Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Program: Process and Early Outcomes Evaluation

Department of Regional NSW

August 2023

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Executive Summary

The program

The Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Program (CEP) was allocated $25m in funding under the Regional Recovery Package, a $200m funding commitment made in 2021 as part of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy. The program aimed to support economic recovery in regional NSW by stimulating activity in the events, hospitality, and accommodation sectors. It also aimed to reconnect communities by facilitating the delivery of events that promoted social cohesion in a post-lockdown environment.

Through CEP, $22 million was made available to 95 regional LGAs and unincorporated areas. Funding was allocated based on population size, with a further $1,812,057 disbursed to cross-border communities.

All events under the program were originally scheduled to be completed by 31 March 2023 but due to natural disasters and weather events impacting event delivery, the program completion date was extended to 31 January 2024. As such, completion report data was not available for this process evaluation. Indicative early outcomes are provided, along with a comprehensive assessment of the processes involved in program design and administration.

Summary of findings

Overall, the evaluation found the program to be appropriate and effective, with early outcomes indicating a positive impact on community connection and economic recovery. 93 eligible applicants took up their funding allocation and proposed 815 events with an average of 8.8 events per applicant. Approximately 43% of the proposed events were new events. While most (84.3%) events were small-scale (with budgets of less than $50,000), a number of 'large' events were held with budgets of over $150,000.

The evaluation found that program objectives were relevant to the needs of communities and aligned with the program's aim to support rapid recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. The flexibility of the program meant grantees were able to consult with their communities and use the funding provided to meet emerging and related local needs, including those of smaller communities and disaster effected areas.

The program introduced several new design features to expedite funding delivery and simplify processes, with the aim of reducing administrative burden for both the Department and grantees. These changes aimed to utilise existing council capacity to quickly fund and implement suitable events but were premised on some assumptions regarding council and community capacity to deliver the events that did not always reflect on the ground realities, particularly in disaster effected areas. Similarly, tight program timeframes, while aligned with rapid stimulus, had negative impacts on some aspects of application quality and event delivery.

Overall, the program was administered effectively and efficiently. Some aspects of program administration were identified as problematic for both grantees and internal stakeholders. These included the recording of multiple community events under a single, 'all-in-one' application form and the use of spreadsheets to record data for projects, which impacted the ability to meet DRNSW reporting requirements and delayed funding delivery.

Early outcomes data indicate that events provided through the program were well received and had a positive impact on community connection and economic recovery. The program also supported access to cultural activities, encouraged council innovation and capacity building, and addressed geographic inequity and community recovery following natural disasters.

Strategic recommendations

Recommendations for future programs with similar objectives are listed in Table 2. Three strategic recommendations have also been identified:

1. Consider engaging councils as partners

There is an opportunity to work with councils more as project partners rather than through traditional grantee arrangements in future programs with non-competitive or allocated funding. Councils understand local needs, are effective managers of local projects and are able to work with community stakeholders but require greater authority to manage low-risk project changes (such as to budget and timing), especially for small events. Such an approach would build on existing good-will and strengthen trust between local government and DRNSW and prevent peaks in workload by 'smoothing' contracting and reporting.

2. Ensure community-focused programs clearly articulate social outcomes and interventions are evidence-based

Programs aimed at supporting community connectedness or similar social outcomes should clearly identify their focus and expected impact. For example, in programs aimed at community connection, thought should be given to whether the program aims to:

- Improve community cohesion and sense of belonging
- Increase levels of community pride
- Improve person to person connection within communities
- Improve connections between marginalised community members or areas and broader community (social inclusion)

Relevant literature should be reviewed during the program design phase to inform the identification of outcomes and to ensure that proposed interventions are evidence-based. Greater use of evidence would improve the effectiveness of proposed interventions, ensure alternative interventions are considered, and to prevent unintended consequences.

A greater focus on evidence-based approaches would also support meaningful measurement of outcomes by grantees.

