

SUBMISSION

House of Representatives Inquiry into Australia's Regional Newspapers

To: Australian Government
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Communications and the Arts

From: Mrs Robyn Lambley, Member for Araluen (Alice Springs)
Member of the NT Legislative Assembly

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An Alice Springs Perspective

Background

The iconic, outback, Central Australian town of Alice Springs was well serviced by its local newspaper the “**Centralian Advocate**”, established in 1947. Like many regional News Corp newspapers, the printed version of the Centralian Advocate was scrapped in May 2020.

This has left a gaping hole in the communication and dissemination of information throughout Alice Springs and the entire region of Central Australia, a population of approximately 50,000 people.

It is now January 2022 and Alice Springs still does not have a local, printed newspaper.

The NT News, also owned by News Corp, is primarily a Top End, Darwin based newspaper. For information relating to Central Australia it provides a couple of pages entitled the “Centralian Advocate” in a few editions each week, however this is no substitute for our original printed Centralian Advocate, which was a complete newspaper, that was distributed two days per week.

The circulation of the NT News in Alice Springs is very low, with an average of approximately 200 printed copies of the NT News sold in Alice Springs each day.

The only other local newspaper in Alice Springs is the “Alice Springs News Online” a privately owned business established in 1994. This has been widely viewed as an alternative source of news and commentary. In recent times the Alice Springs News Online has seen a significant reduction in output due to changes in the personal circumstances of the long term owners. The future of this online newspaper is uncertain.

In summary, there is a major deficit in the flow of news and information in the town of Alice Springs mainly due to the lack of a dedicated locally printed newspaper. All residents are impacted by this.

Many Alice Springs residents are now left in the dark.

Several local broadcast radio stations have a critical role in informing the Alice Springs community, including ABC Alice Springs Radio, CAAMA Radio, 8CCC Community Radio, Sun-FM and 8HA. But these radio stations can only deliver a fraction of the local information previously provided in the Centralian Advocate and if you are not actually listening to the radio, you tend to miss out

The community is of a consensus that Alice Springs needs a local, printed newspaper.

Community Action

As a long term Alice Springs Member of Parliament, I have been working with the Alice Springs community to try to get an alternative local newspaper up and running.

Over the past 18 months the Araluen Electorate Office has been inundated with communication from Alice Springs residents telling us how isolated and uninformed they now are, since the demise of the Centralian Advocate.

Older residents are particularly disadvantaged by having no local printed newspaper. Many are not connected to the internet. But even the internet does not provide the same level of convenience and details of local news that a printed newspaper can provide.

Having consulted widely with Alice Springs residents, particularly seniors, we consider the top 10 impacts of having no regional printed newspaper are:

1. No information about deaths or births
2. No information about local events – e.g. the Alice Springs Show, Festivals, celebrations
3. No information about crime and safety
4. No information about local sporting competitions
5. No information about NT politics
6. No information about NT Government tenders, notices and advertisements
7. No information about local Government - Alice Springs Town Council decisions and activities
8. No information about closures and changes to business operations
9. No information about activities of local groups, associations and clubs
10. No TV guide

A path forward

In response to calls for a printed newspaper in Alice Springs we started gathering information from community and regional newspapers across Australia to inform the discussion and to provide a clearer path as to how the community could approach this problem and move forward.

We were able to identify a number of key areas that need to be considered when attempting to establish a local printed newspaper.

1. Finding a **professional journalist / editor** with the necessary skills and experience
2. **Setup costs** - primarily for software and hardware
3. The most effective **business models** for regional newspapers – private versus not for profit
4. **Distribution** of the newspaper – how to distribute and where to distribute
5. **Printing** of the newspaper – the cost of printing and access to a newspaper printer
6. **Other staff** – advertising sales and photographer
7. **Other costs** – use of car, camera, mobile telephones etc.
8. **Advertising** – the critical revenue stream. Cost of advertising, packages etc.
9. **Charge for paper** - To charge or not to charge for the newspaper?

The Public Meeting

On Tuesday 2nd November 2021 I called a Public Meeting in Alice Springs to discuss establishing a printed newspaper for Alice Springs.

The Purpose of Meeting was to discuss the feasibility and viability of establishing a PRINTED COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER for Alice Springs.

Questions put to the public meeting were:

- Is it possible to establish a new printed newspaper in Alice Springs?
- What are the key factors that need to be considered when making a decision to proceed to the next step?
- Who will drive this initiative?
- Is there the energy, commitment and expertise to take this idea to the next stage of planning?
- Can we do it?

Approximately 40 people attended this meeting representing all sectors of the community, including several past editors and journalists from the Centralian Advocate, to give some practical insight into what is required to produce a weekly printed newspaper.

People who attended the public meeting, although keen to support any action taken, were somewhat overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of the task. To establish a new newspaper is essentially establishing a new business, which is not an easy task and cannot be undertaken lightly.

From the public meeting it was resolved to continue to gather information and support.

Since the Public Meeting

There have been some developments since the Public Meeting in November 2021.

A “consortium” of Alice Springs business people are considering taking this up as a business proposition. They are currently formulating a business case. However, they have made no commitment at this stage to move beyond the provision and consideration of a business case.

Although optimistic, realistically it is likely that the business case to establish a local printed newspaper in Alice Springs will not be viable without some assistance. What is clear is that the bigger News Corp newspapers in Australia were subsidising the smaller, regional newspapers.

This explains News Corp's business decision to cut 112 community and regional newspapers across Australia in May 2020.

The future for Alice Springs

The establishment of a new printed newspaper in Alice Springs would be difficult but not impossible.

Alice Springs has the added complication of being at least 1500km from the nearest newspaper printer (owned by News Corp); labour is difficult to find and expensive to employ; and the cost of doing business in Alice Springs is generally a lot higher than in many parts of Australia.

The business case for an Alice Springs newspaper will be skewed by a generally higher than average costs all round. Perhaps the business case with simply not stack up.

From our analysis, the successful regional newspaper businesses across Australia were mainly the "one-man-bands" that were owned and operated by the same people, relying on the part-time help of one or two staff on the ground to report and take photographs. They did not tend to charge for the paper, as that was seen as an added complication. Their sole source of revenue was advertising, with the big advertisers being Government. Critically many had received Federal Government funding in 2020 to help them set up.

It is at this juncture that I think the Federal Government has an important role in promoting and supporting regional newspapers.

For a newspaper in Alice Springs to get off the ground it is almost certain that funding for set up costs will be required. Such funding was available from the Federal Government after News Corp scrapped the 112 regional newspapers in 2020. I believe this funding is no longer available.

Some individuals and communities from other regional areas were obviously far more organised to take up this funding and kick off, than others. Alice Springs was not in this category.

I thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and Arts for undertaking this very important inquiry into Regional Newspapers. In the case of Alice Springs, not having a local printed newspaper for going on 2 years has been a major blow to the economy and social fabric of our town. I look forward to some positive outcomes from this inquiry that will improve the lives of people living in regional Australia, through enhanced communication.

My Recommendations

I have two recommendations to contribute to this inquiry into regional newspapers:

- 1. The Federal Government must offer funding to assist with set up costs for community and regional newspapers across Australia, particularly where there is no existing printed regional newspaper.**
- 2. All levels of Government should support community and regional newspapers by committing to the purchase of advertising space. Governments must be fair and equitable in buying advertising space from newspapers. Without this important source of income from Governments, regional newspapers will struggle to survive.**