



SUBMISSION TO THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY BY THE PUBLIC INTEREST NEWS FOUNDATION AND OTHERS

‘ALL IN, ALL TOGETHER’

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Introduction

1. This submission relates to the following three sections of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:
 - 1 a) ii) how decisions were made, communicated, recorded and implemented,
 - 1 a) xxii) the safeguarding of public funds,
 - 1 c) i) support for businesses etc.
2. From April 2020 for almost two years, under an initiative labelled 'All In, All Together', which was declared by government to be a part of its response to the Covid pandemic, many millions of pounds of public money were paid to newspaper companies. The initial, short-term budget was stated to be £35 million but the final total could be higher than £200 million. The government stated at the outset that this money was being spent to help these companies at a time of crisis – a form of assistance over and above the help, such as furlough funding, that was provided to those businesses as it was to other businesses more generally.
3. We present below evidence strongly suggesting that the decisions behind this initiative were made, and its implementation was conducted
 - without appropriate process or care,
 - in a manner that caused public money to be spent unfairly,
 - without justification or accountability, and
 - without due regard for journalistic independence and the protection of democracy.
4. The evidence further suggests that the communication of the scheme, throughout its existence and since that time, has at best lacked transparency and at worst been characterised by concealment and evasion.
5. We ask the Inquiry to use its powers to establish the full story of All In, All Together and lay it before the public, to enable appropriate lessons to be learned for the future.
6. For the avoidance of doubt, when this submission refers to 'All In, All Together' and to 'the scheme', these terms are intended to include all of the activities that flowed from the partnership agreed between government and the NMA, as announced in April 2020.

All In, All Together: a press subsidy

7. On 16 April 2020 the News Media Association (NMA) and its marketing arm Newsworks announced an agreement with the government under which member newspapers and their online outlets would deliver Covid-related information to their readers on the government's behalf in the form of paid-for advertising.¹

¹ <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/news-and-opinion/all-in-all-together/>

8. This initiative, for which the Treasury soon announced that £35 million had been set aside to cover the first three months' activity, had two stated purposes.² The first was to inform the public at a time of crisis and the second was to deliver an emergency subsidy for NMA members, whose revenues had been hit by the pandemic and by lockdown.
9. Since that second purpose is central to this submission, and since the government later became reluctant to acknowledge it, it is appropriate to remove any doubt of its reality.
10. The Treasury statement of 30 April 2020 introduced All In, All Together as follows:

'In support of the print newspaper industry, the government has also announced it will be spending up to £35 million on newspaper advertising over the next 3 months as part of its Covid-19 communications campaign to ensure the whole UK is aware of the latest government guidance and advice.' (Our italics)
11. It went on to explain:

'The £35 million extra advertising revenue will be split between local, regional and national print media, and will be a vital boost to the media industry.' (Our italics)
12. Further, the then Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove, in a comment supplied for the NMA/Newsworks statement on 16 April, said that newspapers were 'the lifeblood of our communities' and that with the new campaign 'we are both saving lives by providing essential information to the public and *supporting cherished local institutions*' (our italics).
13. And on 27 April 2020 John Whittingdale, then the minister responsible for media at the DCMS, told the Commons:

*'We have already put in place an unprecedented financial package to provide support to all businesses and have taken a number of steps to provide specific support to news publishers. We are continuing to work closely with publishers to fully understand the specific challenges that they are facing with the supply chain and the fall in advertising revenues and options for addressing these.'*³ (Our italics)
14. The purpose of subsidy was therefore explicit, placed on the record by the Treasury and by two government ministers. It is further confirmed by the context, for the funding and the scheme were a direct response to an appeal for financial assistance from the NMA.
15. The NMA had announced on 30 March that it had made a submission to the government seeking emergency support, saying that 'the crisis posed a grave threat to some publishers because of sharp declines in advertising and some would not survive beyond the next few months without swift intervention'.⁴ It went on to identify 'a series of

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/vat-scrapped-on-e-publications>

³ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-04-27/debates/939EC013-80D0-4298-90A0-7155970BDD6D/Covid-19LocalAndRegionalNewsOrganisations#contribution-FC754A68-DEF2-44BE-A480-CC80E320A99C>

⁴ <https://newsmediauk.org/blog/2020/03/20/nma-calls-for-government-support-for-fourth-emergency-service-news-media-sector-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

financial and operational interventions which are essential to ensure news publishers continue to operate', the first of which was:

'Committing to divert government media spend to newspapers (online and print, national and local) to ensure key public information messages are communicated to readers through an immediate and sustained advertising campaign. '

16. Government go-ahead to begin preparing the campaign, including a specific advertising brief, was received by NMA/Newsworks on or before 10 April – at most eleven days later.⁵
17. To summarise: the NMA asked for 'financial and operational interventions which are essential to ensure news publishers continue to operate 'and the government very swiftly approved spending 'in support of the print newspaper industry', that would serve as 'a vital boost to the media industry 'and would 'support cherished local institutions'. Whatever else it may have been, this was undoubtedly an emergency subsidy and was publicly acknowledged as such by the government at the time.
18. The All In, All Together campaign duly followed. National, regional and local papers published 'wraparounds 'and other display advertisements in line with government policies on Covid awareness and containment, more or less identified as government advertising. Articles also appeared in print and online telling positive stories about how people were coping and what official support was available, again usually with the label 'All In, All Together '(there were occasional, targeted sub-campaigns under other headings) and with the government's role usually acknowledged.
19. It is not within the scope of this submission to measure the exact scale of the scheme as it evolved. A timeline of the project published (and since withdrawn) by Newsworks showed considerable activity across the NMA membership in the first year of the pandemic, reducing thereafter. Articles labelled 'All In, All Together 'continued to appear in NMA papers until spring 2022, almost two years after the initial agreement.

How the decision was made, communicated and recorded

1. The exclusion of small publishers

20. The NMA was not the only journalism-related body to seek help once the financial impact of Covid 19 and lockdown became apparent. The Independent Community News Network (ICNN), also appealed publicly for emergency assistance from the government.⁶

⁵ <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/governments-all-together-campaign-went-pitch-page-seven-days/1713072>

⁶ The efforts of the ICNN are described in detail, with full references, in Jonathan Heawood (2021) 'All In, All Together? Government subsidy for news', in David Harte and Rachel Matthews (eds) *Reappraising Local and Community News in the UK*, London, Routledge. Available online at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003173144-3/together-government-subsidy-news-jonathan-heawood>.

21. ICNN and IMPRESS (the independent press regulator for the UK, recognised by the Press Recognition Panel) collectively represent more than 200 independent news publications, including community- led news organisations, local newspapers, investigative non- profits and special- interest publications.⁷ Many answer Michael Gove’s description of ‘cherished local institutions’. Many, too, are innovators and start-ups and so especially important to journalism’s future. At the outset of the pandemic, ICNN and PINF surveyed this sector. They found that these publishers reach at least 14.9 million unique website visitors every month and circulate 427,000 printed copies of their publications, and that 75 per cent were afraid that they might be forced to close as a result of the lockdown.⁸
22. While the government very swiftly entered into negotiations with the NMA, ICNN was given no opportunity to put its case to ministers or officials and was not involved in any negotiation. An open letter from ICNN published on 25 March 2020 said that members should not be ‘left out of any deals made between the government and organisations under the umbrella of the NMA’. It continued:
- ‘Many of our members are the only news publishers in their areas, some covering entire counties and cities. If these publishers are forced to close, the UK will be left with many more news black holes which we will struggle to fill again.’
23. ICNN’s call was supported by Enders Analysis, a leading independent media consultancy, which urged the government to give financial support to independent and community-led publishers alongside their larger, corporate counterparts. Yet at no time in the period when the decision was made and communicated did the government engage with ICNN.
- 24. The exclusion of ICNN from the negotiations was unjustified. It is a reputable, known body representing an important part of the industry; it had served public notice of the crisis facing its members; its call for help had independent support and its leadership was available to be consulted.**

2. The allegations of Dominic Cummings

25. On 11 May 2022, Dominic Cummings, who in March/April 2020 had been Chief Adviser to then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, wrote in a Twitter exchange with the lawyer Adam Wagner:

‘also of course the newspapers negotiated direct bungs to themselves with him [Johnson], no officials on calls, then he told officials to send the £ -- dressed up as “covid relief” etc’.⁹

⁷ NMA publications also include local and regional papers but with rare exceptions they are not independent. The great majority are owned by three corporations: Reach, Newsquest and National World.

⁸ Heawood (op cit).