3. Consider a two-stream or tiered approach based on scale of projects

For future community-led events programs, consideration should be given to dividing funding across two streams based on the scale and focus of the projects/events, such as:

- One stream aimed at local government and building sustainable, well-known 'marquee' sized community events and festivals that support community pride and/or economic activity
- Another stream aimed at supporting smaller, community-based activities that focus on social capital, equity and local community needs

Reporting requirements should be tailored to risk and commensurate with the size of the approved budget and scope of the projects.

	Evaluation findings
	Program development
✓	F1.1: The program objectives were aligned with supporting recovery from COVID-19 impacts and were relevant to the needs of regional communities.
✓	F1.2: Councils used the program to meet evolving local needs, especially those of smaller communities and disaster effected areas.
	Program design
✓	F2.1 The program design aligned with the focus on rapid stimulus.
⏱	F2.2 Assumptions regarding council capacity, community capacity and local context did not reflect on the ground realities.
⏱	F2.3 The program was effective in providing recipients with flexibility to respond to local context, but this had unintended consequences of increasing grantee administrative burden and risk exposure.
⏱	F2.4 Program timeframes and eligible events/costs criteria supported rapid program roll-out, but negatively impacted on community engagement, application quality, and event delivery.
	Program administration
⏱	F3.1: The program was effectively promoted to the target audience, but some messaging was unclear.
✓	F3.2: The program guidelines were clear for the most part, with applicants only contacting DRNSW staff for clarification regarding eligible costs and admission charges.
✓	F3.3: Support from Program Team and Economic Development Network was responsive and knowledgeable.
✓	F3.4: Effective governance and probity processes were developed and applied.
	Program application and contracting process
⏱	F4.1: Applicants found the application process easy to follow but the 'all-in-one' approach created challenges for both applicants and assessment.

❌ F4.2: The 'all-in-one application form' approach created significant internal challenges for reporting.

🕐 F4.3: The combined funding application and agreement streamlined the contract negotiation process, but any errors in grantee documentation for one or more events delayed contract finalisation for all events included under the project.

❌ F4.4: Due to the tight program timelines, any delays in notification of outcomes of applications, variation and promotional assets approvals created risks for event delivery and stress for grantees and community partners.

Monitoring and evaluation

🕐 F5.1: Reporting requirements were appropriate for larger events but created significant administrative burden for projects with multiple small, community delivered events.

✅ F5.2: Grantees utilised a range of outcomes measurement strategies depending on the type of event and organisational capacity and skills.

Early outputs and outcomes

✅ F6.1: Existing events were enhanced, and a variety of new events were delivered that would not otherwise have occurred.

✅ F6.2: Early data indicate events were well received and had a positive impact on community connection.

🕐 F6.3: Some events will not be sustainable without further funding and community expectations may not be met in future, creating reputational risk for councils.

✅ F6.4: The program created different forms of community connection, including between local community members, between councils and local businesses and community organisations, and with visitors to the region.

✅ F6.5: The program provided opportunities for council innovation and capacity building, addressing geographic inequity and community recovery following natural disasters.

✅ F6.6: The program generated increased economic activity, including direct benefits for local businesses in the event and hospitality sectors, and increased visitation.

