

OPEN LETTER

AND FORMAL COMPLAINT

Election-period local newspaper coverage and saturation political advertising in the Clacton parliamentary by-election

URGENT - POLLING DAY: 13 AUGUST 2026

This complaint concerns the presentation of election coverage in the final days before polling, including the Clacton Gazette report of a 14-candidate hustings and the saturation display of paid advertising for Nigel Farage, who did not attend that hustings.

From:

Martyn OBrien

Independent Candidate, Clacton Parliamentary By-Election

Dated: 7 August 2026

For publication and formal consideration by:

- Clacton & Frinton Gazette and Newsquest Media Group
- Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)
- Editors' Code of Practice Committee
- Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP)
- The Electoral Commission
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government - Democracy and Elections
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport

This document also preserves the screenshot supplied with the complaint as documentary evidence of the presentation observed on 7 August 2026.

1. Executive summary

I am writing to make a formal complaint and to raise a wider matter of significant public interest concerning the coverage of the Clacton parliamentary by-election by the Clacton & Frinton Gazette, a Newsquest publication.

There are 34 candidates on the ballot. On 6 August, 14 candidates attended a public hustings at the Princes Theatre in Clacton. The Gazette subsequently published an article headed "14 candidates debate in Clacton by-election hustings".

The central concern is not that every candidate must receive exactly equal column inches. It is that a principal local news source provided very little substantive information about the candidates who attended the hustings, while the same page was visually dominated by paid political advertising for Nigel Farage, who did not attend.

The issue in one sentence

Candidates who appeared, answered questions and subjected themselves to scrutiny received little more than names and limited reporting, while a candidate who did not attend was repeatedly placed before readers through prominent paid advertising surrounding the report.

I recognise that newspapers and newspaper websites are not currently subject to the same election-period due impartiality regime as broadcasters. I am therefore not alleging that unequal editorial coverage is automatically unlawful. I believe this case exposes a serious gap in UK election, press and advertising regulation which should be examined and changed.

2. The hustings coverage

The Gazette article identifies the candidates who participated but gives readers very little substantive information about what most of the individual candidates actually said.

- No links are provided to the candidates' official websites.
- No links are provided to candidate manifestos or policy pages.
- There is no meaningful candidate-by-candidate summary of the policies or arguments presented.
- There is very limited reporting that enables a voter to compare the people who actually attended the hustings and answered questions from local residents.
- The article gives names, but little practical help for voters trying to find out what the participating candidates stand for.

With 34 names on the ballot paper, access to reliable local information is especially important. A local newspaper covering a public election debate has an important democratic role in helping readers understand who is asking for their vote and what those people actually said.

3. The extraordinary prominence given to Nigel Farage

Nigel Farage did not attend the hustings. Despite that absence, a reader opening the Gazette's report about the candidates who did attend was surrounded by paid advertising promoting him.

- A large advertisement across the top of the page.
- Prominent advertising down the left side of the page.
- Prominent advertising down the right side of the page.
- A large advertisement beside the article content.
- Further repeated campaign imagery lower down the page.

The combined visual effect is striking. An article ostensibly reporting a hustings attended by 14 candidates is dominated by the campaign imagery of a candidate who did not attend it.

This is not simply an abstract complaint that one campaign bought advertising. It concerns the combined effect of editorial omission and saturation political advertising within one of the main local sources of election information, only days before polling.

4. Newsquest's own statement of political neutrality

Newsquest publishes an Editorial Policy on its own website. It states:

NEWSQUEST EDITORIAL POLICY

"Our local newspapers are politically neutral in that they are not affiliated with a particular political party or movement."

The same policy says that Newsquest editors have editorial independence and act in the interests of the communities they represent. It says Newsquest news brands aim to provide accurate reports to a high professional standard and to be authoritative sources of local news that readers can trust.

I therefore ask Newsquest to explain how the presentation of this by-election coverage is consistent with those published principles.

Political neutrality should mean more than the absence of formal affiliation to a political party. When election reporting about 14 attending candidates is surrounded by repeated advertising for one absent candidate, while readers are given almost no route to the other candidates' manifestos, websites or policies, the technical separation between editorial and advertising departments does not remove the democratic effect on the reader.

