

Regional Events Acceleration Fund Round 1 Process Evaluation

Report on Findings

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Executive Summary

The Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW) designed and implemented the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF) to boost economic and social recovery of regional NSW, after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on event venues, workers and communities. Specifically, it aims to:

- boost the economic and social recovery of regional NSW by attracting major events to regional areas and supporting existing regional events to grow
- allow regional communities greater access to world-class sporting, musical and cultural events and entertainment close to home.

The NSW Government committed \$20 million to Round 1 of the program, which was launched on 23 February 2021. Applications closed on 17 December 2021 and all projects were initially to be delivered by June 2022. Over this period event planning and delivery were heavily impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, and in response DRNSW announced that events that were successful in receiving funding but forced to cancel were granted extensions to host their event up until 30 June 2023.

Many event organisers were required to modify their programs, and some were required to apply to the NSW Minister for Health to obtain a COVID -19 Public Health Order exemption to stage large events. In some instances, compliance with public health orders impacted the ability of event organisers to meet their projected visitation numbers. DRNSW staff worked closely with grantees to assist them individually with their applications through what is considered to be an unprecedented time in Australian history.

In November 2021 the NSW Government committed a further \$20 million to a second round of REAF under the \$200 million Regional Recovery Package, which was launched on 18 March 2022.

This Process Evaluation, conducted by the Regional Programs Evaluation Team, in the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW) assessed the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the process to design and implement the program.

Summary of findings

REAF injected a large volume of funding into regional events, which has been welcomed by the tourism and event management industry. DRNSW took care to ensure the program would complement, and not duplicate, existing event grant programs administered by other agencies through consultation during the design phase and inclusion of key stakeholders, such as Destination NSW, throughout its administration.

REAF generated significant interest, receiving a total of 164 applications requesting \$39,720,244 million, or almost twice the value of the fund. As at 4 March 2022, a total of \$19,566,126 was recommended for funding to 94 events across regional NSW. The data and analysis which underpins the evaluation findings in this report reflects four program implementation stages, 1) Program Establishment; 2) the Application Process; 3) Funding Deed Negotiation, and; 4) Project Implementation. Project variations that occur following the commitment of funds by DRNSW to REAF events will be outside the scope of this report, but will be considered as part of the future REAF Outcomes Evaluation.

The process to administer the program was generally well designed and managed, including the following attributes:

- The rolling nature of the fund was the most appropriate mechanism for event funding, as it allowed applicants to submit applications throughout the year and at a time that best suited their planning.
- The involvement of Destination NSW, the lead government agency for the New South Wales (NSW) tourism and major events sectors, demonstrated a high level of commitment to collaborate across government to achieve positive outcomes. By actively engaging Destination

NSW Networks throughout the state in the REAF application process, projects to be funded were well aligned with Destination Management Plans, and Destination NSW and the Destination Networks had oversight of the applications going forward for consideration.

- The level of information required in the application was commensurate to the level of funding that was on offer.
- The level of expertise on the Assessment Panel, including industry, accessibility and inclusion expertise. This led to robust discussions and a high level of due diligence in all funding decisions.
- The management of the program on the whole was adaptive to changes in circumstances, not least widespread COVID-19 lockdowns in NSW which threw the scheduling of many events into limbo. Adjustments were implemented by the program team as quickly as possible, but significant delays in outcome notification for applicants was a common pain point.
- The collaborative and hands-on approach shown by the Program Team to work with all stakeholders to ensure applications had the best chance possible to develop quality applications.

A total of 35 REAF events have been delivered across NSW as of April 2022. The completion reports submitted for seven of those events show that REAF appears to be effective in achieving its short-term outcomes of increased visitation and tourist spend.

Round 2 of REAF opened on 18 March 2022, with early insights from this evaluation factored into Round 2 program design. The following areas for improvement and key changes are noted in Table 1.

Table 1 | Summary of key changes in Round 2 of REAF

REAF Round 1 Interim findings	REAF Round 2 Key changes
Provide greater transparency of assessment processes by publishing merit assessment criteria in Guidelines.	Guidelines will include merit assessment criteria.
Closer adherence to publicly stated timelines, including through increased application clarity and building at least two additional weeks into the timeframe for outcome notification.	An additional four weeks added into the timeframe for outcome notification bringing the published timeframe to ‘approximately’ ten-weeks from the time the application is received.
Earlier and more proactive communication with applicants should there be a risk to delays in outcome notification.	A ‘case management’ approach will be adopted for Stream 2 applicants who seek grants of over \$500,000. They will be notified on receipt of their application that the 10-week application timeframe will not apply to them and will receive regular updates from the program team.
Greater clarity in the intent of the funding streams of the program.	Guidelines have been streamlined to provide better alignment between the program objective and the funding streams. ‘Additionality’ and ‘regional significance’ have been more clearly defined.
Greater emphasis on the importance of, and how to meet, accessibility and inclusion requirement	Guidelines include third funding stream specific to accessibility and inclusion. Application form requires A+I to be incorporated into the event management plan. Merit Assessment Criteria are publicly available and articulate specific requirements to be demonstrated under the Accessibility and Sustainability domain.

<p>Greater clarity regarding the requirement for applicant co-contributions.</p>	<p>Guidelines clearly state the minimum financial co-contribution required under Stream Two and Three (expressed as a percentage of the total grant amount). Guidelines are explicit that co-contributions must be cash and cannot be made in-kind and that evidence must be provided. Guidelines also stipulate that Stream One applicants can request funding of up to 25% of the total event cost.</p>
<p>Level of information required in the application was appropriate but delays were experienced in the assessment process when incomplete or insufficiently accurate information was provided by applicants.</p>	<p>Initial application reviews by program team implemented to assure all documentation is complete and information is accurately provided at submission. If initial reviews indicate applications are incomplete, applicants will be contacted and given 3 days to resubmit their application for assessment. This will improve the quality of applications being put forward to the panel and reduce double handling during the assessment process.</p>
<p>More nuanced scoring system and tighter definitions of key assessment criteria.</p>	<p>Merit Assessment scoring system has been expanded from 3 tiers to 5 tiers enabling more nuanced scoring by the Panel in the medium to high range. Discretionary ('other') factors have been simplified.</p>
<p>Improved documentation of funding decisions, including out-of-session decisions.</p>	<p>Assessment outcomes will be documented in new SmartyGrants form</p>

The Process Evaluation findings and recommendations are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 | Summary of findings and recommendations

Finding	Recommendation for future rounds of REAF	Recommendations for other programs
Evaluation Domain 1: Overview of program results		
Finding 1a. REAF will invest in 94 events, using almost its full allocation of funding	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 1b. The program struggled to meet its publicly stated 6-week turnaround, due largely to delays in outcome notification approval.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In recognition of standard approval timeframes, extend the advertised timeframe for assessment and notification of outcome to at least eight-weeks. • The Department should seek approval for specified turnaround times for outcome notification briefs from the Deputy Premier’s Office as part of the agreed governance arrangements of future rolling-rounds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The recommendation relating to confidential notification of outcome following Delegate approval is applicable to all time-sensitive programs.
Evaluation Domain 2: Program Design		
Finding 2a. REAF injected significant funding into regional events, and was carefully designed to complement existing programs offered by the NSW Government	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 2b. The parameters of the program were largely appropriate to achieve the intended outcome of increased visitation to regional NSW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide greater distinction between Stream One (existing event) and Stream Two (new event or event retention) in the guidelines. • Greater clarity for how the 5,000 visitation estimation can be substantiated should be provided in the Guidelines and/or FAQs • Greater clarity for what constitutes ‘regionally significant’ in the absence of 5,000 visitors, and how to substantiate it 	No recommendations

	should be in provided in the Guidelines and /or FAQs	
Finding 2c. The design of the program points to a primary focus of stimulus and economic outcomes, which is sometimes at odds with the assessment criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See recommendations listed under Evaluation Domain 5 	No recommendations
Evaluation Domain 3: Program Administration		
Finding 3a. Key planning documents supporting program administration were established early by the program team.	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 3b. The program team responded well to significant emerging issues, which could have been strengthened through increased planning around COVID-19 issues, timely communications and updating the risk register.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take a more dynamic approach to risk management by embedding regular, systematic risk reviews into weekly project management, and updating the risk register with emerging risks, updated risk assessments and mitigation strategies. Each week, the current major risks for the program should be highlighted among team members, and briefed up to the executive as required. Communications planning conducted at the start of the program should provide additional emphasis on communications with applicants who are waiting for their outcome. Where a communications risk is identified, the central communications team should be engaged to develop appropriate messages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All recommendations listed here for REAF are equally applicable to other programs, and is an area for improvement across the Regional Growth Program.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where publicly stated timelines are at risk of not being met, the Department should proactively communicate with applicants. 	
Finding 3c. The REAF program team to relied on manual systems which has inherent risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the absence of fit-for-purpose systems, ensure appropriate quality assurance and back up data is available 	No recommendations
Evaluation Domain 4: Application Process		
Finding 4a. The application process was fit for purpose, particularly the rolling nature which allowed applicants to access the funding opportunistically, and to iteratively draft their application for the best chance of success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program guidelines should clearly direct applicants to engage with DRNSW Business Development Managers in the first instance to understand their eligibility, before contacting the Destination Network. 	No recommendations
<p>Finding 4b. The level of information required in the application was appropriate, but delays were experienced in the assessment process when incomplete or insufficiently accurate information was provided by applicants</p> <p>Greater guidance is required for applicants to complete the data sheet.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement initial application reviews by program team to assure all documentation is complete and information is accurately provided at submission, allowing applicants to resubmit within 3 days if necessary. Where possible, streamline the data sheet and provide improved, tailored guidance for its completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data sheets are a common pain point across DRNSW grants programs. A review of the template should be conducted
Evaluation Domain 5: Assessment Process		
Finding 5a. The program team preliminary assessment was fit-for-purpose, but would be aided by a more nuanced scoring system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eligible applications should not progress to funding allocation in instances where the event takes place before the assessment is completed and approved. Applications should be assessed on a first-come, first-served basis. To assist in the 	No recommendations

	<p>workflow of this, applications should not be accepted any closer than 12 weeks to the event date.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify application scoring for merit assessment to enable more nuanced assessments. 	
<p>Finding 5b. The Assessment Panel had appropriate expertise, but panel meetings lacked efficiency due to the need to seek additional information and lack of clarity of some aspects of the guidelines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt greater gender diversity in the Assessment Panel. • The Program Team should revise the summary information template to ensure common points of follow up are included to reduce the need for delays in funding decisions. • Assessment Methodology should be strengthened, in particular the assessment of accessibility and inclusion planning. • The requirements for an Accessibility and Inclusion Plan should be clarified in the program guidelines and application form. • The Assessment Methodology could be strengthened by providing principles on when and how the Assessment Panel should apply discretionary criteria. • Ensure Guidelines have limited opportunity for differing interpretation, including through more detailed internal guidelines. • Program staff should refine processes for recording decisions in Assessment Panel Meeting Minutes and these processes should align with good practice identified in grants management and record keeping. • A central Decision Register should be adopted to improve accountability and transparency. 	<p>No recommendations</p>

<p>Finding 5c. The approval pathway is appropriate, though delays in outcome notification need to be reduced.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive communication with applicants during the application assessment process could be increased, particularly where there is risk of delay. • Future rounds of REAF should consider the use of disclaimers in the Guidelines to enable application status to be shared with NSW Government agencies and statutory bodies that partner in the delivery of a program. • Notification to applicants with ineligible applications should be expedited to occur immediately following endorsement by the decision maker 	<p>No recommendations</p>
<p>Evaluation Domain 6: Funding Deed</p>		
<p>Finding 6a. REAF Funding Deeds were generally executed efficiently, though greater standardisation of conditional letters of offer will reduce extraneous obligations being placed on grantees prior to contracting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program team to oversight the types of inclusions in conditional letters of offer reserving binding clauses for inclusion in the funding deed. 	<p>No recommendations</p>
<p>Finding 6b. DRNSW worked flexibly with grantees affected by COVID-19 lockdowns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs with a tight funding profile (less than 12 months to spend the funds and complete projects) should identify a risk mitigation strategy upfront in the event of program or project delays. • Projects that may be affected by COVID-19 should have specific risk mitigation strategies in place, as well as alternative delivery options listed in the funding deed, that require minimal re-negotiation to implement. 	<p>No recommendations</p>
<p>Evaluation Domain 7: Monitoring and Evaluation</p>		

Finding 7a. An appropriate Program Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (PMEP) is in place	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 7b. Completion reporting needs to be brought in line with the PMEP to improve outcome data capture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The completion report template should be updated to align with the outcomes listed in the new PMEP. • Completion reports should be reviewed by the relevant Program Team and the Evaluation Team to ensure data quality is sufficient. • Completion reporting workshops should be considered by Program Teams to provide additional guidance to grantees regarding the expected data capture within the report. 	Recommendations two and three under this finding are equally applicable across all RGF programs
Evaluation Domain 8: Early outcomes		
Finding 8a. Measurable benefits were consistent with the fund's objectives	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 8b. Organisers used REAF funding to boost event appeal	No recommendations	No recommendations
Finding 8c. Event planning was impacted by COVID-19 and many have been rescheduled to 2022 - 2023	No recommendations	No recommendations

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Introduction

Overview of REAF

The NSW Government committed \$20 million to the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF) Round 1 under the Regional Growth Fund's \$50 million Tourism and Events Package. The program supports projects in any of the 93 regional NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs), the Unincorporated Far West or Lord Howe Island with funding to support existing events in their locality and to increase their capacity to host new events.

The objective of REAF is to:

- boost the economic and social recovery of regional NSW by attracting major events to regional areas and supporting existing regional events to grow
- allow regional communities greater access to world-class sporting, musical and cultural events and entertainment close to home.

REAF supports and enhances major events hosted across regional NSW with a focus on supporting events such as major sporting fixtures that will increase visitation, expenditure and length of visitor stay in regional NSW.

Eligible expenditure items under REAF were primarily for temporary event infrastructure and to secure a major artist or performance group to increase the appeal of an event. A wide range of event types were eligible for funding and these supported the visitor economy in a variety of ways, including:

- Major sporting and lifestyle events
- Major food and beverage events
- Major music, art and culture festivals.

The \$20 million REAF was available through two funding streams:

Stream 1		Stream 2	
Event Operations and Infrastructure		Major Event Attraction and Enhancement	
Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum
\$50,000	\$200,000	\$100,000	No Maximum

REAF was launched on 23 February 2021 and applications will close on 17 December 2021, with all projects to be delivered by June 2023.¹

In November 2021 the NSW Government committed a further \$20 million to a second round of REAF under the \$200 million Regional Recovery Package, to be launched in 2022.

¹ The REAF Guidelines originally stipulated that events had to be delivered before 30 June 2022, however events impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns were granted extensions through to June 2023

Purpose of this Process Evaluation

The purpose of this Process Evaluation is to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the design and implementation of Round 1 of REAF. It covers three initial stages of program implementation, being program establishment, the application process and Funding Deed negotiation.

This Process Evaluation addresses Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) across eight Evaluation Domains, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 | Evaluation Domains

Overview of program results <i>What happened?</i>
Program design <i>Was the program design appropriate?</i>
Program administration <i>Was the program set up for success?</i>
Program application process <i>Was the application process fit-for-purpose?</i>
Application assessment process <i>Were applications assessed appropriately and transparently?</i>
Funding deed negotiation <i>Was the contracting process fit-for-purpose?</i>
Monitoring and evaluation <i>Can the program be effectively evaluated?</i>
Project delivery <i>Have projects been delivered as intended?</i>
Effectiveness <i>To what extent did the program achieve its short-term outcomes?</i>

A list of Key Evaluation Questions for each evaluation domain is provided at Appendix A.

Evaluation Approach

This Process Evaluation involves the following inputs:

1. Document review: REAF program materials and NSW Government strategy documents to understand previously identified issues and the Fund's alignment with NSW Government strategies (see Appendix A).
2. High level data analysis: Application and approval records to understand program processes and outputs, and to identify areas for improvement.
3. External stakeholder consultation: Surveys and interviews with a sample of applicants and grantees to understand key research themes applicable to REAF (see Appendices B to E).
4. Internal stakeholder consultation: Surveys and interviews with Regional Programs Business Unit staff, the Director responsible for Regional Growth Fund (RGF) programs, the Grants Management Office, the Regional Development Network Business Development Managers (BDMs), assessors and assessment panellists to understand the program's effectiveness and efficiency, identify opportunities for enhancement and to test emerging themes (see Appendices F to I).