Table 1 | Summary of findings

Recommendations for future programs
Program development
R1.1: Develop an evidence-based approach for supporting community and social outcomes drawing on relevant literature and recommendations from the evaluation of similar types of programs.
Program design
R2.1: Consult with EDMs and APMs to tailor program materials and better understand local context and capacity.
R2.2: For programs with non-competitive funding allocations, consider engaging councils as program partners through a contractual arrangement.
R2.3: Design program timeframes to suit the unique needs of the program in terms of both application and delivery, specifically: • Where council as a recipient is expected to select projects to be funded, allow at least six months for consultation, planning and approvals • And allow at least 12 months for program delivery.
Program application and contracting process
R4.1: Ensure documents used to capture any reportable data, such as budgets, location, audience or outcomes are managed through to SmartyGrants, rather than external sources such as spreadsheets.
R4.2: For programs with multiple projects under a single applicant, consider the use of an over-arching application with individual projects entered into SmartyGrants with an identifier enabling linkage to the application for accurate tracking and reporting.
R4.3: Where a combined application form and funding deed is used, ensure subject matter experts (such as GMF) review documentation such as insurances and landholder consent at the application stage to avoid delays.
R4.4: For low-risk projects, allow grantees to manage minor changes without requiring formal contract variations. These parameters should be clearly articulated internally and with grantees.
R4.5: For programs with multiple events, ensure the application form includes fields for project wide costs and budget items that are not event specific, such as project coordination and support.
Monitoring and evaluation
R5.1: Consider a tiered approach to reporting requirements for programs with a range of event types and size, i.e. less detailed reporting for small scale events of a certain budget threshold and more detailed reporting for larger 'marquee' events.

Table 2 | Summary of recommendations

This report

Purpose

This report is the process and early outcomes evaluation for Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Program (CEP). It was undertaken by the DRNSW Regional Programs Evaluation Team from February to May 2023.

The purpose of this evaluation is two-fold. The process evaluation component aims to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the design and implementation of CEP. It covers program development and design, and the initial stages of program implementation, including program administration, application processes, contracting, and monitoring.

The early outcomes component assessed the impact of the program based on available evidence, including perceived outcomes from the grantee's perspective. It should be noted that a comprehensive outcomes evaluation will be undertaken once all events have been delivered and projects acquitted.

Evaluation approach

The CEP Evaluation used mixed methods of stakeholder engagement, document review and data analysis to develop triangulated findings for each of the Key Evaluation Questions.

At the time of writing of this report, 90 of the 93 grantees had completed the applicant survey and 10 grantees had been interviewed. The data sources used for the evaluation are listed below.

Stakeholder interviews

- Individual interviews with the relevant Director, Program Manager and Senior Project Officer
- Interviews with representatives from 10 grantee organisations
- One small-group interview with representatives from the Performance and Data Team
- Interviews with representatives from the Grants Management Office

Document review

- Review of relevant program documents, guided by the Key Evaluation Questions (see Appendix A)
- Review of application forms data submitted by grantees

Data analysis

- Analyses of SmartyGrants project data, including application volume, project type, project location, application, notification and payment dates
- Analysis of applicant survey data (n=94[1]), including both quantitative and qualitative responses

Grantee interview selection

A sample of grantees (n=23) was approached to participate in interviews. The sample was designed to reflect the range of characteristics and contextual factors that distinguished members of the total grantee pool. These differences included:

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[1] Survey responses includes 4 responses from ineligible or unsubmitted applicants

- Geographical distribution of recipients
- Cross-border status
- LGA size (and subsequent grant size)
- Experience with natural disasters during the program period
- Positive or negative sentiment towards the program (as expressed through the applicant survey)

10 of the 23 invited grantees participated in interviews (11% of grantees). Interview questions aimed to draw out detailed qualitative information on experiences of the grant process as well as short-term outcomes for local communities from the grantees' perspectives.

Two ineligible applicants and one eligible applicant who chose to decline funding were invited to interview but did not respond to the invitation.

Limitations

Data access limitations were identified during the evaluation, associated with the use of additional documents such as spreadsheets to record event data for those grantees delivering over 10 events under the one project. This issue is discussed in this report (see section 4.2), noting the subsequent impact on DRNSW data collection and reporting. Recommendations are provided to avoid such impact on future programs. Where access to comprehensive, accurate data was limited, notations are contained in the report to identify which findings are based on grantee interview data and where possible have been triangulated with available indicative quantitative data.

Extensions provided to grantees resulted in the completion date being revised from 31 March 2023 to 31 January 2024. Therefore, outputs and outcomes contained in this report are of an early and indicative nature. The findings will be further examined through a comprehensive outcomes evaluation scheduled to commence following completion of projects in January 2024. Nonetheless, the following report contains findings and insights identified as beneficial for consideration when planning future programs with similar objectives.

