

Local News Fund Steering Board - Terms of Reference

Background

The Local News Fund is a multiyear initiative launched as part of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Amplify: Local Media Action Plan. The Fund is worth £6 million for the financial year 2026 to 2027, with a minimum of £1 million and a maximum of £6 million allocated for 2027 to 2028.

The Fund's primary objective is to ensure the long-term provision of high-quality local news by supporting local media outlets to innovate toward a digital, financially sustainable future, thereby stemming title closures and journalist redundancies. This is in support of the Local Media Action Plan's overarching goal to empower communities through a thriving local media which highlights the issues that matter to them, helping to drive community wellbeing, social cohesion and local growth.

The majority of funding in the first year is to be distributed to **local news outlets** in England or Wales in print, online, radio or TV according to the outcomes of a centrally-managed competitive bidding process. Prospective bidders will need to meet specific qualifying criteria, central to which will be that the provision of local news is a primary purpose of the organisation. The rest of the Fund in its first year will be subject to a parallel **infrastructure funding** bidding process, open to any organisations in the UK which are developing the tools and initiatives from which the whole industry could benefit.

The second year of the Fund will apportion £1 million to tackling local news deserts, in collaboration with groups of key community stakeholders, to revive a local news presence in areas of need. Any additional funding up to £6 million will be distributed along the same lines as the first year of funding, with the split between local news outlet and infrastructure funding, grant thresholds and bidding and eligibility criteria refined if necessary based on lessons learned from the first year of funding.

The Fund is being administered by the Government Grants Managed Service (GGMS), which is a cost-effective, technology-enabled managed service run out of the Cabinet Office, and designed to support Government departments, arm's length bodies, and local authorities in the efficient management of grant funding.

To evaluate the Fund's overall impact on the local media landscape, an independent evaluation partner will be appointed to conduct a mixed-methods review. This will include a process evaluation, an impact evaluation and a value for money assessment, focusing on the Fund's ability to support digital transition and financial sustainability.

Purpose and role

The **overarching purpose** of the Local News Fund Steering Board is to play an advisory role in the decision-making process for distribution of funding under the Local News Fund, providing independent expertise and objective advice to DCMS. In convening this board, DCMS is seeking to benefit from a wide range of experience and understanding of the local media sector and related industries. This will help to ensure value for money in the distribution of funding, for the benefit of local media and communities. DCMS is also seeking

to ensure through the Board that a degree of independence is built into government decisions about funding of media outlets.

To meet this aim, the Board has a number of **key roles**:

- Reviewing and advising on the bidding and eligibility criteria for both local news outlet and infrastructure funding streams before the Fund officially opens to applicants.
- Providing a strategic assessment of all eligible bids, in parallel with a technical assessment conducted by GGMS. Collectively these two assessments will inform the final decision of DCMS with regard to grant awards. For DCMS, responsibility for approving grant awards has been delegated to the Fund's Senior Responsible Owner.
- Assisting in the development of the news deserts component of Year 2 funding, including in the identification of candidate geographical areas where local news provision is absent or insufficient, together with relevant community stakeholders, as well as supporting engagement with those stakeholders to help determine the most appropriate funding options.
- Board members are also expected to engage with the evaluation partner, likely through individual or group interviews, to share their perspectives on how the Fund operates and on its impact.

The Board will not play a role in the governance or administration of the Fund, which is a matter for DCMS and GGMS.

Steering Board Membership

The Steering Board comprises eight members, including two co-chairs. Janis Makarewich-Hall will attend as DCMS' Senior Responsible Owner for the Fund. The Board may agree to invite others to attend on an ad hoc basis to provide specialist knowledge if and when required:

- Jeremy Clifford (co-chair): Executive Media Consultant, Chrysalis Transformations - previously a JPI Media and Archant
- Polly Curtis (co-chair): Chief Executive at Demos - previous experience at the Guardian, Huffpost UK, Tortoise Media and PA Media
- George Adelman: Managing Director & Head of Philanthropic Partnerships, FT Strategies
- John Baron: editor and cofounder of the West Leeds Dispatch; Advisory Board Member of the Independent Community News Network
- Agnes Gulyas: Professor of Media and Communications, Canterbury Christ Church University
- Jaldeep Katwala: Director, Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, Birmingham City University - previously Non Executive Director of the Bristol Cable; Network Manager for the Public Interest News Foundation
- Owen Meredith: Managing Director of Public Policy, DMGT - previously CEO of the News Media Association
- Lorna Willis: CEO of Techskills - previously CEO at Archant Community Media

Meeting Frequency and Format

Meetings will take place on approximately a monthly basis, with a peak in activity expected during July-September 2026 and potentially also in February-March 2027. Meetings will be virtual or hybrid, given the geographical distribution of Board members. Meetings will be scheduled primarily on Friday mornings and lasting up to two hours.

It is important that the Board support rapid progress on the Fund, enabling grantees sufficient time in this financial year to plan and deliver their proposals while ensuring value for money and optimising benefits for the local media industry as a whole. Members are therefore encouraged to prioritise the Board over other commitments unless unavoidable.

Agendas and papers will be agreed with co-chairs in advance and circulated approximately one week ahead of each meeting. A note of all meetings will be circulated to members for comment before agreement.

Meeting papers, notes and Board discussions should be treated in strictest confidence and not shared with anyone outside the Board, DCMS or evaluation partner unless agreed by DCMS and the co-chairs.

DCMS will act as the secretariat for the Board, including with regard to the preparation of agendas and papers and note-taking. DCMS officials may participate in discussions but ultimate decisions from the board will be made by board members only. It is possible that staff from the evaluation partner may ask to attend and observe one or more meetings.

Quorum and voting

To ensure a diverse range of perspectives and robust governance, decisions and recommendations cannot be made unless at least five Board members are present, including at least one co-chair. Meetings with fewer than five members can still proceed and be minuted, but no decisions can be taken.

The Board's primary goal is to reach recommendations through consensus, leveraging collective industry expertise. Where a consensus cannot be reached on a specific bid, a formal vote can be called by the chairs. Each present Board member has one vote and decisions will be carried by a simple majority of those present. It is for the co-chairs to resolve disagreements in the event of a tied vote.

Transparency

Membership of the Steering Board will be published on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) with a brief description of the Board's purpose and role.

A list of grantees together with a brief summary of their funded proposals and the amount that they have received will also be published on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) after the bidding process has concluded.

In the event that DCMS chooses to fund or not fund a bidder contrary to the recommendation of the Board, details of this disagreement will not be published but will be recorded in the note of the meeting. Notes of all meetings will not be published but will be kept on file by DCMS.

Conflicts of interest

A conflict of interest arises if a Board member's private, financial, or professional interests could influence, or be perceived to influence, their independent judgment. Conflicts might include for example financial investment, employment, consultancy, or governance roles relating to a bidder, or holding an interest in a local news outlet which competes directly with a bidder for audience share. Perceived conflicts are also relevant, and arise in any situation where a reasonable outside observer may question a member's objectivity, even if no actual bias exists.

Members are expected to review meeting agendas and papers in advance of meetings, and declare to DCMS and the co-chairs any actual or perceived conflict regarding any Fund bids or other Board papers prior to meeting, or as soon as the conflict becomes apparent during a meeting. The conflicted member must recuse themselves from discussion of the relevant bid or paper and shall not participate in scoring that applicant. Conflicts will be recorded in the notes of meetings.

Remuneration

DCMS will pay each panel member £218 for each meeting they undertake as a panel member, as well as an hourly rate for preparation time for each. Claim forms and guidance on submitting claims will be circulated to members.