

NMA Response To Ofcom Consultation On Proposed Annual Plan 2020/2021

The News Media Association (NMA) is the voice of UK national, regional and local newspapers in all their print and digital forms. Our members publish around 1,000 news media titles, reaching almost 48 million adults each month. These publishers are by far the biggest investors in news in the UK, accounting for 58 per cent of the total spend on news provision. Their journalism— holding the powerful to account, informing and entertaining the public, and bringing together communities – are invaluable to the functioning of a healthy democracy and, as trusted sources of news and information, they are more important than ever.

The Government is currently considering interlocking areas of media policy of crucial importance to the future of the news media industry and the sustainability of the independent journalism produced by the UK’s local, regional and national news publishers. These include regulation of online platforms, regulation of the BBC, decriminalisation of the BBC licence fee and the wider issues raised by that in the lead up to the mid-term Charter review, regulation of online harms, regulation of online advertising, implementation of the recommendations of the Cairncross review, Furman review and the interim report of the Competitions and Markets Authority into online platforms and advertising, including codes to regulate platforms/publisher business relations and effective controls to prevent BBC adverse impact upon its commercial competitors. The Government has previously requested that Ofcom investigate and address relevant reviews’ recommendations on measures specifically to assist news publishers and sustain their journalism, as well as provide informed insight into policy areas.

It would be helpful if Ofcom’s proposed annual plan includes some supplementary detail on how it now proposes to conduct and co-ordinate its research, consultation and policy formulation to ensure that its recommendations and action across the now wider range of Government’s policy initiatives will be informed, coherent, fair and timely.

The next two years could be crucial for local news publishers’ successful transition to sustainable digital business models. They are awaiting active steps by Ofcom on avoidance of BBC adverse impact upon its commercial news publishers’ competitors, in follow up to the Cairncross review and Government’s request. All news publishers will be concerned at the creation of any new threats to their trusted independent journalism and the commercial revenues which support it, by Ofcom’s Public Service Broadcasting Review and Ofcom’s stated objective of strengthening public service broadcasting as a trusted source of news and current affairs.

Hence our suggestion for updating Ofcom’s proposed Annual Plan 2020/2021 so that it set out in more detail how it intends to tackle all the inter-related media policy issues within its remit, a timetable for all related consultations and ‘joined up’ recommendations. That would

provide some reassurance that there will be full co-ordinated consultations and timely discussion with the news publishing industry. It is crucial that Ofcom's work over 2020/2021 does not produce any adverse impact upon the industry, but helps promote the sustainability of existing local, regional and national news publishers as trusted sources of news and information. The NMA and its members are of course happy to meet and discuss in detail all relevant substantive policy areas.