Regional Growth – Environment and Tourism Fund
(Round 2 – Streams 1, 2 and 3)

Process Evaluation

Program Design and Evaluation
Investment NSW

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Executive Summary

The Regional Growth – Environment and Tourism Fund (RGETF) is a $300 million allocation of Restart NSW funds intended to increase tourist visitation by investing in regional environment and tourism infrastructure.

This report is a process evaluation of Streams 1, 2 and 3 as part of Round 2 of the RGETF, covering program establishment, administration, governance, application and assessment processes as well as other aspects of program implementation. It was informed by a document review undertaken by the Program Design and Evaluation Team, in addition to staff and applicant surveys undertaken by an independent consultant.

This process evaluation has been completed in accordance with the *NSW Government Program Evaluation Guidelines (2016)* and supported by the RGETF Program Evaluation Plan that was endorsed by Executive Directors in the relevant Departments.

Conclusion

The evaluation found that Regional NSW's program planning was robust, which supported the delivery of the program. Processes for assessing fund applications were mostly effective. Clear information on eligibility and the application process was provided to potential applicants and Regional NSW had a comprehensive methodology for project assessments.

However, Regional NSW's planned data collection strategies did not result in clear data plans or responsibilities for outcomes measurement, although the program did have clear mechanisms in place to identify outcomes.

It is recommended data collection strategies be incorporated into funding deeds to better support the measurement of outcomes.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1 - Objectives

Program objectives were clear, consistent and in line with the *Restart NSW Fund Act 2011*.

Finding 2 - Planning

Program planning was robust.

Finding 3 – Application Process

Information on eligibility and the application process was effectively communicated, however, additional guidance may have better supported outcome reporting by applicants.

Finding 4 – Project Approvals

Department of Regional NSW assessment decisions were mostly transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria. Projects funded under

Round 2 of the RGETF were consistent with recommendations made by the Senior Officers Group (SOG) and Regional Independent Assessment Panel (RIAP). More public information on projects funded under the RGETF would increase transparency.

Recommendation 4.1

Information on funded projects should be made publicly available to increase the transparency of government expenditure.

Finding 5 – Identifying Measurable Outcomes

Business cases for funded projects outlined a range of outcomes strongly aligned to the program objective.

Recommendation 5.1

Include data collection strategies within business cases to measure the achievement of benefits and progress towards the program objective.

Recommendation 5.2

Training and support should be provided to applicants to identify and measure program outcomes.

Finding 6 – Assessing Outcomes

The program had mechanisms in place to identify outcomes, however this did not result in clear plans and responsibilities for outcomes measurement.

Recommendation 6.1

Incorporate data collection strategies into funding deeds and develop an internal outcome monitoring strategy that measures achievement of the program objective.

Finding 7 – Program Resourcing

The program was appropriately resourced to undertake its key activities.

Finding 8 – Governance Arrangements

Program governance arrangements were effective.

Recommendation 8.1

Clearer processes are required for consistently recording and handling conflicts of interest that arise during the course of the assessment process, particularly meetings.

Process Evaluation

About the Regional Growth – Environment and Tourism Fund

The Regional Growth – Environment and Tourism Fund (RGETF) is a $300 million allocation of Restart NSW funds intended to increase tourist visitation by investing in regional environment and tourism infrastructure. Funding is awarded for the construction of infrastructure via a competitive grants based program.

Commencing in March 2017, it is one of six grant programs distributing $2 billion in NSW Government funding for regional infrastructure and community programs under the Regional Growth Fund.

Round 2 of the RGETF incorporated five separate funding Streams. The first three are within scope of this evaluation.

- Stream 1 was designed to fund regionally iconic tourism projects to a minimum of $5 million and was open to local government, incorporated community groups as well as non-government organisations.
- Stream 2 was open exclusively to unsuccessful applicants who were unsuccessful at the EOI stage for Stream 1 but still met all eligibility checks for the program.
- Stream 3 was designed to fund nature-based projects and was open exclusively to NSW Government agencies as well as related entities.

