



**Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport,  
Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts**

**Consultation Paper — News Bargaining Incentive Revenue  
Distribution: Statutory Payment Scheme**

**Submitted by Country Press Australia**

**May 2026**



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## **Country Press Australia response to the News Bargaining Incentive, Consultation on Revenue Distribution**

Country Press Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on the proposed Statutory Payment Scheme for distribution of any News Bargaining Incentive revenue. The paper seeks feedback on eligibility, payment allocation, weightings, payment conditions, reporting and penalties.

CPA represents almost 240 publisher members across all states and territories. It is significantly the largest industry group representing small to medium independent news publishers in Australia. CPA members are genuine producers of covered news content, with a strong membership criteria based on place-based journalism production, or similar public interest journalism activity.

### **Q1: Do you have any concerns with the proposed registration and application process?**

CPA supports the proposed registration and application process, particularly the use of the existing ACMA News Media Bargaining Code Register as the basis for eligibility.

This is a sensible, transparent and administratively efficient approach. It avoids creating a new parallel process, while ensuring support is directed to genuine news businesses producing core news content for Australian audiences.

CPA strongly supports the retention of the \$150,000 annual revenue threshold, indexed. This should be regarded as a minimum test for a credible and sustainable news organisation.

### **Q2: Would your organisation meet the criteria as set out under the ACMA register?**

CPA's members would generally meet the criteria as set out under the ACMA register.

CPA members are genuine news businesses producing covered news content for Australian audiences. They are place-based publishers serving regional, rural, remote, peri-urban and local communities. They produce public interest journalism, operate to professional editorial standards, maintain editorial independence and serve identifiable Australian audiences.

CPA itself has strong membership requirements. Membership is not open to businesses that merely aggregate, promote, market or republish content.

**Q3: Is the proposed eligibility criteria fit-for-purpose in ensuring that the scheme supports continued investment in public interest news, diversity of media voices and quality journalism?**

Yes. CPA supports the proposed eligibility criteria and considers them broadly fit for purpose.

The criteria are consistent with the standard requirements of a credible news business. They appropriately focus on revenue, core news content, professional standards, editorial independence, Australian audiences and the connection between the news business and the nominated news source.

However, the criteria must be applied carefully to ensure the scheme supports genuine producers of covered news content, particularly small and medium independent publishers. The scheme should not be diluted by extending eligibility to businesses that do not have a demonstrated commitment to ongoing journalism production.

The \$150,000 revenue threshold, indexed, is important and should be retained.

**Q4: Do any of the proposed eligibility criteria present significant costs or administrative burden for your organisation?**

No. CPA does not consider the proposed eligibility criteria to impose significant costs or administrative burdens on its members.

The criteria reflect standard expectations for credible news businesses. Genuine publishers should already be able to demonstrate their revenue, editorial standards, Australian audience focus, core news production and editorial independence.

The key design principle should be proportionality. Smaller publishers should not be required to undertake excessively complex compliance processes. The scheme should rely on clear declarations, standard business records and targeted audit powers, rather than imposing heavy upfront reporting obligations on all participants.

**Q5: Is FTE journalists a good approximation for investment in news and journalism, and an appropriate basis for determining payments to the sector?**

Yes. CPA strongly supports payment based on eligible FTE journalists.

Payment per journalist is the best mechanism because it directly aligns the scheme with the public purpose of supporting journalism. It is transparent, simple to administer and less susceptible to distortion than models based on total labour costs, production costs, distribution costs or overall business expenses.

A journalist-based formula also reduces the risk that larger organisations with higher salaries, larger budgets or less efficient cost structures receive a disproportionate share of funding. The scheme should reward investment in journalism, not simply reward higher costs.

CPA therefore supports the use of FTE journalists employed to produce core news content as the central payment mechanism.

CPA does not support alternative models based on broader labour costs or production costs. Those models would risk rewarding scale, higher salaries, higher cost structures or inefficient operations, rather than supporting journalism directly.

**Q6: Are the identified editorial roles clear and fit-for-purpose? Are there other roles that should be included?**

CPA broadly supports the proposed focus on editorial roles directly involved in producing core news content.

