

Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) Phase 1 Process and interim outcome evaluation

■ December 2022


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2019/20 bushfire season



5.5 million
hectares burnt



2,448 homes destroyed in NSW



26 people
lost their lives

BCRRF Phase 1 quick facts



\$7.6 million
of grants provided in Phase 1



\$250,000
provided to 20 LGAs



\$100,000
provided to 23 LGAs



<\$100,000
provided to 3 LGAs

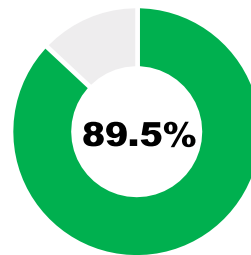


3 LGAs eligible
but did not apply

49

LGAs eligible for BCRRF funding

89.5% of councils that responded to the survey agreed that the BCRRF allowed them to address their community's most pressing recovery needs



66% of funding disbursed by the end of March 2020

46

LGAs approved for funding
3 LGAs did not apply



Funds were disbursed quickly between February and May 2020.

BCRRF Phase 1 - Process and interim outcome evaluation



100% of survey respondents noted the speed that the funding was rolled out.



18 out of 19 survey respondents believed the funding was sufficient for them to fund the initial scope of the project they submitted in their application

1. Executive Summary

What was evaluated?

This evaluation examined the appropriateness and effectiveness of the Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) Phase 1. The BCRRF is a recovery program set up to provide funding to 49 local councils that had experienced moderate to high social impact from the 2019/2020 NSW Bushfires. The BCRRF is a joint Commonwealth–State funding arrangement for local councils to assist with immediate, small-scale disaster recovery projects.

How was the evaluation conducted?

For the process evaluation, we examined the effectiveness of the implementation of the grant funding. The evaluation looked at how the processes around application, assessment, funding, monitoring and reporting assisted councils to improve the immediate social recovery needs of their communities. The early outcomes evaluation focused on what the councils were able to achieve as a result of the funding.

What were the findings?

The intent of Phase 1 of the BCRRF grant program was to provide funding to bushfire affected communities as quickly as possible to ensure their immediate social recovery needs were met. Overall, this evaluation confirms that the BCRRF Phase 1, its elements, and the processes used to implement it were appropriate, and aligned with that intent. Speed of funding distribution was the primary consideration of the BCRRF. The grant program was, therefore, designed to be simple and to ensure that the money could be provided to councils as quickly as possible. On average, this approach allowed councils to receive the funding within 30 days of applying. Consequently, two thirds of the \$7.5 million BCRRF funds that were distributed to Bushfire affected communities was deployed in February and March, 2020.

Nineteen councils (100% of those who responded to the survey) believed the funding was rolled out quickly enough for them to spend the funds as they initially intended. Eighteen respondents indicated the funding was sufficient for them to fund the initial scope of the project they submitted in their application. Seventeen agreed that the funding allowed them to address their community's most pressing needs.

The implementation model used for BCRRF Phase 1 focused on rapid provision of funding to councils and anticipated rapid use of those funds for community-based activities. As such, the model of combining the application and funding deed did not provide for a simplified variation process.

The unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many of the projects requiring variations and changes in their delivery timelines. The lack of a pre-planned strategy for managing variations meant delays and additional workload for councils requesting variations.

What do the findings suggest?

The program was delivered effectively, especially in terms of early implementation outcomes. It is, therefore, a useful model for providing rapid funding into communities via trusted, experienced partners. In future, the model should include a streamlined process for processing and managing variations. Doing so will ensure that gains from the quick deployment of funds to support disaster-affected communities are not offset by the time taken to process variations¹.

¹ This evaluation did not consider the extent to which this program was compliant with the Grants Administration Guide (GAG) as the Guide was not in place at the time of the programs design or implementation. Any consideration of these findings for the design of future programs would need to be done in a manner consistent with the GAG

2. Introduction

2.1 The Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) Phase 1

The 2019/20 bushfire season saw large-scale destruction. Ultimately, across NSW, 5.5 million hectares were burnt, 2,448 homes were destroyed, and 26 lives were lost.²

The BCRRF Phase 1 was launched in response to the 2019/20 NSW Bushfires as a recovery fund for Local Government Areas (LGAs) affected by the Bushfires. Funding for the BCRRF Phase 1 was provided through the joint Commonwealth–State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). Funding was, however, administered by the Department of Regional NSW.

The BCRRF provided non-competitive grant funding to local councils to assist them with immediate, small-scale disaster recovery activities. Eligibility for funding was decided based on the NSW Government Disaster Declarations.

The NSW Government Disaster Declarations list identifies Local Government Areas (LGAs) that have been impacted by a natural disaster³. All Disaster Declarations are issued by the NSW Government and are assigned an Australian Government Reference Number (AGRN). The 2019/2020 NSW Bushfires referred to throughout this evaluation were assigned as AGRN 871. Figure 1 shows the LGAs impacted by AGRN 871 and the fire extent and severity.

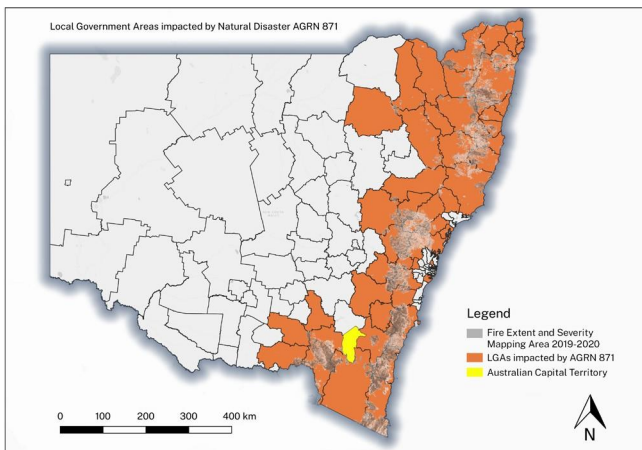


Figure 1: Local Government Areas impacted by Natural Disaster AGRN 871 overlaid with the fire severity in each LGA

Of the 50 LGAs affected by the bushfires, local councils in 49 were eligible for funding under BCRRF, with 46 applying and being approved for funding.

Official Building Impact Assessment numbers (held by NSW Public Works) were used to guide the funding amounts offered to each council. Councils were eligible for maximum amounts of either \$100,000 or \$250,000 based on the impact classifications shown in table 1 (below).

Table 1. Fire damaged impact Classifications for BCRRF Phase 1⁴

Classification	Funding
> 100 damaged or destroyed buildings from official Building Impact Assessment	\$250,000
< 100 damaged or destroyed buildings from official Building Impact Assessment	\$100,000

Based on the categories in Table 1, of the councils that applied 20 councils were eligible for up to \$250,000, and 26 were eligible for up to \$100,000.

In total, \$7.90 million was made available in grant funding.

2.2 About the evaluation

This evaluation examined the processes and interim outcomes of the Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF) phase 1. This evaluation has been produced by Spillover Data Consultancy as commissioned by the Department of Regional New South Wales (DRNSW). This evaluation assessed whether the BCCRF grant program, its elements and the processes used to implement it were:

- (i) appropriate, given the aims of the program, and
- (ii) effective

This evaluation identified the strengths of the BCCRF grant program and opportunities to improve future programs. Where appropriate, recommendations have been made, highlighting best practice and areas for improvement in program design and implementation whilst being mindful of the context and intent of the BCRRF.

² Whittaker J, Haynes K, Wilkinson C, Tofa M, Dilworth T, Collins J, Tait L & Samson S (2021) Black Summer – how the NSW community responded to the 2019-20 bushfire season, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.

³ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/disaster-recovery/natural-disaster-declaration>

⁴ State of New South Wales through Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020), Bushfire Community Resilience and Economic Recovery Fund (Phase 1), Guidelines, NSW.

For this evaluation, a high-level rating system is used, as follows:



Areas where high quality documentation and/or processes have been identified that can, potentially, be generalised to other programs and packages.



Areas where further analyses is required, or some improvement is possible.



Areas where significant improvement can be recommended.

recovery outcomes?

c. Did the programs represent administrative value for money?