Streams 1, 2 and 3 distributed approximately $113.1 million to 28 projects with project contracting undertaken by Infrastructure New South Wales (INSW) commencing in February 2019.

RGETF Round 2 administration occurred across three Machinery of Government (MoG) changes. The first, in early 2017, saw program administration transition from Infrastructure NSW (INSW) and the Department of Industry to INSW and the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC). The second, in mid-2019, saw program administration change to INSW and the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment. Program administration is now the responsibility of the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW).

A program logic for the RGETF can be viewed in Appendix 1.

About this Evaluation

A process evaluation is designed to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of program activities. A process evaluation confirms that implementation of the planned activities has occurred. Process evaluation may also offer timely insights that can improve program implementation where a process is identified not to be working.

This report is a process evaluation of Streams 1, 2 and 3 as part of the RGETF's second round of funding. Recommendations within this report are designed to inform future administration processes for grant programs administered by DRNSW.

The scope of this evaluation report includes multiple aspects of program planning, establishment and implementation up to the point of contracting grant recipients by funding deed. Assessments of infrastructure built under the program, both completed and ongoing, are out of scope for this report.

Evaluation Questions

The Investment NSW Program Design and Evaluation Team undertook this process evaluation in accordance with eight evaluation questions outlined in the RGETF Program Evaluation Plan.

The RGETF Program Evaluation Plan was developed with significant input from program managers involved in the delivery of RGETF. The RGETF Program Evaluation Plan was independently endorsed by the Executive Directors responsible for both the Program Design and Evaluation Team and the RGETF program.

Evaluation questions are the high-level questions that an evaluation is designed to answer. Having agreed evaluation questions in place clarifies what data and information is to be collected, analysed, and reported by the evaluation.

This process evaluation answers eight evaluation questions for the RGETF:

1. Did the program have clear and consistent objectives?
2. Was the program appropriately planned?
3. Was information about eligibility, the application process and project reporting requirements well communicated to the target audience?
4. Were project approval decisions transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria?
5. Did funded projects identify specific and measurable outcomes in their proposals?
6. Were mechanisms in place for outcome achievement to be assessed and appropriate KPIs identified and monitored?
7. Was the program adequately resourced to undertake its planned activities?
8. How effective were the program's governance arrangements?

The following section outlines the findings relevant to each of these evaluation questions based on the document review as well as the staff and applicant survey.

Evaluation Findings

1. Did the program have clear and consistent objectives?

Finding 1

Program objectives were clear, consistent and in line with the *Restart NSW Fund Act 2011*.

The program objective was clear in its intent

The program objective for the RGETF is to 'increase tourist visitation by investing in regional environment and tourism infrastructure, particularly focusing on fixed assets that will grow and further diversify NSW regional economies'.

The objective is well defined and broadly consistent with the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound) principles of outcome measurement. The objective links increased visitation to tourism infrastructure investment, can be measured using visitation data, is largely achievable, realistic against the timeframes and budget of the program and timebound with respect to deadlines in infrastructure funding deeds.

The program was created under the *Restart NSW Fund Act 2011* and its objective showed a clear link to the legislation

The program was funded from the Restart NSW Fund which is regulated by the *Restart NSW Fund Act 2011 No 32.* In the context of the RGETF, the purpose of the fund is to improve the state's economic growth and productivity by funding infrastructure projects that will improve the economic competitiveness of the state.

The program objective was communicated consistently across internal and external documentation

The RGETF's objective was communicated consistently across program guidelines, assessment methodology and other external documentation.

Investment in tourism related infrastructure may not result in economic diversification for all funded regions

Investment in regional environment and tourism infrastructure is likely to increase tourist visitation and enhance business opportunities and employment in the visitor sector.

Achieving these short-term outcomes would not in all instances support increased economic diversification in all regions. Increased investment in regional environment and tourism infrastructure may not represent a broadening of the economic base for some regions where tourism and tourism-related industries already represent a considerable share of the economy.

Program objectives were largely reported as being clear by staff and applicants

An applicant survey found that a large majority of applicants within each Stream either 'completely' or 'mostly' understood the Stream's objective. Interviews with program staff also highlighted a general perception that program objectives, as well as stream-specific objectives, were clear and consistent for both staff and potential applicants.

