

*Witness Statement*

1. My name is Peter Golds and I have been a serving councillor in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets from May 2006. Since May 2007 I have been leader of the opposition Conservative Group on the council.
2. I have previous local government and political experience having served as a councillor in the London Borough of Brent between 1990-98. Prior to that time I was employed by the late Sir Geoffrey (later Lord) Finsberg, the late Lord Bethel and the Rt Hon. Dr Sir Rhodes Boyson, whilst serving as Members of Parliament and in the case of Lord Bethel, a former Member of the European Parliament.
3. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is home to the largest population of Bangladeshi residents outside of Bangladesh, making up some 35% of the total population of the borough. This community is rightly encouraged to play an active part in public life and assume civic responsibility. This civic engagement welcomed by all democratic political parties and the wider community.
4. There is however, an underside to this involvement. We have an extensive "Bangla" media, much of which is unregulated and irresponsible and can in some cases, wilfully damage community cohesion.
5. In October 2010 the borough held its first ever election for an Executive Mayor, following a referendum. During the campaign a newspaper called "*London Bangla*" came to the forefront. This journal was published weekly in English and Bangla and was available free in shops, Mosques and community centres. Its editorial leadership was very supportive of a particular candidate, now Mayor, and its coverage became increasingly unbalanced and dangerous as the election approached.
6. The week before polling day it published an edition **which I enclose** as an attachment. As you will see the coverage is extraordinarily unbalanced, However page 8 stoops to extraordinary depths. You will see an advertisement for a "Rally to stop the wife beating Mayoral candidate, Helal Abbas". This advertisement is a fabrication. It refers to an event that did not take place, a phone number that was unanswered and was from an organisation that does not exist.
7. Above the advertisement is a "news story" referring to this non existent organisation and non happening rally.

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8. The advert and news story was designed to affect the election chances of a candidate who was in opposition to the candidate favoured by the publisher of *London Bangla*.
9. Extraordinarily the print run was dramatically increased and copies of this paper were, for the first and only time, delivered door to door across the borough.
10. This newspaper was to all intents and purposes an election leaflet, but as it was disguised as a newspaper was treated as such; and not recorded for election expenses.
11. Within *London Bangla* there was no attempt at balance, no attempt to seek confirmation of facts, such as, was this a genuine advertisement and was the rally actually taking place. No attempt to apologise for a lie was made. Journalists from a variety of legitimate newspapers covering the election described this advert and the paper as the most disgraceful they had seen in an election.
12. Following the election complaints were sent to the Press Complaints Commission who was unable to act, because *London Bangla* is not a member. The Advertising Standards Authority would not investigate because the issue complained of is an election advertisement and the ASA is excluded from covering these. The Electoral Commission would not act, for reasons known only to themselves.
13. There the matter remained until a year after the election and publication of this edition, the publisher has appeared in court. By that time the damage had long been done. Although *London Bangla* then disappeared, it was reborn in the guise of *East London News*, which follows the tradition of unbalanced and irresponsible commentary, masquerading as news and operates from the same address and includes many of the original staff.
14. Tower Hamlets Council is extremely controversial and local politicians are themselves both forthright and unafraid of controversy. I enclose a copy of *East London News*, dated 30<sup>th</sup> November 2011, the day after a meeting of the Borough council. The front page has a headline story "Labour and Tories combine to undermine referendum outcome" This is based on councillors amending the council's constitution to require the Mayor, who has reserved all decision making himself, to answer questions from members. This story extends to page 3 of the paper and in a paragraph in the second column; I am referred to directly by name and even physically described. In fact it was another councillor from another party who raised the point. Semantics maybe, but this lax and inaccurate reporting with the strange headlining damages democracy. As the paper is unregistered there is no redress regarding this publication, other than potentially expensive legal action to secure a correction.