However, CPA has concerns about the inclusion of graphic designers as an eligible category. While visual journalism can form part of core news production, the definition must not become so broad that it captures general design, page layout, marketing, branding, advertising production or non-editorial creative work.

The definition should be limited to key editorial roles only. Eligible roles should include journalists, reporters, editors, sub-editors, photojournalists and videographers who are directly involved in producing, editing, verifying or publishing core news content.

CPA submits that editors and sub-editors of core news content should be expressly included. In many local and regional newsrooms, editors and sub-editors are central to the production of quality journalism. They assign stories, verify information, edit copy, uphold editorial standards, mentor journalists and ensure that public interest news reaches audiences accurately and responsibly.

CPA cautions against including graphic designers as an eligible editorial category. In practice, it would be difficult to distinguish between design work that contributes to editorial presentation and broader page layout, advertising, marketing, branding or stylistic production. Graphic designers are generally not directly involved in the production, verification or editing of journalism itself, but in the presentation and output of that journalism. Their role is therefore peripheral in the same way as many other important support functions, and should not be treated as core eligible newsroom labour.

CPA does not support expanding eligibility to broader operational, commercial or production roles.

**Q7: Do the proposed evidentiary requirements present any specific difficulties, or a sizeable burden, for your business?**

CPA does not consider the proposed evidentiary requirements to present a sizeable burden, provided they remain proportionate.

Evidence of employment through payroll records and evidence of role type through job descriptions, statutory declarations or examples of work should be manageable for genuine news businesses.

However, the scheme should avoid requiring excessive individualised evidence from every journalist in every reporting cycle. A practical model would allow organisations to submit payroll records, role classifications and a responsible officer declaration, with targeted audit powers available where there is a risk of misreporting.

This would protect the integrity of the scheme without creating unnecessary red tape for small and medium publishers.

**Q8: Are the proposed weighting categories an appropriate and effective means of accounting for economies of scale and resourcing differences across the sector and meeting the objectives of the scheme?**

CPA supports the principle of weightings but submits that the proposed weighting categories should be strengthened.

Regional and remote weightings are essential. However, CPA submits that the model should also recognise local and peri-urban public interest journalism.

Too often, producers of news in peri-urban and outer-suburban communities are excluded from government support programs because they do not fall neatly within regional or remote definitions. Yet these communities often have significant democratic, social and information needs. They can include fast-growing populations, culturally diverse communities, first-time voters, lower socio-economic communities and areas with limited alternative sources of trusted local news.

Government advertising and grant programs have too often overlooked these publishers. Inclusion within the NBI distribution model would be vital to ensuring the scheme supports local public interest journalism wherever it is needed, not only where it satisfies narrow geographic definitions.

CPA also supports a small and medium publisher weighting, but suggests the relevant threshold should be based on the turnover of the news organisation and set at under \$50 million. This would better capture genuine independent and medium-sized news organisations, while still excluding the largest media groups from receiving additional scale-related support.

**Q9: What weighting values would best achieve these aims?**

CPA supports the proposed weighting approach but submits that 10 per cent is too modest to properly address the structural disadvantages faced by smaller, regional, remote, local and peri-urban publishers.

CPA recommends a weighting of 20 per cent for eligible journalists who fall within priority categories, including regional and remote journalists, local and peri-urban journalists producing place-based public interest journalism, journalists employed by small and medium news organisations with turnover below \$50 million, and journalists producing news for under-represented or marginalised communities.

A 20 per cent weighting would provide a more meaningful recognition of the additional challenges faced by these publishers, including recruitment difficulties, smaller advertising markets, higher relative production costs and reduced access to government advertising.

**Q10: Is the proposed retention obligation an appropriate measure to ensure that funding delivers against a clear and valid public purpose?**

CPA supports the intent of the retention obligation. Public funding should support journalism and should create an incentive to maintain newsroom capacity.

However, a strict requirement to maintain exactly the same number of eligible FTE journalists may be difficult in practice, particularly for regional and remote publishers. Recruitment is increasingly difficult. Vacancies can remain open for extended periods, especially in smaller communities.

Publishers may also face commercial pressures outside their control, including print cost increases, advertising downturns, staff departures, illness, parental leave or housing shortages affecting recruitment.

The obligation should therefore be designed as an incentive to maintain journalism capacity, not as a punitive rule that unfairly penalises publishers acting in good faith.

**Q11: Are there any risks or other issues to consider with regard to the retention obligation, including time periods and tolerance thresholds?**

Yes. CPA recommends that the scheme include a practical tolerance threshold.

While CPA supports the policy intent of maintaining journalist numbers, a strict requirement to maintain exactly the same number of eligible FTE journalists could be difficult in practice, particularly for regional, remote, local and peri-urban publishers. Recruitment challenges, staff turnover, illness, parental leave, housing shortages and commercial pressures can all affect newsroom staffing levels, even where a publisher is acting in good faith and actively seeking to maintain or rebuild capacity.

CPA therefore recommends a tolerance threshold before any penalty applies. For example, a publisher could be required to maintain at least 75 per cent of the eligible FTE journalist level used to calculate the previous payment. Where a publisher remains above that threshold, and can demonstrate good-faith efforts to maintain or replace editorial staff, no penalty should apply beyond the ordinary fact that its next payment would be calculated on its actual eligible FTE numbers.

Where a publisher falls below the 75 per cent threshold without reasonable explanation, a proportional adjustment could apply in the following year. This should operate by limiting the number of eligible FTE journalists that the organisation can claim in the following year to the proportion of journalist capacity it actually maintained.

For example, if an organisation received funding based on 100 eligible FTE journalists but maintained only 85 per cent of its journalist capacity during the relevant period, it would be treated as having maintained 85 per cent of its journalist capacity. If the tolerance threshold is set at 75 per cent, this should not trigger a penalty. However, if an organisation maintained only 70 per cent of its journalist capacity, the following year's claim could be capped or adjusted to reflect that 70 per cent level, unless exceptional circumstances applied.

This approach would create a strong incentive to maintain journalists, while recognising the practical realities of operating newsrooms in regional, remote, local and peri-urban markets.

It would act as a carrot rather than a stick, encouraging publishers to maintain or rebuild newsroom capacity without imposing unfair penalties for short-term vacancies or unavoidable staffing disruptions.

The scheme should also allow reasonable grace periods for vacancies where an organisation can demonstrate active recruitment or other genuine steps to maintain editorial capacity.

CPA also recommends that the scheme expressly address approved parental leave and other legally protected leave in the FTE and retention rules. An eligible journalist who remains employed, is on approved paid or unpaid parental leave, and has a right to return to an eligible editorial role should not be treated as a reduction in FTE for the purposes of retention compliance.

However, the scheme should not permit double counting. Where a publisher employs another person to perform the duties of the employee on parental leave, the original employee and the replacement should not together be counted as more than one FTE for payment allocation purposes in respect of the same continuing role, unless the publisher can demonstrate that the replacement represents an additional, ongoing eligible editorial position rather than a temporary backfill.

This should be verified through payroll records, leave records, employment records and, where required, a statutory declaration confirming the journalist remains employed, the eligible editorial role is being maintained, and no double counting has occurred.

**Q12: What penalties should apply for organisations later found to have misrepresented their eligibility or employment practices?**

CPA supports penalties for misreporting, particularly for serious or significant breaches.

The penalties should be proportionate and should distinguish between administrative error, minor inadvertent mistakes and deliberate or reckless misreporting.

For serious and significant breaches, penalties could include repayment of funds, administrative penalties, pecuniary penalties, suspension from the scheme, permanent exclusion in the most serious cases and public reporting of penalties imposed.

However, publishers should be given a fair opportunity to correct minor errors, particularly where there is no evidence of deliberate misconduct and no material financial benefit has been obtained.

**Q13: Do you have any concerns about the general approach to regular reporting and an event-based notification framework?**

CPA supports the general approach, provided the reporting framework is practical and proportionate.

Regular reporting is appropriate where public funds are being distributed. However, reporting should not become so burdensome that it diverts small newsroom and management teams away from journalism production.

CPA supports a model based on standardised reporting templates, responsible officer declarations and targeted audit powers.

Event-based notification obligations should be limited to material changes that affect eligibility, weighting status or payment calculation. They should not require constant reporting of minor operational or staffing changes that have no material impact on the scheme.

**Q14: What lead-in time would you require for information required under regular reporting and event-based notices?**

CPA submits that publishers should have at least two months to comply with event-based notice requirements, depending on the complexity of the requirement.

Some changes, particularly corporate restructures, masthead changes, staffing changes or changes affecting weighting status, may require internal review, payroll reconciliation, legal advice or board approval. A two-month period would provide a practical and fair timeframe.

For regular reporting, the scheme should align with normal business reporting cycles wherever possible.

Annual reporting should be preferred over unnecessarily frequent reporting, unless there is a clear integrity reason for a shorter cycle.

CPA also submits that care must be taken with the disclosure of commercially sensitive information. Public transparency is important, but the scheme should not require disclosure of detailed payroll, staffing or commercially sensitive operational data beyond what is necessary to ensure accountability.

**Q15: Do you have any concerns or views about penalties under the scheme, including thresholds and penalties for serious non-compliance?**

CPA supports a clear penalties framework for serious non-compliance.

The framework should include escalating thresholds. Minor administrative errors should be treated differently from deliberate, reckless or systemic misreporting. Serious and significant breaches should attract meaningful penalties, including repayment, exclusion from the scheme and pecuniary penalties where appropriate.

The scheme should also include procedural fairness protections, including notice of the alleged breach, an opportunity to respond, an opportunity to correct minor errors and review rights.

The integrity of the scheme is important. However, penalties must not be so rigid that they punish good-faith publishers dealing with genuine staffing shortages, recruitment difficulties or administrative complexity.

## COUNTRY PRESS AUSTRALIA MEMBERS

Agricultural Today	Mackay & Whitsunday Life
Alexandra & Eildon Standard	Maldon Tarrangower Times
Allora Advertiser	Mansfield Courier
Apsley Advocate	Maranoa Today
Ararat Advocate	Mareeba Express
Armstrong Creek Times	Maribyrnong & Hobsons Bay Star Weekly
Bairnsdale Advertiser	Maryborough Advertiser
Ballarat Times News	Maryborough Sun
Ballina Times	Melton & Moorabool Star Weekly
Barcoo Independent	Mildura Sunraysia Daily
Beaulesert Bulletin	Monaro Post, Cooma
Beaulesert Times	Moorabool News
Beaufort Pyrenees Advocate	Moreton Border News
Beechworth Ovens & Murray	Mornington News
Bellarine Times	Mortlake Dispatch
Benalla Ensign	Morwell Latrobe Valley Express
Bendigo Times	Mount Evelyn Star Mail
Berwick Star News	Mountain Views Star Mail
Boorowa News	Mt Gambier Times
Border Chronicle	Murray Valley Standard
Border Watch	My City Logan
Bridge-Yarram District	My Weekly Preview
Brimbank & Northwest Star Weekly	Myrtleford Alpine Times
Broken Hill Times	Narrandera Argus
Bugle, The	Newcastle Weekly
Bundaberg Today	Newsport
Burdekin Life Newspaper	Nhill Free Press & Kaniva Times
Burnett Today	Noosa Today
Byron Coast Times	North East Farmer
Cairns Local News	North West Express, Ouyen
Camperdown Chronicle	North West Farmer
Canberra Weekly	Northern Star Weekly
Canowindra News	Numurkah Leader
Canugra Times	Oakey Champion
Cap Coast Today	Ocean Grove Voice