⁹ <https://twitter.com/Dominic2306/status/1524394482938093571>

26. A subsequent Cummings tweet shed light on who, by his account, had been talking to Johnson. On 18 May 2022 he wrote, in the context of an exchange about working from home (WFH):

'you can only understand the WFH farce if u understand this is an issue [Johnson] gets direct repeated calls from newspaper *proprietors* not just editors: "It's killing us, tell us what you want in return but you must get commuters back" since April 2020'¹⁰

27. According to Cummings, therefore, Johnson received 'direct repeated calls' from April 2020 onwards from both proprietors and editors (who were overwhelmingly likely, given their access, to have been of national newspapers and therefore NMA publications) and a consequence of these calls was 'direct bungs' from government to newspapers.

28. Such exploitation of privileged, direct access to the prime minister by editors and proprietors may help explain how the NMA's pleas for help came to receive such a rapid response. Less than two weeks passed between the NMA submission and government agreement – not merely agreement in principle but official approval of a specific brief.¹¹

29. The conclusion of the 11 May tweet '–then he told officials to send the £ -- dressed up as "covid relief" etc' – is an explicit assertion that

- a) Johnson personally made the decision to subsidise the NMA newspapers
- b) that he did so as a direct result of these calls from editors and proprietors, and
- c) that there was a deliberate intention to deceive the public about the nature of the subsidy.

30. The implication of (c) is that the true objective was to transfer public money to the newspaper groups and that the public information function of All In, All Together was a charade conceived after the subsidy had been agreed by the prime minister.

31. It should be noted here that Johnson is a former employee of two NMA member organisations and that he had been a highly-paid columnist for one of them, the Telegraph group, until only nine months before these events occurred.

32. Cummings further states that no Downing Street officials were listening when Johnson received these calls – a departure from normal civil service practice – with the consequence that no official record could have been kept. This in turn meant that accountability was constricted and it may be thought to lend weight to the allegation that there was an intention to deceive.

33. The Cummings allegations suggest that the All In, All Together scheme was conceived or at least accelerated through the exploitation by NMA members of privileged access to the prime minister, and in a manner that was not monitored and noted according to established practice. This raises the question of whether

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/Dominic2306/status/1526836612990177280> The name Johnson here was replaced by an emoji of a supermarket trolley, Cummings's Twitter shorthand for the then prime minister.

¹¹ <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/governments-all-together-campaign-went-pitch-page-seven-days/1713072>

there were legitimate grounds to justify such fast-tracking. The allegations also point to a deception or attempted deception of the public about the true purpose of the scheme by passing off a ‘bung’ as ‘Covid relief’.

3. Neglect of risks to democracy

34. Subsidies for news media are not unknown in the UK but they always give rise, or at least should give rise, to a duty to address attendant risks to democracy. When ministers give public money to organisations engaged in journalism they must be conscious of, and guard against, the risk that this acts as, or may be perceived to act as, a form of influence upon organisations and individuals whose job includes holding ministers to account in the interests of the public and of democracy. Subsidy must never be, or appear to be, a bribe or a reward for favourable news coverage.
35. The Johnson government publicly declared its awareness of the need for caution in these matters less than three months before lockdown began, in its formal response to the Cairncross Review into the future of journalism. Writing in January 2020, the then Secretary of State for DCMS, Nicky Morgan, rejected the Review’s recommendation to create a public body tasked with providing support for ‘public interest news’, explaining:

‘It is not for the government to define what qualifies as ‘public interest’ news. While any institute would be at arm’s length from government, we recognise concerns that *even an arm’s length relationship risks perceptions of inappropriate government interference with the press.*’¹² (Our italics)
36. All In, All Together was either a direct relationship with the press (government to NMA) or an arm’s length relationship with the press (government to media buyer to NMA). By the government’s own terms, ministers were therefore, at the least, risking the perception of inappropriate interference.
37. The risk was all the greater given that the agreement with the press included a reference to preserving national unity – an explicitly political objective. The 16 April statement from the NMA/Newsworks referred to ‘a three-month advertising partnership to help keep the public safe and *the nation united* throughout the Covid-19 pandemic’ (our italics).¹³
38. For the government to fund newspapers to encourage national unity was in itself questionable. For it to do so without giving the public a full account of what this entailed was wrong. This is because in the UK context the terms of any such agreement would have to be very carefully defined to ensure that national unity could not be confused with support for the government of the day.
39. No claim can be made that the government was absolved of its duty of caution on the grounds that the money was distributed across the whole of the press industry, because it was not. As we have seen, no effort was made to ensure the whole of the industry was

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism/government-response-to-the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism>

¹³ <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/news-and-opinion/all-in-all-together/>

included, even though ICNN, for example, was publicly calling for help. Other news publishers such as openDemocracy and Byline Times, which were critical of the government in this period, received no assistance.

