

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.
ANSWERS TO INQUIRY QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

IQ 35

Division: Content

Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Inquiry Date: 28/9/2020

Topic: Public Interest News Gathering Fund

Question Type: Written

Senator Gallagher asked:

1. In relation to the Public Interest News Gathering Fund announced by Minister Fletcher on 15 April 2020 as part of a package of “immediate COVID-19 relief”: a. What evidence does the Minister have to support the statement in his media release “\$5 million support for AAP Newswire”, dated 18 September 2020, that “The AAP Newswire provides services to more than 250 regional news mastheads across Australia”?
2. On what basis was the sum of \$5 million under the PING for AAP calculated?
3. Did the Government depart from the PING criteria in any way for the allocation of \$5 million to AAP?
4. Did the Government reject any applications for the PING on the basis applicants did not meet the criteria? If so, how many?
5. What amount of funding under the \$55 million PING has been allocated to TV and Radio broadcasters; and across how many broadcasters is that funding spread?
6. In 2017 the Government announced \$50 million in funding for regional and small publishers. What amount has the Government allocated to regional and small publishers since 2017 under: (i) the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund; and (ii) under the PING; and across how many publishers is the funding spread?
7. What economic analysis did the Department undertake to inform the decision on what the funding allocation formula for the PING should be, and when?
8. What alternative options did the Department consider in deciding on the funding allocation formula for the PING?
9. Who suggested the funding allocation formula as contained in the PING?
10. Where did the additional \$5 million in funding for AAP come from, given the original PING was set at \$50 million?

Answer:

1. Information on the number of mastheads was provided to the Department by Australian Associated Press Newswire Service (AAP).
2. The amount of funding to be provided to AAP was a decision of Government.
3. AAP did not apply and would likely have been ineligible for the original PING Program as they would not have met the definition of a ‘regional publisher’ (Stream 3). Under the PING Program Guidelines, a ‘regional publisher’ was defined as a provider where:

- their primary operations are located in a regional area, and
- their news and journalistic output is targeted to readers and audiences in one or more regional areas.

AAP's primary operations are not in a regional area as they service both metropolitan and regional media outlets. Funding provided to AAP must be expended on activities that are consistent with the PING Program as outlined under Section 5 of the PING Program Guidelines.

4. 21 grant applicants were found ineligible to receive funding under the PING Program as they did not satisfy the eligibility criteria as set out in Section 4 of the PING Program Guidelines.
5. A total of \$20 million funding was allocated to five television broadcasters. A total of \$12 million funding was allocated to 13 radio broadcasters.
6. (i) Under the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund, 41 small and regional publishers were found eligible to receive a share of \$5 million funding in 2020, 62 recipients were found eligible to receive a share of \$9 million funding in 2019 and 25 recipients received a share of \$3.6 million funding in 2018. Successful grantees are listed on the Australian Communications and Media Authority's website.

(ii) A total of \$18 million funding was allocated to 92 publishers under the PING Program.
7. A range of options was provided to Government for approval during the development phase of the PING Program and Guidelines.
8. A number of alternative approaches to determine individual funding amounts were considered prior to the final approach being approved by the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts as the decision maker for the PING Program.
9. The Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts approved the PING Program Guidelines. The Funding Allocation Formula is at Section 3.2 of the PING Program Guidelines.
10. An additional funding stream of the PING Program of \$5 million was provided for in the Economic and Fiscal Update July 2020 (JEFU). As stated in the JEFU, \$55 million over two years from 2019-20 is provided to establish a Public Interest News Gathering Program to support broadcasters and publishers who are producing news in regional Australia, partially offset by redirecting unallocated funds from the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package.