2. Was the program appropriately planned?

Finding 2

Program planning was robust.

Multiple NSW Government agencies were consulted in program design

The design of RGETF Round 2 involved planning and consultation with multiple other NSW Government agencies which supported the addition of several new initiatives. Documentation outlined input from Destination NSW, Department of Industry, and Infrastructure NSW during the program design stages.

Program guidelines were well planned and provided clear information on eligibility and assessment to applicants

Round 2 of the RGETF developed program guidelines for Streams 1 & 2, open to all organisations and separate guidelines for Stream 3, which was open to NSW Government agencies and NSW Government owned entities exclusively. Overall, both sets of program guidelines appear to be well-planned, communicating key information regarding initial eligibility, the application process and assessment criteria.

Across both sets of program guidelines, information on reporting requirements could have been better communicated to prospective grantees with limited guidance offered around the required frequency and the overall reporting of project outcome data.

Assessment criteria were closely aligned to the program objective but did not specifically address the program objective of diversifying regional economies

The program objective for RGETF Round 2 outlined four primary components designed to support growth in local visitor economies:

- investment in regional environment and tourism infrastructure
- increased tourist visitation
- growth in NSW regional economies
- diversification of NSW regional economies.

Assessment criteria (economic, strategic, affordability and deliverability) were well aligned with delivering on the program objective, except for economic diversification, which was not well incorporated in the program design.

Diversification of regional economies was consistently communicated as a program objective across both public and internal facing documentation. Minimal guidance was provided however as to how this component of the program objective might be assessed or how it could be demonstrated by applicants within their proposals.

An evaluation plan supporting the delivery of evaluation activities was created

The RGETF Program Evaluation Plan was developed to support future process, outcome and economic evaluations across Rounds 1 and 2 of the RGETF. The evaluation plan outlined key evaluation questions, and established an agreed program logic model and timeline for evaluation activities across each stream.

However, the evaluation plan could have been more effective if a framework for assessing project outcome data against its contribution to the program objective was included in the plan.

Governance arrangements between NSW Government agencies for Round 2 were clearly defined and probity managed

Governance arrangements for coordinating NSW Government agencies involved in Round 2 of the RGETF were outlined in both a dedicated Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and the program's assessment methodology. The MoU provides a joint understanding of program implementation and governance between INSW, NSW Treasury, Department of Industry, and DRNSW. Responsibilities were outlined for each respective agency, including contributions to project assessment criteria.

Probity protocols were developed that outlined standards of probity for different aspects of program implementation. An external probity officer was engaged to attend assessment panel meetings as well as provide iterative, ongoing advice on documentation recording the assessment process.

Program staff advised that the program was well planned

Program staff advised that the program was well planned. A variety of planning aspects were considered to have worked well:

- the two-step application process was well regarded and useful in filtering out weaker projects
- the assessment and eligibility criteria were considered robust and reasonable
- the use of a Benefit-Cost Ratio was appropriate and fit-for-purpose
- assessment panels were well run
- targeted streams funding different applicant cohorts was supported and seen as equitable and well targeted.

3. Was information about eligibility, the application process and project reporting requirements well communicated to the target audience?

Finding 3

Information on eligibility and the application process was effectively communicated, however, additional guidance may have better supported outcome reporting by applicants.

Applicants reported high levels of clarity on eligibility requirements and the application process

Most applicants who responded to the applicant survey were either very (68%) or somewhat satisfied (20%) with the information available on eligibility. Program documentation was described as clear, simple, thorough and well presented.

Applicants mostly indicated a clear understanding of the application process, with 40 percent indicating they 'completely understood' and 60 percent indicating they 'mostly understood'. Additionally, most applicants (89%) were 'very satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with support they received from program managers during the application process.

Program documentation effectively communicated information to applicants, except for reporting requirements

Organisations across all streams had access to program documentation designed to convey key information on eligibility, the application process and project reporting requirements. Public-facing examples of this documentation included:

- program guidelines
- factsheets
- FAQs
- webinars.