40. Nor can it be argued that the NMA's membership is a representative sample of the population. In political terms – crucial to the issue of 'inappropriate interference – 'the NMA was and remains dominated by news publishers that strongly, even aggressively support the Conservative party and the government. Of the national dailies, five routinely support the Conservatives and two or at most three Labour. The imbalance is far greater when viewed in terms of combined readerships: for example, in late 2019, shortly before the first lockdown began, Conservative-supporting NMA papers had been selling more than six times as many print copies as Labour-supporting ones.¹⁴ Subsidy to the NMA thus entailed providing significantly disproportionate financial assistance to news organisations supporting the political party which alone decided on its distribution.
41. Further, the two government figures most closely involved with the scheme were Johnson and Gove, both of whom had previous careers in journalism working for NMA-member, Conservative-supporting newspapers and both of whom remained close to those organisations. Morgan acknowledged the importance of perceptions: these connections are bound to increase a perception that the All In, All Together arrangement was corrupt.
42. As for any suggestion that due care was not practical since the government was dealing with an emergency, that may also be ruled out. Where public money is concerned, due care is never optional. Further, emergencies should sharpen the awareness of the risks to democracy, since democracy is at its most vulnerable in times of crisis. In any case, bodies representing other parts of the news industry, such as ICNN, had offered to assist the government in reaching small and impartial news publishers, but they were ignored or rejected.
43. **All In, All Together was, or at least risked the perception of being, a partisan political press subsidy, something recognised as a hallmark of corrupt government. It was incumbent on ministers to ensure that the decision-making and allocation of money were transparently non-partisan. It should at least have sought the opinions of other parties in Parliament with a view to achieving this.**

4: Absence of a value-for-money test

44. It is a duty of government, when spending the public's money, to ensure first that, so far as possible, it will receive value for that money. Three forms of evidence exist to suggest that no effort was made in Spring 2020 to determine whether, insofar as the All In, All Together funding was intended as support for the press industry, it represented value for money.
45. The first form of evidence is negative: the government has never said it applied a value-for-money test.

¹⁴ <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/national-newspaper-abcs-full-figures-for-november-2019/>

46. The second form is inferential: the eight NMA member companies that received the overwhelming majority of the money cannot collectively be described, even in the context of the whole economy in March 2020, as conspicuously in need. They were News UK, Associated Newspapers, Telegraph Group, Reach, Newsquest, National World, Guardian Media Group and Independent Digital News and Media.
47. Four of these companies, News UK, Associated Newspapers, Telegraph Group and Independent Digital News and Media, are ultimately owned by billionaires who might have been presumed capable of sustaining their businesses unsupported through even a prolonged lockdown. Of the remainder, the Guardian group, Reach and Newsquest are corporations with annual turnover in excess of £100 million, Newsquest also being a subsidiary of the largest U.S. newspaper corporation, Gannett, which has annual revenues in excess of \$2 billion.
48. Giving public money to such companies, over and above what was made available to businesses generally, required public justification on financial grounds. In the highly unlikely event that there was some measure by which these ranked among the neediest companies in the UK, the government has not only failed to disclose that measure to the public but it has also failed to say that any such measurement was attempted.
49. The third form of evidence is the testimony of the well-placed Mr Cummings, whose description of the decision-making process allowed no place for a value-for-money test.
50. Had a value for money test been applied, there were a number of further questions for it to address, chief among them the basic ones of whether advertising through NMA members was likely to be as or more effective than advertising through other media, and whether campaigns of the proposed kind conveyed the messages most effectively.
51. Other considerations would have included how far it was justifiable to pay the NMA press to do the job that is already its principal function – informing the public – and whether it was wise to advertise in popular national newspapers when they are known to command low levels of public trust. These matters are addressed in more detail below at paragraphs 81 to 86.
- 52. The evidence strongly suggests that no serious value-for-money exercise took place, which constitutes a failure of process. Further, given that the principal beneficiaries included the government’s political supporters in the press, this failure can be said to justify perceptions of corruption.**

How the decision was implemented

1. The exclusion of small publishers persisted after launch

53. Despite attempts by ICNN to gain access to government support once the All In All Together scheme was being implemented, it continued to be excluded.