Funding for Round 2 of REAF was committed while the Process Evaluation for Round 1 was being undertaken. In order to ensure the lessons learned from Round 1 were incorporated in Round 2, the Evaluation Team held 'insights sessions' with the Program Team and reviewed program documentation for Round 2.

External Stakeholder engagement for REAF was undertaken in late October 2021 while the program was still open. While a process evaluation is generally scheduled when 50 percent of all funding

deeds are in place, the REAF process evaluation commenced earlier so that findings could inform the development of REAF Round 2 Guidelines. Applicant and grantee surveys take place after the notification of assessment outcomes. Due to a delay in notifying REAF stakeholders of the outcome of their application a proportion of applicants and grantees had to be excluded from the survey sample which was unavoidable. The survey sample is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 | REAF Stakeholder survey

	Applicant	Grantee
Sample size	15	28
Responses	2	8
Population size October 2021	33	63

Due to the relatively low survey response rate (applicants 13.3 percent; and grantees 28 percent), and recognition that the sample size was not a statistically significant one, survey data was treated as qualitative input to the analysis of stakeholder experiences. Survey responses were also used to tailor and focus interviews with applicants and grantees and insights were drawn from observing feedback sessions with unsuccessful applicants.

This evaluation also highlights where the REAF program has implemented a particularly good practice that should be considered by other programs, as well as instances where recommendations for REAF are applicable to other Regional Growth Programs.

Evaluation findings

Evaluation Domain 1: Overview of program results

KEQ: *What happened?*

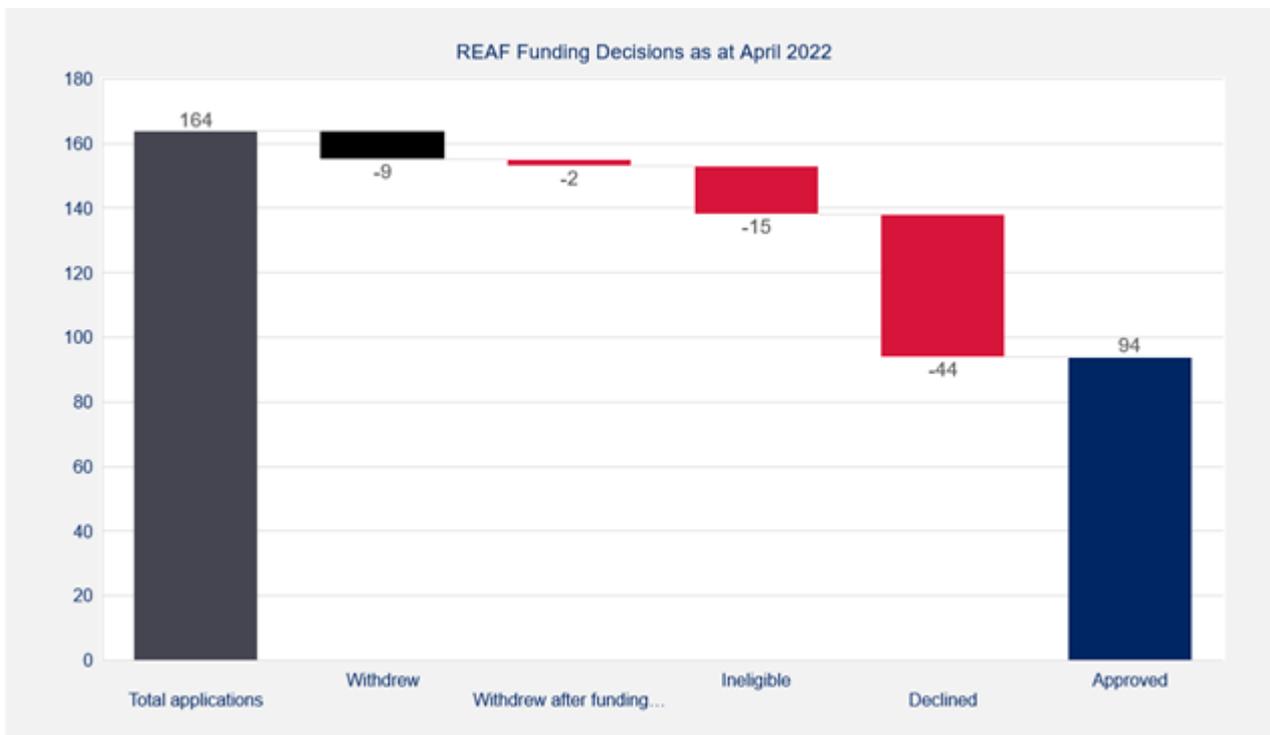
Finding 1a. REAF will invest in over 94 events, using almost its full allocation of funding.	
Finding 1b. The program struggled to meet its publicly stated 6-week turnaround, due in part to delays in outcome notification approval.	
Recommendations for future REAF Rounds	In recognition of standard approval timeframes, extend the advertised timeframe for assessment and notification of outcome to at least eight-weeks.
Considerations for other Programs	N/A

Finding 1a. REAF will invest in over 94 events, using almost its full allocation of funding

REAF opened for applications on 23 February 2021 and closed on 17 December 2021. REAF received 164 applications, totalling \$39.7 million in funding requests.

As shown in Figure 1, of 164 applications received, a total of 94 events have been approved for funding, totalling \$19.5 million.

Figure 1 | REAF Funding Decisions



The proportion of ineligible applications is acceptable at 9.1 per cent. This indicates that in general, the guidelines for the type of organisation and project that could apply were clear.

More projects were funded under Stream 1, though a greater volume of funding was spent through Stream 2

The Program Guidelines stipulate that applicants can apply for funding under Stream One, Stream Two, or both.

Figure Two illustrates that \$6.6 million, or less than one-third of the total funds were allocated to projects under Stream One, which had a maximum grant amount of \$200,000. With no cap on the maximum grant amount under Stream Two, and the total value awarded at \$13.3 million, the average grant amount was around 2.5 times the size of the average Stream One grant amount. Five grantees received funding through both Streams.

Figure 2 | Value and number of applications to REAF

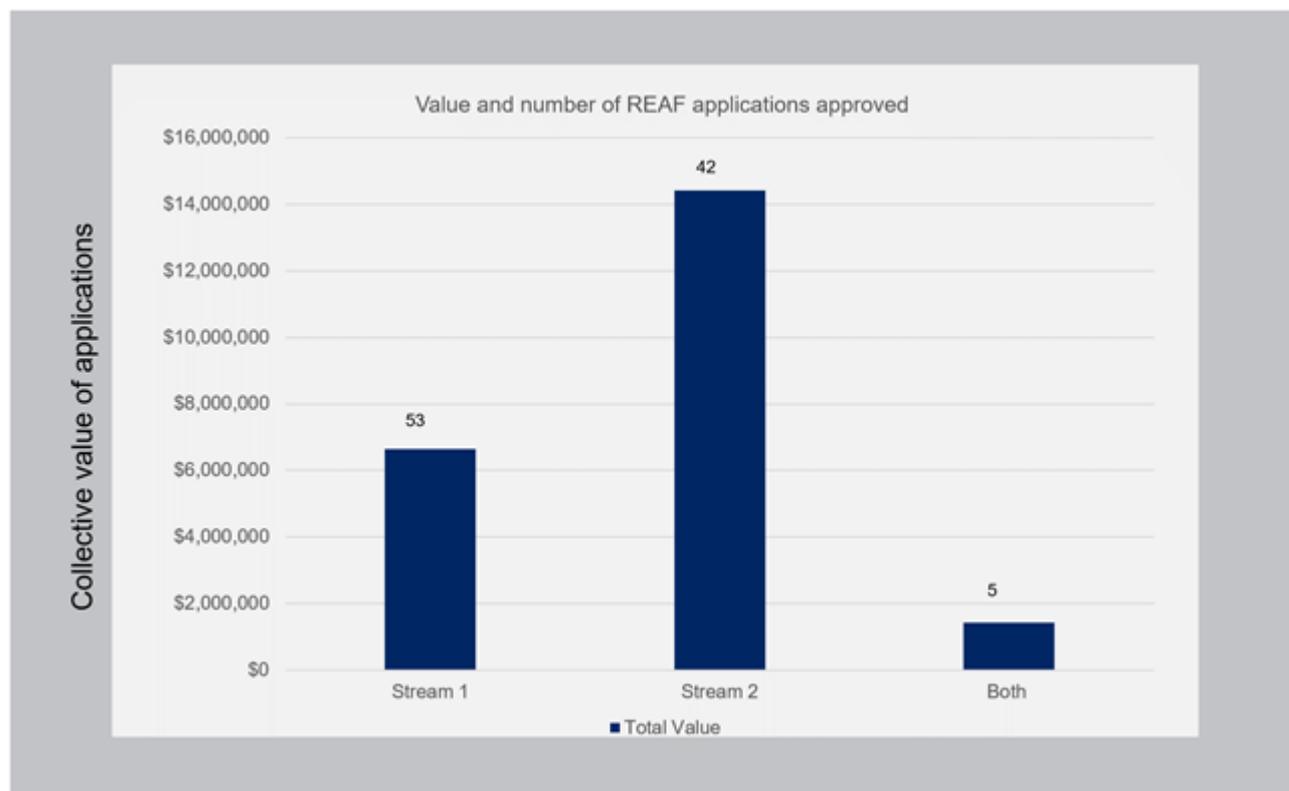


Figure 2 above shows the distribution of funds across REAF’s two funding streams and reveals that only a handful of applicants applied under both Stream One and Stream Two.

The distribution of funding was spread across more than a third of eligible NSW LGAs

All 93 regional NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs) were eligible to apply to REAF. Of these a total of 39 LGAs were successful in having projects funded.

As shown in Figure 3 overleaf, of the six Destination Networks, North Coast had the highest funding awarded and the lowest funding awarded was in Southern NSW.

Figure 3 | Geographic distribution of REAF funds by LGA and Destination Network

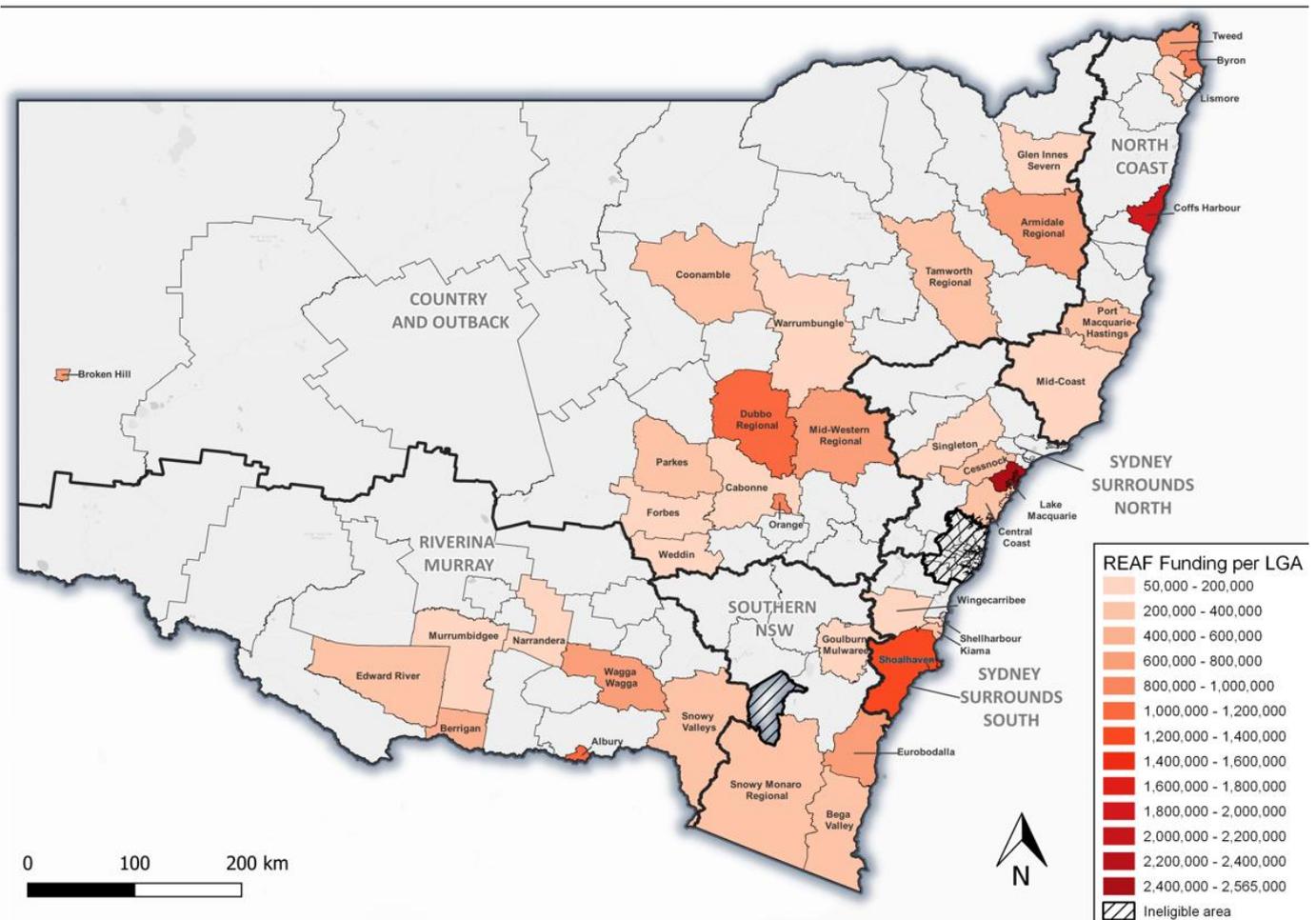
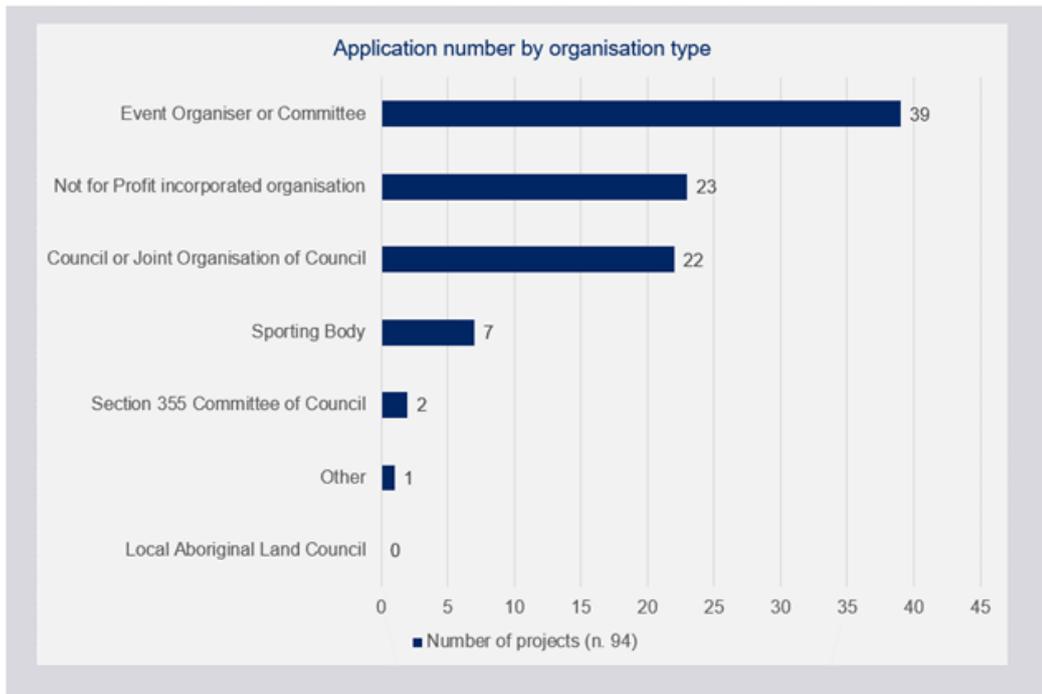


Figure 3 (previous page) shows the geographic distribution of REAF grants across NSW by Destination Network. The map shows that REAF grants had wide geographic distribution, funding 94 projects across 39 of the 93 eligible regional NSW LGAs

Most projects funded event organisers or Councils

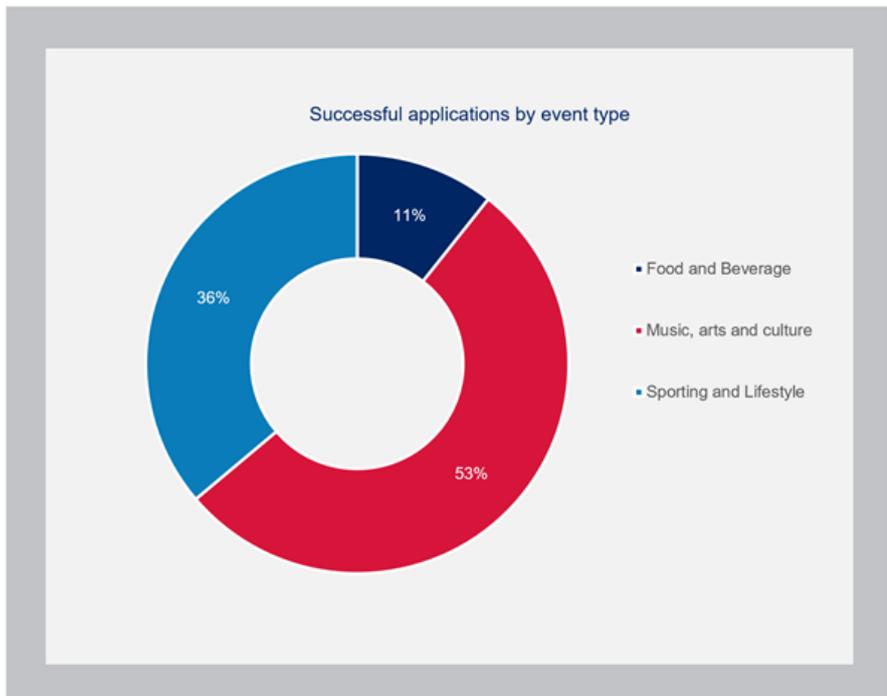
REAF was open for applications from a wide variety of organisations. As shown in Figure 4 below, event organisers and committees had the largest share of successful applications. Not-for-profit organisations were slightly more successful than councils.

