

Office of Local Government South Australia
GPO Box 1475
Adelaide SA 5001

Thursday 26 June 2025

To the Office of Local Government,

The Local & Independent News Association (LINA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Local Government Community Engagement Charter on behalf of its members. Please note that while LINA is submitting on behalf of its members, any submissions made directly by member newsrooms should take precedence and will not be overridden by this submission.

LINA is a not-for-profit industry association representing 177 digital newsrooms across Australia, including eight in South Australia. LINA provides newsrooms with capacity and sustainability building support, to foster public interest journalism and media diversity. To further improve Australian's access to quality and locally-relevant news, LINA also provides support to emerging newsrooms and individuals wishing to establish a news publication. LINA members are locally owned and operated news publishers, creating high-quality public interest news content that meets [professional editorial standards](#), along with the Australian Press Council's Principles and Standards of Practice. This growing local and independent news sector reaches almost 11 million people with public interest journalism each month, and is well placed to address the news and information needs of local communities and strengthen engagement with local decision-making processes. LINA members engage journalists who are deeply embedded in their communities, strengthening social cohesion and connecting people to one-another and to the outside world.

An example of one such member includes *Murray Bridge News*, founded by a local journalist in 2020 after the local newspaper suspended production, leaving the community without a local news source. In a 2022 independent analysis, the [Public Interest Journalism Initiative's Australian News Sampling Project](#) found that of the four sampled news producers serving Murray Bridge (*Murray Bridge News*, ACM-owned *Murray Valley Standard*, ABC Adelaide and ABC Riverland), *Murray Bridge News* produced the highest percentage of public interest journalism stories (95%), and the highest percentage of local news stories (95%). These were broken down into stories covering government, courts and crime, community and public services. The report found that local government stories focused on "community facilities delivery, such as upgrades to sport clubs, parklands and playgrounds" and upcoming council elections, and "much more coverage of the elections was found in the newspapers than the public broadcaster". Other coverage included disaster preparedness for anticipated flooding, and health information about a newly announced distribution of Japanese encephalitis vaccinations in response to a worsening outbreak.

These are examples of the types of local reporting that will be strengthened by the Local Government Community Engagement Charter's drafted mandatory requirements regarding news publications, and LINA commends the Office of Local Government for initiating this update.

Specifically, LINA supports:

1. **The principles outlined in the Charter:** LINA supports and encourages action from all levels of government, in partnership with media, to keep communities informed and facilitate civic engagement.
2. **The platform agnostic approach to the mandatory requirement for news publications:** Using the term ‘news publication’ within the Charter (instead of ‘newspaper’, for example) reflects the necessarily multi-platformed approach taken by news publishers today, often reaching audiences through a combination of websites, newsletters, social media, podcasts, apps and other platforms. A South Australian example of this is the Fleurieu App, represented by LINA and serving communities on the Fleurieu Peninsula. Importantly, this broader, future-focused approach is consistent with the principles outlined in the Commonwealth government’s **News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) 2024** framework. As the framework advises:
“Journalism policy should generally be neutral about the distribution method... Australians are able to access news content through a broad range of distribution technologies—print newspapers, radio, television, digital publications and online services like podcasts and social media... government interventions should not generally be targeted to a specific distribution technology...” and
“[Policy should] Promote diversity and competition, and respond to changing conditions... Policy interventions should not seek to fix or revert things to a point in time, entrench incumbents, or fail to pragmatically engage with changes in technology.”
3. **The requirement that news publications must be locally produced and available in the council’s area:** News publications that are locally produced and distributed are particularly well-placed to contribute to community well-being, democratic functions, and societal resilience. This includes community building and social cohesion, addressing news deserts and information voids, identifying and combating misinformation and disinformation, strengthening democracy and civic engagement, and providing essential information for emergency preparedness and public safety.

Crucially, local news publications have high levels of trust due to their community connection, particularly independent media that is upholding strong editorial standards. The [2025 Digital News Report](#) found once again that Australians are most interested in local news above all other news topics/areas. In the context of [overall declining media trust](#) and [high news avoidance](#), along with the “fear that leaders are lying to us” being at an all-time high ([2025 Edelman Trust Barometre](#)) it is particularly critical for local governments not to underestimate the potential reach and impact of local news publications in disseminating important public information.
4. **That the mandatory requirement applies to matters categorised as ‘significant (annual business plan and rating policy)’, ‘significant’, ‘standard’ and ‘local’:** This reflects both the principles of the Charter and the valuable role of news publications in informing communities.

These changes all reflect a positive step-forward from the consultation requirements outlined in the *Local Government Act (1999)*. LINA suggests that public consultation reach and impact, along with broader community outcomes such as democratic participation, civic engagement, public health and emergency response, could be further improved by including the following suggestions in the new Local Government Community Engagement Charter:

1. **That the mandatory requirement applies to matters categorised as ‘inform’, or alternatively that the matter of ‘election information’ be reclassified as a ‘significant’ matter:** While local news publications will likely provide editorial coverage of local elections, such as candidate profiles and interviews, mandating for election information to be published within news publications would increase accountability and transparency in local decision-making processes, particularly concerning local government, and mitigate the risk of election advertising being relational to favourable editorial.
2. **That the Office of Local Government introduce a legislated minimum government advertising spend specifically directed to locally produced and distributed news publications:** Research ([*Media Innovation and the Civic Future of Australia's Country Press*](#)) indicates that audiences are five times as likely to go to directly to a local news website for local news than to Google or Facebook, and almost ten times more likely than to go to a local council website. This study also found that public notice spending has been “used as a lever of control, with some local councils withdrawing advertising from local newspapers because of concerns about negative council coverage, while other government departments choose to control public messaging via their own websites and publications”. Introducing a mandatory requirement would enhance reach, transparency and engagement with local communities by:
 - a. Incentivising government media buying agencies to familiarise themselves with local media outlets, which currently often overlook smaller publishers in favour of larger publications, despite their proven impact. Whilst local media outlets in some areas may reach a relatively small number of people, their audience share is often significant with some reporting reach of over 80% of people in their regions.
 - b. Increasing the return-on-investment for government campaign spends by reaching a broader but highly targeted audience. Local news publications are explicitly positioned to reach and connect with diverse audiences, such as communities in regional and remote regions, and people of different ages and cultural and language backgrounds. This is particularly valuable for advertisers in the context of increasingly syndicated, monocultural news services that are “local in name only”, which audiences have been found to be “acutely aware of, and resistant to” (*Media Innovation and the Civic Future of Australia's Country Press*).

The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometre reports surveyed respondents felt that “government leaders earn legitimate authority when they understand what people like me need and want”. Supporting newsrooms in their role of public consultation and amplifying diverse community voices and needs is therefore beneficial for local governments.

Additionally, this measure would fund more public interest journalism and support the ongoing sustainability for local newsrooms, allowing them to continue serving their communities with timely and accurate local information, particularly critical during crises like natural disasters or pandemics. Many local news publications, including *Murray Bridge News*, serve communities and audiences with reduced capacity to pay for news. Mandated advertising spend can help grow the sustainability of newsrooms as community assets.

A similar arrangement in New York City, where the local government signed an Executive Order to boost advertising spend through community media organisations (including print and digital publications, television, and radio outlets), resulted in a [“transformative impact” for local communities](#) and a [“more effective use of ad dollars by a government”](#) (The Centre for Community Media). The City of New York in 2019 mandated that at least 50 per cent of city agencies’ annual print and digital publication advertising spending go toward community and ethnic media outlets. Fifty-nine of these editors and publishers wrote in an [open letter](#) to city and New York State officials that “without advertising from city agencies, many of us would not have survived the pandemic”. Following this success, in 2021 the program was passed in Local Law and approximately 230 community media outlets received \$15.6 million in city agency advertising, representing 82 per cent of the city’s total print and digital budget for the year. Since then, more than \$47 million has been “infused into the local community media ecosystem”, and similar policies have been initiated in other cities and seven other states.

This month the Queensland Government announced a minimum commitment of at least 75% of press advertising placement be invested in regional and rural newspapers. While the design of the Queensland Government policy is problematic as it doesn’t include digital and metro publications, it represents a policy-mandated earmarking of government advertising spending that could be adapted for use by the South Australian government.

A [national report](#) into local news sustainability recommended that all tiers of government “review advertising frameworks and legislation for disseminating campaign and non-campaign advertising ... to ensure information reaches and is absorbed by diverse rural and regional geographies”. The report recommended that 20 per cent of all Federal Government advertising expenditure be directed to rural and regional news outlets. LINA suggests that 10 per cent also earmarked for State Government advertising within local news publications would be enough to have substantial impact on the industry and on community engagement.

Additional considerations for inclusions in the Charter:

3. **Including a definition of ‘news publication’:** To mitigate against local governments being required to place public notices within publications that are not producing professional quality news content, LINA suggests a definition of ‘news publication’ be included in the Charter. Definitions for news are well-established in other policy and could be taken from there, for example [ACMA's definition of professional news](#): *News produced by a news outlet that adheres to professional standards, is editorially independent, operates predominantly in Australia and produces publicly available news content.*
4. **Accounting for news deserts within the ‘mandatory minimum actions to achieve the mandatory requirements’:** To address the roadblock some local governments in Australia have faced when required to publish public notices within news deserts, LINA suggests the wording of the ‘mandatory minimum actions to achieve the mandatory requirements’ be amended to: *Publish information about the matter in a news publication that is locally produced and available in the council’s area, **where one exists.***

LINA also urges South Australian local governments to consider partnering with news publications on solutions-focused engagements. LINA is aware of many examples of local councils partnering with news organisations to bring communities together for productive conversations on topics that impact all citizens (e.g. transport, housing, education, food security). One highly successful example of this type of partnership is [The Green Line](#), a Canadian publication which contextualises issues through reporting, then arranges public events for discussion with councillors and other relevant stakeholders and reports on the leading solutions discussed, creating an eco-system for civic engagement on topics relevant for community engagement. Similar partnerships could be encouraged to great effect in South Australia. Strengthening the relationship between local government and local news is a shared investment in democracy, transparency and community wellbeing.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to the welcomed updates drafted in the Charter, and for your consideration of the suggestions put forward by LINA on behalf of its members. Adopting these changes would uphold the “significant, although subtle, change in how the Australian Government engages with news and journalism” outlined in the Commonwealth Government’s News MAP. The News MAP guidelines recognise that “government influence must remain checked, but that inaction is no longer a viable option. Deliberate and transparent action is required to protect the vital role played by Australian journalists and news organisations” that are “fundamental to Australia’s democracy, civic society, and community wellbeing”.

LINA would be happy to meet with the Office or respond over email or phone to provide further information on any of the points outlined above, and stands ready to work alongside local governments in building more informed, engaged and connected communities.

Sincerely,



Claire Stuchbery
Executive Director