2.3 Evaluation questions

This evaluation has set out to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. To what extent are program design elements and processes aligned with the program objectives?
 - a. How appropriate has planning and resourcing been for program delivery?
 - b. Was the scope of the grants appropriate to support recovery objectives?
 - c. To what extent have funding arrangements and governance structures supported effective implementation of the program?
2. How effectively are the programs being delivered?
 - a. How well has information about the program (i.e., program objectives, eligibility, assessment criteria and process) been communicated to the target audience? To what extent has this affected grant take-up?
 - b. How well was the grant application, assessment, and disbursement process implemented?
 - c. To what extent are programs actively and consistently collecting and managing data for monitoring and evaluation purposes? How effective has this been?
3. What are the enablers, barriers, and areas for improvement for the grants?
4. What was delivered by the program?
 - a. To what extent are projects being delivered according to approved deeds?
 - b. How do project outputs (thus far) indicate progress towards short- and medium-term

2.4 Evaluation methods


This evaluation has used a mixed method design drawing on qualitative and quantitative data sources including:

- de-identified administrative data from DRNSW for the 46 councils who participated in the BCRRF
- an online survey with BCRRF grant recipients. All 46 councils were invited and 19 responded. The survey was undertaken in October of 2022.
- interviews with program design staff and grant management staff.

We present all three data sources in this report under key headings related to the design, implementation, and early outcomes of the BCRRF.

We have used a 95% confidence interval (CIs) wherever we measure mean ratings of different aspects of implementation and impact based on the survey data. The 95% confidence interval accounts for uncertainty in our sample compared with the actual population. To interpret the CIs, imagine that if we were to take repeated samples and constructed the 95% CIs for each sample, 95% of them would contain the population mean. The CIs can be used to compare differences on two or more aspects that have been measured. Wherever a difference exists between these aspects, and there is no overlap between the CIs, we can be confident at the 95% level that these differences are not due to chance (they are statistically significant differences).

3. Overview of Program results

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	What was delivered by the program?	Evidence from SmartyGrants, interviews with program staff, Grant Management Office (GMO) staff, and feedback from grant recipients confirm that the program met its goal to distribute grant funds quickly to bushfire affected LGAs.
	How effectively are the programs being delivered?	
	Was the scope of the grants appropriate to support recovery objectives?	The BCRRF funding allowed councils to use the funds in a way they saw would benefit their communities the most. This included community events and spaces to raise the morale and spirits of the local community, upgrading local infrastructure as well as promoting their community as an attractive place to visit or relocate to.

3.1 Disaster recovery outcomes

Table 2 shows the disaster recovery outcomes towards which councils anticipated their projects would contribute when lodging their application (Application Form). Councils were also asked to report which disaster recovery outcomes their projects actually contributed to (Completion Report). The seven disaster recovery outcomes were pre-defined and available as a tick box option on the two forms. The community has improved capacity and capability to respond to future disasters had the highest selection rate (selected by 40 of 46 councils) amongst the councils as the disaster recovery outcome they were addressing with the BCRRF funding.

Table 2. Number of councils that nominated each of the pre-defined disaster recovery outcomes in their application form and completion and acquittal forms Note: Applicants could nominate more than one outcome⁵.

Disaster recovery outcome	Application Form (n=46)	Completion Report (n=43)
The community has improved capacity and capability to respond to future disasters	40	36
The needs of vulnerable groups are addressed in disaster recovery	30	24
Business and not-for-profits have in place adequate mitigation practices for risks and threats	26	22
The community can express its changing disaster recovery needs	26	17
The community is aware of the disaster recovery processes	23	17
Government, private sector, civil society, and organisations are engaged in plans for mitigation and management of the recovery	20	15
Community members are aware of the risks of future disasters	19	14

Table 3 below shows that the activities councils planned to complete to achieve their intended outcomes. The application form did not ask applicants to align activities to their nominated outcomes and as such data matching activities to each of the pre-defined disaster recovery outcomes was not possible.

On the Completion and Acquittal (C&A) form, councils were asked to list the activities they undertook. Responses were analysed and grouped into key themes, as presented below in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of activities councils listed on their completion and acquittal forms.

Activities that contributed to outcomes	# of projects (n=43)
Community events or spaces	23
Training programs or coordination of existing support	21
Promoting the region	20
Infrastructure (physical or digital), equipment or stock replacement	20
Research or Planning	15

Table 3 shows that across the 43 projects that had submitted their C&A form, the most common type of activity was community events or improvement to outdoor community meeting space designed to raise the morale and spirits of the local community. Training programs were the next most common activity and included a wide range of subject areas such as business training and diversification, photography and promotion, first aid, and understanding the impacts of trauma.

⁵ At the time of this evaluation 3 councils had not submitted completion reports.

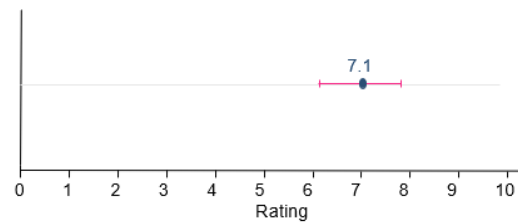
Many councils used their funding to pull together promotional material of their region to be used at the time, but also for years to come. Promoting the region was with the intent of reaching potential visitors, as well as people who might plan to move to the region or invest in the region. All of these groups were seen by the councils to be important to the economic recovery of the regions. During the delivery phase of BCRRF, COVID-19 had also impacted the economic position and environment of the townships. As such, local councils were not just needing to manage their recovery from the bushfires, but also manage town spirit and economy during a pandemic. The impacts of COVID-19 on regional economies that applicants described included two main facets; firstly, reduced visitors and tourism due to borders closing and general COVID-19 restrictions, and secondly, but at a later time point, there was increased tourism due to domestic travel booming when overseas travel was not possible. Councils were aware of this opportunity and the need to increase the visibility of their region above others in the inflated domestic tourism market.

An example of a physical infrastructure project is improving an existing building to be used as an evacuation centre in future events. This included upgrades for accessibility such as ramps and accessibility of toilets. Digital infrastructure often included hub-type websites such as a central platform for business community to connect with others for small business development or where the local job market could be coordinated at no cost to local businesses or job seekers.

Some councils took the opportunity to conduct general research in and of their region, or, to gather the information they need to be able to plan for future disaster events.

Figure 2 shows that survey respondents provided positive ratings (7.1 out of 10) regarding being able to use their BCRRF funds to meet their community's social recovery needs. This supports the conditions of the grant giving councils the ability to spend their BCRRF funding in a manner which they thought would benefit their community the most. Survey respondents also provided a positive rating (6.4 out of 10) of where they think their councils are on their recovery journey so far. It is possible that one of the reasons why councils feel positive about their recovery journey is because they believe they were able to meet their community's social recovery needs.

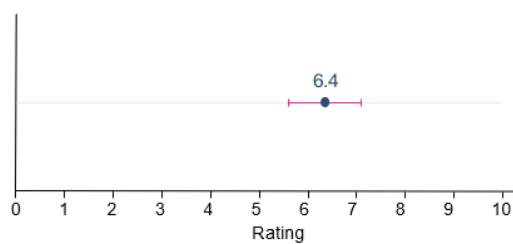
To what extent were you able to use the BCRRF funding to meet your community's social recovery needs?



n=19 95% CI Average rating

Rating: 0 - Not at all; 10 - A great extent

How far along your recovery journey is your community?



n=19 95% CI Average rating

Rating: 0 - Not at all recovered; 10 - Completely recovered

Figure 2: Councils ratings of the extent that the BCRRF funds were able to be used to fund social recovery needs and where they are on their recovery journey

3.2 Distribution of funds

All 20 councils that were eligible for the higher funding (\$250,000) received that full amount. Of the 29 that were eligible for the lower funding (\$100,000), three did not apply at all, three others applied for less than the \$100,000, and the remaining 23 councils applied for and received the full \$100,000. Figure 3 shows how these funds were distributed across NSW as well as the fire extent and severity as identified by the NSW Department of Planning and Environment in collaboration with the NSW Rural Fire Service⁶.