Program overview

Program details

Strategic context

The Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Package (CEP) was allocated $25m in funding under the Regional Recovery Package, a $200m funding commitment made in 2021 as part of the *COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy*. One component of the Regional Recovery Package was a Regional Events Package comprised of:

- Agricultural shows (under the Country Shows Support Package)
- Larger regional events (under the Regional Events Acceleration Fund Round 2)
- Small-scale community-led events (under the Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Package [CEP])

Objectives and aims

The objective of the Reconnecting Regional NSW Community Events Program (CEP) was to provide immediate positive economic benefits and improved social outcomes across regional NSW by:

- promoting economic and social recovery to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns
- assisting communities and businesses as the state reopened and visitors started returning to regional NSW

Specifically, the Program had two aims:

- facilitating economic recovery in regional NSW by stimulating activity in the events, hospitality, and accommodation sector
- reconnecting communities by supporting the delivery of events that promote greater social cohesion in a post-lockdown environment, bringing people together to create improved social outcomes

Funding

A based allocation of $22 million was allocated to LGAs based on population size. A further $1,812,057 was allocated to cross-border communities according to population due to the greater impacts of COVID-19 restrictions in those areas (see **Appendix B** for allocations).[2]

Eligibility and assessment

CEP was open to all local councils in eligible regional NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs), including the unincorporated Far West and Lord Howe Island. Applicants were eligible for a defined funding allocation for one or more events to be held in a particular location within their LGA or locality.

In April 2022, DRNSW wrote to eligible councils inviting them to apply for a single grant between $199,826 to $392,221 (depending on their calculated allocation) to deliver one or more COVID-19 safe community events and festivals in their LGA or locality to be held before

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[2] Population was calculated using ABS figures for 2020.

31 March 2023. The unincorporated Far West and Lord Howe Island were each offered $47,930. Co-contributions from recipients were encouraged, but not mandatory.

There was no requirement for a minimum or maximum number of events or amount of the total funding that could be used for an individual event. Applicants were required to respond to the following two criteria, which were assessed on a met/not met basis:

- Positive social outcomes in local community - how the proposed activities will rebuild local community cohesion and deliver positive social outcomes.

- Local business support - how the proposed activities will support local business – applicants were strongly encouraged to engage external event coordinators and local businesses to run and deliver the events.

All proposed events had to meet eligibility criteria outlined in the program guidelines relating to location, openness to the public, delivered in line with relevant COVID-19 NSW Public Health Orders. Applicants were advised that assessment and approval would take 20 days from submission.

Councils were encouraged to engage with local community and business groups to identify and deliver suitable events. Accessible and inclusive events were encouraged and where appropriate, applicants should have aligned planning to their Disability Inclusion Action Plan and Community Engagement or Community Development Strategic Plans.

Key dates

The key public dates for the program were:

- Applications opened on 7 April 2022

- Eligible entities received letters by email confirming funding allocation on 8 April 2022

- Applications were scheduled to close on 24 June 2022 but were extended until 8 July 2022

- Successful projects were published on the DRNSW website on 16 December 2022

- Project completion was due by 31 March 2023 but an opportunity for extension to 31 January 2024 was offered to all LGAs (by application to the GMO)

Program results

Applications received

There were 95 entities that were eligible for funding under CEP. One eligible entity chose not to apply for the fund. Another eligible entity submitted an application but withdrew their interest at the funding agreement execution stage.

At closing, 98 applications were made (including 5 ineligible applicants) with a total of funding request of $23,718,361. Total funding requested by eligible applicants was $23,380,684, or 98.2% of the $23,812,057 in available funding.

There were 58 unique unsubmitted applications from ineligible entities, including community groups, private citizens, sporting groups, and Aboriginal organisations.

