

TEES VALLEY MAYOR BEN HOUCHEN

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Our Ref: BH/CP/JL-015

David Jordan

By email: david.jordan@bbc.co.uk

2 September 2022

Dear Mr Jordan

RE: Complaint over the Today Programme dredging feature, Wednesday, 31 August

I am writing to make an official complaint against the BBC and a breach of its Editorial Guidelines in respect of an interview I conducted with journalist Fiona Trott for BBC Radio 4's Today programme, broadcast at around 7.40am on Wednesday, 31 August.

In my role as the Tees Valley Mayor, I was approached by Ms Trott to participate in an interview over the shellfish die-offs in the north-east of England. Despite a Defra report concluding that dredging activity and chemical pollutants were not to blame for this, several individuals still claim the deaths are due to dredging releasing the contaminant pyridine into the water.

During a wide ranging 15-minute interview, I stated that I had sympathy for the fishing community whose livelihoods have been impacted. I also called for more financial support from Government to help these people. Unfortunately, only one short soundbite was used, in which I detailed a number of other theories I had been made aware of as to the die-offs – theories which clearly do not need to be investigated.

By just using this small clip wildly out of context, I believe I have been misrepresented, in direct contravention of the BBC's guidelines on Fairness, specifically that of Fair Editing:

6.3.25 *The final content should be a fair representation of what a contributor says and does and their contribution should not be misrepresented.*

I also think that the way that this has been edited could be in contravention of Ofcom's rule 5.1. (N.B. my complaint is not about impartiality but about *accuracy*.)

5.1 *News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.*

Eco activists and political activists are attempting to mislead fishermen as to the causes of the die-offs. The clip as used in the feature was edited to make it seem that I was implying that members of the fishing community are the activists, which could not be further from the truth. Ever since this worrying issue first arose, I have made it clear that we must get to the bottom of it, that I empathise with those fishermen whose life's work has now become unsustainable. What I was highlighting in the quote used was that one person's viewpoint or reports should not be given the same weight as official studies by statutory bodies such as Defra and the Environment Agency.

I hope you understand how damaging such a misrepresentation could be at a time when politicians are, rightly, being scrutinised. Many communities in Hartlepool and Redcar, the region which I represent, include fishermen directly impacted by this situation.

In any investigation, it would be important to listen to the full original recording of the interview in its entirety, which I hope the BBC has kept.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ben Houchen', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ben Houchen
Tees Valley Mayor