accessible language.

Mrs Sharp noted that the Hillingdon Herald was a completely impartial newspaper and would report both sides of stories, giving a right of reply, but that it would also be a campaigning paper on issues such as the third runway. It was important to ensure that the journalists were reporting on the facts but this could be quite tricky when dealing with the Council as it could take time to get a response.

Mr Joshua Neicho was a freelance features journalist who had written for OnLondon, an independent online new site. He had started his journalism career at the Evening Standard where he had been the Letters Editor. Since leaving the Evening Standard, Mr Neicho had continued as a features journalist and had been working on public relations and campaigns at Middlesex University in the journalism department.

With regard to very local issues, Mr Neicho suggested that hyper local websites, newsletters and newspapers like Hillingdon Herald could help with information dissemination and public engagement. With the reduction in local newspapers came a growth in social media news vehicles such as Nextdoor and Facebook which were able to provide news at a local level – this left a gap for printed news. Mr Neicho stated that OnLondon bridged this gap to a certain extent in that it covered issues that might span more than one borough but did not provide coverage of local breaking news issues.

The My London website had recently seen an increase in popularity. The site claimed to provide the latest news and sport headlines for London as well as guides for things to do around different areas. By using an app, the information received was customisable. This, along with other technological advancements, had provided opportunities for news as well undermining some jobs.

Mr Neicho suggested that, given their reach, there was scope for local newspapers to pool resources with groups such as Residents' Associations and community groups. This would provide the opportunity to pool local wisdom on specific issues. He believed that the issues that made good stories were those that really grabbed the reader's attention but also recognised that the editor was hugely important in the process.

Action-based story telling was thought to provide the ability to hold up a behaviour or approach as a 'show and don't tell'. Mr Neicho advised that Waltham Forrest had done a good job of showing stories in a dynamic and creative way.

Mrs Sharp noted that decisions on which stories to run were based partly on gut and partly on experience. For example, although the Hillingdon Herald did not want to inflate the issue, a women's safety campaign would be launched in the December edition to raise awareness of the issue.

It was recognised that residents would sometimes complain generally about issues that were being caused by other residents but they would not take action themselves to advise the Council of specific incidences (for example, beds in sheds). The Hillingdon Herald had run a story on the front page of the November issue about the dichotomy of the Borough gaining 63 Green Flag awards yet still battling a fly tipping issue which had been perpetrated by residents. Mrs Sharp advised that she would be doing a follow up piece with the litter pickers, perhaps as part of her editor's column.

Members asked whether the local government element of the Brunel University journalism course could include a section on "if not me, then who" to introduce the concept of public service. Mrs Sharp would consider doing a feature on this.

Over the last few years, the Council's social media presence had grown. Ms Emma Gilbertson, the Council's Head of Communications, advised that a social media campaign had been built around the need to get vaccinated against Covid 19 and Councillors had been encouraged to share their vaccination stories. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Linked In were all being more regularly used to share good news stories.

Members were advised that the Council's Contact Centre responded to social media enquiries and the communications team dealt with proactive work such as the recent key amnesty campaign. The Communications Team continued to engage with residents as well as having conversations about what action was being taken and where the Council could improve,

RESOLVED: That the discussion be noted.

37.	WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 6</i>)
	Consideration was given to the Committee's Work Programme. It was agreed that palliative care and hospice provision be included as a future topic for consideration by the Committee. This would include the palliative care provided at home as well as care provided for children and young people.
	RESOLVED: That the Work Programme, as amended, be agreed.

The meeting, which commenced at 6.35 pm, closed at 8.05 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Nikki O'Halloran on 01895 250472. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.