Proposed events

There was significant variation in how applicants proposed to deliver on the objectives of the program. Most applicants worked with local community groups to identify existing and new events that were suitable for the fund. Approximately 43% of proposed events were new, with

the remainder being existing events. Overall, 815 events[3] were proposed across the 93 eligible applications with an average of 8.8 events per applicant. 26 councils proposed more than 10 events.

Proposed event attendance, focus areas and types

For existing events, average estimated attendance in past years was 2,386. With the support of the program, applicants projected an increase in attendance of 35% for existing events. The average number of expected event attendees was 4,694.[4]

Application data indicates that grantees expected approximately 30% of events to have some focus on Aboriginal inclusion, 47% would consider accessibility and inclusion, and 54% would have aspects relating to youth audiences.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most common label chosen by applicants for events was 'Festivals and fairs', followed by 'Food and leisure' and 'Sporting events'. However, this data should be treated as only broadly indicative as many events involved several types of activity (such as both live music, food stalls and youth activities) and these events were often given an umbrella label of 'Festivals and fairs.'
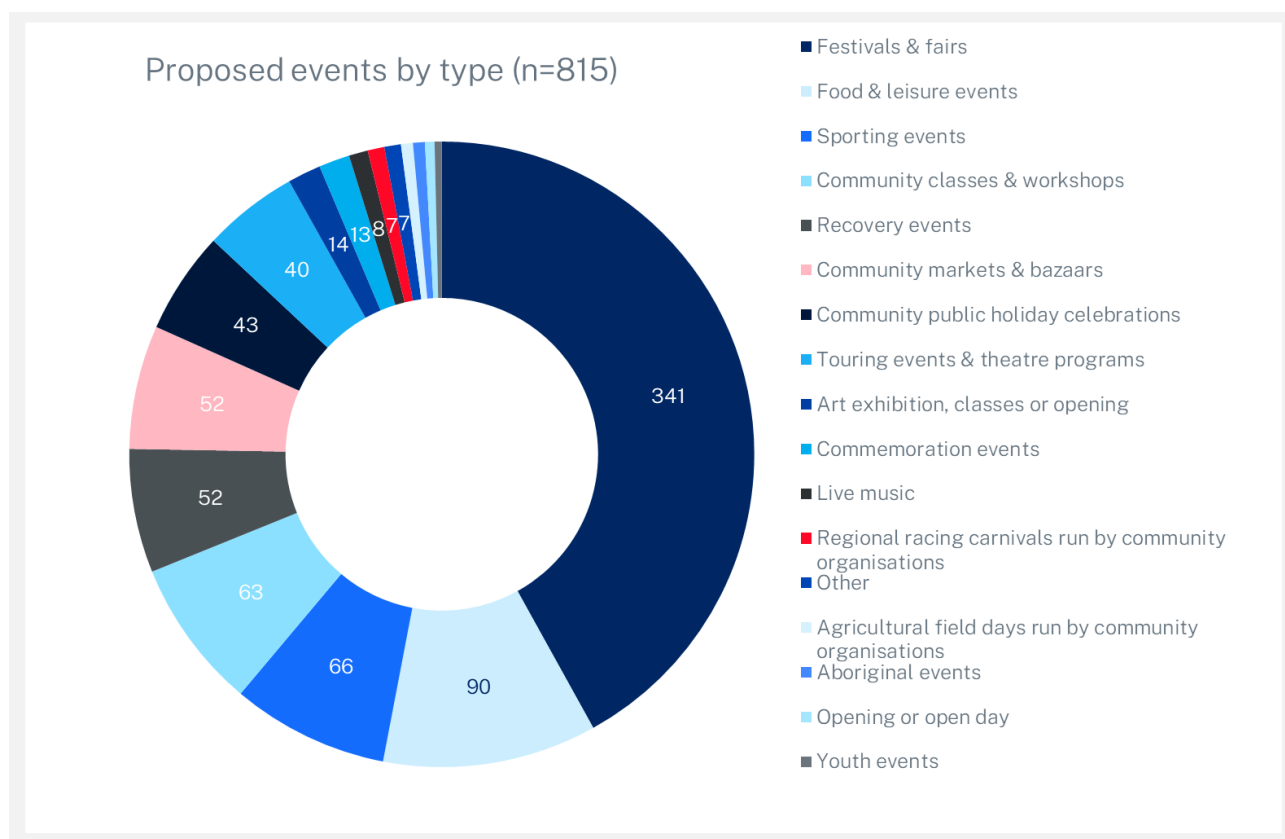

