

Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

Inquiry Submission

February, 2023

The Local and Independent News Association (LINA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models to disaster recovery. We bring to the Committee's attention the contribution of local news media in and around increasingly common crisis events.

LINA represents 46 digital news publishers, producing 74 mastheads in all States and Territories across Australia. LINA members are locally owned and controlled news publishers, creating high-quality public interest news content that meets professional Editorial Standards, by and for a defined community. LINA membership is open to all digital news publishers who meet our membership requirements, however, most of our services are tailored to capacity building for small publishers, with most LINA members having an annual income less than \$350k and operating with fewer than 5 staff. Although many of our members are for-profit entities, they are community focussed and provide an essential public service to their communities, operating with an average 5 volunteer contributors per organisation.

LINA sees these news businesses as the 'green shoots' of the news industry, observing the expansion of digital newsrooms in the wake of newsroom contractions. This change reflects an audience shift to digital news consumption over decades and the weakening of business models sustained by advertising and user-fees on a global scale. LINA's role is to support hyperlocal and independent digital news publishers, including their capacity to provide accurate and timely information during emergencies.

LINA notes the increasing frequency of natural disasters and the significant contribution to public safety made by local digital news publishers during recent floods, cyclones and fires. Several LINA members were founded in response to a lack of locally relevant information available during the COVID-19 pandemic, even in metropolitan areas where news was primarily national or state focussed. In times of crisis, people need to know granular information such as road closures, clinic hours, emergency hubs, supply donation processes, school closures and other public services that is relevant to their immediate surrounds. Familiarity with local areas is particularly beneficial in providing clear information during a crisis but is also helpful in preparing communities to respond to emerging extreme weather events.

The Commonwealth, LINA and its members are strongly aligned in the ambition to increase the sustainability and diversity of news services to communities across Australia. LINA notes Government priorities to meet the information needs of geographically and culturally diverse audiences and address news deserts. We urge the Committee to consider mechanisms for resourcing local newsrooms to:

- support the distribution of information that helps communities prepare for fire and cyclone seasons;
- encourage communities develop response plans ahead of disasters;
- increase awareness of sources of information during a crisis;

- provide emergency response information support services to increase community safety during an emergency (LINA members can publish information at any time);
- train journalist teams and volunteers in emergency response procedures;
- strengthen relationships between state-based services, the Australian Defence Force, volunteer groups and not-for-profits and news services; and
- provide post-event reporting services on rebuilding and renewal processes to support community resilience.

Local newsrooms are key components of community building, sharing experiences and relaying key information. They foster the type of connectedness that brings communities back to local areas following disaster events. But most importantly, they are highly trusted sources of news due to their connections in communities and their localised knowledge. When time is of the essence, this level of trust is more important than ever.

LINA does not seek to comment on the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to natural disasters. Instead, we encourage the Commonwealth to support the role of hyperlocal and independent digital news publishers in Australia's capacity to respond to disasters through policy interventions to increase newsrooms sustainability, such as: access to Deductible Gift Recipient status; legislated government advertising spend ratios; start-up support for emerging newsrooms; capacity building programs to strengthen public interest journalism; and eligibility for government programs that support community infrastructure and services to respond to disasters for locally produced media services such as community radio and public interest news publishers.

LINA would be happy to discuss these suggested measures further and thanks the Committee for its consideration of these matters.

Sincerely,



Claire Stuchbery
Executive Director