5. The particular responsibility of dominant local media

The problem is especially serious in local journalism. Many communities now have very few substantial local newspapers, and local titles can be the principal source of election information both online and in print.

Freedom of the press is fundamental. I am not asking government to dictate editorial opinions, compel endorsements, or impose mathematically equal coverage. But editorial freedom should not mean that a financially dominant campaign can visually overwhelm local election journalism while other candidates remain little more than names on a list.

A voter cannot make an informed choice about candidates whose policies and arguments are barely reported or made difficult to find.

6. Political advertising, campaign expenditure and transparency

I request clarification concerning the advertising displayed around the Gazette's election coverage. The Electoral Commission explains that campaign material may require an imprint identifying responsibility for publication and promotion. Election advertising and related services may also form part of regulated campaign spending.

I ask Newsquest, the relevant campaign, and the appropriate authorities to answer the following questions:

1. Who purchased the Nigel Farage advertising displayed on the Clacton Gazette website?
2. Was it purchased by Nigel Farage's candidate campaign, Reform UK, another organisation, or an intermediary?
3. Was the advertising supplied at Newsquest's normal commercial rate?
4. Was any part of the advertising supplied free of charge or at a discounted or preferential rate?
5. Were equivalent advertising opportunities made available to every Clacton by-election candidate on equivalent commercial terms?
6. Was the advertising specifically targeted at Clacton election articles or political content?
7. What safeguards does Newsquest apply to prevent one candidate's paid advertising from visually overwhelming editorial reporting concerning other candidates during an election?
8. Were all required election imprints correctly displayed on every relevant digital and printed advertisement?
9. Will the full cost, or any appropriate notional value, be recorded in the relevant election spending return?

I am not alleging in this letter that a campaign finance or imprint offence has occurred. I am asking the responsible bodies to ensure that the scale, funding, value and statutory identification of this advertising are properly accounted for.

7. The gap in the current Advertising Code

The ASA and CAP state that political advertisements whose principal function is to influence voters in an election are exempt from the CAP Code. That means the normal non-broadcast advertising regime does not regulate the political claims in such advertising in the same way it regulates ordinary commercial marketing.

That exemption is part of the problem exposed here. Advertising intended to influence who represents a constituency can be repeatedly inserted around election journalism without the normal advertising code addressing the political content itself.

I ask the ASA and CAP to record this complaint as evidence that the political advertising exemption and the rules governing placement of political advertising around election journalism deserve formal reconsideration.

8. The gap in the Editors' Code

The current press framework protects newspapers' freedom to editorialise and campaign. But it contains no meaningful election-period requirement that a major local newspaper provide even basic fair access to information about candidates appearing on the ballot.

I ask the Editors' Code of Practice Committee to consider a specific election-period provision. This should not require identical coverage. It should establish minimum democratic safeguards.

- Clearly and prominently distinguish paid political advertising from election journalism.
- Prevent saturation political advertising for one candidate from materially overwhelming editorial coverage concerning other candidates.
- Provide accurate basic information about all candidates appearing on the ballot when publishing an election guide.
- Where reasonably available, provide links to official candidate websites, manifestos or policy information in online election guides and candidate lists.
- When reporting a significant public hustings, give readers a reasonable account of the arguments actually made by participating candidates.
- Disclose clearly when a prominently covered candidate did not attend the debate or hustings being reported.
- Maintain transparent safeguards between political advertising revenue and editorial election decisions.
- Ensure that election coverage cannot be materially distorted by the purchasing power of one candidate or political party.

9. Request to government and the Electoral Commission

I ask the Electoral Commission, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to consider whether the present regulatory distinction between broadcasters and major newspaper websites remains adequate in modern elections.

Online local newspapers can reach large local audiences and can be a voter's main source of local political information. The fact that election journalism is delivered through a newspaper website rather than television should not mean that basic fairness, transparency and political advertising concerns disappear.

I therefore request consideration of an election-period statutory duty of reasonable fairness, transparency and advertising separation for major news organisations covering parliamentary elections, particularly dominant local news providers.

Such a duty need not prohibit newspapers from expressing political opinions or endorsing candidates. It should instead set a minimum democratic floor so that voters can readily find basic information about the people actually asking for their vote.

10. Immediate action requested before polling day

Because polling takes place on 13 August 2026, I ask Newsquest and the Clacton & Frinton Gazette to consider immediate corrective action, not simply a response after the election has concluded.