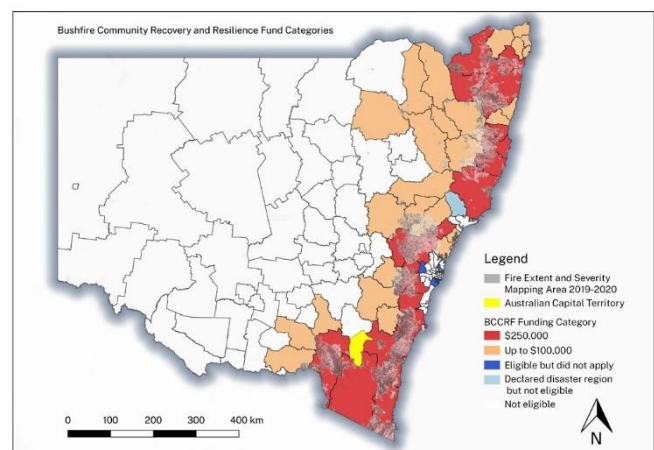


Figure 3: Distribution of grant funds by amount and LGA

⁶ State Government of NSW and Department of Planning and Environment 2020; <https://datasets.seed.nsw.gov.au/dataset/fire-extent-and-severity-mapping-fesm>

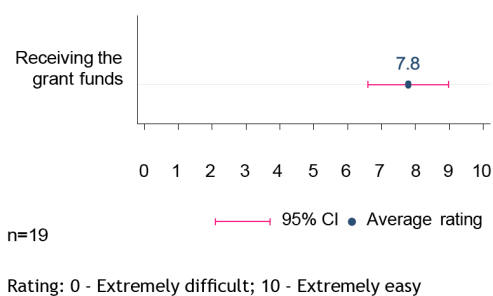
3.3 Responding to community need

Figure 4 shows that councils found the process of securing and accessing grant funds very easy, on average rating it 7.8 out of 10. Program staff at DRNSW confirmed that this process is different to other programs. A DRNSW staff member reported that this process was 'super condensed.' They commented further that once a project was approved, full payment was then released up-front. Some projects were approved one day and contracted the next. Although 'not the usual practice,' it was in line with the intent of this program to provide immediate recovery funding.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the timeliness of some aspects of the grant as well, with 0 being 'Extremely slow' and 10 being 'Extremely fast'. They rated receiving the initial funds in a timely manner very highly – with an average rating of 8.3 out of 10. They thought the funding agreements were finished in a timely manner as well, rating this aspect at 7.5 out of 10. This is important because any delay in finalising the funding agreements would have led to a delay in access to funds. Survey respondents were also asked to rate whether the BCRRF grant was made available in a timely manner following the bushfires. This too received a positive rating (7.4 out of 10).

Taken together, the non-competitive targeted design of the program and the speed of assessment and approval processes, allowed for the rapid deployment of funds, which is exactly what was needed by the LGAs impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires.

Please rate the ease with which you found the following aspect of the BCRRF?



Timeliness of the following aspects of the BCRRF?

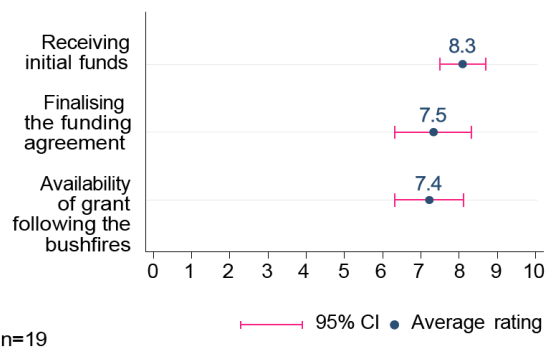
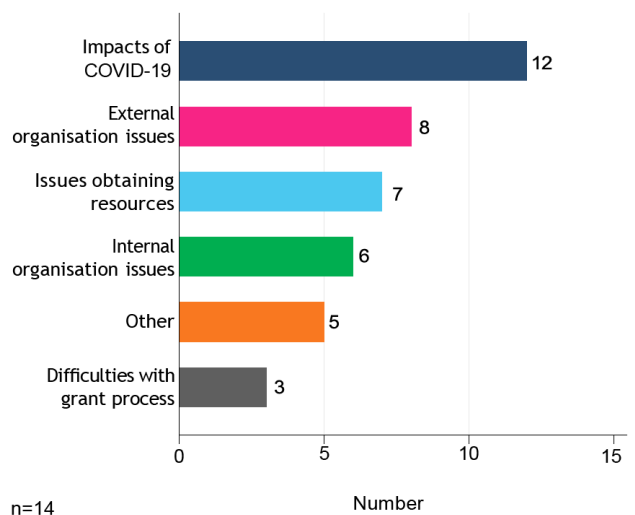


Figure 4: Ease of receiving grant funds, as well as the timeliness of receiving the initial funds, finalizing funding agreement, and timeliness the grants availability following the bushfires

3.4 Project timelines

Thirty-five of the 46 councils applied for at least one project variation to overcome the challenges associated with project delays. The reasons variations were required are outlined in Figure 6. Fourteen of the 19 survey respondents reported that they were not able to deliver their project to the agreed timelines with 12 citing COVID-19 as a major reason. Other reasons included issues obtaining resources and external and internal organisational issues. The reasons for project delays are explored in greater detail in chapter 7 when we investigate project variations and the broader impact of COVID-19.


Reason(s) for not being able to deliver project in agreed timeframes



Respondents could give more than 1 response

Figure 5: Survey respondents' reasons for delays to their BCRRF funded projects

4. Program Design Elements

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	To what extent are program design elements and processes aligned with the program objectives?	The intent of the program was to provide funding to bushfire affected communities as quickly as possible to ensure that Councils could begin to address the social recovery needs of their community. Interviews with program and GMO staff as well as council feedback confirm that the BCRRF's program features, and processes used to implement it were appropriate.
	To what extent have funding arrangements and governance structures supported effective implementation of the program?	Speed of funding distribution was the number one objective, with program design developed to ensure funds were distributed to the affected communities immediately following the fires.

4.1 Fast and simple design

The BCRRF had program design elements that aimed to provide funding to bushfire affected communities quickly. Interviews with DRNSW Program staff discussed the key driver for program design: To provide funding to bushfire affected communities as quickly as possible. For rapid distribution of funding it was important that there was a straightforward program design with clear guidelines stating what was, and what was not eligible for funding. One of the survey respondents found this to be an appealing aspect of the grant.

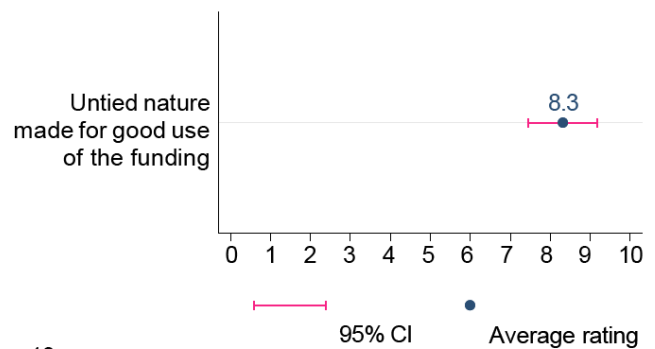
“Easy process for applying, accessing funding, guidelines were general meaning it was easy to find projects to fit”.

The program was deliberately designed to be non-competitive, with a broad statement on scope of projects and clear guidance on eligible and non-eligible elements, to ensure that money could be with councils as quickly as possible. Interviews with staff from the DRNSW Grant Management Office (GMO) confirmed that this simple design supported a rapid deployment of funds. As previously mentioned in chapter 3, some projects were approved one day and contracted the next.

The design elements of the BCRRF provided flexibility to respond in the way that was most appropriate for each council's community. Councils that responded to the survey also shared these sentiments, as represented in Figure 6, rating the untied nature of the funding very highly - 8.3 out of 10. Furthermore, one of the survey respondents also commented on the flexibility of the grant to respond to their needs.

“Much needed funding and support to community. The ability to make decisions based on community need. Flexibility to vary project based on evolving needs (during and post COVID-19 lockdowns)”.

