

Minister Darragh O'Brien TD
Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

By email

07 September 2022

I write on behalf of Transparency International Ireland (TI Ireland) to call on the Government to develop statutory guidance for local authorities to prevent undue pressure being placed on print or broadcast media. The call comes on foot of a TI Ireland survey of Irish local broadcasters and newspapers. The survey suggests that local authorities interference in local media's editorial decisions, as shown in a recent Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) finding against Wexford County Council, might not be an isolated incident.

TI Ireland's survey found that of 18 respondents, 39% reported unfavourable treatment after covering news that is critical of local government. A further 50% suggested that they have difficulties accessing information or having their queries answered by local officials. The majority of respondents (67%) believed that local government officials do not welcome media questions or scrutiny, while 45% described their contact with local government as not 'open and welcoming'.

Despite the significant challenges faced in reporting on local government, the majority of respondents (78%) said that they feel free to report on or discuss the performance of local government, even if that reporting might be critical. However, 22% of respondents reported that they would be nervous about the consequences of such coverage.

The survey findings suggest that while the majority of councils may have a healthy relationship with local media, problems are not confined to Wexford. Broadcasters and print journalists have reported to TI Ireland that they are finding it difficult to access information and are facing threats to their advertising income if they are seen to be critical of some local authorities. This is even more concerning given current adverse economic conditions and the reliance of local independent media on advertising revenue for survival. Further, council officials may feel emboldened by Wexford County Councils' unwillingness to place any sanction against those found by the Commission to have breached the Ethics Acts.

Following the Taoiseach's recent comment that there can be no connection between advertising sponsorship and editorial control, TI Ireland is calling for the government to publish statutory guidance for local authorities so that officials understand what is and what is not acceptable in their interaction with local media. Such guidance should also ensure that council officials are made aware of the consequences for breaching standards laid down in such guidance and related provisions in the Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members and Employees.

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Examples of statutory guidance on council publicity and transparency can be found in several jurisdictions including New Zealand and the UK, where 'A Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity' has been implemented by the governments of the England, Wales and Scotland.

The underlying objective of such guidance would be to ensure the proper use of public funds for publicity and ensure information is made available to the public, in accordance with clear principles and examples of good practice.

We would be happy to assist the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in developing such standards and engaging with both you and all relevant stakeholders in any dialogue that might inform them. In the meantime, please let us know if you should like further information.

Yours sincerely,

John Devitt
Chief Executive

Cc: An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD