

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (2021 Measures No.1) Bill 2021
Public Hearing 7 June 2021
Communications Portfolio
Australian Communications and Media Authority

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Topic: Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund

CHAIR: Could you take notice on notice what work ACMA, in conjunction with the department, has done or will do to inject into your development of guidelines an outcomes based test whereby, if the guidelines you have developed result in a situation like this, where there is a clear confound between the reality of what a business is delivering versus the guidelines, the overarching purpose of the whole grant scheme will carry more weight—essentially will allow an exemption—if it can be guaranteed that something has happened that we did not envisage and clearly is not sensible. I have seen this operate under both sides of politics, from guidelines and statistically based models that are developed here in Canberra that, when you apply them to rural and regional communities, often make no sense at all. If we are going to be an effective form of government, we need to make sure that decisions can be made that are in the interests of our community, not just ones that line up with statistical models. Could you take on notice what work you have done or will be prepared to do to look at a form of guidelines that allows an outcomes based test where an outcome is clearly frustrated by what appears to be a Sir Humphrey Appleby-like constraint in your guidelines?

Ms Rainsford: Certainly I can take that on notice.

Answer:

The policy design of the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund (the Fund) was set by the Government.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) administered all 3 rounds of the Fund in accordance with the policy design and the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines.

For each round, the ACMA developed Grant Opportunity Guidelines in consultation with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (the Department). These Guidelines set out the outcomes and objectives of the Fund. In summary, these were to provide small and regional publishers with financial support so they are able to operate on a sustainable basis and continue to produce public interest journalism and reposition their businesses to adapt to the new media environment.

The ACMA is satisfied that its administration of the Fund and decisions on successful grantees were consistent with the outcomes and objectives of the Fund. The ACMA does not consider that granting exemptions from the eligibility or merit criteria for particular applicants would have achieved these outcomes or objectives or be an appropriate use of government funds under the program.