Please rate your agreement with the following statement



Rating: 0 - Completely disagree; 10 - Completely agree

Figure 6: Average councils rating of the untied nature of the BCRRF funds



4.2 Streamlined

Unlike other grant schemes that involved grant recipients completing an application and then completing a funding agreement if successful, the BCRRF streamlined the process, so that the application became the basis of the funding agreement. This design element was intended to reduce the burden of applying and the need for repeated submission of project details by grant recipients, with the merging of two steps into one.

To simplify the process, an expert assessment panel was not used to assess projects. Instead, projects were assessed by the program team and approved by the Program Manager. The design of the grant and assessment focused on project eligibility meant that applications could be easily assessed by program staff. Furthermore, funding was low and within the delegation of the Program Manager to approve.

Another important design element was that all the grant funding was released up-front to ensure that communities would have the means to implement their recovery programs without delay.

5. Applications and assessments

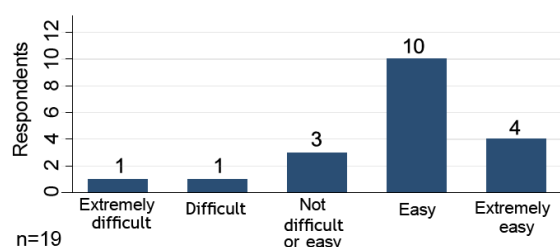
Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	How well was the grant application, assessment, and disbursement process implemented?	Feedback from councils and staff was very positive regarding the application process and clear guidelines which made it easy for councils to identify eligible projects. However, the impact of COVID-19 highlighted that whilst combining the application and funding agreement processes allowed for rapid deployment of funds, the processes around variations was not complementary.
	Did the programs represent administrative value for money?	Evidence from SmartyGrants, feedback from councils, and interviews with programs team staff and GMO staff all confirm that the nature of the grants (i.e., non-competitive) made the assessment process easy. Furthermore, evidence from SmartyGrants demonstrates that grant processing times were very efficient

5.1 The application process

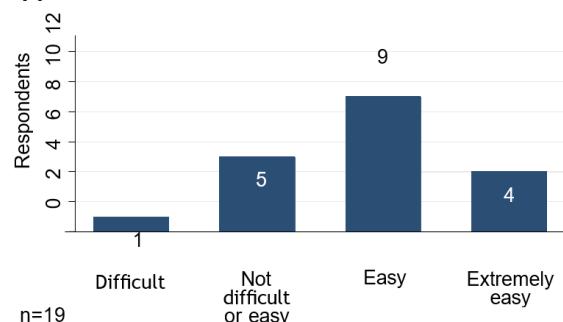
The program was first announced in January 2020, with applications open from late January 2020 until 31 March 2020. The first application was received by 5 February 2020. Applications closed on 27 October 2020 with the last application received on 29 April 2020.

Figure 7⁷ shows that of the three processes the 19 council recipients who completed the survey were asked about, using the online system to apply for the grant and funding agreement received the greatest number of “Easy” responses (10 compared with 9 and 8 for the ease of completing the application form and ease of obtaining assistance with the grant’s application process respectively). Similarly, the ease of using the online system to apply for the grant and funding agreement received fewer neutral responses than the other two processes. This demonstrates that, based on the responses of those that completed the survey, it appears that council recipients’ experiences of using the online system was easier than either completing the application form or receiving assistance with aspects of the grants application and funding process. Nevertheless, at least two thirds of the 19 respondents found all three processes to be “Easy” or “Extremely easy”.

The ease with which you found using the online system for applying for the grant and funding agreement:



The ease with which you found completing the application form:



The ease with which you found obtaining assistance with aspects of the grant’s application and funding process:

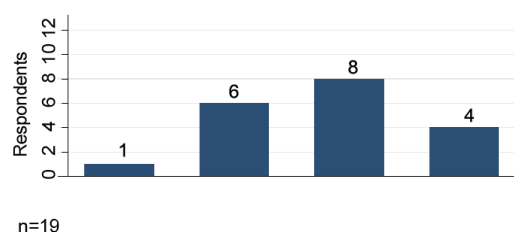


Figure 7: Survey respondents’ responses to questions about the ease of aspects of the application process for the BCRRF grant

⁷ Respondents were originally asked to rate each aspect on a scale between 0 (Extremely difficult) and 10 (Extremely easy). Average scores were identical across all three processes, so we collapsed the responses into 5 categories (0-1 Extremely difficult, 2-3 Difficult, 4-6 Not difficult or easy, 7-8 Easy 9-10 Extremely easy) to see whether there were any meaningful differences over the distribution of responses

When survey respondents were asked: What do you think worked well in the BCRRF grant process? The response theme that was reported the most centered on the application process:

“Easy process for applying”

“Application process was straightforward”

“All elements...very clear and stepped out process”

Survey respondents also had high praise for the staff in the GMO:

“Easy to follow reporting process. Good staff assisting with any questions regarding the grant”

“Staff that were taking care of grant process were very accommodating to any queries we had.”


► **5.2 What about eligible LGAs that did not apply?**

There were three councils that were eligible but did not apply. Whilst there is no direct data elucidating why some councils didn't apply, GMO staff reported they understood, anecdotally, that some of the councils had communicated to them that they felt they weren't as impacted by the 19/20 bushfires as other LGAs.

► **5.3 Assessment process**

As BCRRF was a non-competitive funding program, the assessment process was very simple. Assessments were conducted by two project officers and manager, with that panel assessing each application against eligibility parameters. Most activities were assessed as eligible (according to the guidelines) and one of the staff members interviewed for the evaluation indicated that additional information was rarely required. Of the 50 applications received, 4 were withdrawn (all from the one council) and all 46 applications were approved.

6. Communication and support

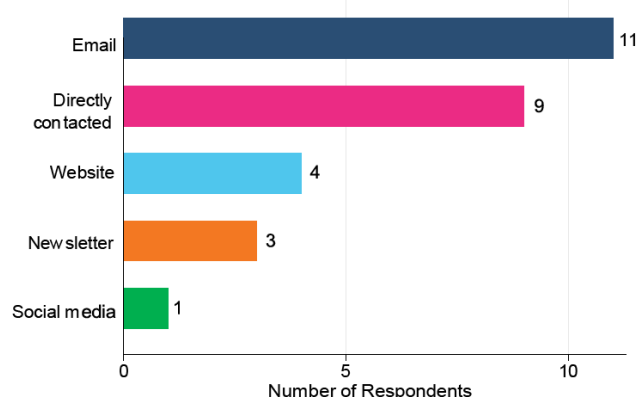
Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	<p>How well has information about the program (i.e., program objectives, eligibility, assessment criteria and process) been communicated to the target audience? To what extent has this affected grant take-up?</p> <p>What are the enablers, barriers, and areas for improvement for the grants?</p>	<p>Evidence from SmartyGrants as well as feedback from councils confirms that the availability and details of the grant were well communicated to councils. Councils did not have any negative commentary about the communication of the grant. Nonetheless, grantee feedback indicated that additional communication mechanisms would provide further benefit.</p>

6.1 Awareness of BCRRF funding opportunities

Overall, the program guidelines were clear and applicants understood the program. This is reflected in the take up of the grant from most eligible councils and the low level of ineligible projects. All councils eligible to receive BCRRF funding were sent an email advising them of their eligibility and the guidelines associated with the grant. Throughout the application process, GMO staff were available to each applicant to support them with their application or to answer any questions they had about the grant.

Figure 8 below shows that, when surveyed, most respondents confirmed that they were made aware of the BCRRF funding opportunity via email or were contacted directly. At least sixteen of the 19 survey respondents reported being made aware by either email, being directly contacted, or both⁸.