1. Publish an accessible guide identifying all 34 candidates.
2. Include links to candidates' official websites and manifestos where these have been supplied and can be verified.
3. Publish a fuller account of the hustings, including substantially more information about what participating candidates said.
4. Review the placement and density of candidate-specific political advertising around election journalism for the remainder of the campaign.

5. Explain publicly what safeguards exist between political advertising sales and editorial election coverage.
6. Confirm whether equivalent advertising products were available to all candidates on equivalent commercial terms.
7. Confirm that the displayed advertisements comply with all applicable election imprint requirements.

The question this case raises

Should a major local news organisation be permitted, in the final days of a parliamentary election, to provide minimal information about most candidates while simultaneously surrounding its election journalism with saturation advertising for a single candidate?

If the answer under the present rules is yes, then I believe the rules are inadequate and should be changed.

I would appreciate this complaint being treated seriously and urgently. This is not simply about whether one candidate received more coverage than another. It concerns whether voters can reasonably expect their principal local news providers to help them make an informed democratic choice rather than allowing financial purchasing power and editorial selection to determine which candidates voters repeatedly see and which candidates they barely hear from.

Yours faithfully,

Martyn OBrien

Independent Candidate

Clacton Parliamentary By-Election

Polling day: 13 August 2026

Appendix A - Screenshot evidence

The image below is the screenshot supplied with this complaint. It shows the Clacton & Frinton Gazette article headed "14 candidates debate in Clacton by-election hustings" together with the political advertising displayed around the article.

Source article:

<https://www.clactonandfrintongazette.co.uk/news/26444537.14-candidates-debate-clacton-by-election-hustings/>

Evidence file: gazette_screenshot.png

SHA-256: eb45e0d1ff9bd949b65d5381994f69f01d1c38ca447aaf46e9ff37ca6a53e1e2

WHY THE SCREENSHOT IS PRESERVED

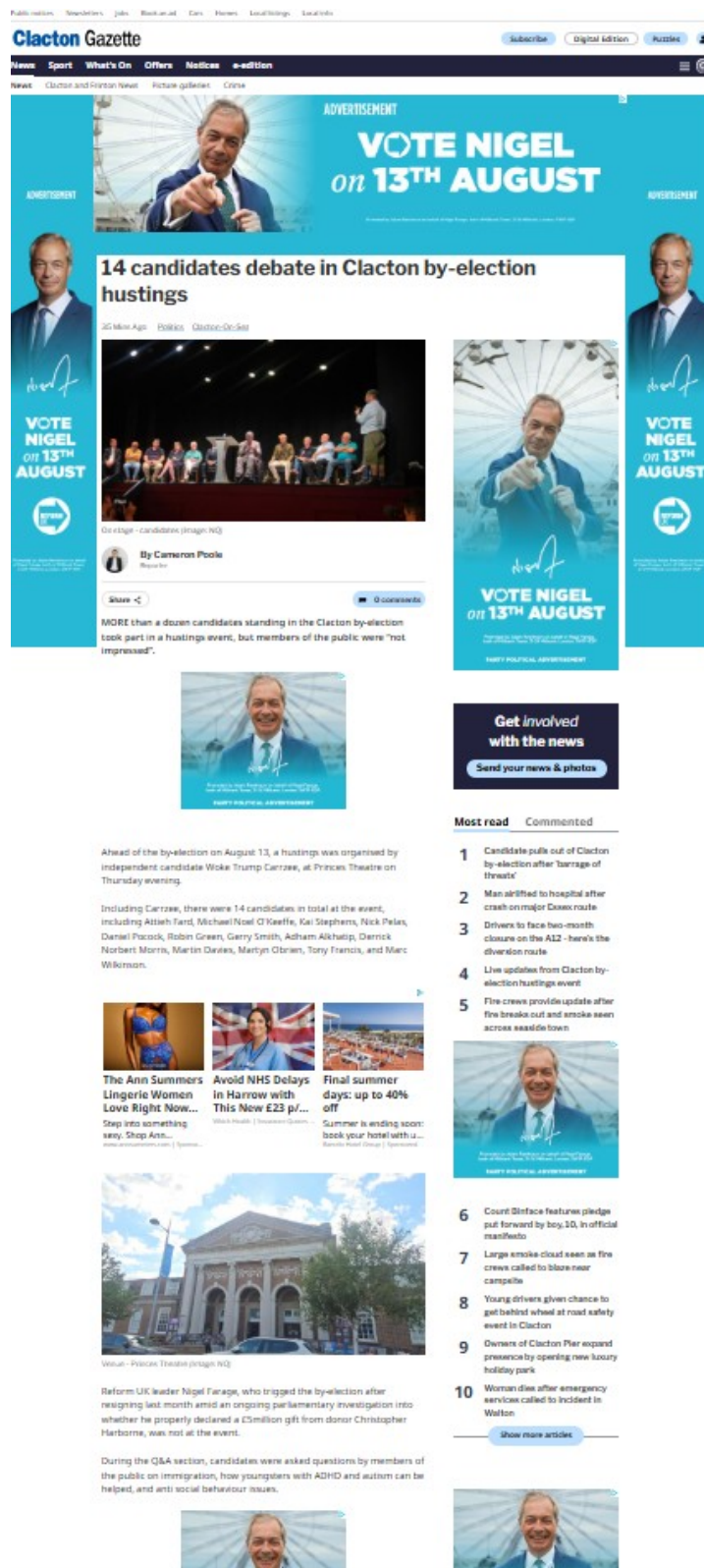
The complaint concerns the combined visual presentation of election journalism and paid political advertising. The screenshot is therefore part of the evidence, not decoration. The SHA-256 value above provides a fixed fingerprint of the source image embedded in this document.

