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PRESIDENT
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Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into the operation of Commonwealth Freedom of Information (FOI) laws

June 2023



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Country Press Australia

As the largest representative organisation for regional and rural news publishers across Australia, Country Press Australia welcomes this opportunity to present our submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs inquiry into the operation of Commonwealth Freedom of Information (FOI) laws.

Country Press Australia (CPA) represents more than 200 regional and rural news producers across Australia and is a not for profit association committed to providing a one-stop shop for governments, advertisers and other commercial entities wishing to engage with communities served by our members and their mastheads.

CPA is also a passionate advocate and lobbyist for the regional news industry.

The inquiry

CPA has a proud track record of standing up for country papers and ensuring our members have a voice when important legislative and policy changes are being considered.

We very much believe in a free press, and that journalists should be able to access relevant information as part of a Freedom of Information inquiry, and that this process should be afforded the deepest respect and should not be compromised by the outcomes of this inquiry.

In developing this submission, our members were asked for their views and their use of existing FOI rules, and there is an element of concern among our membership that any changes to FOI regulations could be to the detriment of our industry.

Our democracy is one of the most admired in the world and the ongoing existence of a free and open press is a fundamental component of our society.

It's the job of journalists to ensure that readers are accurately and reliably informed of any and all matters of public interest, and access to government information that's ultimately in the public interest goes a long way to protecting and preserving the essential element of trust that communities place in their local media to hold governments to account.

Feedback from within the broad CPA membership indicates there are issues and concerns that our journalists often face when seeking to use Freedom of Information regulations to obtain details that might contribute to the production of public interest journalism.

Some of these areas include, but are not restricted to:



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- Substantial delays in processing requests unduly impact the news value of a story by effectively stalling the process;
- Costs to submit applications for information;
- Government officers denying requests;
- Undue redaction of key information contained in information subject to requests;
- The utilisation of exemptions and differing interpretations by government officers to effectively deny an application.

Recommendations

Country Press Australia welcomes the opportunity to submit the following recommendations:

- Any review of existing Freedom of Information regulations should be undertaken by an independent and external body. It is not appropriate for the government to be the arbitrator of its own laws in this instance.
- Governments should not look to be making it even more difficult for the media to do its job and should welcome the layer of transparency and accountability that a responsible media industry affords. Understanding the role the media plays in a healthy democracy is integral.
- The Federal Government must adequately staff and fund its respective agencies, departments and workforce to facilitate Freedom of Information requests from members of the community in a timely and efficient manner, and to do so without fear or favour.
- A statutory time frame should be established for Freedom of Information requests.
- A quick and simple Freedom of Information hotline or point of contact should be established to deal with difficulties faced by applicants when making requests or after receiving responses to requests.