How did you hear about the BCRRF grant?



n=19
Respondents could give more than 1 response

Figure 8: How survey respondents reported hearing about the BCRRF grant

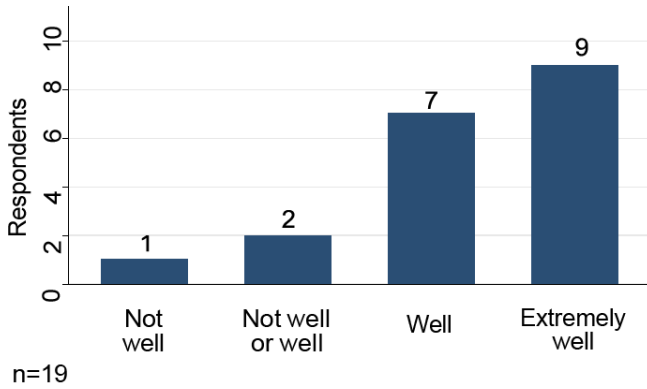
As previously mentioned, the application submitted by the councils also contained all their funding deed terms, so councils were aware of the funding requirements when they were putting forward their projects.

6.2 Effectiveness of the communication

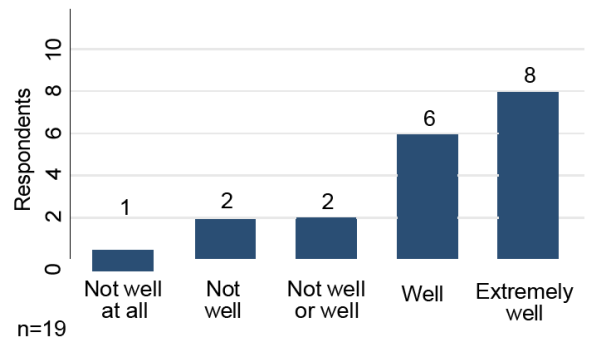
Figure 9 shows the extent to which councils understood specific aspects of the grant scheme prior to signing the funding deed. Survey results suggest that councils generally had a good understanding across all aspects that were asked about. Eligibility rules, both for the councils as well as the types of projects, ranked especially high. Organisations also had a fairly good understanding of who they could contact with regards to the grant, as well as what their “other” obligations were. There was a relatively low level of understanding of reporting requirements, which could be explained by progress reporting requirements being introduced part way through the program (see Section 7).

⁸ As most survey invites were sent to generic council emails it is not possible to determine whether the applicant and survey responder were the same person. It is also possible that survey respondents selected being directly contacted if they received the email.

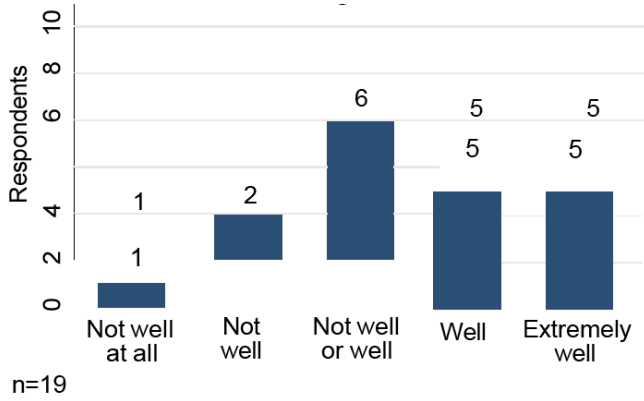
How well did you know your eligibility for the grant before your organisation signed the funding deed?



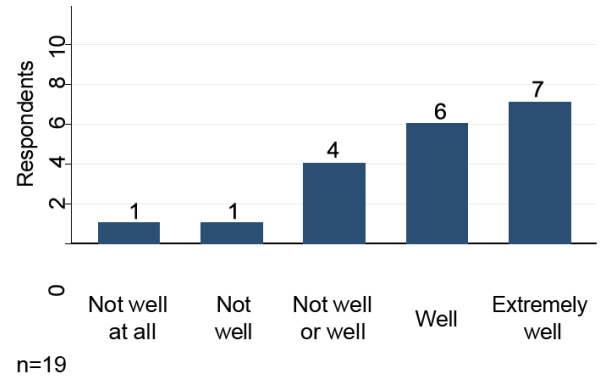
How well did you know which projects were eligible for the grant before your organisation signed the funding deed?



How well did you know your reporting requirements for the grant before your organisation signed the funding deed?



How well did you know your other obligations as a grantee before your organisation signed the funding deed?



How well did you know who to contact for the grant before your organisation signed the funding deed?

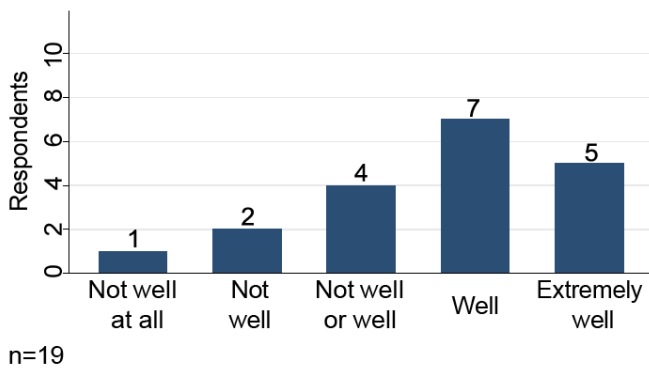



Figure 9: Survey respondents' awareness about BCRRF grant requirements at time of signing funding deed

7. Funding Deed

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	<p>To what extent are projects being delivered according to approved deeds?</p> <p>How appropriate has planning and resourcing been for program delivery?</p>	<p>Analysis of activity data in SmartyGrants (presented in Chapter 3) confirms that the councils are spending the money in-line with their funding deeds. Furthermore, 18 of the 19 councils who completed the survey believed that the funding was sufficient for them to fund the initial scope of the project they submitted in their application.</p>

The design of the BCRRF grant meant that the funding deed was combined with the application, leading to a speedier process and ensuring that recovery funds could reach the councils in the shortest possible time. Once the approval was granted, the funding deeds were quickly executed and preparations for the upfront payments were made immediately.

7.1 Processing times

Table 4 shows a summary of the time taken for each stage of the application process from the BCRRF administrative data. There were five stages from when the application was received to when the payment was confirmed. Table 4 shows that the process was speedy, and on average took just over 14 days for each grant application to be approved and paid. Thus, the administrative data confirms that the objective of dispensing recovery funds quickly was achieved. Where there is a 0 value in one of the table columns, this indicates that the application moved from that stage within a day. Where there is a negative value, this indicates that the date an application appeared in a later stage was before the date it appeared in a preceding stage⁹.

7.2 Disbursement

As stated earlier, the design of the BCRRF was such that all grant money was to be paid up-front to each LGA at the beginning of the contract. Table 5 shows that the first batch of money was deployed in February 2020 and the final funds were deployed in May 2020. Contracts were established quickly after application and monies were disbursed in line with that. Most grants were paid in the same month that the application was lodged, except for those received after the 27th of April and the 27th of May.

Table 4: Summary of application process times in days

Processing stage	Description	Min	Max	Mean
Council Application	From when the council representative opens application form to when they submit the form.	0	28	7.4
Step 1: From submission to approval	From when the application is submitted to when the first government officer deems that the application is valid.	0	22	1.6
Step 2: From approval to Funding Deed review	From when the application is deemed as valid to when the Financial Deed is opened.	0	14	2.1
Step 3: From Funding Deed review to Funding Deed approval	From when the Financial Deed is opened to when the Financial Deed is approved.	0	20	1.3
Step 4: From Funding Deed approval to payment request	From when the Financial Deed is approved to when the Payment Request is sent to the Finance team.	0	8	3.0
Step 5: From payment request to payment confirmation	From when the Payment Request is sent to the Finance team to when the Finance team confirms the payment is made.	-7	19	6.1
Sum of Days with Government (Steps 1 to 5)	Adding the preceding stages together, from FA Submit to Payment Confirmed.	-1	32	14.1

⁹ This is most likely an administrative error but we have included all data 'as is' in the evaluation. Consequently, the mean scores in the final column of the last two rows will be slightly underestimated.

Table 5: Disbursement of funds and application information by month paid.