Program documentation for Streams 1, 2 and 3 was reviewed for its completeness in communicating eligibility, the application process and project reporting requirements. Information on eligibility requirements and the application process were mostly communicated effectively.

However, reporting requirements for project milestones and outcome data could have been better communicated in most documents, with information often limited or absent. The limited detail provided to applicants on the collection of data may adversely impact a future outcome evaluation and hamper assessments of whether the program has achieved its objective.

Correspondence with applicants for Streams 1 and 2 was timely and informed

As part of investigating the communication of eligibility, the application process and project reporting requirements, correspondence between applicants and Regional NSW was reviewed. Streams 1 and 2 had correspondence on general notifications and enquiries stored in dedicated folders while no records could be sourced for Stream 3.

A sample of correspondence was taken from the general notifications and enquiries folders for Streams 1 and 2 with the theme of each message and the frequency of this theme across all messages recorded.

Of sampled messages most were replied to in a timely manner and provided the information requested or were forwarded to the relevant party for actioning.

4. Were project approval decisions transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria?

Finding 4

DRNSW assessment decisions were mostly transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria. Projects funded under Round 2 of the RGETF were consistent with recommendations made by the program assessment panels. More public information on projects funded under the RGETF would increase transparency.

Assessment documentation had a high level of transparency and were in line with eligibility and assessment criteria

A Senior Officers Group (SOG) was convened for each Stream. The SOG prepared preliminary assessment information on EOI's and shortlisted detailed applications for the consideration of the Regional Independent Assessment Panel (RIAP) for Steams 1 and 2 and for the consideration of the CEO INSW for Stream 3.

The RIAP was comprised of permanent panel members and invited members with tourism expertise.

The assessment sheets developed by the SOG were comprehensive and transparent, containing scoring against economic, strategic, affordability and deliverability criteria as well as other analysis on project cost, co-contribution requirements and eligibility. Information provided on assessment sheets for RIAP consideration was aligned with the published assessment criteria.

DRNSW assessment within Stream 1 was mostly transparent and accorded with assessment criteria

Assessment and approval of Stream 1 projects was in line with the planned assessment methodology and was mostly transparently documented. Reasons for decisions and analysis supporting decisions were documented for most aspects of both the EOI and detailed application stages.

However, the methodology for calculating strategic scores, that were assigned based on alignment to the Visitor Economy Action Plan, Destination Management Plan and the Regional Economic Development Strategies at the detailed application assessment stage, was not clear based on available documentation. Similarly, the reasons and analysis supporting two of five aspects of assessment at the EOI stage were not clearly documented, specifically relating to assessment of affordability and deliverability.

The two-stage competitive process for Stream 1 involved the assessment of EOI applications and subsequent shortlisting, followed by the assessment of invited submissions. Of the 58 EOIs received, 22 were shortlisted and invited to submit detailed applications. Ten of these projects were awarded funding.

DRNSW assessment within Stream 2 was transparent and accorded with assessment criteria

Stream 2 project assessments and recommendations were documented and in line with the assessment methodology.

Stream 2 was a single stage assessment process. Fifty-nine applicants were invited to submit a detailed application, of these 25 submitted applications and 13 were awarded funding.

DRNSW assessment within Stream 3 was transparent and accorded with assessment criteria

Project approval decisions were in line with the prescribed assessment criteria. Application and assessment decisions were documented at each stage of the process and advice from other NSW Government agencies appropriately recorded.

Stream 3 consisted of a single stage assessment process that was open exclusively to NSW Government agencies and NSW Government owned entities. NSW Government owned agencies and owned entities were invited to submit a detailed application, with a total of seven submitted. Five applications were funded and two were unsuccessful.

Projects funded under Round 2 of the RGETF were consistent with recommendations made by the SOG and RIAP, however, INSW's assessment and recommendation process was not detailed in the assessment guidelines

In line with planned governance arrangements RIAP provided advice and funding recommendations to INSW for Streams 1 and 2, from which the INSW CEO made final funding recommendations. These were submitted to Cabinet's Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) for approval.