Figure 4 | Applicant organisations to REAF



As shown in Figure 5 below, just over half of funded events were 'Music, arts and culture' and 'Sporting and lifestyle' events comprised around a third of the funded events.

Figure 5 | REAF event types



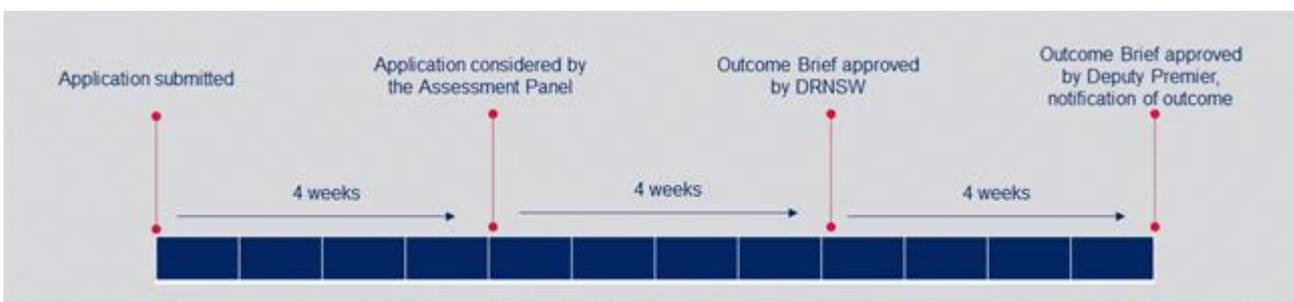
Finding 1b. The program struggled to meet its publicly stated 6-week turnaround, due largely to delays in outcome notification approval.

A key feature of REAF was that applications could be submitted at any time between February and December 2021, for assessment and notification of outcome within a six-week period. This was widely identified as a positive design element by applicants and industry stakeholders as it allowed multiple access points to the fund, and would enable events to make decisions quickly based on whether or not they were successful in their application.

However, DRNSW was generally not able to meet the six-week timeframe. On average, the time taken to notify an applicant of their outcome was 12 weeks. Of this, 4 weeks were spent by the program team getting the application ready to go to the Assessment Panel (which often required back-and-forth with the applicant for supplementary information). For some, this step was extended as the Assessment Panel deferred their decision to the next meeting as they sought further additional information, or ran out of time and needed to finalise assessments out of session. This is explored further in Evaluation Domain 5.

Applicants were notified of the outcome of the application after approximately 8 weeks after the Assessment panel made its recommendation. This comprised an average of four weeks for internal clearances and four weeks for Deputy Premier approval. This timeline is represented in Figure 6.

Figure 6 | Average timeframes for application assessment and outcome



For proponents, the benefits of an open and competitive, rolling grant program was the extended length of time they had to develop their applications and flexibility in submission date. This, in tandem with a commitment by DRNSW to provide applicants a response within 6 weeks of their application, was seen to be well tailored to the needs of an event grant program. However, not

meeting the 6-week timeframe caused some event organisers considerable stress. While there are some improvements that could streamline the application and assessment process, the realities of internal Departmental and Deputy Premier approval timeframes mean that a six-week timeframe is unlikely to be feasible. It is therefore recommended that at least two-weeks is added to the advertised turnaround time for Round 2 of REAF.

Recommendation: In recognition of standard approval timeframes, extend the advertised timeframe for assessment and notification of outcome to at least eight-weeks.

Recommendation: The Department should seek approval for specified turnaround times for outcome notification briefs from the Deputy Premier's Office as part of the agreed governance arrangements of future rolling-rounds.

Evaluation Domain 2: Program design

KEQ: Was the program design appropriate?

<p>Finding 2a. REAF injected significant funding into regional events and was carefully designed to complement existing programs offered by the NSW Government.</p> <p>Finding 2b. The parameters of the program were appropriate to achieve the intended outcome of increased visitation to regional NSW.</p>	
<p>Recommendations for future REAF Rounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide greater distinction between funding streams in the guidelines • Provide greater clarity for how the 5,000 visitation estimation can be substantiated in the Guidelines and/or FAQs • Provide greater clarity for what constitutes 'regionally significant' in the absence of 5,000 visitors, and how to substantiate in the Guidelines and /or FAQs
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<p>N/A</p>

Finding 2a. REAF injected significant funding into regional events, and was carefully designed to complement existing programs offered by the NSW Government.

Conceptualised as part of the \$2 billion Regional Growth Fund in late 2020, the policy need and broad intentions of the REAF are described by the Deputy Premier in his introductory message in the Program Guidelines² :

Major events not only showcase our regional places and communities, they contribute significantly to our regional economies by attracting more visitors to the region...

The cancellation of major events due to COVID-19 over the past year has impacted local event venues, workers and communities who rely on the influx of visitors and tourist dollars.

That is why the NSW Government has established the \$20 million REAF as part of the recharged 2 billion Regional Growth Fund to encourage new domestic and international events to our regions and support existing regional major events to grow bigger and better.

REAF is aligned with the NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2030³ , specifically Strategic Pillar 4 'Invest in world class events'. One of the Guiding Principles (Principle 5) of the NSW Visitor Economy Strategy is to foster greater cooperation and engagement with the industry to deliver the Vision and to take a whole of government approach to growing the visitor economy. REAF's design embedded collaboration, coordination across the industry and planning towards communication and clear messaging to industry from DRNSW and the Destination Networks.

The program is designed to complement existing NSW Government event funding programs, specifically the Destination NSW Regional Event Fund .

² <https://www.nsw.gov.au/regional-growth-fund/regional-events-acceleration-fund> (accessed 6 December 2021)

³ <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/about-us/strategies-and-plans/visitor-economy-strategy-2030> (accessed 6 December 2021)

“The first events that were funded through REAF were regional NRL games, which is fine because you had that perspective of boosting the local economy and bringing events to the local communities, which isn't necessarily one of our key priorities. It (REAF) fitted quite well...”

Destination NSW

Key NSW Government stakeholders were consulted on the program's design and involved throughout program delivery

When REAF was proposed, key stakeholders from Destination NSW and the NSW Office of Sport were involved in the program's design. A representative from the Office of the Secretary, DRNSW who is a special advisor on inclusive infrastructure and experience, was also consulted in the development of the program guidelines and assessment process.

The consultation process with REAF's key stakeholders took place in late November and December 2020 and continued through January 2021 with the announcement of the REAF on 23 February 2021.

The focus of consultations was fourfold; the development of the program's Guidelines; the establishment of a merit assessment process, the use of the NSW Destination Network in supporting applicants and promoting the program to industry and operationalising accessibility and inclusion objectives in the application process.

Application assessment criteria developed by Destination NSW for the Destination NSW Regional Event Fund⁴ were adopted by REAF. The implications of this aspect of the program's design are discussed under Finding 2(c).

Opportunities for continued involvement from key stakeholders to ensure complementarity between REAF and other NSW Government regional event funding programs were built into the program's design:

- Individual officials from NSW Office of Sport, Destination NSW and the Office of the Secretary DRNSW were represented on the assessment panel. The role of the Application Assessment Panel is examined in more detail under Domain 5: Application Assessment.
- Program Guidelines encouraged applicants to engage their local council tourism advisor and the Destination NSW Network representative for their region prior to applying. The role of the Destination Network in supporting the application process is examined in more detail under Domain 4: Program Application Process.
- Letters of support obtained by applicants from Destination NSW were used by the program team in ranking eligible applications against merit criteria. Where a proposed event proposed couldn't demonstrate any alignment to key visitor themes / experiences or projects listed in the relevant Destination Management Plan, it was unlikely to receive funding.
- Strategic communications planning enabled the program to swiftly establish a region-wide profile through utilising Destination NSW industry networks. The efficacy of the Destination Network to promote REAF is examined more fully under Evaluation Domain 3: Program Administration.

“The Destination Network had to be involved, which is fantastic and we often facilitated a lot of meetings between the program and the event organiser or the Council...So that was our role. Destination Network.”

“Our role really was that letter of support, alignment with the destination management plan and regional visitor economy priorities. So we provided a significant number of letters of support for REAF, and I think it was a great program. It's nice to see a program of this significance and size.”

Destination Network representative

⁴ <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/tourism/business-development-resources/funding-and-grants/regional-event> (accessed 6 December 2021)

REAF adds-value to existing event grant offerings

Key NSW Government funding programs that support events in regional locations are:

- Regional Sport Facility Fund administered by NSW Office of Sport⁵
- Destination NSW Regional Event Fund administered by Destination NSW⁶
- Local Government Authorities (LGA) Arts & Cultural Projects Funding administered by Create NSW⁷

In the design phase, DRNSW aimed to ensure the program would add value, and not duplicate these existing offers. The key points of differentiation between other NSW Regional Event Funds is that REAF offers:

1. Level of funding: larger amounts of funding for each project
2. Use of funding: funding for temporary infrastructure and/or securing a major artist/performer to boost visitation
3. Eligible applicants: inclusive of commercial operators
4. Rolling application fund: offered more entry points and assessment in tranches over nine months.

“...in the program design phase the program logic was pitched to Destination NSW. There was an intention to differentiate REAF from other regional event funding grants.”

DRNSW employee

REAF’s critical point of difference is the size of the grants awarded. Unprecedented funding amounts were available to applicants. REAF grants well exceed those available through existing NSW Government Grant programs that targeted regional NSW. Stakeholders commented that this enabled applicants to be ambitious about the scale of events proposed for funding and filled a gap in the funding landscape.

“I think the sums of money...are larger than most of the programs NSW has run previously and I think that's a big point of difference.”

“The ability to tap into funding it gives them, I guess, a bit more confidence to think about how they might be able to change their event to benefit the community more, or the visitor economy more. “

Destination Network representative

REAF consciously supported expenditure on items that were not eligible to be funded through existing regional event grant programs⁸. Through this specific program design element, REAF grants have been made available for temporary infrastructure and programming to stage events with the intention of allowing them to grow in scale, diversity and range of audiences.

DRNSW Regional Network BDMs were positive about the program’s alignment with overarching strategies and policies and recognised that there were clear economic stimulus levers offered

⁵ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/regional-sport-facility-fund>

⁶ <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/tourism/business-development-resources/funding-and-grants/regional-event>

⁷ <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/arts-and-cultural-funding-program/lga-multi-year/>

⁸ Assistance with the cost of marketing and promotion of an event as well as fixed capital expenditure were ineligible under the REAF, as this is the primary focus of other grant programs.

through the program. Event owners, sole traders, event management firms were eligible to apply for REAF, which was commended by BDMs.

“It did have a clear place... I thought it was a positive and complementary in that it did open the door for private sector operators where they could demonstrate a clear benefit...Unlike some funds that are only open to councils or NGOs.”

DRNSW Regional Development Network

The design of REAF also complemented the DRNSW’s Regional Tourism Activation Fund (RTAF) announced shortly after REAF, which focussed almost exclusively on funding permanent tourism infrastructure.

While there was an attempt to ensure an accessibility and inclusion lens in the program’s design, this didn’t translate well into the development of the Guidelines and the Application form

DRNSW’s advisor on accessibility and inclusion was consulted on the program’s design. However, the Guidelines did not explicitly provide guidance on how accessibility and inclusion would be assessed in applications⁹. The requirement for an accessibility and inclusion plan is tied to the event management plan component of the application form. While accessibility and inclusion was considered as a key feature of the Fund, this was not clearly articulated in publicly facing documentation¹⁰. The implications of this are examined in more detail under Domain 5: Application Assessment.

Finding 2b. The parameters of the program were appropriate to achieve the intended outcome of increased visitation to regional NSW

The diversity of eligible applicants, the eligible project types and costs, the timeframe to complete the event and the size of the grant in each stream was appropriate to create an economic stimulus in regional NSW.

The two streams of funding were sensible, though could have been clearer in their intent and the types of events that could be funded

The \$20 million REAF was available through two funding streams:

- Stream One: Event Operations and Infrastructure, applications can be made for \$50,000 and \$200,000 for existing regional events
- Stream Two: Major Event Attraction and Enhancement, applications can be made for a minimum of \$100,000 with no cap on the maximum grant application amount.

While the REAF Guidelines attempted to differentiate between eligible expenditure for existing events (Stream One) and new events (Stream Two), applicants could apply to the Fund for expenditure items under both Stream One and Stream Two in a single application. In total five applicants were successful via this approach. Notwithstanding, there were also applicants who were unclear about how to position their application and consequently when it was put to the Panel the application was reclassified under the opposite stream and subsequently re-assessed¹¹. Before this could happen, the applicant was required to provide additional information about their proposed event, pushing out the approvals timeframe. REAF Round Two has addressed this by removing the option to apply under both Stream One and Stream Two and providing greater clarity on each funding stream in the Guidelines.

⁹ The Guidelines cite improvements to an event’s accessibility infrastructure as an example of an eligible funding item under Stream 1

¹⁰ Unlike the Regional Tourism Activation Fund (RTAF) which specified in the Guidelines what was required by applicants.

¹¹ When this occurred the Probity Advisor was consulted and agreed to the reclassification of the application.

“Agree the guidelines were self-explanatory, particularly for Stream One. On Stream Two, it was a little less clear to applicants.”

DRNSW Regional Development Network

Applicants would benefit from greater clarity in the Program Guidelines to assist them target their application to funding Stream One or Stream Two.

Recommendation: Provide greater distinction between funding streams in the guidelines.

The definition of regionally significant was potentially a barrier to some worthwhile events

The Guidelines defined ‘regionally significant events’ as those capable of generating economic benefit through visitation of over 5,000 people. Applicants (whether Stream One or Stream Two) were required to provide ‘strong evidence’ (such as previous event ticket sales) to demonstrate that the proposed event would be able to attract 5,000 visitors.

For organisers hosting events in smaller, more remote locations, particularly where there is limited accommodation capacity not only couldn’t achieve the 5,000-visitor target, but they also struggled to meet the requirement to show evidence that their event could be assessed as ‘regionally significant’. Two key observations about the 5,000-visitor target were made by BDMs:

- New event proposals that had a lot of potential were not put forward for funding because organisers were deterred by the assessment criteria requiring them to demonstrate their event could attract over 5,000 people
- Well established and well-run events needed greater assistance from government in the current environment of COVID-19 related impacts which made it difficult to forecast visitation of over 5,000 people.

Thirty-five percent of applications which scored below the economic assessment threshold were none the less recommended for funding. In these cases the Assessment Panel could deem the event proposal ‘of significant importance to the local economy’. This was based on the applicants’ ability to successfully argue and evidence ‘regional significance’ and the views of BDMs and Destination NSW Network (DNN) representatives, which were important to verifying claims that events were regionally significant.

Unsuccessful applicants who didn’t meet the 5,000-visitor threshold (which underpinned the economic assessment) were subsequently provided feedback from the Program Team which included advice on the types of evidence applicants could provide to substantiate their claim that the event was regionally significant.