54. On 6 May 2020, following protests from ICNN and others, and a question in the House of Commons, John Whittingdale met ICNN director, Emma Meese, and Jonathan Heawood, director of the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF).¹⁵
55. According to Heawood, the minister stated that the Cabinet Office, not DCMS, was responsible for the scheme and that, since the Cabinet Office had assigned delivery to the media buying agency OmniGOV, Meese and Heawood should meet OmniGOV. They did so on 14 May 2020, to be told by OmniGOV that they should address themselves to the NMA and its marketing arm Newsworks – advice subsequently repeated by the Cabinet Office.
56. Thus the NMA, representing almost exclusively large corporate news publishers, was arbitrarily placed by government in a position of power over the entirely separate body ICNN, which represents news publishers that have chosen to be independent of the NMA. Only one ICNN member publication in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, The Wokingham Paper, was then selected to participate in All In, All Together.¹⁶
57. The situation was different in Scotland, where the Scottish Government appointed a different agency, Republic of Media, to buy advertising on its behalf, and where eight ICNN member publications were selected to participate in two rounds of public health advertising.¹⁷ In Wales, despite not having any direct public health advertising spend, the Welsh Government did provide two tranches of emergency grant revenue funding to independent titles which proved essential in those publications weathering the worse of the pandemic. Across the UK, the #saveindependentnews campaign, calling for an increased share of public health communications spending for local and independent media, received cross-party support. Many MPs on both sides of the House stood up in support of independent media.
- 58. All In, All Together was explicitly intended to support ‘the press industry’, yet with the knowledge of ministers an important part of that industry – independent, innovative, often serving communities that would otherwise be ‘news deserts’, and no less in need – was denied that support.**

2. Lack of financial transparency and accountability

59. In early 2022 Brian Cathcart, then professor of journalism at Kingston University London and one of the signatories of this submission, asked the Treasury what the total spend had been on All In, All Together to that date and how it had been distributed among publishers.¹⁸ He was referred to the Cabinet Office, which referred him to the department’s published monthly spend data.¹⁹
60. Since those data include no heading or category specific to All In, All Together they do not provide a basis to make the relevant calculations. It is possible, however, to make

¹⁵ Heawood (op. cit.) provides a fuller account of these meetings.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/03/08/government-refuses-to-reveal-taxpayer-cost-of-secret-covid-subsidy-for-its-wealthy-press-friends/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cabinet-office-spend-data>

an estimate of the total Cabinet Office spend on advertising and marketing channelled through the buying agency OmniGOV. That sum is considerably in excess of £200 million.

61. While it is not possible on this basis to assert that the emergency subsidy-cum-advertising arrangement launched in April 2020 ultimately cost the taxpayer more than £200 million, it can be stated that on the evidence cited by the Cabinet Office the spend could have approached or even exceeded that level.

62. Approached again by Cathcart, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury declined to provide more specific figures, while further approaches to Newsworks and OmniGOV were no more fruitful. A Freedom of Information request for the total spend, made to the Cabinet Office, produced the response that the Cabinet Office did not hold that information:

‘Our agreement is for the press partnership as a whole and not just for the ‘All In, All Together’ campaign. We therefore do not hold a cost breakdown for this campaign only.’²⁰

63. This attempt to create a distinction between All In, All Together and ‘the press partnership as a whole’ is both mischievous and disingenuous. Though some of the advertising content generated by the partnership may have carried different labels such as ‘Hands, Face, Space’ and ‘Stay Home’, it was manifestly all the fruit of one arrangement. The Cabinet Office language actually concedes this point: the words ‘our agreement is for the press partnership as a whole’ tell us that there was one agreement and one partnership: the agreement was the one announced in spring 2020, creating the partnership that would ‘deliver government communications’ in the pandemic.²¹

64. On 2 February 2022 Daisy Cooper MP tabled a written parliamentary question:

‘To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, if he will publish the (a) ten publishing companies that received the most from the public purse through the All In, All Together advertising campaign and (b) total sum each of those companies received.’²²

65. On 7 February 2022 she received the reply:

‘Cabinet Office publishes expenditure, including on public information campaigns, on a rolling monthly basis on GOV.UK as part of routine government transparency arrangements.’

66. This in effect the same as the evasive reply made to Cathcart. The reply also noted that a list of the companies participating in All In, All Together had been placed in the House of Commons library. This was merely a list of participating NMA member publications without sums of money attached.