A RIAP panel was not convened for Stream 3 and SOG recommendations were made directly to INSW for recommendation by the INSW CEO.

Internal INSW processes are outside the scope of this evaluation. However, final RGETF funding allocations were in line with SOG and RIAP recommendations.

Program managers confirmed project approval decisions were transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria

Program managers confirmed project approval decisions were transparent and in line with eligibility and assessment criteria. Additionally, feedback on probity indicated broad consistency between assessment methodologies and public-facing information.

Applicants were offered feedback on unsuccessful applications and most understood why their projects were not funded

Applicants were offered the opportunity to receive feedback on their unsuccessful application. Of those that took up the offer, 70 percent 'completely understood' or 'mostly understood' why their project was not funded.

Approval decisions have not been made publicly available on the DRNSW website

At the time of the evaluation, a review of information online information has found that Round 2 RGETF projects have not been made publicly available. This reduces the transparency of the program to the public.

5. Did funded projects identify specific and measurable outcomes in their proposals?

Finding 5

Business cases for funded projects outlined a range of outcomes strongly aligned to the program objective.

Proposals at the business case stage were required to demonstrate clear outcomes for the local visitor economy

Successful applicants at the EOI stage were invited to complete a detailed application, including a business case outlining the anticipated outcomes of the project following completion. In line with the program objective, projects were required to demonstrate the expected project benefits to the local visitor economies of Regional NSW.

Applicants frequently included many of the following metrics when outlining project benefits:

- Change in visitor numbers following the project, overall or progressively over time.
- Change in aggregate accommodation bookings, occupancy rates and overnight stays.
- Change in average length of stay, stays per night and visitor satisfaction levels.
- Change in trading volumes, revenues and prices charged to customers.
- Long-term financial positions of the recipient organisation based on anticipated profitability and investment payback periods.
- Change in employment and salaries for the organisation following the project. In some cases, this was extended to the Local Government Area (LGA) using multiplier effects to estimate the impact on employment and wages in the area.

There was confusion in certain outcomes identified by applicants

In addition to the outcome indicators listed above, some applicants provided confusing or misaligned outcome indicators. Applicants provided project outcomes that were actually project outputs or attempted to measure non-program specific outcomes. In other instances, outcome data provided by applicants included broader estimates of impacts on salary and employment growth for broader LGAs. These broader outcomes are often difficult to forecast or measure and may have weak links to the activities of the project.

Applicants reported few problems in identifying project outcomes

Almost all applicants indicated that it was either somewhat (39%) or very easy (56%) to identify the intended outcomes of their project. Similarly, almost all applicants reported that identifying metrics for monitoring performance was somewhat (67%) or very easy (28%).

6. Were mechanisms in place for outcome achievement to be assessed and appropriate KPIs identified and monitored?

Finding 6

The program had mechanisms in place to identify outcomes, however this did not result in clear plans and responsibilities for outcomes measurement.

Responsibilities for measurement of outcome data were not assigned under the coordinating MoU

The *Memorandum of Understanding – Submission Based Restart NSW Funds March 2018* does not establish responsibility for monitoring achievement of project outcomes. Under this agreement, INSW was responsible for monitoring project outputs.

Business cases required applicants to nominate outcomes but not mechanisms to measure these in the future

Business case templates contained dedicated sections for applicants to nominate program outcomes but no sections within the template to propose measurable KPIs or outcome targets in line with the program objective. These templates did not contain sections for applicants to outline data collection methods to measure anticipated benefits on the local visitor economy. Furthermore, a requirement for sound data collection strategies regarding benefits was not communicated to applicants at the prospective stage.

Funding deeds did not detail specific obligations for applicants to measure outcomes

Funding deeds included provisions for payments to be withheld or suspended in the event of non-compliance. In addition, grantees were required to participate in any survey or feedback request by DRNSW during or after the life of the deed.

While acknowledging the requirement to participate in departmental surveys, applicants were not required to collect data, as part of the funding deed, that may inform an outcome evaluation. By better identifying the data requirements of an outcome evaluation and incorporating appropriate reporting requirements in funding deeds, outcomes could be more effectively monitored.