Recommendation: Greater clarity for how the 5,000 visitation estimation can be substantiated should be provided in the Guidelines and/or FAQs.

Recommendation: Greater clarity for what constitutes ‘regionally significant’ in the absence of 5,000 visitors, and how to substantiate it should be in provided in the Guidelines and /or FAQs.

The BCR assessment methodology did not always align well with REAFs aim of attracting large scale national and international events

The Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) is calculated through the use of a data sheet, prepared in conjunction with the Investment Appraisal Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The IAU methodology for calculating a BCR downgrades the benefit associated with a project if the applicant is not based in NSW. This means proponents based internationally or interstate will rarely receive a BCR higher than one.

This was highlighted with respect to a non-Australian sporting code being an eligible applicant to stage a major sporting event in Coffs Harbour, which estimated it would attract 10,500 people from over 50km away and generate 100 percent of its spending in NSW, however the applicant scored a very low BCR:

100% of the applicant ownership being international (NZ). This significantly reduces the BCR score and it should be noted that without this factor the BCR exceeds 1.0 - Applicant Assessment sheet SmartyGrants

While this methodology is appropriate for most NSW grant programs, it does not align with REAF's aim of attracting large scale national and international events to regional NSW. The model of assessment does not necessarily need to change, but the suitability assessors should clearly indicate the impact of foreign or interstate ownership on the BCR for the Assessment Panel, to support the Panel to exercise discretion to rankings based on the BCR.

Finding 2c. There was some tension between the design of the program, which points to a primary focus of stimulus and economic outcomes, and some of the assessment criteria

REAF is funded by the Regional Growth Fund, which aims to grow regional economies and enhance social outcomes. However, REAF was launched at a time when COVID-19, bushfires and floods had had a major impact on regional NSW. This led to a program objective focussing on economic and social stimulus, rather than long-term growth.

The objective of the Regional Events Acceleration Fund is to:

- *boost the economic and social recovery of regional NSW by attracting major events to regional areas and supporting existing regional events to grow*
- *allow regional communities greater access to world-class sporting, musical and cultural events and entertainment close to home.*

At the same time, the assessment criteria were modelled from those used by Destination NSW, which takes a different approach to event funding. Destination NSW, through its 'Event Development Fund', has three streams of funding that aim to match the level of maturity of an event. The fund aims to develop the capability and capacity of the events to run sustainably over the longer-term.

REAF, on the other hand, has been designed to provide a relatively large injection of funding to existing events to grow, or to attract new events. This is well aligned with an objective of economic stimulus and social recovery. However, when assessing the programs for strategic alignment, one of the criteria was whether the event had a long-term vision to benefit regional NSW over multiple years. This suggests a focus on longer-term, sustainable growth for which the program is not necessarily designed.

These dual objectives led to some tension points in the program design and assessment: between growth and stimulus, and economic and social outcomes. The primacy of each of these requires clarification to assist in objective assessment, as is explored further in Evaluation Domain 5.

Evaluation domain 3: Program administration

KEQ: Was the program set up for success?

<p>Finding 3a. Key planning documents supporting program administration were established early by the program team.</p> <p>Finding 3b. The program team responded well to significant emerging issues, which could have been strengthened through increased planning around COVID-19 issues, timely communications and updating the risk register.</p> <p>Finding 3c. The REAF program team to relied on manual systems which has inherent risk</p>	
<p>Recommendations for future REAF Rounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications planning conducted at the start of the program should provide additional emphasis on communications with applicants who are waiting for their outcome. • Where a communications risk is identified, the central communications team should be engaged to develop appropriate messages. • Where publicly stated timelines are at risk of not being met, the Department should proactively communicate with applicants • Take a more dynamic approach to risk management by embedding regular, systematic risk reviews into weekly project management, and updating the risk register with emerging risks, updated risk assessments and mitigation strategies. Each week, the current major risks for the program should be highlighted among team members, and briefed up to the executive as required. • In the absence of fit-for-purpose systems, ensure appropriate quality assurance and back up data is available
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All recommendations listed here for REAF are equally applicable to other programs, and is an area for improvement across the Regional Growth Fund. • The articulation of a COVID-19 Risk Management Framework for REAF and regional event grant programs

Finding 3a. Key planning documents supporting program administration were established early by the program team

Generally effective systems for project management and adequate resourcing for the program's administration were in place from the outset.

Key planning documents to support program administration were established early by the program team including:

- Probiity Plan & Conflict of interest register (Evaluation Domain 5: Application Assessment Process examines the efficacy of the Plan and Register)
- Communications Plan
- Risk Register
- Application Assessment Guidelines and a Forward Schedule of panel meetings

- Program Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (Evaluation domain 7: Application Assessment Process examines the efficacy of the PMEP)

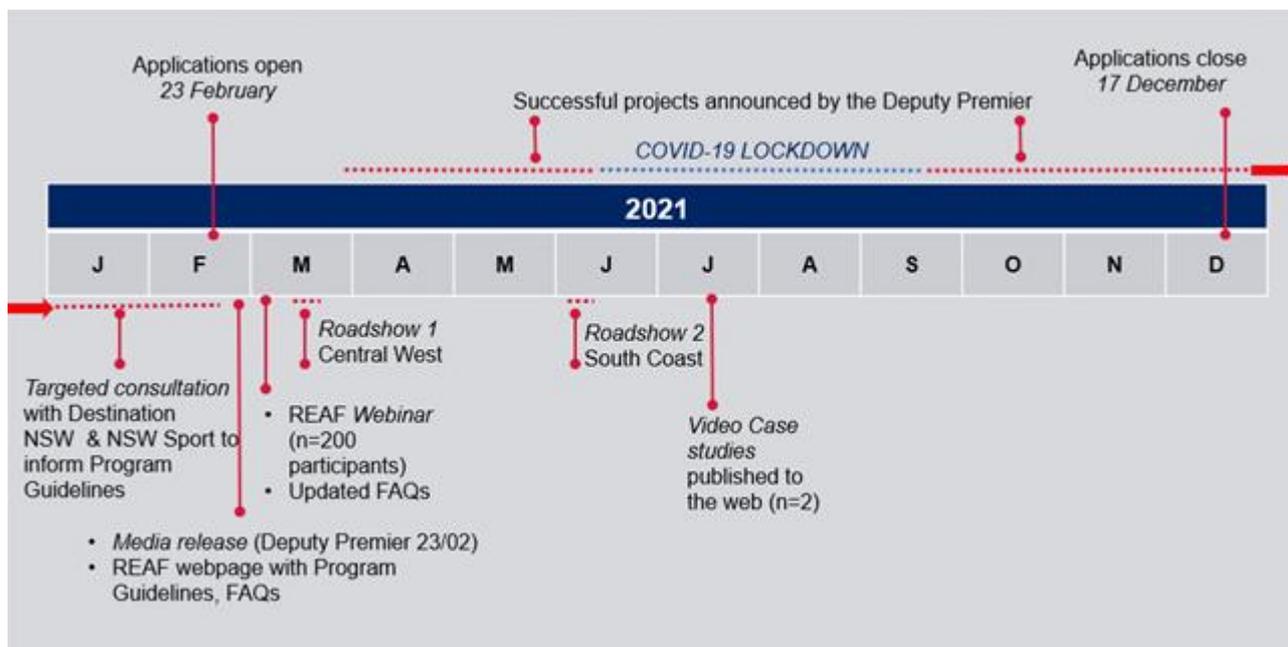
As an open and competitive rolling application fund, REAF applications were assessed monthly, tranche-by-tranche. This iterative assessment approach was resource intensive with the program team required to manage multiple panel assessment processes (nine meetings over ten months) and provide briefings on meeting outcomes to the Deputy Secretary and the Deputy Premier after each meeting.

The DRNSW REAF Program Team comprised two Grants Advisors and the Program Manager. While there were occasional surges in the receipt of applications particularly in June and July, overall the level of resourcing was appropriate for the program requirements.

The REAF Communications Plan was fit for purpose, but improvements could be strengthened through an end-of-program review by the Communications team and the Program team

REAF was well-promoted to the target audience through a variety of channels and communication with applicants was strong during the development of applications. Grant applicants reported no difficulties in finding out about REAF from a range of channels in a timely manner. The DNN representatives and BDMs valued the opportunity for face-to-face meetings between the REAF Program Manager and event owners, local governments and other relevant stakeholder groups during his promotional Roadshows to regional NSW. Key communications activities are outlined in Figure 7.

Figure 7 |Timeline of communications activities



Underpinning successful public awareness of REAF was a comprehensive and well targeted Communications Plan developed by the DRNSW Media and Communications Teams.

A robust and collaborative drafting and clearance process was used to develop the Communications plan. The Communications team used the program Guidelines to develop the Communications plan and input to the plan was obtained from specialist areas including the strategy team, the digital communications team and the media team. Senior managers reviewed the plan and then it was provided the Program Delivery team for their review. Once both areas approved the plan it was provided to the relevant directors for final endorsement. The collateral was then created and published in line with the key dates in the plan.

Clear strengths of the REAF Communications Plan were:

- REAF webinar, 3 March 2021
- Timely, instructional information for applicants; introduced a public face to the program

- A paid Facebook and LinkedIn campaign targeted people living in regional NSW
- Effective use of social media to provide widespread exposure through branded advertisements targeting existing networks
- Regional Roadshows, planned and costed for March, May, June, and September 2021
- Outreach provided timely opportunities for face-to-face meetings with stakeholders in the Central West and the South Coast
- Use of the Destination Network's communication channels (e-newsletter and socials)
- Targeted, push communications to existing subscribers; known potential grant applicants
- DRNSW e-newsletters
- Targeted, push communications to existing subscribers; known potential grant applicants

Areas where the Communications Plan could be improved:

- Specific communications plans could include strategies to raise awareness among the Destination Network immediately after the Guidelines are endorsed and throughout the program lifecycle.
- Website links to grant writing resources to assist applicants improve the quality of applications.
- Communications team to include Review or evaluation of the implementation of the REAF Communications Plan at the close of REAF Round One to determine the efficacy of the Communications Plan and activities. The objective of this is to support continuous program improvement and the provision of tailored communications with grantees that pro-actively advise stakeholders when delays are experienced and publicly communicated timeframes will not be met.

Finding 3b. The program team responded well to significant emerging issues, which could have been strengthened through increased planning around COVID-19 issues, timely communications and updating the risk register

Clear governance and probity frameworks were in place and clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for decision making, managing risk and conflicts of interest. Probity advice was sought appropriately during Assessment Panel Meetings.

The program had to employ significant adaptive management to respond to pronounced delivery context changes. REAF had to adapt to changing circumstances, specifically:

- COVID-19 travel restrictions and lockdowns which impacted heavily on the program and resulted in cancellation of events
- Political leadership change, specifically the appointment of a Deputy Premier to the NSW Parliament with ministerial responsibility for the program
- Departmental changes to the grants' approvals process that required additional communication to all applicants

Events were subject to changing advice from Government around COVID compliance (such as attendance numbers, social distancing, and food handling) which required the Program team to communicate more frequently than usual with some grantees on proposed changes.

Public facing information, including the Guidelines and FAQs were frequently updated in response to these changing circumstances, but further improvements could include:

- Proactive communications with 'holding lines' to stakeholders during times of pronounced uncertainty could be helpful to applicants who are waiting to hear an outcome.
- The articulation of a COVID-19 Risk Management Framework for REAF and regional event grant programs more broadly could assist programs to be better prepared. Such a strategy could specify grantee responsibilities (such as the provision of a COVID-19 risk plan) and a guide for grant program managers.

Recommendation: Where publicly stated timelines are at risk of not being met, the Department should proactively communicate with applicants

Recommendation: Where a communications risk is identified, the central communications team should be engaged to develop appropriate messages.

The REAF Program Risk register was in place but there was little evidence of identified and emerging risks being logged systematically and with any regularity.

More systematic and routine risk management could have improved project management.

Recommendation: Take a more dynamic approach to risk management by embedding regular, systematic risk reviews into weekly project management, and updating the risk register with emerging risks, updated risk assessments and mitigation strategies. Each week, the current major risks for the program should be highlighted among team members, and briefed up to the executive as required.

More systematic risk management could have improved the quality and consistency of communications with applicants, BDMs and DNN representatives particularly when stakeholders were waiting to hear the outcome of their applications. This is examined in more detail under Finding 1b. REAF Round 2 has adopted a specific process improvement focus to work closely more closely with successful Stream Two applicants through from when their applications are recommended for funding and notification of funding offer.

Recommendation: Communications planning conducted at the start of the program should provide additional emphasis on communications with applicants who are waiting for their outcome.

"We assumed because of the 6-8 week process and then experienced a delay of 8 weeks after that. We were in no-mans land in terms of offering employment and even though we had allowed time for blow-outs, the delays put pressure on us more than normal."

Grantee

Finding 3c. The REAF program team to relied on manual systems which has inherent risk

As a competitive, rolling application fund, tracking the total allocated funding and number of applications funded under the REAF budget over the nine-month period that the program was open was a manual and onerous task for the Program Team. A granular level of temporal detail was required by the Program team in regard to applications that were recommended for funding but not yet approved, or approved but not yet announced. The program team were also required to track events that had been rescheduled due to the impacts of COVID-19.

Applicant data captured in SmartyGrants and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet were used simultaneously by the Program Team. Excel was the central expenditure tracking tool, tailored for use for internal reporting and to inform the REAF Assessment Panel through a monthly Application Pipeline Summary. Manual updates to the status of applications in the Excel spreadsheet was a function performed by the program team.

Applications recommended for funding but not approved were captured in the spreadsheet bottom line to avoid over-allocating funding. Program Staff were conscious of the limits and risks of this approach to managing data about the program but had few alternatives.

There were no processes in place for internal budget management, which is a common feature for improvement across Regional Growth Fund programs.

The processing of applications within SmartyGrants and the availability of data for program reporting could be better supported by the implementation of a customer relationship management system (CRM) which provides a centralised, streamlined real-time data on the status and history of communications with applicants. Salesforce is one the applications used by the DRNSW but is currently only used by BDMs and it is not integrated with SmartyGrants.

Considerations:

- Where possible use a single ICT system to store critical information about applicants and the Department's engagement with applicants.
- Establish a data governance framework that enables data sharing at the appropriate level of authorisation to enable information to be exchanged between key stakeholders.

Recommendation: In the absence of fit-for-purpose systems, ensure appropriate quality assurance and back up data is available.

Evaluation domain 4: Program Application Process

KEQ: Was the application process fit-for-purpose?

Finding 4a. The application process was fit for purpose, particularly the rolling nature which allowed applicants to access the funding opportunistically, and to iteratively draft their application for the best chance of success.

Finding 4b. The level of information required in the application was appropriate, but greater guidance is required for the data sheet.

Recommendations for future REAF Rounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The program guidelines should clearly direct applicants to engage with DRNSW Business Development Managers in the first instance to understand their eligibility, before contacting the Destination Network.• Where possible, streamline the data sheet and provide improved, tailored guidance for its completion.
Considerations for other Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data sheets are a common pain point across DRNSW grants programs. A review of the template should be conducted.

Finding 4a. The application process was fit for purpose, particularly the rolling nature which allowed applicants to access the funding opportunistically, and to iteratively draft their application for the best chance of success.

The rolling application and assessment process, whereby applications could be submitted at any time between February and December 2021, and were to be assessed within six weeks, was an appropriate method to meet the needs of applicants. Due to the nature of events, which have a specific date for delivery and complex logistical planning required in the lead up to the date, flexibility in the application date and a fast turnaround for the outcome is necessary for event organisers to confidently move ahead with their plans. This feature was point of difference of REAF, compared to other event grant programs in NSW, as was noted favourably by stakeholders within the Department, Destination Networks and applicants.

“I think one of the things that's been good about it, is that it's been open. It's open for a considerable amount of time, so it so it means that people who are thinking about events you know or projects can actually just apply as they need to, rather than...programs where you have to sort of submit in rounds and you know it doesn't always suit the applicant” – DRNSW employee

“Funding programs that allow people to work something up, find new partnerships, seek the right advice about the event or the right approvals before jumping into an application. So yeah, that was a really, really positive thing” – Destination Network representative

“The timing was really good in the sense that it offered a uniqueness in that advertised a 6 week turn around time from application through to knowing, so I think that's very different to a lot of programs and that was seen as a huge benefit.” – Destination Network representative

As described in Evaluation Domain 1, the six-week timeframe for notification was rarely met. One of the reasons for this is a lack of clarity in the application requirements requiring back-and-forth with applications, which is explored in Finding 4b. However, the intent of the application process is appropriate.