Figure 1: Number of events by type

Proposed event budgets and timing

There was also a high degree of variation in event budgets around an average of $28,340. The smallest budget allocated to an event was $500 and the largest was $301,708. While most 84.3%) event budgets were for $50,000 or less, there were also significant number of 'large' events with funding of more than $150,000 (see Figures 2 and 3). On average, each grantee proposed 1.3 of these 'larger' events and 7.3 'smaller' events. This pattern of many smaller-scale events coupled with one or two 'large' events was reflected in interviews with a sample of grantees.

Co-contributions were encouraged in the program guidelines, but not required. Ten eligible applicants made co-contributions to a total of $52,068. Approximately 10% of events indicated that they planned to charge an admission fee.

While most events were scheduled to occur between October 2022 and March 2023, 135 were planned for the period immediately following the application window (see Figure 4).
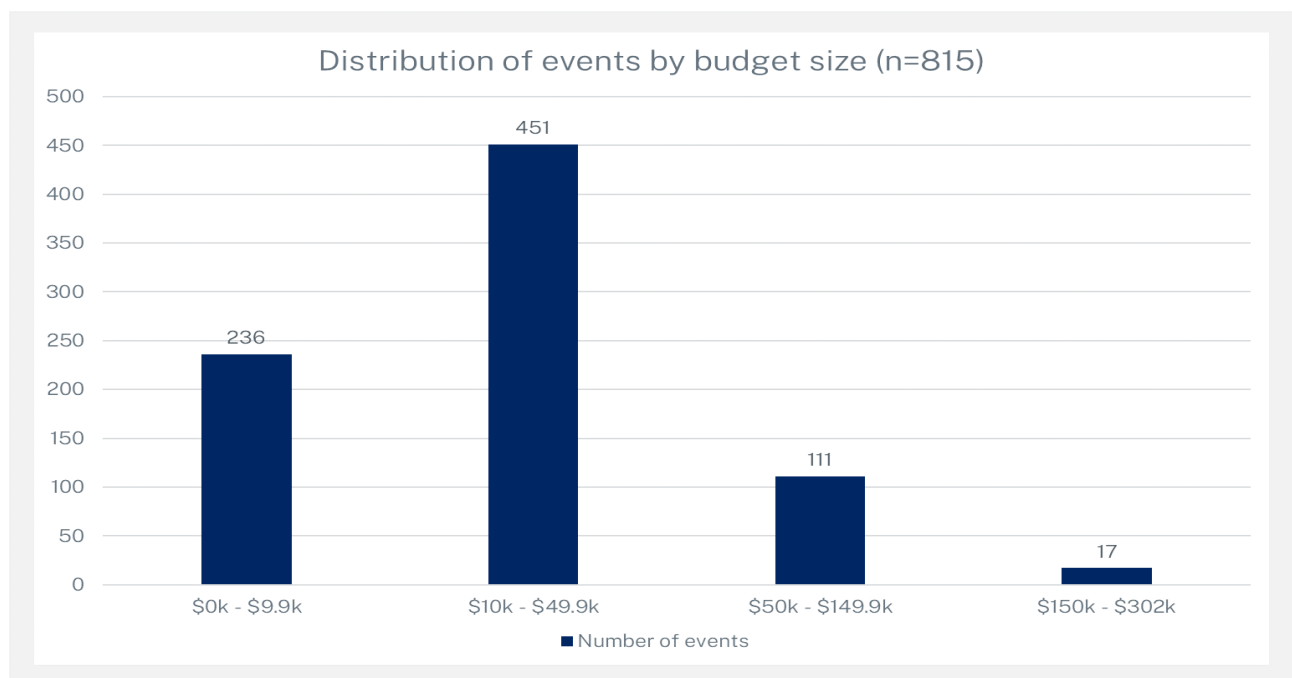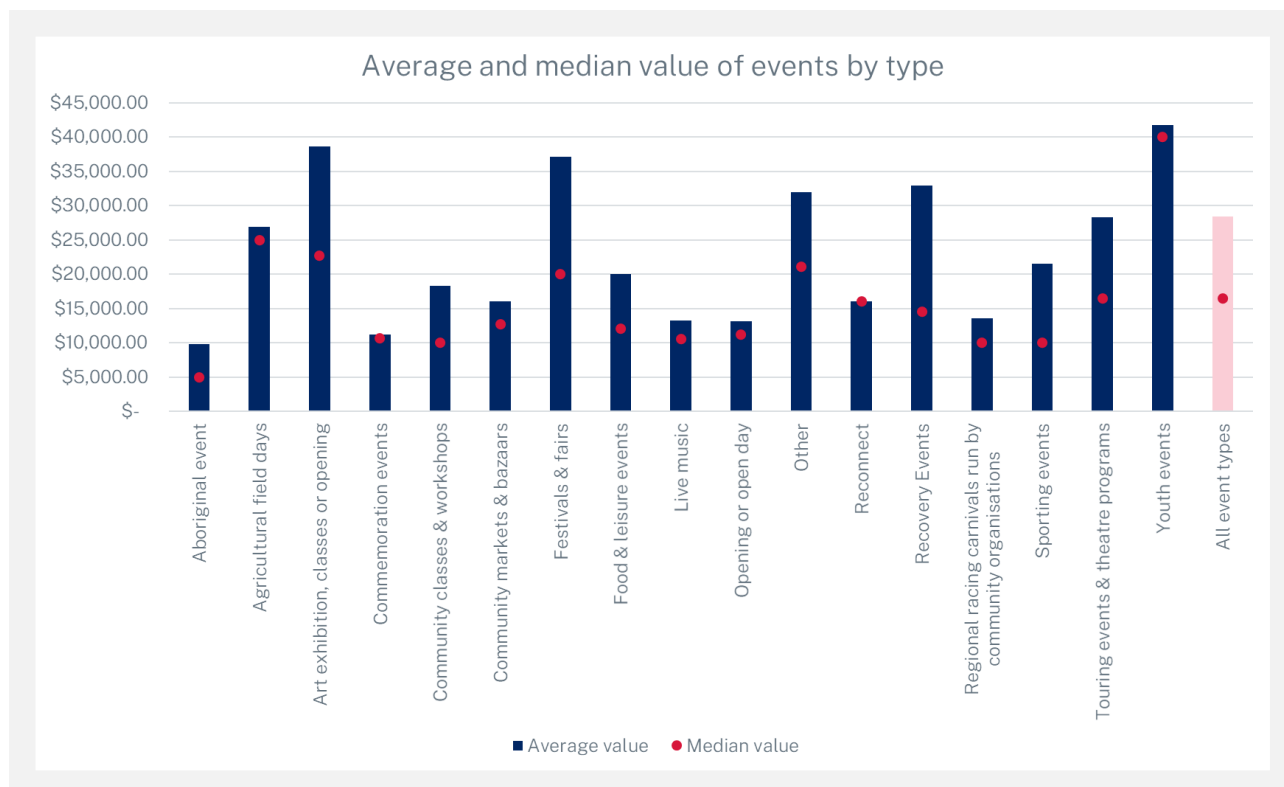