²⁰ FOI Reference: FOI2022/01750

²¹ <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/news-and-opinion/all-in-all-together/> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/vat-scrapped-on-e-publications>

²² <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-02-02/117080>

67. It should be noted in passing that in October 2022 the then DCMS Secretary, Julia Lopez, stated in testimony to the House of Commons DCMS Select Committee in relation to what she called ‘the government’s comms spend’:

‘That spend was very substantial during the pandemic. I think it was to the tune of £35 million.’²³

68. Whether this was genuinely intended to suggest that the All In, All Together spend never exceeded its original three-month budget or whether the minister herself was unaware of the true total is a matter for the Inquiry to establish.

69. The real final figure must already be known or else be readily knowable. That the data may have been merged with other data in the published spending files, and that despite formal requests – including from a Member of Parliament – they were not refined and disclosed, invites the perception of deliberate concealment. Concealment of official payments to newspapers and their editors in Britain and Ireland – the so-called ‘secret funds’ – was a characteristic of the corrupt rule of George III.²⁴ It surely is not a practice to be revived.

70. Whether deliberately hidden or not, the funding for All In, All Together – both the total and how it was distributed – is entirely secret. In almost any context this would be unacceptable, since this was the public’s money; it is doubly so given the evident possibility that spending ultimately exceeded by a wide margin the government’s original, publicly-stated allowance and given the considerations of principle attached to subsidising journalism organisations that have a role in upholding democracy.

3. Retrospective re-characterisation of the project

71. After the All In, All Together scheme came under public scrutiny the government changed the way it characterised its arrangement with the NMA. For example, on 14 July 2020 Whittingdale told the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications:

‘The first thing to say is that this was a campaign to support the government’s messaging during the Covid crisis. *It was not about a need to prop up newspapers.* It did have the very beneficial effect of providing advertising revenue for newspapers which had seen a massive drop in sales.’²⁵ (Our italics)

72. This was not compatible with the words used by the government at the time the arrangement was agreed (see above). It was also at odds with Whittingdale’s own words, both in the Commons on 27 April 2020, when he said that the government had ‘taken a number of steps to provide specific support to news publishers’²⁶, and later in

²³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/10967/pdf/> Q302

²⁴ See A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press 1780-1850*, Home and Van Thal, London, 1949

²⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/708/pdf/> p14

²⁶ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-04-27/debates/939EC013-80D0-4298-90A0-7155970BDD6D/Covid-19LocalAndRegionalNewsOrganisations#contribution-FC754A68-DEF2-44BE-A480-CC80E320A99C>

the same 14 July select committee session, when he described the campaign as a 'support package'.²⁷

73. Since mid-2020 the government has tended to avoid reference to All In, All Together as anything other than an advertising operation or 'comms spend'. The language of April/May 2020, when ministers and the Treasury openly acknowledged that the scheme was intended to provide financial support for the press industry, was abandoned.
74. Further, from Whittingdale in July 2020 to Lopez in October 2022 there is a pattern of ministers and government emphasising 'reach' when discussing All In, All Together. NMA publications were chosen for subsidy, they say, because they were able to reach more people than, say, ICNN publications.
75. This again is an attempt to mask the explicit second purpose of the scheme '—support for the press industry'. Had 'reach' been a priority, after all, other media such as television and radio would have entered the frame. But reach was never mentioned by government in April 2020; indeed when Michael Gove spoke of 'supporting cherished local institutions' the clear implication was that reach was not a priority.
76. Coupled with the language used by the Cabinet Office in its FOI response to Cathcart (paragraph 62, above), which sought to bury All In, All Together spending in an unexplained 'press partnership as a whole', this must be read as further evidence of deception and concealment.
77. **Not only has the government refused to disclose how much public money was spent on All In, All Together, but it has also attempted to rewrite history by presenting it exclusively as an advertising arrangement and denying or glossing over the once-explicit second purpose of the scheme, which was to subsidise newspaper businesses.**

Safeguarding of public funds

78. We submit that All In, All Together also demands scrutiny under part 1 a) xxii) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, relating to the safeguarding of public funds. Much of the relevant detail for this is given under separate headings above, but in brief:
79. This was a project announced to the public as having two distinct purposes and with £35m allocated to it for the first three months, with a promise from the Treasury of close scrutiny. The scheme ran for three years, and
 - the decision-making and implementation were at best hurried and lacked process;
 - there is no evidence that any value-for-money exercise took place;
 - no interim or final spending totals have ever been issued, nor is there evidence of ongoing testing for value;

²⁷ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/708/pdf/> p15

- the limited available financial information suggests that as much as £200m may have been spent;
- the lion's share of the money went to very well-resourced organisations;
- there is ample evidence of ministers attempting to re-characterise the project's purposes retrospectively.