The inclusion of Destination Network representatives in the application process is appropriate, though their exact role should be clarified going forward, with BDMs playing a stronger and earlier role in some regions.

The Destination NSW Grant Design and Administration team were consulted early in the program design to devise a method for directing applicants to access their local Destination Network for guidance with their application. It was agreed that applicants would be required to obtain a letter of support from their Destination Network to accompany their application. In the Program Guidelines, applicants were guided to use the Destination NSW website to obtain Destination Management Plans and were 'encouraged to meet with their local council and their regional representative from Destination NSW's Destination Network prior to submitting an application'.

While this was positive to ensure that the Destination Networks were closely involved in the program and therefore able to maximise opportunities for alignment with their own work, it introduced some ambiguity for applicants regarding where to submit questions about the application process. Some Destination Network staff felt they were required to field basic enquiries about the program, and to provide guidance on eligibility. As the program is administered by DRNSW, it is not appropriate for another agency to play this role. Additionally, some Destination Network representatives did not feel adequately supported by the DRNSW BDMs.

This is reflective of the fact that the role of DRNSW Regional Development Network staff in assisting applicants was variable across the state. In some locations, DRNSW BDMs were closely involved in the program and provided detailed assistance to applicants on eligibility and application processes. In one location in particular, this included holding a teleconference with each applicant and the Destination Network representative to guide the initial development of the application. In other regions though, the level of engagement with the program by DRNSW BDMs was much less. This seems to have been influenced by two key factors:

- The level of importance that tourism plays in the economy of the region
- The level of capacity of DRNSW BDMs to provide support to applicants.

It is suggested that DRNSW BDMs, regardless of location, be the first port of call for applicants in order to field general enquiries and questions of eligibility. Once it is clear that an applicant is eligible, they should be referred to their local Destination Network representative to receive more detailed advice about the alignment of their project with the relevant Destination Management Plan. This is an important element of ensuring equity of access to the fund, as differing levels of BDM support may translate to differing success rates for applicants.

It should be noted that the Regional Job Creation Fund was open for applications at the same time as REAF, which required high levels of BDM support. BDM capacity is limited to provide support across every DRNSW program, as well as conducting the other elements of their role.

Recommendation: The program guidelines should clearly direct applicants to engage with DRNSW Business Development Managers in the first instance to understand their eligibility, before contacting the Destination Network.

Recommendation: The program guidelines should clearly direct applicants to engage with DRNSW Business Development Managers in the first instance to understand their eligibility, before contacting the Destination Network.

Changes to the Destination Network structure will take effect from 1 July 2022 and include the new Destination Network for Central West NSW. This is a positive development for REAF as better resourcing of DNN representatives with local knowledge of the area would likely improve outcomes for applicants in the Central West.

Finding 4b. The level of information required in the application was appropriate, but greater guidance is required for the data sheet

In general, the application form was well-structured, enabling applicants to fill it in relatively easily, particularly those with prior grants experience. Applicants and DRNSW stakeholders alike felt the form was well-designed, and the supporting materials such as the program guidelines (notwithstanding comments made in Evaluation Domain 2), Frequently Asked Questions and assistance from the program team themselves contributed to a positive experience. In fact, the level

of direct access to the program team, and the Program Manager in particular, to provide insightful guidance and clarification for applications was raised consistently as a strength of the program.

“Great program team to work with and they think about the end user in the end-to-end process and how it’s all provided up front.” – Grants Management Office stakeholder

“Of all the grants/funds we have applied for this process was one of, if not the best we have come across.” Successful applicant

“I do many applications and this process was very clear and easy to follow...a good experience”. Successful applicant

“Brilliant support from the team at DRNSW. Very well put together process with good supporting material and personal support as required.” Successful applicant

The level of information required to complete the application was necessary to enable effective assessment. While some applicants felt this was onerous they understood the rationale for the requirement. Unsuccessful applicants were, understandably, more frustrated by the effort required to complete the applications.

“Just a bit onerous. Some of the extent of some of the things that we have to do for the application took a lot of time.” – Successful grantee

“It was lot of detailed questions, felt like a uni exam. But it was relative to the amount of funding we were asking for.” –Grantee

The main frustration for applicants in completing their application was the data sheet. This frustration was expressed equally with both successful and unsuccessful applicants reflecting that this process was difficult. The data sheet is a critical input to the economic assessment, and requires estimates of visitation. These estimates were particularly challenging to generate for new events, and for events that did not include pre ticket sales.

“The only complicated bit of the whole process was the financial spread sheet...” - Successful applicant

Aware that the data sheet was a common pain point for applicants, the program team developed an instructional video for applicants. However, this was found to only be marginally useful, due in part to the fact that the data sheet is to be filled in differently depending on which REAF Stream you are applying to, but this was not made clear until nearly halfway through the video.

Recommendation: Where possible, streamline the data sheet and provide improved, tailored guidance for its completion.

Consideration for other programs: Data sheets are a common pain point across DRNSW grants programs. A review of the template should be conducted.

Evaluation domain 5: Application Assessment Process: KEQ: Were applications assessed appropriately and transparently?

Finding 5a. The preliminary program team assessment was fit-for-purpose, but would be aided by a more nuanced scoring system.

Finding 5b. The Assessment Panel had appropriate expertise, but panel meetings lacked efficiency due to the need to seek additional information and lack of clarity of some aspects of the guidelines.

Finding 5c. The approval pathway is appropriate, though delays in outcome notification need to be reduced.

Recommendations for future REAF Rounds

- Eligible applications should not progress to funding allocation in instances where the event takes place before the application assessment is completed and approved.
- Applications should be assessed on a first-come, first-served basis. To assist in the workflow of this, applications should not be accepted any closer than 12 weeks to the event date.
- Modify application scoring for merit assessment to enable more nuanced assessments.
- Adopt greater gender diversity in the Assessment Panel.
- The Program Team should revise the summary information template to ensure common points of follow up are included, to reduce the need for delays in funding decisions.
- Assessment Methodology should be strengthened in particular the assessment of accessibility and inclusion planning.
- The requirements for an Accessibility and Inclusion Plan should be clarified in the program guidelines and application form.
- The Assessment Methodology could be strengthened by providing principles on when and how the Assessment Panel apply discretionary criteria.
- Ensure Guidelines have limited opportunity for differing interpretation, including through more detailed internal guidelines.
- Program staff should adopt clearer processes for recording decisions in Assessment Panel Meeting Minutes and these processes should comply with the NSW Government's Standard on Records Management.
- A central Decision Register should be adopted to improve accountability and transparency.
- Proactive communication with applicants during the application assessment process could be increased, particularly where there is risk of delay.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the use of disclaimers in the Guidelines to enable application status to be shared with NSW agencies that partner in the delivery of the Fund • Notification to applicants with ineligible applications should be expedited to occur immediately following endorsement by the assessment panel
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

Applications to REAF were assessed by the Assessment Panel every 4 – 6 weeks and more frequently when a surge of applications were received. A total of 11 Panels were convened on 16 April, 7 May, 9 June, 7 July, 14 July, 4 August, 8 September, 28 September, 11 November and 14 December 2021 with the final panel held on 4 February 2022. The fund closed on 17 December 2021.

To provide program transparency and assurance, an independent probity advisor was contracted by DRNSW to endorse the REAF Application Assessment Methodology. The advisor also oversighted conflict of interest declarations and provided advice on a case-by-case basis during panel deliberations.

Conflicts of interest were actively managed at the commencement of each Assessment Panel meeting and a Conflicts of Interest Register was used at the program level to track the receipt of signed declarations from Panel members and applicants, specifically in the following scenarios:

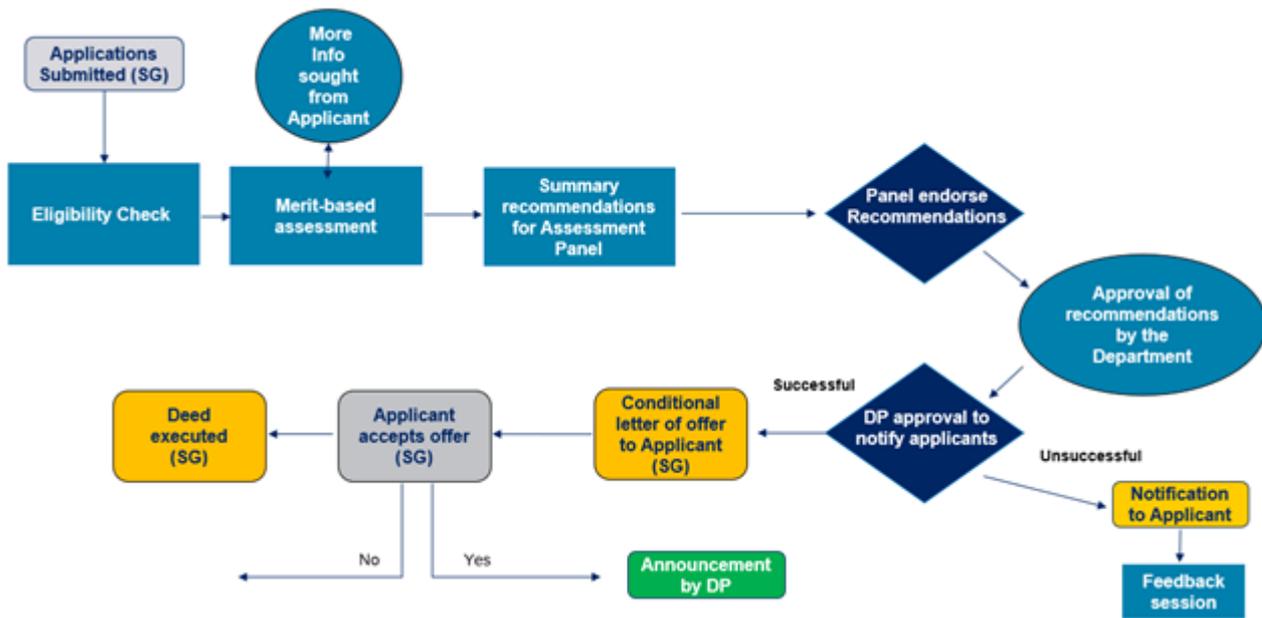
- Where an applicant had previously received funding from Destination NSW funding programs, the panel member declared a non-significant/ non-pecuniary interest in relation to their professional relationship with the applicants
- Where an applicant had met with the Deputy Premier prior to having their application assessed by the Panel, potential conflicts of interest were managed through a probity declaration by the applicant.

Panel meeting Minutes illustrate the efficacy of having a Probity Advisor embedded in the process and how this played out in regard to managing conflict of interest declarations in meetings. Where a Panel members’ interest was assessed as ‘business as usual’ the panel member was able to participate in decision-making. If not, they abstained from voting.

Finding 5a. The preliminary program team assessment was fit-for-purpose, but would be aided by a more nuanced scoring system.

The application process for REAF was open and competitive. A standard process in line with DRNSW grants administration practices was adopted for REAF which is described in Figure 8.

Figure 1 | REAF Assessment process



The Program Team worked with applicants to ensure all required information was provided.

Some applications received for assessment were incomplete. When the program team identified that an application was likely to be eligible, but data provided by the applicant was incomplete, the program team contacted the applicant by email to explain precisely the information sought to assess their application. This included where applicants had not included letters of support in their application from the Destination Network or Tourism Advisor in the Local Council. A fair and consistent process was established to manage how additional information was sought from applicants.

“We give applicants three working days to provide more information on their application, we don’t give them the chance to re-write their answers. We are clear on the boundaries.”

DRNSW employee

Regional Development Network and Destination Networks provided advice on applications which provided local knowledge

Geography played a part in the method of assessing individual applications. Where Tourism was identified as an Engine Industry in the Regional Economic Development Strategy, BDMs were utilised as subject matter experts in the application assessment process. In advance of an Assessment Panel meeting, the program team contacted the relevant BDM by email and asked a set of standard questions about applications, as per Figure 9.

Figure 2 | BDM input template

Awareness	Issues	Follow-up
Were you aware of this event and this application for funding?	Do you have any concerns about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the ability of this organisation to deliver this event? the event itself? the event timing? 	Would you like to schedule a meeting with the DRNSW Tourism Team to discuss this event, or any concerns you might have?

The BDM had the opportunity to raise an issue about the application in advance of a Panel meeting through an open offer to engage in a discussion with the Program Manager. Local knowledge

provided by the BDM could help to substantiate the applicants' claim of the regional significance of an event. This process generally kept BDMs informed of which applications were eligible and being work-flowed through to assessment by the Panel.

BDMs generally felt that the Program Team was responsive to their input to the assessment of applications.

"...but before the Panel assesses they (the BDMs) will get a call from the Program Manager to seek their input... I think it does get factored into the assessment "

"The application template captures the information well. It's good to be consulted on the project."

DRNSW Regional Development Network

Systems and processes were in place to effectively workflow the assessment of applications, which was adapted according to event urgency

The flow of applications from receipt, through eligibility checking to the preparation of summary sheets for assessment by the Panel was adeptly managed by the program team. Each officer alternated in reviewing applications. This meant that potentially subjective views were moderated through co-scoring and co-checking for completeness via the comparative views of two individuals. The Program Manager authorised the summary sheets before they were dispatched to the Assessment Panel, no less than five days before the meeting.

To ensure the timely processing of applications, ten days before an Assessment panel meeting a tranche of applications were closed off for assessment by the Panel. Applications received after that point were placed on the Agenda for assessment at the subsequent meeting.

Timelines for the provision of assessment documents to panel members were consistently met and panel members were satisfied with the quality of the documentation provided by the Program Team, reporting they felt 'well prepared' for each meeting.

For the most part, the sequence in which applications were received (through SmartyGrants) determined the order in which they were presented to the panel for decision-making. This is a fair and defensible practice. The Guidelines indicate:

Funding reservations may be considered where decisions are required for time-sensitive events.

On one occasion a decision was made to assess applications based on event time-sensitivity. This meant that applications for events scheduled sooner had their application assessed ahead of those that had been submitted earlier but for an event later in the year. While this was an appropriate decision at the time to ensure events could receive funding in a timely manner, and was within the guidelines, a fairer approach would be to assess applications based on order of submission. This is particularly the case with a rolling fund, as each successful application reduces the remaining funds.

Separately, on two occasions, events were funded after the event had been delivered. While applications were received prior to the event, this occurred in one instance because the panel sought additional information, during which time the event was delivered, and in one instance due to delays in getting the application to the Panel.

Although the assessment of these applications complied with the program guidelines, events funded retrospectively cannot meet Section 15 of the DRNSW funding deed which requires organisers of events to provide evidence that they have acknowledged NSW Government Funding in advertising and signage. This applies to the acquittal of grants of over \$100,000.

Again, while within the guidelines, this is not necessarily the intent of the fund, and caused some concern among some Panel members.

"...[panel member] noted [their] concerns that the event had been held and whether the funding would change the event outcomes....is there any value in providing public money to the event?"

Assessment Panel Minutes, (Meeting of 9 June 2021)

Recommendation: Eligible applications should not progress to funding allocation in instances where the event takes place before the application assessment is completed and approved..

In future rounds, the sequencing of assessment should be based on a first-come, first-served basis, and applications should close well in advance of the event date.

Recommendation: Applications should be assessed on a first-come, first-served basis. To assist in the workflow of this, applications should not be accepted any closer than 12 weeks to the event date.

A more nuanced scoring system would assist in differentiating between applications.

Key to a successful competitive application process is the ability of the Assessment Panel to differentiate between each application and score them fairly and consistently based on objective, merit-based criteria. This process relies on the quality of information available to the Panel to effectively assess each application and the scoring methodology adopted to achieve a defensible ranking of each application.

The evaluation found that the information provided to the Panel was summarised well and of a high quality but the rating system (low, moderate, high) didn't support the assessment process appropriately because it did not provide sufficient gradation between applications in the moderate band which made it difficult to clearly distinguish the higher performing event proposals.

Table 5 illustrates the rating system used to score either the event (economic, strategic alignment, affordability) or the applicant's ability to deliver the event. A low rating afforded a low score and a high rating a high score. The scores for four categories generated a subtotal which was then deemed above or below the threshold score for that criterion in the merit assessment process.

Table 5 | REAF Assessment categories and weightings

Economic	Strategic Alignment	Deliverability	Affordability
Threshold score (75%)	Threshold score (75%)	Threshold score (75%)	Threshold score (75%)
15	34	23	12

"...(we) took away some learnings from this (round of the) program and plan to make the scoring a bit broader to allow the scoring framework to be well fleshed out. It helps to know who are the top performers versus something that's a bit more average" – DRNSW employee

This has been addressed in part through a modified scoring system for merit assessment in the REAF Round Two and the introduction of an assessment rubric tool for use by the Assessment Panel. This tool is intended to clearly indicate achievement criteria across all REAF R2 assessment categories.