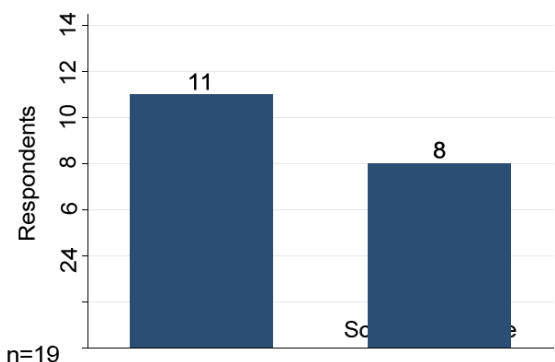
Month of payment	Sum amount paid	Cumulative	Application date range	Number of council recipients	Grant amount \$100,000/\$250,000
February 2020	\$1,841,515	\$1,841,515	5/2/2020 to 26/2/2020	11	6 / 5
March 2020	\$3,150,000	\$4,991,515	3/3/2020 to 27/3/2020	18	9 / 9
April 2020	\$1,861,933	\$6,853,448	27/3/2020 to 9/4/2020	13	9 / 4
May 2020	\$700,000	\$7,553,448	27/4/2020 to 29/4/2020	4	2 / 2
Grand Total	\$7,553,448			46	26 / 20

Survey respondents also rated the speed that they received the initial funds very highly (8.3 out of 10). Overall, this is best captured by the following quote:

‘I think you can’t underestimate how busy those small councils are when a disaster hits. To have a non-competitive allocation to councils was a godsend’

Figure 10 shows that all 19 councils who responded to the survey “Agreed” or “Somewhat agreed” that the funding was rolled out quickly enough for them to spend the money as they intended to. It also shows that all except one respondent believed that the funding was sufficient for them to fund the initial scope of activities in their project submission.

The funding was available quickly enough to do what you intended initially:



The funding was sufficient to do what you intended initially:

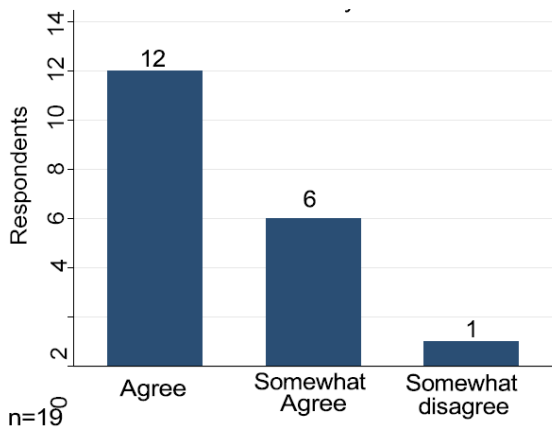


Figure 10: Survey respondents’ level of agreement that the BCRRF funds were both sufficient rolled out quickly

When asked to provide additional commentary around this, two respondents reported positively on the grants flexibility:

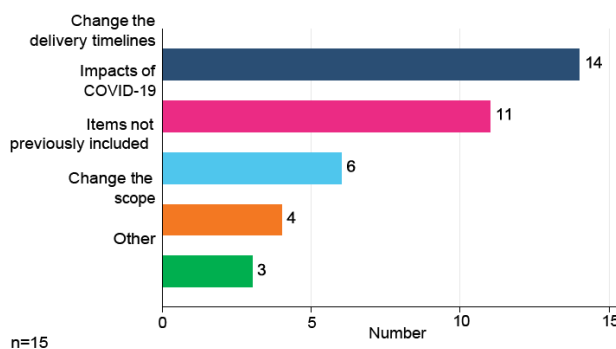
“The funding guidelines were very flexible which meant the community could determine the best way to use it to maximise benefit”.

“program was fit for purpose and flexible to allow each community to prioritise as per their needs.”

7.3 Project variations

Analysis of the administrative data reveals that of the 46 applicants 24 have requested one variation to their funding agreement, nine had two variations and a further three had three variations. In total, 36 of the 46 councils that received BCRRF funding applied for at least one variation (which was comparable to the 15 of 19 survey respondents that reported requesting a variation). Figure 11 shows that 14 of the 19 respondents reported changing timelines, and 11 of the 19 respondents reported the impacts of COVID-19, as the two main reasons for councils needing to submit project variations.

Reason(s) for requesting variation(s)



Respondents could give more than 1 response

Figure 11: Survey respondents’ reasons for requiring a BCRRF project variation

Analysis of the administration data confirms that managing timelines was a major contributor to the need for variations. When submitting a variation request, applicants were required to indicate if the type of variation was for a time extension and/or change in project scope. Across all 50 variation requests, 38 (76%) included a request for a time extension and 33 (66%) included a change in project scope.

The applicant was also able to note the reason they are requesting the variation. Regardless of type of variation, COVID-19 was noted as the reason in 30 of 50 (60%) variation requests.

7.4 The impact of COVID-19


COVID-19 can be directly linked to the large number of project variations. Many of the planned events were cancelled: For example, a “thank you” BBQ for the Rural Fire Service couldn’t be held. Most early variations involved changing dates of events as at the time the longevity of COVID-19 impacts were not known. Further variations were required as restrictions were extended. Ultimately, many project events were cancelled and variations were required so the funding could be allocated to other needs in their LGA.

This became a challenge with the number of variations required due to COVID-19 as the variations were being requested before the contracts were finalised. To speed up the contracting process for BCRRF, the application form and funding deed were integrated into the one document. While this was attributed by staff and councils as contributing to the simplicity and speed of the fund, there was one administrative down-side to this design. For those applications that had been submitted but not yet approved, this presented an administrative impost. In order to modify the application/funding deed, program staff needed to revoke the submitted status of the application, then applicants needed to update the relevant fields, secure the relevant signatures again and then resubmit the form. This process of acquiring the signatures was complicated because of the high prevalence of people working from home, and at the time the Department did not accept digital signatures. Were the application and funding deed two separate documents, as they usually are, then the application could remain unchanged and the details in the funding deed updated to suit the new environment.

When survey respondents rated the difficulty associated with submitting variations, the mean rating of the variation process was lower than the ratings for other processes (mean rating of 5.9 out of 10). The process appears to have been particularly onerous because numerous variations required the application form to be recompleted. However, had these processes not been combined in the BCRRF grant, the process of getting the funding to councils would have been longer.

Nonetheless, there was some negative feedback about variations not related to COVID-19 or the combined application/funding deed. One of the responding councils said that the variation process was slow, and that they are still waiting for approval on variations requested four months ago. Another responding council stated that whilst assessment and approval was quick, administering the grant was time-consuming and the variation process ‘didn’t help’. There were other concerns, but they were largely outside the fault of the grant administration, for example, rising costs leading to projects being over budget.

8. Monitoring and reports

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	<p>To what extent are programs actively and consistently collecting and managing data for monitoring and evaluation purposes?</p> <p>How effective has this been?</p>	<p>Data collection for the BCRRF program has been comprehensive and well recorded. This is evidenced by the breadth of data included in this report as well as from interviews with GMO and programs team staff.</p> <p>However, the evaluation has highlighted that improving the data collection methods to reduce duplication and expand its application to be able to be used in both the monitoring and evaluation of programs, as well as developing an 'evaluation view' from the outset will aid in improving monitoring and evaluation efficiency.</p>

The BCRRF grant's initial reporting was designed to have minimal impact on the councils. The guidelines required the councils to submit a short completion report and evidence of expenditure within 2 months of project completion. The original timeline for project completion was 30 June 2020. However, the completion date was extended due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the requirement for progress reports was also introduced.

8.1 Monitoring projects and ongoing data collection

Progress reports, while not originally planned for the fund, provided useful, on-going insights into fund expenditure. While noting that without the impact of COVID-19 there would have been no need for progress reports (projects were originally scheduled to be completed by June 2020), lengthy time extensions and the concomitant provision of reporting to Resilience NSW meant progress reports became a risk management tool.

As a result, progress reports were tracking:

- The rollout of projects
- The need for variations and revised completion dates, and
- Current expenditure.

The project team noted that in most other grants, progress reports are usually associated with a milestone payment and that this serves as a strong motivation for reports being submitted. However, the BCRRF was not designed to include progress reports as councils were paid the full amount of funds up front. Table 6 shows that the proportion of progress reports lodged at the beginning of the projects was high with more than 90% of active projects submitting a progress report. It also shows that the proportion declines throughout 2021 and rises again in 2022. Caution should be taken when interpreting submission rates as the reasons for this are unknown, and

there are many possible explanations including fatigue due to COVID-19 and numerous flood events in 2021 and 2022.

