

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
ANSWERS TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

Division: Content

Inquiry: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Topic: Public Interest Newsgathering Fund

Question Type: Written (25/05/2020)

Senator Katy Gallagher asked:

1. How is the Public Interest News Gathering (PING) Fund consistent with the recommendations of the Final Report of the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry?
2. How does the PING Fund support journalism, particularly as media organisations face increased challenges due to COVID-19?
3. Why was \$50 million allocated for the PING Fund in 2020, and will this amount also be available in 2021 and 2022?
4. What proportion of the \$50 million is available under each of the three streams of the PING Fund?
5. The ACCC recommended that program eligibility criteria be designed by an independent expert advisory panel. Who designed the PING eligibility criteria and who was consulted on the design?
6. The ACCC recommended that a grants program be administered at arm's length from Government. Why is a panel of officials from the Department assessing eligibility and the Minister deciding which grants to approve under the PING Fund?
7. Why is the ACMA not administering the PING Fund?
8. To what extent will the PING Fund support small or independent publishers as opposed to larger media entities?
9. How does the PING Fund ensure media diversity, local newsgathering and jobs in regional Australia will be protected?
10. Are First Nations Media eligible for the PING? If so, what proportion of funds will be available to First Nations Media?

Answer:

1. How is the Public Interest News Gathering (PING) Fund consistent with the recommendations of the Final Report of the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry?

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Digital Platforms Inquiry recommended a targeted grants program that supports the production of original local and regional journalism, including that related to local government and local court. The Government's response stated that it will enhance the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package to better support the production of high quality news, particularly in regional and remote areas of Australia, with a particular focus on the production of public interest journalism that is at greatest risk of being under-provided.

The PING program will support regional broadcasters and publishers to maintain or increase their production and distribution of public interest journalism in regional Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic phase.

2. How does the PING Fund support journalism, particularly as media organisations face increased challenges due to COVID-19?

The objective of the PING Fund is to support regional broadcasters and publishers to maintain or increase their production and distribution of public interest journalism in regional Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic phase. The PING Program will meet its objective by enabling regional television and radio broadcasters, and regional publishers, to continue to provide public interest journalism to regional and remote communities across Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Why was \$50 million allocated for the PING Fund in 2020, and will this amount also be available in 2021 and 2022?

The Government's response to the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry stated that it will enhance the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package to better support the production of high quality news, particularly in regional and remote areas of Australia, with a particular focus on the production of public interest journalism that is at greatest risk of being under-provided. The \$50 million funding allocation comprises \$13.4 million of new money and repurposed funds from the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package. The funding is expected to be paid in the 2020-21 financial year.

4. What proportion of the \$50 million is available under each of the three streams of the PING Fund?

As stated in Section 3.2 of the PING Program Guidelines, once all applications have been received and screened for eligibility, the Assessment Panel will determine the size of each stream funding pool for the purposes of the nominal grant funding allocation formula, taking into consideration factors including the total number of applications received, and the contribution of each sector of applicant to public interest journalism in regional areas.

5. The ACCC recommended that program eligibility criteria be designed by an independent expert advisory panel. Who designed the PING eligibility criteria and who was consulted on the design?

The Government convened a number of consultations with regional and other media organisations in late 2019 and early 2020 on the challenges faced by the sector, including the adverse effects of COVID-19. The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications developed the eligibility criteria, which was informed by these consultations. The PING program is being conducted using a *demand-driven* grant process, meaning applicants only need to satisfy eligibility criteria, which reflects the urgent and considerable request for assistance due to COVID-19. The Program Guidelines were approved by the Department of Finance.

6. The ACCC recommended that a grants program be administered at arm's length from Government. Why is a panel of officials from the Department assessing eligibility and the Minister deciding which grants to approve under the PING Fund?

It was a decision of the Government that the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications administer the PING Program. The Minister is the decision maker as outlined in Section 7 of the PING Program Guidelines. This process is consistent with the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines 2017.

7. Why is the ACMA not administering the PING Fund?

The ACMA is administering the 2020 Regional Innovation Fund. It was a decision of the Government that the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications administer the PING Program

8. To what extent will the PING Fund support small or independent publishers as opposed to larger media entities?

The PING Program is open to all regional broadcasters and publishers that provide public interest journalism into regional areas. Three separate funding streams – television, radio and print – have been created and final allocation of funds will be determined following the assessment of applications.

9. How does the PING Fund ensure media diversity, local newsgathering and jobs in regional Australia will be protected?

The objective of the PING Program is to support regional broadcasters and publishers to maintain or increase their production and distribution of public interest journalism in regional Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic phase. Eligible regional broadcasters and publishers will be able to use grant money to support the provision of public interest journalism in regional areas, which could include the employment of journalists and other staff involved in the news gathering process.

10. Are First Nations Media eligible for the PING? If so, what proportion of funds will be available to First Nations Media?

The eligibility of all applicants will be determined by the Assessment Panel, as outlined in the PING Program Guidelines.