Recommendation: Modify application scoring for merit assessment to enable more nuanced assessments.

Finding 5b. The Assessment Panel had appropriate expertise, but Panel meetings lacked efficiency as members often needed to seek additional information and interpret aspects of the Guidelines.

Nine percent of the total number of applications received were ineligible and did not progress to a merit-based assessment. This relatively small proportion of ineligible applications supports the

efficacy of the program's design along with a consistent and objective application of eligibility and merit assessment by the Program Team.

The Assessment Panel composition was appropriate, and the members were well-prepared for their role on the Panel.

Seven suitably qualified representatives from NSW Government (n=6) and industry (n=1) were inducted, five of them were interviewed and reported that they felt well prepared for monthly panel meetings. They also commented that they were very well prepared and inducted as assessors.

The evaluation found that diversity in the panel composition could influence more nuanced decision-making for music, art and cultural festivals. REAF Round 2 has addressed this through the use of Create NSW as a source of subject matter expertise for the Panel.

One panel member commented on the need for more gender balance in the assessment panel composition in future rounds of the Program.

Recommendation: Adopt greater gender diversity in the Assessment Panel.

The Assessment Panel frequently required additional, sometimes extraneous, information, to make their assessment

Summary sheets were provided to Panel members to aid their assessment, rather than the full application. The summary sheets provided a clear overview of the application and the eligibility and merit assessment conducted by the Program Team. However, some panel members were reluctant to make an assessment decision based on the information provided. A resolution to defer the decision to the next panel meeting while additional information was sought from the applicant was a regular occurrence in Panel meetings particularly during the first six months of the program.

Often the level of detail sought by the panel was above and beyond what was anticipated by the Program Team for the effective assessment of the application. Panel members were often seeking additional information in relation to the deliverability of an event.

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Often the level of detail sought by the panel was above and beyond what was anticipated by the Program Team for the effective assessment of the application. Panel members were often seeking additional information in relation to the deliverability of an event

Recommendation: The Program Team should revise the summary information template to ensure common points of follow up are included, to reduce the need for delays in funding decisions.

Accessibility and inclusion was another area where the panel sought significant detail, but the application form and guidelines did not emphasise the importance of an accessibility and inclusion plan. This meant many applications did not provide sufficient detail for this aspect.

No guidance is provided on the assessment of accessibility and inclusion or youth despite this increasingly becoming a factor in Panel assessment and decision making:

The program team will provide details for future panel meetings on information provided by and requested of the applicant relating to accessibility and inclusion and youth considerations within event management plans. (Minutes, 16 April 2021)

That information be sought from applicants on accessibility and inclusion for event participants (for example, participants in sporting events) in addition to information that is specific to attendees or spectators. (Minutes, 7 May 2021)

Recommendation: Assessment Methodology should be strengthened in particular the assessment of accessibility and inclusion planning.

Recommendation: the requirements for an Accessibility and Inclusion Plan should be clarified in the program guidelines and application form.

There was ambiguity and potential for inconsistency in the application of eligibility, merit and discretionary criteria

From time-to-time an application did not meet one or more of the threshold assessment criteria in which case (as documented in the Program Guidelines), the Panel could exercise discretionary power by nominating from pre-determined additional criteria (listed below) to determine whether the application is worthy of funding:

- If the event had received or expects to receive other NSW Government funding
- Suitability for other government funding opportunities
- Importance of the event to the local economy
- Intent to deliver a geographical spread of program funding across regional NSW
- Community need and support
- Other factors that are deemed relevant and important in a local or whole of NSW context.

'The importance of the event to the local economy' was the most frequently cited reason to support an application that had not met one or more threshold score for each category in the merit-assessment process. Where a project recommended for funding did not meet all threshold scores the decision and rationale was documented in Panel meeting Minutes.

'Community need and support' could have been exercised in relation to some events that did not meet the threshold assessment, particularly not-for-profit events such as those run by charitable organisations and Aboriginal groups. To date, community need and support has not factored into the application of discretionary criteria and decision-making in a Panel meeting in the same way that the economic discretionary criteria have been taken into account.

To support an equitable geographic spread of grants, a resolution was adopted in the Minutes of the June 2021 meeting seeking point-in-time geographic data to be presented to each meeting to evidence the distribution of grants across NSW. Geographic spread did not factor into the application of discretionary criteria and decision-making in Panel meetings.

The Program Guidelines for REAF Round 2 have narrowed the broader considerations to:

- Suitability for other government funding opportunities
- Importance of the event to the local economy
- Intent to deliver a geographical spread of program funding across regional NSW.

Recommendation: The Assessment Methodology could be strengthened by providing principles on when and how the Assessment Panel apply discretionary criteria.

There were occasions where the interpretation of the guidelines was inconsistent among Panel members

A touring concert presented the Panel with a challenge in terms of applying assessment guidelines, with some ambiguity around how to apply the strategic alignment assessment criteria and more broadly whether touring events were eligible. Risk mitigation measures were put in place to address the concerns raised by the Panel, with probity advice sought by the program team and published FAQs updated on the website to clarify the eligibility of events that form part of a one-off tour or series for applicants:

Can an event that is scheduled as part of a tour apply for funding?

Regular touring events (e.g., regional theatre programs and other events scheduled on a regular or recurring basis) are ineligible to apply, however individual major events which are part of a unique or one-off tour or series are eligible to apply and must submit a separate application for each event that is requesting funding. Each event must meet the Program's eligibility and assessment criteria to be considered for funding. Multiple events submitted as part of a tour within one application are ineligible – REAF Frequently Asked Questions

Another point of tension in the Guidelines was highlighted by charitable organisations being eligible applicants but if their event proposal involved fund-raising, it was deemed an ineligible event type. This played out in the assessment of an application for a children's charity event which brought together the beneficiaries of that charity and their supporters to participate in free activities and entertainment. The program team provided a preliminary assessment that the event was eligible, but the assessment panel deemed the event ineligible. Destination Network representatives indicated that ineligible expenditure items could be made clearer through the use of specific examples in resources such as the FAQ.

Recommendation: Ensure Guidelines have limited opportunity for differing interpretation, including through more detailed internal guidelines.

Assessment Panel mitigated risk by providing conditional funding or only providing part of the funding for some events

The panel made a judgement on part-funding depending on a number of factors including whether:

- one component of the project was more suitable for funding over another
- the amount requested was deemed to be more than what seemed appropriate.

Another key determinant of part-funding was the overall funding pipeline and whether sufficient funding was available. This was somewhat inevitable as the fund drew to a close, particularly with regard to Stream Two - Major Event Attraction and Enhancement, which funded events with large budgets.

Re-applications to the fund could have been avoided by making Merit Assessment Criteria clearer to applicants

In total six 're-applications' have been presented to the REAF Assessment Panel with four successful grants awarded. This highlights the flexibility of the program's design and the tangible support provided by program staff to unsuccessful applicants through feedback sessions.

Applying a second time for government funding is however resource intensive for any organisation. Notwithstanding, it points to the applicants' genuine requirement to access in advance substantive details of how their application will be assessed. Where practicable, the assessment scoring categories and weightings should be made publicly available, potentially with examples of how these are applied to support the Guidelines. This may strengthen the quality of applications, accelerate the assessment process and contribute to a less onerous process for applicants.

To some extent this finding has been addressed through the publication of more detailed Merit Assessment Criteria in the REAF Round Two Program Guidelines.

Refinements to record keeping processes are required to ensure a clear and auditable record of decisions made in session and out-of-session

Minor but nonetheless important findings are that the Meeting Minutes did not provide details of how a majority decision was reached and that Minutes did not consistently capture the detail of out-of-session decisions.

The Minutes of each REAF Assessment Panel indicate the level of consensus of the vote, the meeting records did not include detail on number of votes cast and the split of votes in favour, against and abstained for each decision reached. This has implications under the principles of good governance particularly with respect to occasions where a unanimous decision is not achieved.

In cases where decisions were made out-of-session, the Program Team reviewed forms provided to them by email by each Panel member following the Panel’s individual deliberation on the merit of the application. If the outcome was not a clear 50 percent vote in favour of the application, then the Program Team would represent the application to the next Panel meeting. The Program Team advised that a decision was subsequently documented in the Brief to the program approver which was recorded in CM9.

The need for an auditable link between meeting minutes and the formal record of Departmental approval has been addressed through the introduction of a SmartyGrants form for documenting decision outcomes which will serve as an auditable decision record for Round 2.

Recommendation: Program staff should refine processes for recording decisions in Assessment Panel Meeting Minutes and these processes should align with good practice in grants management and record keeping.

Processes for handling applications for decision (including those deferred and taken out-of-session) can be improved by adopting:

- An itemised numbering system (unique identifier) for each agenda item which corresponds to individual applications put forward for decision by the Panel, illustrated in Table 6
- Unique identifier which is recorded in meeting minutes along with the decision outcome, reason for the decision and number of votes cast.
- A composite summary of all decisions by meeting date captured in a Decisions Register for the Fund. This should explicitly capture decisions taken both in and out-of-session and a status for the latter which enables tracking chronologically as illustrated in Table 7

Table 1 | Sample numbering system for itemised Decision Register

Application number	Meeting number	Agenda item number and sequence
REAF - 162	#01	4:1

Table 7 | Sample Decision Register

Sample Decision Register – in session	Sample Decision Register – out-of-session		
Minutes: REAF-162.01.4:1 was found to be ineligible for funding. REAF-067.01.5:1 was deferred for assessment to meeting #02. REAF-067.02.6:1 was recommended for funding of \$ xxx. REAF-024.01.6:1 was recommended for part-funding of \$ xxx. REAF-097.02.6:5 was not recommended for funding.	Application #	Out-of-session Number	Status
	REAF-005	REAF-005.OOS - 01	Recommended for funding
	REAF-066	REAF-066.OOS - 02	Pending decision

Recommendation: A central Decision Register should be adopted to improve accountability and transparency

Finding 5c. The approval pathway is appropriate, though delays in outcome notification need to be reduced

The change in approval process part-way through had no material impact on the program, but caused a considerable delay for many applications

In August 2021, the NSW Government approved amendments to the approval pathway for individual grant payments, which impacted the approval pathway for projects recommended through REAF. The REAF approval pathway had initially been approved by the Delivery and Performance Committee of Cabinet on 8 February 2021 and required projects recommended for funding over

\$500,001 to be considered and approved by the ERC. The new approval pathway for REAF requires funding recommendations over \$500,001 per application to be approved by a DRNSW representative with the relevant financial delegation, at a minimum, the Executive Director, Regional Programs.

The program team generally met the internal assessment timelines, but most notifications took at least eight weeks between panel recommendation and notification of outcome

Publicly advertised notification of outcomes were approximately six weeks from submission to date of assessment. The efficacy of meeting the six-week notification period has been examined previously under Finding 2(c).

A wide range of stakeholders provided feedback that they sought clearer timeframes around the grant approval process. Publicly stated timelines for assessment panel meetings were a suggested improvement to the assessment process.

“So yeah, knowing if possible...., even if you set a date range to say when applications handed in over these six weeks will be assessed” – Grantee

“Haven’t heard anything about our unsuccessful applicants. Great to get pumped up about our successfulls, but need to give our unsuccessfuls feedback quickly” – DRNSW Regional Development Network

The timely announcement of applications was constrained by three key factors:

- Approval to dispatch conditional letters of offer to successful applicants being delayed in the Office of the Deputy Premier, following a change in leadership in October 2022;
- the announcement of a snap lockdown of Sydney metropolitan regions by the NSW Government in July 2021, and regional lockdowns which ensued thereafter; and
- catastrophic floods in the Northern Rivers region of NSW through February and March 2022 led to letters of offer being held up in the Office of the Deputy Premier.

Applicants require more communication, even holding lines, when the assessment of their application is delayed

There were a diversity of impacts experienced by grantees resulting from uncertainty about the outcome of grant applications which predominantly impacted applicants’ ability to plan their event. Specifically, they were:

- constrained from making public announcements about the event
- unable to secure alternative and supplementary funding sources
- unable to contract artists and performers with confidence.

Even when experienced applicants factored in a ‘buffer’ they were disappointed by the extended delays and lack of communication from the DRNSW.

“One of the main things that was a cause for concern was that we’d lodged our application on 24 June for an event in October. Seemed COVID had an impact on the assessments. We weren’t notified until 1 October. It was obviously delayed. But we had no communication. We were in a void for a little a while” – Grantee

While communication of the outcome could not have occurred until formal approval was granted, proactive communication with applicants whose 6-week timeframe has passed is required.

Recommendation: Proactive communication with applicants during the application assessment process could be increased, particularly where there is risk of delay.

Ineligible applicants should be notified as early as possible

Notification of all funding decisions, including successful, unsuccessful and ineligible applications, are held over until Deputy Premier 's approval is obtained for successful application notifications. In total, 15 applications were assessed as ineligible and notification of these applications were held over until after the Deputy Premier's approval for all application notifications was obtained. This resulted in extended delays for some applicants which, impacted their opportunities to target alternative funding sources or resolve identified application eligibility issues and reapply to REAF. One application identified the benefits of having an early indication of their ineligibility.

"Maybe it would've been an idea for an initial review of the submission, we be provided with feedback on what needed to be improved in the submission, then we could've resubmitted it."

Unsuccessful applicant

Applicants who have submitted an ineligible application should be notified as possible to maximise options for the applicant to pursue alternative funding or resubmit their application. This is consistent with internal assessment guidelines for the program, as outlined here:

'If the Assessment Panel determines an application is not suitable for funding and this decision is supported by the Executive Director, Regional Programs, the Department will inform the applicant in writing of the outcome and provide the opportunity for feedback.'

Recommendation: Notification to applicants with ineligible applications should be expedited to occur immediately following endorsement by the assessment panel.

Destination Networks should be notified at the same time as the applicant

Destination Network representatives who had provided support to applicants were not systematically notified by the program team of the outcome of an application. Interviews with DNN representatives indicated that without knowing which were successful and unsuccessful applications, they were to some extent constrained from reaching out more broadly across their region to promote the program, specifically as events may compete for the same audiences if held at the same time.

These key stakeholders affirmed their understanding of the protocols around announcing successful grantees and the need for confidentiality prior to official announcements. Nonetheless they said they would value receiving an email at the same time, or just after the applicant so they could be across which events are successful and to continue to provide support to both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

Recommendation: Consider the use of disclaimers in the Guidelines to enable application status to be shared with NSW Government agencies and statutory bodies that partner in the delivery of the program

Unsuccessful applicants were offered a feedback session with the program team

Every unsuccessful applicant was provided the opportunity for feedback. Measured and defensible feedback on the application process was professionally communicated by the program team.

While co-contributions were encouraged but not mandated in the Program Guidelines, a number of applicants were provided feedback that they did not achieve the right balance in their event budgets and ultimately this resulted in a low to medium scoring under the 'deliverability' assessment category.

Experienced grant applicants who understood how to develop a budget that showed a comparatively acceptable funding ratio between what their organisation would contribute, potential ticket sales and the input they sought from government were more likely to be successful.

REAF Round 2 will publish specific co-contribution ratios for each stream of the program.

Evaluation domain 6: Funding Deed Negotiation:
KEQ: Was the contracting process fit-for-purpose?

<p>Finding 6a. REAF Funding Deeds were generally executed efficiently, though greater standardisation of conditional letters of offer will reduce extraneous obligations being placed on grantees prior to contracting.</p> <p>Finding 6b. The Department worked flexibly with grantees affected by COVID-19.</p>	
<p>Recommendations for future REAF Rounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program team to oversight the types of inclusions in conditional letters of offer, reserving binding clauses for inclusion in the funding deed. • Programs with a tight funding profile (less than 12 months to spend the funds) should identify a risk mitigation strategy upfront in the event of program or project delays • Projects that may be affected by COVID-19 should have specific risk mitigation strategies in place, as well as alternative delivery options listed in the funding deed, that require minimal re-negotiation to implement.
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

Finding 6a. REAF Funding Deeds were generally executed efficiently

As of 11 April 2022, 61% of the 94 projects had a funding deed in place. The average timeframe from outcome notification to signed funding deed for projects approved was just under four weeks, which is relatively fast compared to other programs. A key feature of REAF was that applications could be submitted at any time between February and December 2021 for assessment and notification of outcome within a six-week period. This design element allowed multiple access points to the fund, enabling event organisers to make decisions quickly based on whether or not they were successful in their application.