Table 6: Number of projects that submitted progress reports by month of reporting

Date of Progress Report	Number of projects still active	Number of reports submitted	Proportion of progress reports submitted relative to active projects
21 October 2020	46	44	96%
11 January 2021	42	39	93%
23 April 2021	24	11	46%
2 August 2021	10	4	40%
20 January 2022	6	4	67%

8.2 Data collection improvements

Some of the data collected about grants involves multiple entries of events, funding amounts, or activities. These are often stored in a single cell for an application and create additional data cleaning steps before the data can be analysed.

Recommendation: build in a mechanism to report against relevant items or activities for each grant, providing a 'long' view, for example: activity 1, activity 2 etc.

Specific activities supported by this grant were reported in both the Progress Reports and in the Completion & Acquittal forms. However, the formats of these tables included dates and attendee counts for events or training, but did not include costs. Separately, project expenditure was itemised but did not include dates.

Recommendation: to be able to see greater detail of fund utilisation, include date and cost information against activities in the Project Expenditure section of the completion and acquittal form. Having this data would provide additional insights for no additional impost on the grant recipients, and should be considered for future grants of this nature.


8.3 Developing an 'evaluation view'

DRNSW should consider investigating the possibility of developing an automated 'evaluation dataset' from SmartyGrants. Ideally this would involve querying the underlying SmartyGrants data to compile key evaluation fields in a single table or 'view'. This would not change the underlying structure or data but simply draw upon it to produce a convenience dataset for the purposes of evaluation. Automating such a process would enable ongoing monitoring of the progress of grants from an evaluation perspective (as opposed to an administrative perspective).

Recommended fields:

- Project
- A summary of eligibility (i.e., did they meet the published eligibility criteria, and if not, why they were provided the funding)
- Key application and funding dates (to enable a view of timeliness of administration)
- Project description
- Funding amounts
- Original scope and delivery dates
- What has been delivered so far
- Current status (i.e., current milestone, or completed), status at each milestone, expected or actual completion dates
- What was delivered at the point of completion, whether this differed to original scope, and why

9. Outputs and early outcomes

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	How do project outputs (thus far) indicate progress towards recovery outcomes?	The BCRRF was intended to deliver immediate outcomes – mostly because the program was meant to deliver outcomes for impacted communities within a 6 months period, and the intent was to distribute grant funds quickly to bushfire affected LGAs. Evidence from Program and GMO staff, administrative data analysis, and feedback from councils show that the short-term or early outcomes of this program have been numerous and effective.

9.1 Summary of council-reported BCRRF projects early outcomes

The speedy rollout and broad guidelines for eligible projects has resulted in numerous early recovery outcomes being achieved. During project completion and acquittal reporting, councils were asked if the funding provided had the desired impacts to their community, and to describe those impacts. These free text responses were analysed and grouped into key themes presented in Figure 12¹⁰.

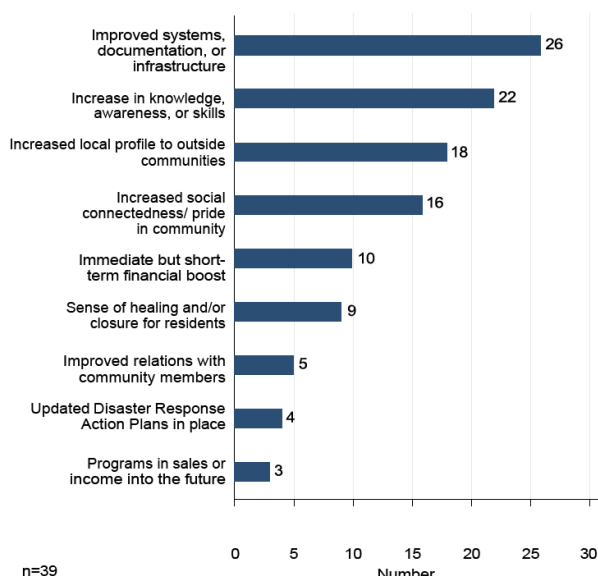


Figure 12: Types of impacts reported by councils

Four councils strongly noted that the desired impacts were realised, but they did not provide specific information in their descriptions that could be used to identify the types of impacts they saw.

Across the 39 councils that did describe the impact on their community, the most common type of impact described was one where they had improved systems such as hub -

like online connections, documentation such as business plans, risk strategies, etc. or updated infrastructure such as buildings being more appropriately prepared to be used as evacuation centres in the future.

Many regions held some type of training or research that resulted in local business or community increasing knowledge or skills in a range of topics, including the impacts of trauma on people and how to support yourself and others to heal.

About half of the LGAs felt that their region had an increased exposure to potential visitors, investors or people looking to permanently relocate, all having the potential to contribute to the economic recovery of the region.

Four councils specifically mentioned having improved disaster response action plans in place as a result of this funding. While this seems low, many of the other impacts described, such as 'improved systems, documentation or infrastructure', or 'increase in knowledge, awareness, or skills', would also contribute to a community that has improved capacity and capability to respond to future disasters (one of the Disaster Recovery Outcomes; Table 2).

9.2 Perceptions of early outcomes

Aside from the council-reported early outcomes in the administrative data, councils that responded to the survey were also asked a broad question about the outcome of ensuring that bushfire affected communities' immediate social recovery needs were met. Figure 13 clearly shows that there is widespread agreement amongst councils that the funding was sufficient to support their community's social recovery needs.

¹⁰ It is important to note that no parameters or guidance was provided on the form. This means that while the table includes a count of the number of projects that mentioned each of the themes, this cannot identify which projects have, and have not, addressed each theme; only which projects have mentioned each theme in their description

The BCRRF funding provided as part of these grants was sufficient to support our communities social recovery:

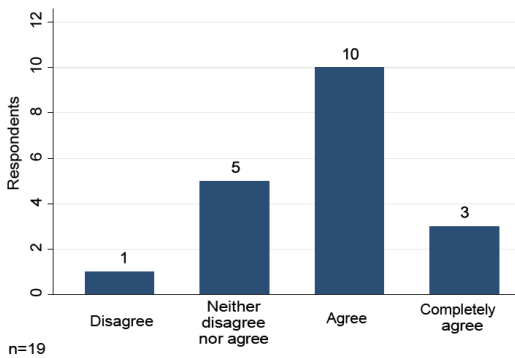


Figure 13: Survey respondents level of agreement on whether the BCRRF was sufficient to support social recovery in their communities

Additionally, Figure 14 shows that nine of the 19 councils that responded to the survey believed the BCRRF assisted them in meeting their community's basic recovery needs to 'a great extent', and the remaining 10 respondents believed the BCRRF to 'some extent' assisted them to meet their community's basic recovery needs. None of the councils believed that there was no effect from the funding.

To what extent did BCRRF funding assist in meeting your community's basic recovery needs?

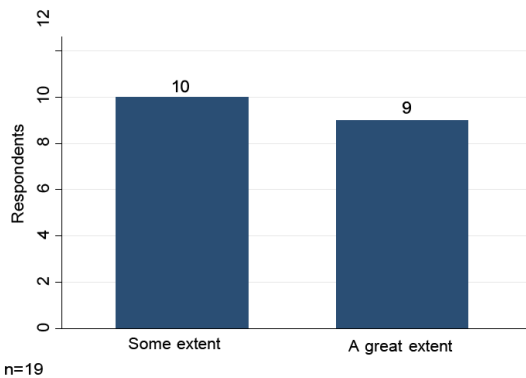


Figure 14: Survey respondents' beliefs about the extent that the BCRRF funding assisted them in meeting their community's basic recovery needs

Figure 15 shows that 17 of the 19 councils that responded to the survey either 'agreed' or 'somewhat agreed' that the BCRRF funding allowed them to address their community's most pressing recovery needs.

Two respondents disagreed with those sentiments.

