

**Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP, Minister of State for Media and Data,
HM Government - Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—
supplementary written evidence (FOJ0105)**

Firstly may I thank you for your work on the House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee's inquiry into the Future of Journalism. As I hope I made clear in my oral evidence to the Committee, this is a subject that the Government takes very seriously and I am personally working hard to ensure we get right. I look forward to the outcome of your inquiry to support the Government's work to ensure a sustainable future for journalism in the UK.

I am primarily writing to respond to the claims made in the Public Interest News Foundation's (PINF) letter to you regarding my appearance at the Select Committee meeting on 14 July 2020 to provide oral evidence to the inquiry. These are based on a misinterpretation of my evidence and are totally incorrect. I was asked by Baroness Greener about the 'All in, all together' campaign and the letter from PINF regards my response to that question. I will respond to each of the following key points made in the letter from the PINF:

- "He did not demonstrate that there has been any transparency in the allocation of the £35m 'All in, all together' budget. Instead, he said that the allocation has been made by a private company, OmniGOV, who took the 'relatively easy' step of directing public funds towards 'titles they knew about'. As we have shown, OmniGOV, when asked to consider supporting other titles, directed us towards another body, the NMA, which exists to represent the interests of large publishers and thus has no legitimate role whatsoever in the allocation of public funds."

As I set out in my response to Baroness Greener, the primary purpose of the campaign was to get the Government's message across and to reach as much of the population as possible. The campaign is being evaluated on this basis, through independent auditors assessing both value for money and verification of content across the network of 600 titles. The Cabinet Office are also conducting a wider econometric study to demonstrate which strands of the Covid-19 campaign drove the desired behaviour changes the most effectively. I also made clear that the campaign did have the very beneficial effect of providing advertising revenue for newspapers, which had seen a massive drop in sales.

I clarified that the Cabinet Office has overall responsibility for Government information, so it took the decision - approved by the Treasury - to fund a £35 million campaign that would run for three months. The allocation of that funding has indeed been made independently by the Government's media planning and buying agency, OmniGOV. Titles have been selected on their ability to engage with audiences at a national, regional and local level and are those which can be verified by the Government's media auditors. News titles that are not audited or cannot demonstrate their circulation/readership are not included in the partnership as the Government would not be able to demonstrate value for money.

The Cabinet Office and OmniGOV continue to welcome applications from newspapers who are not currently part of the partnership and which meet their set criteria. Where appropriate, senior Cabinet Office officials are happy to speak directly with the applicants to discuss potential opportunities for working together, including other UK Government advertising campaigns.

- “He did not demonstrate that any consideration was given to ensuring that the budget was pushed out to small, independent news publishers. Quite the opposite. He acknowledged that the ‘vast majority’ of the campaign budget has been allocated to members of the NMA, but said that this was simply ‘because the NMA represents most of the large publishers’. He also said that it is easier for a minister to talk to a large publisher, such as Newsquest, than to engage with small publishers. This is a very troubling admission, which suggests that the Government puts its own convenience ahead of the public interest in a diverse and plural media.”

It is correct that the NMA does represent the majority of publishers in the UK, including the largest regional and local publishers who together make up almost 70% of the total number of regional and local titles, as well as a number of independent titles. It is therefore expected that the vast majority of the campaign budget has been allocated to NMA members. Overall, the partnership comprises over 600 titles, reaching communities throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and includes over 50 BAME publications. It has been structured so that the majority of the funding, at least 60%, goes to the smaller regional and local titles.

In my response I made no assertion that ‘it is easier for a minister to talk to a large publisher than to engage with small publishers’. The Government does not put its own convenience ahead of the public interest and it is categorically supportive of a diverse and plural media. As per the transcript of the evidence session, I set out clearly that OmniGOV ‘are obviously very familiar with the national media — the broadcasters and the national newspapers, and indeed the big regional titles. Therefore, it was relatively easy to set up a campaign with titles that they knew about. They had done due diligence, they understood the reach — the audience that they would be getting to.’ I also suggested that for OmniGOV, it would likely be more difficult to administer hundreds of individual tiny contracts with very small publishers rather than directly through Newsquest, for example, which publishes 150 titles and so would allow them to instantly reach a lot of local communities.

- “He did not explain who made the decision that the budget should be allocated only to print-first publications, or give any grounds for this decision. In the absence of any such explanation, we can only conclude that the campaign was deliberately designed as a subsidy for the print industry, which is dominated by a small number of very large publishers, rather than a serious attempt to convey information to the whole of the public, or to support the whole of the news industry.”

To be clear, the Cabinet Office have not selected digital-only titles because they are already investing heavily in digital advertising across other campaigns. The press partnership is designed specifically to reach older audiences and audiences which consume less online media, as well as to support the printed media who have suffered most as a result of the impact of Covid on print sales and print advertising revenues.

I hope this letter helps to clarify the Government’s position and to explain the rationale behind the press partnership. It has been an absolute priority to ensure we do all we can as a Government to support news publishers at this time of financial instability. The Government will continue to work with stakeholders from across the sector to consider all possible options in the interests of promoting and sustaining high-quality news journalism and to further drive awareness, engagement, and compliance with key Government messages.

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