Due to the delays experienced in the applications approvals process, the majority of funding deeds for REAF were held over until late October/November 2021 and with an additional panel meeting in February 2022, applications were held over for decision into the next quarter. This extended out the 4 week average timeframe, however the cause of the delays were outside the control of the program team.

The GMO reported that the funding deed negotiation for REAF was generally smooth, with minimal back-and-forth required with grantees. They attributed this to the clarity of the guidelines and the process established by the Program Team.

“[REAF is a] great program team to work with; they think about the end user in the end-to-end process and how [the information is] all provided up front.”

DRNSW employee

Grantees surveyed and interviewed for the evaluation also had generally positive views about this stage of the process. According to grantees, the process was all conducted electronically shortly after their notification of outcome, which they found to be easy and efficient.

“No problems with the timeframes [for the funding deed]. Received the announcement, and then everything else was done via the portal.”

Grantee

One area of potential improvement noted by one grantee was that they had to manually fill in the funding deed with information already provided in the application. If this could be pre-filled it would save grantees time, and reduce potential errors.

The Program Team communicated with grantees that were being part-funded, or had received conditional funding, which sped up the funding deed stage but additional obligations were occasionally placed on grantees prior to contracting and delayed the finalisation of contracting

The Assessment Panel had discretion to provide applicants with only part of the funding they had applied for, or to place certain conditions on the funding. While the Program Team made sure to communicate this clearly with the grantee, from time-to-time, conditions specified in conditional letters of offer were too onerous or impossible for grantees to implement prior to contracting. An example provided by the Program Team was that grantees provide specific details around broadcasting rights for major sporting events.

Recommendation: Program team to oversight the types of inclusions in conditional letters of offer, reserving binding clauses for inclusion in the funding deed.

Finding 6b. The Department worked flexibly with grantees affected by COVID-19.

Many REAF funded events scheduled between July 2021 and February 2022 had to be rescheduled due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequent outbreaks across NSW over that period.

A formal extension to the delivery timeframe for events that were forced to cancel due to COVID-19 lockdowns was brought in following NSW Government approval in October 2022.

Not all grantees were eligible for the extension. The program team held meetings with applicants who were eligible for the extension to inform them directly of the implications of the change in process. Subsequently the GMO either re-opened an EFT form to allow for an amendment to the event date, alternatively if a funding deed was already executed, the GMO variations team were notified of the need for a contract variation. To communicate the extension publicly, the DRNSW REAF web page was updated with the following message:

The funding is for events hosted in regional NSW between March 2021 and June 2022. Events that were successful in receiving funding for an event to be held during this period, but were forced to cancel due to COVID are eligible to host their event up until 30 June 2023.

Grantees that were able to reschedule were very grateful for extension to timeframes for completion, and were positive about their experience working with the Program Team and GMO to rearrange their events

“After getting the grant, staff were extremely helpful regarding COVID issues which dictated changes. Online meetings were excellent.”

Successful applicant

Because re-profiling requires Cabinet approval, it took weeks to be approved. During this time, the Department was unable to advise grantees what would happen their events, which meant many event organisers felt they were taking on significant risk.

It was suggested by the GMO that programs with a tight timeframe for expenditure due to the profile of the fund should have the risk of delays clearly identified in their risk management plan, with a realistic mitigation strategy mapped out to enable fast responses to these issues.

Recommendation: Programs with a tight funding profile (less than 12 months to spend the funds) should identify a risk mitigation strategy upfront in the event of program or project delays.

GMO suggested that all projects which could be potentially affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, should have specific alternative delivery plans listed in their funding deed, so that these can be enacted quickly if required. It also provides DRNSW with a clearer understanding of the program risk should COVID-19 lockdowns occur. For example, DRNSW could estimate how many events would have to be rescheduled by a full year (if they are seasonal), and how many would have to be cancelled all together (if they are a major international act that is unlikely to return for a rescheduled date).

Recommendation: Projects that may be affected by COVID-19 should have specific risk mitigation strategies in place, as well as alternative delivery options listed in the funding deed, that require minimal re-negotiation to implement.

Evaluation domain 7: Monitoring and Evaluation:
KEQ: *Can the program be effectively evaluated?*

<p>Finding 7a. An appropriate Program Monitoring and Evaluation Plan is in place.</p> <p>Finding 7b. Completion reporting needs to be brought in line with the PMEP to improve outcome data capture.</p>	
<p>Recommendations for future REAF Rounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The completion report template should be updated to align with the outcomes listed in the new PMEP. • Completion reports should be reviewed by the relevant Program Team and the Evaluation Team to ensure data quality is sufficient. • Completion reporting workshops should be considered by Program Teams to provide additional guidance to grantees regarding the expected data capture within the report.
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The second two recommendations are equally applicable across all RGF programs.

Finding 7a. An appropriate Program Monitoring and Evaluation Plan is in place.

The Evaluation Team prepared a Program Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (PMEP) in consultation with the Program Team during the design stage. The PMEP was approved alongside the other program documentation in early 2021.

The PMEP was updated, along with all other Regional Growth Program PMEPs, in September of 2021, to bring it into line with the newly developed Regional Programs Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy. This did not create material changes to the monitoring and evaluation approach for REAF. Rather, it aligned outcome language to the Regional Programs Outcome Framework.

The PMEP outlines the approach to the Process Evaluation, which was followed to develop this report. It also outlines the approach for the Outcome and Economic Evaluation, which is due to be completed in December 2022.

Finding 7b. Completion reporting needs to be brought in line with the PMEP to improve outcome data capture.

As some events had already been completed by the time the PMEP was updated, the completion reporting template was not altered. However, a review of the completion reports that have been submitted to date suggests that a process improvement to require a program team member to review the completion report before it is finalised in SmartyGrants.

Recommendation: Program Team review completion report before it is finalised in SmartyGrants.

Data on employment outcomes may not be reliable

There are several questions in the completion report template relating to employment outcomes. The phrasing of the questions is open to interpretation, meaning that the questions may be answered inconsistently by grantees. This reduces the Evaluation Team’s confidence in the data, and may result in some data points that appear to be incorrect to need to be removed from the data set. This is both time-consuming and reduces the amount of data that can be analysed to determine program impact. The current questions relating to employment outcomes, and the evaluation considerations for these questions is listed in Table 8.

Completion report template	Evaluation consideration
Number of new full time equivalent (FTE) positions created during event	It is unclear if this is asking about ongoing employment, or temporary (contract) employment. As events are inherently short-term, long-term employment is not an expected outcome of the program, so the emphasis should instead be on short-term employment outcomes.
Number of FTE positions created that were based in Regional NSW	As above.
Number of FTE positions created that were based in Regional NSW by LGA	As above.
Number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons employed in the event workforce	This question does not differentiate between employees that were employed as a result of the program, and those who were already on-staff. This makes attribution of the employment outcome to the program unclear. It is also unclear whether the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons counted here are those who are employed by the company generally, or those who worked on this event specifically.
Number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons employed in the event workforce and based in Regional NS	As above.
Number of people under 25 employed in the event workforce	As above, but relating to people under 25.
Number of people under 25 employed in the event workforce and based in Regional NSW	As above.
Number of apprentices/trainees employed in the event workforce	As above.
Number of apprentices/trainees employed in the event workforce and based in Regional NSW	As above.

Recommendation: The completion report template should be updated to align with the outcomes listed in the new PMEP

Program team to review completion reports prior to acceptance

Currently, the GMO reviews the completion report to ensure the project has been completed with respect to the commitment by the grantee to deliver the specified activities in line with the funding deed in order to make the final payment. A review of the completion reports has revealed some reported information, particularly data provided on overnight visitation numbers, is not always robust and may require further validation. A review of outcome data needs to be conducted at the

point of submission, and a request for resubmission made as quickly as possible if required, to ensure high quality data is available for the Outcome and Economic Evaluation.

Recommendation: Submitted completion reports should be reviewed by the relevant Program Team and the Evaluation Team to ensure data quality is sufficient.

Recommendation: Completion reporting workshops should be considered by Program Teams to provide additional guidance to grantees regarding the expected data capture within the report.

Evaluation domain 8: Project Delivery:
KEQ: *Have projects been delivered as intended?*

<p>Finding 8a. Measurable benefits were consistent with the fund’s objectives</p> <p>Finding 8b. Organisers used REAF funding to boost event appeal.</p> <p>Finding 8c. Event planning was impacted by COVID-19 and many have been rescheduled to 2022 - 2023</p>	
<p>Recommendations for future REAF Rounds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
<p>Considerations for other Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

A total of 35 REAF events have been presented across NSW as of 11 April 2022. A desktop review undertaken in November 2021 of nine completion reports for REAF funded events provided a range of insights into early outcomes for the Fund. Notably all nine events were completed within the original event delivery timeframe advertised in the Guidelines, despite over half of the event organisers reporting that they were impacted by COVID-19.

New, high profile domestic and international events were brought to regional NSW during off-peak periods, five of which were public events presented by major sporting associations. No less significant was support REAF provided for existing events such as a well-established equestrian competition run for 15 years previously by a not-for-profit pony club. This event boasts the only interschool polorosse championship event in the Southern Hemisphere.

All but two of the nine events reviewed were being staged for the first time. City Councils and Regional Councils both presented two events each. One event was an arts and cultural festival and the remainder were sporting and lifestyle events, with Rugby League and Rugby Union receiving the majority of REAF funding to date.

For each project completed the Grants Management Office found that expenditure requirements were met, works were completed to scope in the Funding Deed and sufficient evidence of completion had been provided by the Grantee. A range of supplementary evidence to demonstrate event outcomes was submitted by grantees, including:

- Progress photos with geographic marker or GPS location
- Media coverage, web analytics, social media sentiment and photographs
- Council Board reports and event reports
- Analysis of participant surveys

The following are the early outcomes and learnings about REAF.

Finding 8a. Measurable benefits were consistent with the fund’s objectives although impacted by COVID-19

More than half the events reviewed did not meet their visitor projections, but televised events provided exponential exposure for regional sporting venues and around \$2.2 million was injected into local economies

Of the nine REAF funded events reviewed, five did not meet target attendance numbers. One event achieved less than half its projected number of visitors. The impacts of COVID-19 are discussed under Finding 8c.

Five major sporting events were broadcast which extended event audiences nationally and internationally, providing regional towns unprecedented exposure and locals the opportunity to experience world-class entertainment at their doorstep.

More than half of the total visitors¹² to all events were from outside the LGA

All nine REAF funded events reviewed attracted over 30 percent of their total number of visitors from greater than 50km away. An average of 53 percent of all visitors were from outside their LGA with close to 21,287 overnight stays tallied for eight of the nine¹³ events.

65 percent of total event expenditure was in regional NSW with suppliers receiving contracts worth around \$2.3 million

65% or \$3.1million of the total \$4.6 million expenditure was in regional NSW.

The nine funded events reviewed injected around \$2.2million into local economies through contracts to deliver services from event photography to portable toilet hire.

Finding 8b. Organisers used REAF funding to boost event appeal

Some local councils used the opportunity to piggy-back other events onto their REAF-funded major sporting and lifestyle event to expand the entertainment appeal to locals and visitors alike. For instance, Mudgee organised a country race meeting and air show to take place the day following the NRL Premiership game held on 21 April. This served to significantly boost the number of overnight visitors.

Events created a positive legacy for local communities

Organisers created a range of opportunities for the event to generate or increase positive legacy ensuring the host community benefited beyond the event itself. These included:

- Investment in grass roots sport and engagement through sports clinics and open training sessions for local youth (occasionally involving elite teams as a drawcard)
- Outreach to disadvantaged and marginalised local Indigenous youth through charities
- Direct cash injection to volunteer sports and community groups
- Volunteer workforces creating social connection
- Sponsors offering industry internships
- Inclusion focus for local participants and spectators living with a disability
- Local creative artists and musicians provided opportunities to present their work
- Local venues beautified and renewed creating a sense of local pride

“In the lead up to the NRL Game...approximately 2,800 children and community groups were involved in the Souths Cares community engagement program” – Council Report, Coffs City Council

“Players and club staff were fantastic, giving their time for kids’ football clinics and open training sessions where fans could talk to their heroes face-to-face. While the economic impacts are fantastic, it’s also great for local kids and families to have this kind of opportunity” – Des Kennedy, Mudgee Mayor quoted from Mid Western Regional Council Media Release (21 April 2021)

“The overall sentiment for the ice rink was largely positive, with many commenting that the ice rink was a unique and novel experience for the city. The location, atmosphere and affordability of the ice rink were common themes throughout the responses. Many reported that the ice rink was a great

¹² Visitors were defined as people who travelled to the event from over 50km away.

¹³ One completion report did not supply data on overnight stays.

family friendly activity for the winter school holidays” – Survey Data Analysis, Wagga Wagga City Council Report

“Yes, I agree with Marjorie Breckenridge in her praise for the ice rink (“Praise for ice rink initiative”, The Daily Advertiser, July 9). While watching our grandchildren at the ice rink, two young boys aged about eight skated to the edge and I said to them they seemed to be having a great time. The reply from one of the boys said it all: ‘This is the best day of my life’. You can’t ask for more than that.”– Lyn Taylor, Wagga Wagga The Daily Advertiser

Events generated community pride

Sentiment expressed in feedback through surveys, social media and event reports demonstrates that REAF funded events not only created a focal point for the community to come together but also provided an opportunity for event organisers to showcase their town to visitors and those who tuned into live broadcasts. In one LGA, a town beautification project funded by the local council was delivered prior to the event. The involvement of local people as members of volunteer workforces and participants in event activities generated a feeling of community spirit and a sense of occasion around the events.

“A beautification project for the Apex Oval entrance was undertaken including planting of mature trees, mulching and resurfacing of the road” – Dubbo Regional Council – Event Report

“It was so lovely having the ice skating in the Victory Memorial Gardens, for us it looked like Christmas every night – Mate’s Gully” – Local business feedback

“Last week I found myself at the North West Equestrian Expo supporting the ShadyRider and her horse Cindy and the school equine team. I have never seen so many riders and horses in one place. I was impressed by so many well-mannered young riders and the welcoming community spirit of the event. Congratulations to you all and we hope you return again next year”– Event participant

Finding 8c. Event planning and delivery were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and many REAF events that were scheduled for 2021 were rescheduled to 2022 – 2023

The program introduced a formalised extension mechanism for COVID-19 impacted events which was communicated publicly in October 2021.

The following alert was Published on the REAF program webpage:

Events that were successful in receiving funding for an event to be held during this period, but were forced to cancel due to COVID are eligible to host their event up until 30 June 2023.

Two event owners withdrew applications prior to the announcement and/or assessment of their applications indicating they had no choice other than to cancel due to COVID-19.

Events that could demonstrate they had been directly impacted due to COVID-19 were able to request and be granted an extension to reschedule up until June 2023. Events that requested a change in dates for other reasons not directly related to COVID-19 were able to reschedule at any time within the event delivery timeframe between March 2021 and through to 30 June 2022.

Some events organisers were required to modify their programs, for example, a Women in Aviation Careers Schools and Careers Open Day which was scheduled as part of Wings Over Illawarra was cancelled due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions and issues.

Some event organisers were required to apply to the NSW Minister for Health to obtain a COVID-19 Public Health Order exemption to stage large NRL games. Local Councils in the main were required to adopt tactics such as zoning, seating, and segmentation of event areas key into the development of specific COVID-19 risk mitigation action plans. These public health mitigation strategies impacted on the ability of event organisers to meet their projected visitation numbers.

The program team worked closely with grantees to assist them throughout the grant process.

“After getting the grant, staff were extremely helpful regarding COVID issues which dictated changes.”

