



Australian Government

Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

MEDIA PROGRAMS

Response to ACIL Allen report

Evaluation of the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs
and Innovation Package and the Public Interest News
Gathering program

December 2022

Report overview

In November 2022, ACIL Allen completed an independent evaluation of the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package (RASPJI) and the Public Interest News Gathering (PING) program.

The RASPJI package ran over three years from 2018 and the PING program commenced in mid-2020. With the program lifecycles coming to an end, in April 2022, the department engaged ACIL Allen to independently evaluate the RASPJI package and PING program.

The evaluation analysed program design, delivery, outcomes achieved and identified improvement opportunities.

Key findings from the evaluation

The department welcomes the finding that most stakeholders who received grant funding were satisfied with their involvement in the programs and that funding recipients considered the programs to be helpful in supporting industry during a period of transition (with respect to RASPJI) and crisis (with respect to PING).

The evaluation found that the programs were, in large part, well-designed and reasonably well-delivered. The evaluation found the underpinning logic to support an industry that provides public goods (i.e. public interest journalism) that communities value through innovation, employment, training and crisis funding, is sound.

Observations on key program outcomes from the evaluation

- The Scholarships funding reduced scholars' financial stress and supported them to overcome key financial barriers to complete their studies
- The Cadetships program provided opportunities for cadets to explore journalism in practice and gain a broad range of practical skills and regional experience, creating a pipeline of future industry professionals
- The Innovation Fund supported recipients to digitise, use new content delivery methods and technologies, train staff and employ new business models. Recipients operated more efficiently, adapted and accelerated their digitisation efforts, created new revenue streams and reached a broader and more diverse audience
- PING supported organisations with operational costs, digitisation and revenue creation. This enabled them to address challenges with declining advertising revenue and the COVID-19 pandemic that may not otherwise have been addressed
- The programs delivered stronger value where recipients received multiple grants (across different programs or Innovation Fund rounds), enabling recipients to leverage each grant opportunity and the intangible benefits (such as business confidence and momentum) associated with the funding.

Insights for future programs

These programs were precipitated by the challenges facing the industry and the need to support the industry through the short-term economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are not dissipating and (during the period of the evaluation), the Australian Government added two new programs – the Journalist Fund and the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program – to further support the industry.

ACIL Allen identified ways these and other new programs can be improved in the future. For instance, the report recommends additional stakeholder engagement during the design phase of future programs should help identify and

resolve eligibility issues before the programs are delivered. These improvement suggestions are now informing grant programs that support public interest journalism and regional media.

During the evaluation, the department provided ACIL Allen with access to all program records and ACIL Allen engaged extensively with stakeholders that were involved in the programs. We thank everyone who gave their time to help inform the evaluation, including our colleagues at the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) who ran the innovation component of the RASPJI package.

While the programs have delivered benefits to those involved, we are embracing the opportunities to learn from the design, delivery and impacts achieved to improve the design and delivery of future programs and continue to build the evidence base to demonstrate that public value is delivered.

Key findings and recommendations from the report

The department's response to each recommendation in the report appears below:

Recommendation 1

Better coordinate and sequence the programs to amplify the impacts and public value delivered by the funding. Individual and overall program logics that clearly map the connections between programs should be developed before they are launched.

Supported. In early 2022 all program and evaluation functions to support the media industry were consolidated into one Media Programs team. Program logics are developed for all programs and work is underway to develop an evaluation strategy and outcomes framework including performance indicators for longer term news media assistance impact assessment.

Recommendation 2

Ensure similar programs clearly identify and target areas of need, define key terms appropriately and provide certainty for stakeholders.

Supported. The department has incorporated this principle into the program design process for new public interest journalism programs. This has been put into practice in the last two initiatives, the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program and the Journalist Fund. In these programs there has been more consultation on program design elements, including eligibility criteria. This has assisted in more clearly identifying and targeting areas of need.

Recommendation 3

Enhance the level and type of guidance provided to applicants (particularly for first-time applicants).

Supported. The department has incorporated this principle into the program management processes for new public interest journalism programs. This has been put into practice in the last two initiatives, the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program and the Journalist Fund. For instance, the department continues to use the SmartyGrants grants management system for these programs as it did for RASPJI and PING. In designing the application processes for the new programs, the department leveraged previous applicant and assessor feedback to improve and automate the applicant guidance and make the application process simpler. Increased program level resourcing has lifted capacity and a capability for program delivery.

Recommendation 4

To set the foundations for delivering public value, the design of the funding formulas, funding acquittal and payment arrangements should - align with the intent of the program; balance the burden of compliance with appropriate reporting

obligations, and where possible, align reporting complexity with risk tolerance and target support to areas or types of organisations most in need across the sector.

Supported. This has been put into practice in the latest initiative, the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program. In line with the Commonwealth Grant Guidelines and best practice grants administration a two-tiered reporting regime has been adopted for the Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program so that reporting requirements are proportional to the risk to the Commonwealth and a lesser reporting burden is applied to grant recipients assessed as lower risk.

Recommendation 5

Use targeted promotion (including through closer engagement with relevant industry bodies) to raise awareness of the program among the intended target audience and ensure program take-up.

Supported. The Regional and Local Newspaper Publishers Program was well promoted through the now well-established public interest journalism stakeholder networks. This resulted in a high level of awareness among eligible applicants for this program evidenced by the increased volume of applications received.

Recommendation 6

The program design should be outcomes-focused to enable flexibility in the delivery of the funding (to achieve program outcomes) and ensure that reporting, monitoring and evaluation capture progress toward intended outcomes.

Supported. Program logics are developed for all programs and work is underway to develop an evaluation strategy and outcomes framework including performance indicators for longer term news media assistance impact assessment.