80. Brief mention is made above (paragraph 51) of two issues relating to safeguarding public funds that merit further exploration here.

81. Firstly, it should be asked how far it was justifiable for the government to pay public money to the press to do a job that is already its chief function and its highest calling: informing citizens of matters of importance to them. Indeed the press already received substantial benefits – including legal privileges, special access and subsidies such as zero-rating for VAT – on the basis that it would perform this public service.

82. During the pandemic these professional news organisations had access to daily ministerial news conferences as well as to the normal services of large government communications departments. Covid-19, what the government was doing about it and how their readers could best protect themselves were *news* – indeed together they represented one of the biggest news stories in decades.

83. Would not, and should not, NMA members have conveyed most of the essential messages to their readers without the need to spend money on a scheme such as All In, All Together? Insofar as NMA titles participated in unusual joint activity (which was only a part of the scheme), would it not have been possible for the government to work with them to achieve that, in the public interest, with reduced or no public spending?

84. The available evidence demonstrates how it was possible for the government to have Covid-related messages carried in the press, even at short notice, without recourse to public funds. Leaked WhatsApp messages from then Health Secretary Matt Hancock show him 'calling in a favour' from the editor of the London Evening Standard, which resulted in a front-page news article about vaccine availability which Hancock considered helpful.²⁸

85. Secondly, when considering whether All In, All Together represented prudent or justifiable use of public funds, the question of how far the public trusts these publications is relevant. If the public trust in a given publication or group of publications is weak, it is inevitably harder to justify spending public money advertising with them.

86. Independent data exist to show, for example, that public trust in popular national tabloids is very low – typically 10 per cent or fewer of respondents to opinion research surveys say that they trust such titles to report truthfully.²⁹ Upmarket national papers – the former broadsheets – tend to fare better in such studies, and regional and local

²⁸ <https://www.thenational.scot/news/23354832.matt-hancock-asked-george-osborne-favourable-front-page/>

This is emphatically not presented here as a model for ethical government/press relations.

²⁹ <https://www.radstats.org.uk/no118/Cathcart118.pdf>

papers better still, but even the highest-rated press outlets tend to be trusted less than broadcast news.

Support for businesses

87. We further submit that these matters are relevant to part 1 c) i) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, 'support for businesses'. Again, the evidence is largely presented above, but in summary:

- All In, All Together was explicitly intended to act as a support for businesses in the press industry;
- this support was in addition to what was made available to businesses in other industries;
- no effort was made to ensure it was distributed fairly across the industry;
- no explanation has been offered as to how it was determined that the press industry was in greater or more urgent need than other industries;
- there is no evidence that any value-for-money exercise took place;
- no interim or final spending totals have ever been issued, nor is there evidence of ongoing testing for value;
- the limited available financial information suggests that as much as £200m may have been spent;
- the lion's share of the money went to very well-resourced organisations;
- ministers have since attempted to re-characterise the project's purposes retrospectively.

Conclusion

88. The matters raised in this submission fall squarely within the Inquiry remit and we believe that it is a matter of great importance to the public, to the news media industry, to the profession of journalism and for the protection of democracy that the facts of what occurred should be established and made public and that any lessons that may be learned from the experience of All In, All Together are learned.

89. In particular we urge the inquiry to seek answers to the following questions:

- How much public money was spent in 2020/2022 on All In, All Together and/or on what the Treasury refers to as 'the press partnership as a whole', and which companies and publications received what sums?

- How, meaning by what process, was the decision to initiate the scheme made, and what role was played by direct personal contacts between NMA members and representatives and Johnson?
- What precautions were taken to ensure that the initiative was ethical and responsible, and that it represented good value for money?
- Have the facts about All In, All Together been communicated to the public in a manner that was accurate, honest and appropriately full?
- What records were kept of the decision-making?
- Were public funds safeguarded satisfactorily and in an appropriately transparent fashion throughout the period of the press partnership?
- Was this a fair and effective form of support for businesses at a time of crisis?

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