“Thank you for adapting the guidelines for the new 2022 dates. It was the only grant out of 10 that we were not able to do this for and we had already started to spend the funds which caused additional covid stress”

Grantees

Appendix A: REAF Key Evaluation Questions

Domain	Key Evaluation Questions	Data sources
<p>Overview of program results</p> <p><i>What happened?</i></p>	<p>To what extent was the program fully subscribed?</p> <p>Were publicly communicated timeframes met?</p> <p>What was the volume and ratio of ineligible and unsuccessful applications at each stage?</p> <p>What was the geographic spread of applicants and successful grantees?</p> <p>What types of projects were successful?</p> <p>What was the allocation of projects between streams?</p> <p>What has been delivered so far? How many visitors attended the completed events?</p>	<p>Program data:</p> <p>All preliminary and detailed applications</p> <p>Successful applications</p>
<p>Program design</p> <p><i>Was the program design appropriate?</i></p>	<p>To what extent does the program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> align with overarching strategies/policies aim to address an identified need draw on consultation feedback from key stakeholders <p>To what extent does the program have clear and consistent objectives?</p> <p>To what extent are program design elements and processes aligned with the program objectives?</p> <p>What were the benefits and limitations of having two funding streams?</p>	<p>Document review:</p> <p>Design documentation</p> <p>Approval briefing</p> <p>NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2030</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement:</p> <p>Program team interviews</p> <p>RG Program Director interview</p> <p>Destination NSW interview</p>
<p>Program administration</p> <p><i>Was the program set up for success?</i></p>	<p>To what extent did the program have appropriate project planning in place, including:</p> <p>Project plan</p> <p>Communication plan</p> <p>Risk register developed</p> <p>Did the program demonstrate adaptive management to emerging issues?</p> <p>Was the resourcing provided to the administration appropriate?</p> <p>Was there a clear governance and probity framework in place, with clearly articulated roles and responsibilities?</p> <p>Was there a consultation process for the design of the program guidelines and process?</p>	<p>Document review:</p> <p>Project plan</p> <p>Risk register</p> <p>Communications plan</p> <p>Resourcing documentation</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement:</p> <p>Program team interviews</p>
<p>Program application process</p> <p><i>Was the application</i></p>	<p>Was the program promotion effective in reaching the target audience?</p> <p>To what extent were the program guidelines clear and easy to understand?</p>	<p>Document review:</p> <p>Program guidelines</p> <p>Program documentation</p> <p>Preliminary and Detailed Application templates</p>

Appendix B: Document review

Evaluation Domain	Documents reviewed
1. Overview of Program Results <i>What happened?</i>	Brief to Deputy Secretary of DRNSW Program data – Projects approved for Funding, Unsuccessful applications, Withdrawals Analysis of distribution of REAF funding by Destination Network and LGA
2. Program Design <i>Was the program design appropriate?</i>	Cabinet submission – REAF Guidelines <i>The 20-Year Economic Vision for Regional NSW</i> <i>NSW Visitor Economy Strategy (2030)</i> <i>NSW Government Statewide Destination Management Plan</i> Sample of Destination Network (DN) Destination Management Plans Regional Economic Development Strategies (REDS) Program Guidelines External Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Assessment Methodology Probity Plan Risk Register Communications Plan
3. Program Administration <i>Was the program set up for success?</i>	Risk Register Assessment Methodology (including eligibility check) Probity Plan Communications Plan Financial tracking of funding allocation
4. Program Application Process <i>Was the application process fit-for-purpose?</i>	Program Guidelines Application Forms Eligibility Checklist Webinar/Information sessions
5. Application Assessment Process <i>Were applications assessed appropriately and transparently?</i>	Assessment Methodology (including eligibility check) Assessment Schedules Sample Assessments (Scoring sheet provided with Agenda papers) Assessment Panel agenda and minutes Conflict of Interest Register Analysis of REAF Distribution by Destination Network and LGA Notification Letters, including feedback on unsuccessful applications
6. Funding Deed Execution	Sample of executed Funding Deeds

Appendix C: Unsuccessful applicant Survey

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this survey because you recently applied for grant funding through the Regional Events Acceleration Fund administered by the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW). This survey is intended to help us to understand and improve our future grant application and assessment processes.

This survey is voluntary and anonymous, and your grant funding will not be affected in any way if you choose to participate or not. It is best for this survey to be completed by someone who was involved in the application process.

This survey is consistent with the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998 (NSW)*. Any identifying information will be de-identified and aggregated prior to being reported.

Are you happy to continue?

- Yes
- No

About Your Project

This information will be used to assist in our analysis and will not be used for identification purposes.

1. Please select the program and round that you are providing feedback on
2. Which region is the project which you applied for located?
 - Far West
 - New England and North West
 - North Coast
 - Central West and Orana
 - Hunter
 - Central Coast
 - Greater Sydney
 - Riverina Murray
 - Illawarra Shoalhaven
 - South East and Tablelands
 - Unsure
3. Which statement best represents your previous grant application experience?
 - I have lots of experience applying for grants
 - I have some experience applying for grants
 - This is the first grant I have applied for

Application Process

4. How did you first hear about the Regional Events Acceleration Fund?
 - Department of Regional NSW website
 - Newspaper
 - Social media

- Newsletter
- Direct communication from Department of Regional NSW
- Word of mouth
- Other

5. Was this the best way for you to hear about it?

- Yes
- No
- Why/why not?

6. How helpful were the following in developing your application?

	Not at all helpful	Somewhat unhelpful	Neither helpful or unhelpful	Helpful	Very helpful	I did not access these resources
Program guidelines						
Webinars / info sessions						
DRNSW website (including Frequently Asked Questions and information sheets)						
Outcomes Reporting Guidance Notes						

- Did you access any other resources? Yes/ No

7. Did you contact the Department of Regional NSW for any advice during the application process?

- No
- Yes

Using the scale below, how strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Not applicable
The advice provided by the Department of Regional NSW addressed my specific question/s					

- Why did you rate these statements this way?

8. Using the scale below, how strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The objective/s of the program was/were easy to understand					
I understood how my application would be assessed					

Overall, I had enough information from DRNSW to help me prepare my application					
I was notified of the outcome of my application in a timely manner					
The application assessment process was transparent					

b. Why did you rate these statements this way?

		Yes	No	N/A
9.	I received assistance from the Regional NSW Business Development Manager during the application process			

		Not at all useful	Not very useful	Neutral	Useful	Very useful
10.	To what extent was the assistance provided by the Regional NSW business Development Manager useful to your application?					

a. Why did you rate these statements this way?

Application Outcome

11. Were you informed why your application was unsuccessful?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. Following notification of your application outcome, did you seek and receive feedback?

- a. Sought and received
- b. Sought, but did not receive
- c. Did not seek feedback

13. Was the feedback helpful to you?

Not at all helpful	Somewhat unhelpful	Neither helpful or unhelpful	Helpful	Very helpful

a. Do you have additional comments on the feedback?

Program alignment with community needs and project

14. Using the scale below, to what extent do you feel the program's objectives target the needs of your community and/or industry? (These needs could be social, economic, and/or environmental needs)

Not at all	Not very	Neutral	Somewhat	Very targeted

a. Why did you rate this in this way?

Overall satisfaction

15. Using the scale below, to what extent were you **satisfied overall** with the application and assessment experience?

Not at all	Not very	Neutral	Somewhat	Very satisfied

Self-nomination for interview

Would you be willing to participate in an short (15 minutes) confidential interview with the DRNSW Regional Programs Unit Evaluations Team? Learning about your experiences with the program is critical to ongoing improvement of the grants that we provide for regional communities.

Title

First name

Surname

Position

Organisation

Email

Phone number

Close

16. Do you have any final comments or feedback for the program team?

Thank you for taking part in this survey. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact [contact details].

Appendix D: Successful applicant survey

Timing: After notification of assessment outcome

Preamble

You are being invited to take part in this survey because you recently applied for grant funding through the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF) administered by the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW). This survey is intended to help us to understand and improve our future grant application and assessment processes.

This survey is voluntary and anonymous, and your grant funding will not be affected in any way if you choose to participate or not. It is best for this survey to be completed by someone who was involved in the application process.

This survey is consistent with the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998 (NSW)*. Any identifying information will be de-identified and aggregated prior to being reported.

Are you happy to continue? Yes/No

About Your Project

This information will be used to assist in our analysis and will not be used for identification purposes.

1. Please select the program and round that you are providing feedback on.

2. Which region is the project which you applied for located?
 - Far West
 - New England and North West
 - North Coast
 - Central West and Orana
 - Hunter
 - Central Coast
 - Greater Sydney
 - Riverina Murray
 - Illawarra-Shoalhaven
 - South East and Tablelands
 - Unsure

3. Which statement best represents your previous grant application experience?
 - I have lots of experience applying for grants
 - I have some experience applying for grants
 - This is the first grant I have applied for

Application Process

4. How did you first hear about the Regional Events Acceleration Fund?
 - DRNSW website

- Newspaper
- Social media
- Newsletter
- Direct communication from DRNSW
- Word of mouth-
- Other

5. Was this the best way for you to hear about it?

- Yes
- No
- Why/why not?

6. How helpful were the following resources in developing your application?

	Not at all helpful	Somewhat unhelpful	Neither helpful or unhelpful	Helpful	Very helpful	I did not access this resource
Program guidelines						
Webinars / info sessions						
DRNSW website (including Frequently Asked Questions and information sheets)						
Outcomes reporting guidance notes						

a. Did you access any other resources? Yes/ No

7. Did you contact the Department of Regional NSW for any advice during the application process?

- No
- Yes

8. Using the scale below, how strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The advice provided by the Department of Regional NSW addressed my specific question/s					

a. Why did you rate this statement this way?

9. Using the scale below, how strongly do you agree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The objective/s of the program was/were easy to understand					
I understood how my application would be assessed					
Overall, I had enough information from DRNSW to help me prepare my application					
I was notified of the outcome of my application in a timely manner					

a. Why did you rate these statements this way?

	Yes	No	N/A
10. I received assistance from the Regional NSW Business Development Manager during the application process			

	Not at all useful	Not very useful	Neutral	Useful	Very useful
11. To what extent was the assistance provided by the Regional NSW business Development Manager useful to your application?					

a. Why did you rate these statements this way?

12. Using the scale below, to what extent do you consider the program's objectives target the needs of your community and/or industry? (These needs could be social, economic, and/or environmental needs)

Not at all	Not very	Neutral	Somewhat	Very targeted

a. Why did you rate this in this way?

Application Outcome

13. Using the scale below, to what extent were you satisfied overall with the application and assessment experience?

Not at all	Not very	Neutral	Somewhat	Very satisfied

a. Why did you rate this in this way?

Funding deed

14. Using the scale below, to what extent were you satisfied overall with the funding deed negotiation process?

Not at all	Not very	Neutral	Somewhat	Very satisfied

a. Why did you rate this in this way?

15. Do you have any other feedback you would like to provide the department?

Self-nomination for interview

Would you be willing to participate in a short (15 minutes) confidential interview with the DRNSW Regional Programs Unit Evaluations Team? Learning about your experiences with the program is critical to ongoing improvement of the grants that we provide for regional communities.

Title

First name

Surname

Position

Organisation

Email

Phone number

Close

Do you have any final comments or feedback for the [program] team?

Thank you for taking part in this survey. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact [contact details].

Appendix E: Unsuccessful Applicant Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a 15-minute interview about your experience applying to the Regional Event Acceleration Fund (REAF).

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential, and your eligibility to apply for future grant funding will not be affected in anyway if you choose to participate or not.

With consent from you, we will record and transcribe the interview to assist us in collecting interview data. Interview transcripts will be treated as confidential information. It is your decision as to whether you agree for the interview to be recorded.

This interview is consistent with the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* (NSW). Any identifying information will be de-identified and aggregated prior to being reported.

As with the survey you completed, this interview is intended to help us to understand and improve our future grant application and assessment processes. And for this, we thank you for your time in sharing your experience.

Questions

The questions below have been prepared for the interview and others may arise during the course of the interview. During the interview, you may decline to answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

Theme	Question
Application process	To what extent was the application process clear to follow?
	Did you access support from a DRNSW Business Development Manager or Destination Network representative? Why/Why not?
	How could the application process be improved?
Assessment of application	To what extent was the assessment process clear?
	Did you feel that the assessment criteria would provide a fair assessment of the merits of your application? Why or why not?
Notification of outcome	To what extent did the notification of outcome timeframes and feedback meet your expectations?
General observations	Would you apply for a REAF grant in the future? Why or why not?
	Any final comments you would like to make?

Appendix F: Grantee Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a 15-minute interview about your experience applying for the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF).

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential, and your eligibility to apply for future grant funding will not be affected in anyway if you choose to participate or not.

With consent from you, we will record and transcribe the interview to assist us in collecting interview data. Interview transcripts will be treated as confidential information. It is your decision as to whether you agree for the interview to be recorded.

The interview is consistent with the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* (NSW). Any identifying information will be de-identified and aggregated prior to being reported.

As with the survey you completed, the interview is intended to help us to understand and improve our future grant application and assessment processes. We thank you for your time in sharing your experience.

Questions

The questions below have been prepared for the interview and others may arise during the course of the interview. During the interview, you may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

Theme	Question
Application process	To what extent was the application process clear to follow?
	Did you access support from a DRNSW Business Development Manager? Why/Why not?
	How could communications with applicants regarding timeframes, the assessment process and notification of outcome be improved?
	How could the application process be improved?
Funding deed negotiation	Are there any improvements that could be made to the funding deed negotiation process?
General observations	Would you apply for a REAF grant in the future? Why or why not?
	Any final comments you would like to make?

Appendix G: Program team Interview Guide

Background

The DRNSW Regional Programs Evaluation Team is conducting a Process Evaluation of the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF) as part of our routine monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement of our program processes. The evaluation assesses the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of key DRNSW process elements from the program design through to the point of funding deed negotiation. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential.

Questions

The interview will be semi-structured. See below the types of topics we intend to cover, though there will be time to explore other relevant themes that arise during the conversation.

Theme	Question
Program design	How was the original concept developed?
	What stakeholder consultation was conducted as part of design?
	How were needs identified?
	What were the core objectives identified for the program?
	What Departmental policies and/or strategies were considered while developing the objectives and program logic?
Program Administration	Were you able to meet all publicly communicated timeframes? Why/why not?
	Did you have the resourcing and access to expertise required to effectively administer the program?
	How did the engagement of BDMs in the application process impact the reach of the program and application quality?
	What governance mechanisms were put in place to ensure accountability, fairness and funding transparency?
	How were roles and responsibilities for governance and probity articulated to DRNSW staff involved in program administration?
Application process	How did the rolling application phase work in practice? What were the benefits and challenges of this approach?
	Was the two-stage application process fit-for-purpose?
	How would you describe the quality of applications received?
	How well did the assessment process support the selection of quality applications for funding?

	How did the approval process ensure fairness, accountability and transparency in funding decision-making?
	How did the program respond to the change in approval process?
Monitoring and evaluation	Is the PMEP clear, easy to understand, and achievable / feasible to implement?
	Are the appropriate data collection mechanisms in place for monitoring and data collection throughout the implementation period?
Overall impressions	What worked particularly well in the program?
	What do you think could have been done differently to improve the program?

Appendix H: GMO Interview Guide

Background

The DRNSW Regional Programs Evaluation Team is conducting a Process Evaluation of the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF) as part of our routine monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement of our program processes. The evaluation assesses the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of key DRNSW process elements from the program design through to the point of funding deed negotiation. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential.

Questions

The interview will be semi-structured. See below the types of topics we intend to cover, though there will be time to explore other relevant themes that arise during the conversation.

- What are your general reflections on rolling funds from a contracting perspective?
- What are the general benefits and challenges?
- How well did the guidelines and application process set up the funding deed negotiation process?
- What was the level of awareness of the funding deed process among grant recipients?
- Were funding deeds able to be established efficiently? Why/why not?
- Were funding deeds able to be executed within the specified timelines?

Appendix I: Assessment Panel Interview Guide

Background

The DRNSW Regional Programs Evaluation Team is conducting a Process Evaluation of the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF), as part of our routine monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement of our program processes. The evaluation assesses the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of key DRNSW process elements from the program design through to the point of funding deed negotiation.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and confidential.

Questions

The interview will be semi-structured. See below the types of topics we intend to cover, though there will be time to explore other relevant themes that arise during the conversation.

Theme	Question
Preparation	To what extent did you feel suitably prepared as an assessor?
	Was your role and responsibilities as a panellist clearly communicated?
Application assessment	To what extent was the application and assessment process fit for purpose?
	Were the program objectives, eligibility and assessment criteria clear and consistent?
	How well did the assessment guidelines support the assessment panel?
	To what extent did the assessment process meet your expectations in terms of fairness and transparency in funding decision-making?
	Were applications able to be assessed efficiently? Why / why not?
General observations	What worked particularly well?
	What could be improved in the future?

Appendix J: Director, Regional Growth Programs Interview Guide

Background

The Regional Programs Evaluation Team is conducting Process Evaluations of the Regional Events Acceleration Fund (REAF), the Regional Job Creation Fund (RJCF) and the DRNSW Regional Stimulus Package stream, as part of our routine monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement of our program processes. The evaluation assesses the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of key DRNSW process elements for the program design through to the point of funding deed negotiation.

Regional Events Acceleration Fund

The REAF section of the interview focuses on the design of the program and your general perceptions of the process.

Questions:

- How did the concept for the REAF arise?
- What has worked well in the implementation of REAF? What could be improved?