"The inability to use existing Council staff inhibited our use of the funds, such as we are returning unspent funds. We are a small rural area with no "labour hire" businesses. If things are to happen here, it is usually the Council that needs to deliver it."

"The funds came relatively untied... Had we been aware at the time that so many similar opportunities existed we may have designed some different response."

So whilst the BCRRF was successful on the whole in allowing councils to address the most pressing recovery needs in their community, at least one council was disappointed in not being able to direct the funding into paying council staff directly. The other council appreciated that the funds were untied but acknowledged a more coordinated rollout of the entire suite of grants doing similar things would allow them to prepare a more strategic response to the many grants available.

The conditions of the funding allowed you to prioritise your community's most pressing recovery needs:

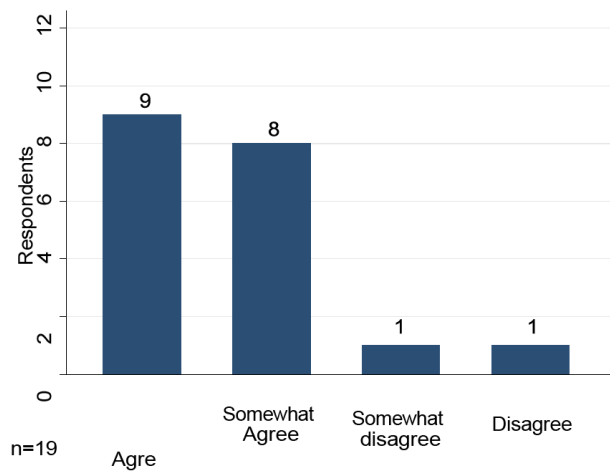



Figure 15: Number of survey respondents' level of agreement that the BCRRF funding allowed them to prioritise their community's most pressing recovery needs

10. Findings: Emerging themes and recommendations

Finding	Evaluation question(s)	Evidence
	<p>How effectively are the programs being delivered?</p> <p>What are the enablers, barriers, and areas for improvement for the grants?</p>	Evidence of the BCRRF achieving its early outcomes and meeting its objective of distributing grant funds quickly to bushfire affected LGAs confirm that this program has been delivered effectively.

10.1 Key findings and recommendations

The BCRRF met its objective of providing fast, immediate, and adequate funding to bushfire affected LGAs to support them in meeting their immediate social recovery needs. This is evidenced by the summary of projects funded by the BCRRF, projects' meeting their short-term intended early outcomes, and the testimonies of DRNSW GMO, program staff and former council staff outlined in this evaluation.

Councils also appreciated the flexibility in the design of the grant — particularly the broad scope of the guidelines — which made it easier for them to identify suitable projects that fit within the guidelines.

The program design of deliberately paying the funds in full, up front, and with flexible spending conditions, worked well in this instance. This is because councils are experienced delivery partners and work frequently with DRNSW to deliver grant funded projects. This approach would have presented greater risk with less experienced delivery partners and may present a considerably higher risk when applied to different programs of greater monetary value.

Even though the BCRRF design combined the applications and funding deeds to counteract delays in payment, having to duplicate this process each time a variation was requested when the funding deed was not yet finalised became frustrating for councils. Whilst the BCRRF delivered rapid stimulus in which the application form and funding deed acted as the funding contract, it is recommended that future grants with a similar goal should use a combined application/ funding deed process but also develop a variation process that addresses only the necessary change elements and does not require duplication of the combined process.

The impact of COVID-19 and other flood disaster events cannot be underestimated when considering the design of the BCRRF. Project delays ensued and the need to submit variation requests increased. Furthermore, having the councils fill-in progress reports, that were not

part of the initial design, increased the level of administration required to monitor the BCRRF. A GMO representative claimed that if no subsequent disasters occurred once the contracts had been finalised, the projects would most likely have been completed on time and the program design would have been very efficient. It is recommended that future designs should include contingencies for the possibility of follow-up disaster events.

11. Appendix A – Evaluation strategy

11.1 Evaluation

Directions of inquiry were developed to ensure that data would be collected and utilised to answer each evaluation question. These formed the evaluation's basis.

Evaluation Question	Directions of Inquiry	Key stakeholder(s)
1. To what extent are program design elements and processes aligned with the program objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did they do with the funding and when did they do it? Did the program design i.e., non-competitive grants round facilitate immediate access to funding? 	Data
a. How appropriate has planning and resourcing been for program delivery?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the program complete 	Document review
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Were there enough resources to stand up and implement the program in a timely fashion? Are there enough resources to continue to support the ongoing administration of the program? 	Document review GMO Programs team
b. Was the scope of the grants appropriate to support recovery objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did you do what you indicated you would? Were you able to do it quickly? Any barriers e.g. funding level? Do you understand how the level of funding was allocated? From your perspective did the grant support your community to recover? 	Councils
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you feel about untied funding? Was an allocation of funding for you to spend on what you needed to better than being locked into a project in early recovery Was it helpful for you to be able to choose the projects that you spent the money on? 	Councils
c. To what extent have funding arrangements and governance structures supported effective implementation of the program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there clear structures in place to support the ongoing administration of the program? 	GMO staff Programs team

Evaluation Question	Directions of Inquiry	Key stakeholder(s)
1. How effectively are the programs being delivered?		
a. How well has information about the program (i.e., program objectives, eligibility, assessment criteria and process) been communicated to the target audience? To what extent has this affected grant take-up?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What was the documentation provided to recipients about funding allocation and requirements – funding deed 	GMO staff Document review
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did all eligible councils access the fund – if not why not? 	Data GMO staff
b. How well was the grant application, assessment, and disbursement process implemented?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speed of disbursement 	Data
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent were councils and grant recipients clear about their roles and responsibilities before a formal agreement was entered into? 	Programs team Councils
c. To what extent are programs actively and consistently collecting and managing data for monitoring and evaluation purposes? How effective has this been?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the monitoring and evaluation data requirements, were these communicated to councils, are they being followed? 	Programs team and GMO staff Document review

Evaluation Question	Directions of Inquiry	Key stakeholder(s)
2. What are the enablers, barriers, and areas for improvement for the grants?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What enabled the successful delivery of the program? 	Programs team GMO Councils
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the barriers hindering the successful delivery of the program? 	Programs team GMO Councils

Evaluation Question	Directions of Inquiry	Key stakeholder(s)
3. What was delivered by the program?		
a. To what extent are projects being delivered according to approved deeds?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could organisations/ grant recipients spend the money in the way that they envisioned? 	Document review Councils
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Were grant recipients able to deliver the projects on time? If projects are still ongoing, are they close to finishing? 	Document review
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent did grant recipients have/ need to modify their projects? 	Data Councils
b. How do project outputs (thus far) indicate progress towards short- and medium-term recovery outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did you use the funding to do activities you would not have otherwise been able to do? In hindsight, did those activities effectively support your community as you'd expected? 	Councils
c. Did the programs represent administrative value for money?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If this funding were to be rolled out again what changes would you recommend? 	Programs team Councils

12. Appendix B – Evaluation data and analyses

The following data sources were used in the evaluation.

1. Administrative data was collected and stored by DRNSW in their SmartyGrants system. Councils accessed an online portal to input their applications, variation requests, submission of progress reports, submission of completion reports, and for submitting invoices.
 - a. The data was shared with Spillover Data Consultancy via online cloud storage.
 - b. Each of the different data processes (e.g., applications, completion reports etc.) were stored on separate spreadsheets
 - c. The evaluation team combined these spreadsheets to form a single dataset for analysis
 - d. Each variable field was given a separate name to ensure that the variables would not be misidentified
 - e. We undertook descriptive statistical analyses of multiple fields of the data and we present the results in the evaluation report
2. BCRRF Grant Recipient survey
 - a. A survey consisting of 16 questions was developed and administered on SurveyMonkey
 - b. The survey was sent to all 46 councils and 19 responded (a response rate of 41.3%)
 - c. STATA 16 was used to download and analyse the survey responses
 - d. We undertook descriptive statistical analyses of the data and we present the results in the evaluation report
3. Online interviews with Program staff and GMO staff were conducted
 - a. The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams
 - b. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and interview footage, and present the results in the evaluation report