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15. A further example of the unusual editorial and reporting policy of *East London News*, concerns Councillor Shelina Akhtar of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Shelina Akhtar was elected Labour councillor for the Spitalfields and Banglatown ward in May 2010 giving her address as [redacted] During April 2010, after her selection, the number of electors at [redacted] increased and subsequently all voted in the election. Following her election she demanded that her name be changed on council records to Shelina Aktar and quickly left the Labour Party, joining the Independent group supporting the Executive Mayor, who was, as noted, supported with extraordinary coverage by *London Bangla*. In July 2010 Shelina Akhtar of [redacted] was convicted on three counts of benefit fraud. In April 2011 she was charged on three further counts of failing to notify a change of circumstances, which would have affected her entitlement to benefit.
16. In January 2012 she was summoned to appear in Court on the latter charges. She claimed that she was unwell, but the Judge threatened to issue a warrant for her arrest, unless she presented herself. She duly appeared, pleaded guilty to the charges and was remanded until February 6<sup>th</sup> for sentencing. During this time she visited the office of *East London News* and gave an extraordinary interview which implied that the case was still outstanding. **I attach a copy of this interview.** She was subsequently handed a sentence of four months imprisonment and the court was told that in addition to illegally claiming benefit she had also illegally sublet the property at [redacted] and conspired to illegally sublet a further RSL owned property whose legal tenant was her sister.
17. This conviction and the sentencing was extensively covered by national, local and regional media. However, none produced anything as bizarre as the interview published by East End News.
18. A free press is a fundamental to active democracy. In my lifetime the investigation into Thalidomide by *The Sunday Times*, the exposure of expenses by Members of Parliament by *The Daily Telegraph*, the exposure of corrupt cricketers by the former *News of The World*, has been the result of a free press and a press that pushed boundaries to secure an accurate story that was overwhelmingly in the public interest. Politicians, sportspeople, film stars and other personalities need the press to survive in front of the public, but fear the disinfectant of a free press when it examines their other activities. It is arguable that political pressure and cross party collusion on the press allowed the Kray brothers several more years of freedom criminality and violence.
19. By removing press freedom the nation will end up with a sterile cowed media that only prints what the establishment wants to be seen. What is required is a press that is free, fearless but **responsible**. If a newspaper or journalist is found to be corrupt or malicious, then they must pay the price for this.

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20. It is incongruous that the electronic media should be regulated by Ofcom, whereas the print media is regulated on a voluntary basis. On a purely local level, *London Bangla*, is responsible for serious communal problems and division, which is far worse than arguments between sportspeople and their mistresses.
21. We have laws of libel and privacy. They should be the last resort when the press fails in its responsibilities. Excessive regulation of the news media will bring in censorship. There is certainly an argument that too many of those who have been affected by the press are "priced out" of the legal system and this committee should consider this problem in the context of complaints regarding the press and media.
22. The recent revised procedures introduced by Parliament to consider parliamentary boundaries may be a way forward. Previously boundary reviews resembled a court, with teams of lawyers and often aggressive cross examination. The revised rules were for examination and consideration of proposals. This enabled the public to attend and make their case which was then considered by the impartial Commissioner. The atmosphere was reasonably formal but not intimidating, the absence of hostile cross examination enabled those who were not lawyers, to make their points which were considered by a properly qualified expert.
23. I believe passionately in a free press. Over many years in local politics, I have sometimes been annoyed and bruised by the media. My first appearance in *Private Eye* was not to my liking, but over regulation will cause immense damage to our country and society. Ultimately by living in public life, one must expect the interest of the public into ones activities.
24. However a free press demands responsibility and unregulated scandal sheets calling themselves newspapers" must be open to the same level of complaint as the *BBC* or *The Times*.
25. I therefore believe that registration of newspapers and magazines is essential and with this regulation will come an acceptance of a Code of Practice, Transparency and Behaviour. The organising body must be able to insist on corrections and these should be displayed with the same level of prominence as an inaccurate story. This body should also have the power to refer certain cases to the courts. Its deliberations should be non confrontational but fair, which will permit access to those who cannot afford the services of certain legal firms; with what appears to be a season ticket to what appears a form of expensive judicial censorship for the great and the not so good with large bank balances.
26. There have been some cases of legal cases based around small circulation academic and specialist journals. The method that I have

suggested could reach conciliation long before some unfortunate is threatened with bankruptcy as a result an extended judicial case.

27. In conclusion, *London Bangla* has been party to a corruption of public and political life in a London Borough, which has many existing problems of poverty, deprivation and community cohesion. The ease in which this journal departed and reappeared under a different name, but operated from the same address, organised by the same people is open to question. Regulation is essential in these cases to protect the community and the reputation of a free press.

[Redacted signature area]

Signed.....

Date.....

14/2/12.

*[Large handwritten signature]*

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