What is visible in the preserved image

- The hustings article is surrounded by repeated Nigel Farage campaign advertising.
- The advertising includes a large top banner and prominent side placements.
- Nigel Farage did not attend the hustings reported in the article.
- The screenshot is included to preserve the page presentation complained of before it can later be changed.

The next page reproduces the complete screenshot supplied with the complaint.

Figure A1 - Full-page screenshot



Screenshot supplied and preserved with the complaint on 7 August 2026. The full page view shows the top banner, side placements and repeated Nigel Farage campaign advertising surrounding the hustings article.

Appendix B - Evidential observations visible in the screenshot

- The article headline states: "14 candidates debate in Clacton by-election hustings".
- A large "VOTE NIGEL on 13th AUGUST" advertisement is positioned immediately above the article.

- Additional Nigel Farage campaign advertisements appear on both sides of the article layout.
- Further Nigel Farage campaign imagery is placed within the page alongside the article and lower down the page.
- The article text visible in the screenshot names participating candidates but does not provide visible links to each candidate's website or manifesto.
- The visual prominence of the paid campaign advertising is substantially greater than the individual presentation of the candidates who attended the hustings.

The screenshot is included to preserve the presentation complained of. Its inclusion is not, by itself, an allegation that the advertising or editorial treatment was unlawful.

Appendix C - Suggested distribution

Recipient	Purpose
Clacton & Frinton Gazette / Newsquest	Primary formal editorial complaint and request for immediate action before polling day.
IPSO	Press standards complaint, particularly if any material inaccuracy, misleading presentation or failure to correct can be identified.
Editors' Code of Practice Committee	Request for an election-period addition to the Editors' Code.
ASA / CAP	Request that the political advertising exemption and placement around election journalism be reconsidered.
Electoral Commission	Request for confirmation of imprint, campaign spending and any notional spending implications.
MHCLG - Democracy and Elections	Request for review of the statutory election framework.
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Request for review of press and advertising rules affecting election-period local news.

Appendix D - References

Clacton & Frinton Gazette hustings article: <https://www.clactonandfringtongazette.co.uk/news/26444537.14-candidates-debate-clacton-by-election-hustings/>

Newsquest Media Group - About Us / Editorial Policy: <https://www.newsquest.co.uk/about-us/>

Advertising Standards Authority and CAP - Political Advertising: <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/political-advertising.html>

Electoral Commission - Imprints: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/political-registration-and-regulation/imprints>

Editors' Code of Practice Committee - About Us: <https://editorscode.org.uk/about-us/>

Prepared as an open letter and formal complaint. The document deliberately distinguishes between concerns about fairness and requests for regulatory review, and allegations of unlawful conduct. No allegation of a specific criminal or regulatory offence is made without supporting evidence.