Agricultural Today	Mackay & Whitsunday Life
Cape Yorke Weekly	On Our Selection
Casterton News	Orange City Life
Castlemaine Mail	Orbost Snowy River Mail
Centralian Today	Pakenham Berwick Gazette
Chelsea Mordialloc Mentone News	Pakenham Officer Star News
Clifton Courier	Parkes Champion Post
Cobar Weekly	Peninsula News
Cobden Times	Penola Pennant
Cobram Courier	Phillip Island & San Remo Advertiser
Colac Herald	Pittsworth Sentinel
Collie River Valley Bulletin	Plains Producer
Condobolin Argus	Port Lincoln Times
Cooloola Bay Bulletin	Port Pirie Recorder
Coolum & North Shore Advertiser	Portland Observer
Coonabrarabran Times	Prom Coast News
Coonamble Times	Queensland Farmer
Corowa Free Press	Rainbow Argus
Corryong Courier	Rainbow Beach Cooloola News
Country News	Ranges Trader Star Mail
Cowra Guardian	Redland Bayside News
CQ Today	Robinvale Sentinel
Cranbourne Star News	Rochester Campaspe Valley News
Dandenong Star Journal	Sale Gippsland Times
Deniliquin Pastoral Times	Sealake & Wycheproof Times
Dimboola Banner	Seymour Telegraph
Donald Buloke Times	Shepparton Adviser
Dubbo Photo News	Shepparton News
East Gippsland News Weekend	South Eastern Times
Eatons Echo	South Gippsland Sentinel Times
Echuca Riverine Herald	Southern Farmer
Emerald Today	Southern Peninsula News
Euroa Gazette	Southern Riverina News, Finley
Everton Echo	St Arnaud North Central News
Eyre Peninsula Advocate	Stanthorpe Today
Fassifern Guardian	Stawell Times News
Ferntree Gully Star Mail	Sunbury & Macedon Ranges Star Weekly
Fleurieu Sun	Sunshine Valley Gazette
Forbes Advocate	Swan Hill Guardian
Forster Fortnightly	Tamborine Mountain News
Franklin Huon Valley News	Temora Independent
Frankston Times	Tennant Creek Today

Agricultural Today	Mackay & Whitsunday Life
Geelong Independent	Terang Express
Geelong Times	The Border Times, Pinaroo
Gilgandra Weekly	The Bunyip, Gawler
Gippsland Farmer	The Courier, Mt Barker
Gladstone Today	The Islander
Glasshouse Country & Maleny News	The Leader, Angaston
Golden Plains Times	The Local (Central Highlands)
Goondiwindi Argus	The Murray Pioneer, Renmark
Grenfell Record	The Observer - Cassowary Coast
Gundagai Independent	The Sentinel
Guyra Gazette	The Southern Argus, Strathalbyn
Gympie Today	Torquay & Surf Coast Times News
Hamilton Spectator	Town & Country Journal
Hay Riverine Grazier	Transcontinental
Heathcote Mclvor Times	Tumbarumba Times
Hervey Bay Sun	Tumut & Adelong Times
Hills Echo	Tweed Coast Times
Hinchinbrook Life	Upper Yarra Star Mail
Hinterland Times	Victor Harbor Times
Hopetoun Courier	Village Voice - Ascot
Horsham Weekly Advertiser	Village Voice - Newfarm
Horsham Wimmera Mail-Times	Wangaratta Chronicle
Hunter River Times	Warracknabeal Herald
Ipswich Tribune Today	Warragul Gazette
Journal Star Mail	Warren & Nyngan Weekly
Kerang Ganawarra Times	Warrnambool Weekly
Kilmore North Central Review	Warwick Today
Kingborough Chronicle	Wellington District Leader
Koondrook & Barham Bridge	West Wyalong Advocate
Kyabram Free Press	Western District Farmer
Kyneton Midland Express	Western Downs Today
Lakes Entrance Post	Western Downs Town & Country
Lilydale Star Mail	Western Port News
Limestone Coast Today	Whittlesea Review
Lismore Times	Whyalla News
Local Ipswich News	Wimmera Farmer
Lockyer & Somerset Independent	Wyndham Star Weekly
Loddon Herald	Yarrowonga Chronicle
Logan West News	Yea Chronicle
Longreach Leader Today	Yorke Peninsula Country Times
MacIntyre Gazette	Young Witness