The program did not have an overarching framework to explain how it will achieve its objective. This shortcoming has been addressed through the development of an Outcome Evaluation Framework.

At commencement, the program did not have an overarching framework to provide evidence linking the delivery of project outcomes to the achievement of the program's objective. Program managers engaged the Program Design and Evaluation Team to develop a program evaluation plan at the inception of the program.

The developed plan includes an agreed program logic, illustrating the expected relationship between project inputs, outputs and outcomes, and sets out the methods for assessing and evaluating the program's achievements.

However, a shortcoming of the evaluation plan is its omission of a framework linking project outcomes with the high-level program objectives. This has since been mitigated with the development of the supplementary Outcome Evaluation Framework.

7. Was the program adequately resourced to undertake its planned activities?

Finding 7

The program was appropriately resourced to undertake its key activities.

Budget documentation itemised funds allocated for staff and operational expenses

Budget documentation for Round 2 itemised funds allocated for staff and operational expenses during the financial year 2018/19. The financial year 2018/19 did not account for the entirety of program implementation, covering the application and assessment processes for Stream 2 and only partially for Streams 1 and 3. Within the budget, staff and operational expenses were itemised by month across two separate sections, funds budgeted and actual expenditures.

Positive evaluation findings suggest that the program had sufficient resources to undertake its key activities

This process evaluation has found that the program was generally well planned, had comprehensive assessment processes, transparent processes and good governance. This suggests that the program had sufficient budget and human resources to undertake its planned activities.

Program staff reported appropriate program resourcing

Regional NSW had a team of four staff including a project manager, senior project officer and two project officers. Generally, program staff reported feeling that their work unit had been appropriately resourced to undertake their role. However, it was suggested by program managers that the assessment process and workflow could have been streamlined to improve assessment timeframes.

8. How effective were the program's governance arrangements?

Finding 8

Program governance arrangements were effective.

Broad oversight of Restart programs (including RGETF) was conducted through a Program Coordination Group

Under the coordinating MoU, a Program Coordination Group (PCG) chaired by INSW and comprising senior officers from primary NSW Government agencies, was a cross-government forum supporting objectives across several Restart NSW programs. These objectives included escalating and resolving issues, coordinating delivery for funded programs, and the monitoring and ongoing evaluation of programs.

Probity protocols provided a broad outline for program governance

Round 2 of the RGETF was guided by probity protocols. These protocols provided standards for several aspects of program governance including:

- Documenting the responsibilities of all involved in the assessment process prior to program commencement.
- Maintenance of records sufficient to enable independent audit and review, particularly regarding the assessment process.
- Project approvals and related decision-making within the assessment process being appropriately signed-off and certified.
- Meetings held by assessment panels keep consistent records noting conflict of interest declarations and decisions made.

The program was generally well-documented and in line with probity protocols

Overall, program documentation was comprehensive and prepared in line with the probity protocols detailed above:

- Roles were defined in a dedicated MoU at the agency level, and additional detail specific to the RGETF was included in respective assessment methodologies.
- Maintenance of records was thorough and supported a comprehensive document review by the Program Design and Evaluation Team.
- Project approvals and related decision-making were consistently and transparently documented.
- Meeting minutes and related documentation provided a clear record of project approvals.

An external probity advisor was engaged to provide oversight

A probity advisor was engaged to provide feedback on probity protocols and consult on matters of confidentiality relating to the distribution of documents. A final probity report was not available for review as part of this evaluation.

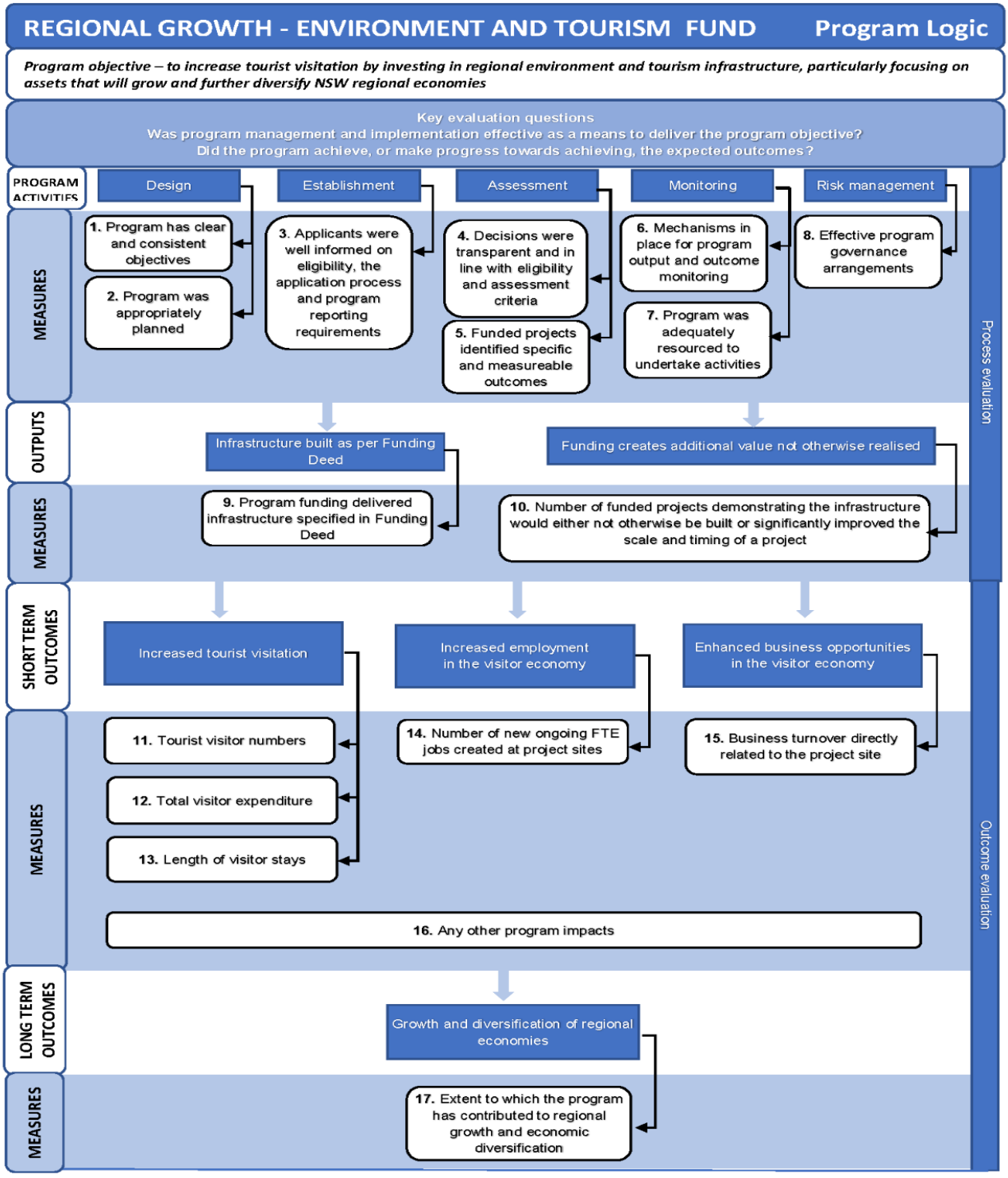
Assessment panel meetings were mostly in accordance with probity protocols although records of conflict of interest declarations were often unclear

The review of assessment panel meeting minutes found meetings were mostly run in accordance with probity protocols, however, records of conflict of interest declarations were often unclear. Of the meeting minutes examined, there was an inconsistent standard of recordkeeping relating to conflicts.

A risk register was created with evidence that risks are being managed on an ongoing basis

The RGETF risk register provided evidence risks were being managed on an ongoing basis through active controls and designated risk owners. Additionally, correspondence with program managers indicated the risk register was not a static document and would be modified as needed throughout program delivery.

Staff reported good internal governance

Program managers indicated that they believed probity and conflicts of interest had been well managed. They reported clear lines of accountability and were aware of their responsibilities. Generally, staff indicated they understood their role at the outset of the program and reported a good level of preparedness.

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