Figure 2: Number of events by budget groupings

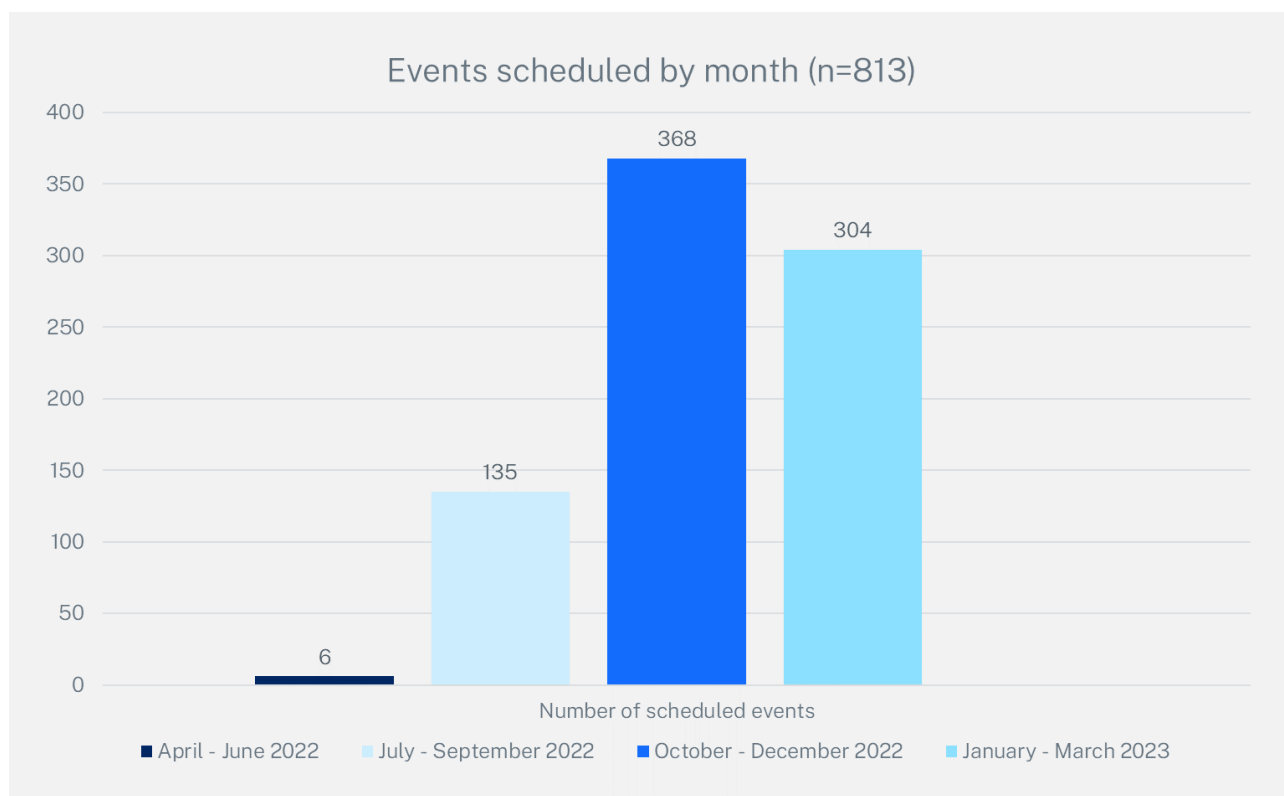**Figure 3: Average and median value of events by type**

Figure 4: Proposed event dates by month

Program processes

Evaluation domain 1: Program development

	Findings
✓	F1.1: The program objectives were aligned with supporting recovery from COVID-19 impacts and were relevant to the needs of regional communities.
✓	F1.2: Councils used the program to meet evolving local needs, especially those of smaller communities and disaster effected areas.
	Recommendations for future programs
→	R1.1: Develop an evidence-based approach for supporting community and social outcomes drawing on relevant literature and recommendations from the evaluation of similar types of programs.

Finding 1.1: The program objectives were aligned with supporting recovery from COVID-19 impacts and were relevant to the needs of regional communities

As outlined above, CEP and the broader Regional Events Package were developed through a process led by NSW Treasury as part of the wider economic response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with DRNSW staff involved in the early stage of program development indicated that the key drivers for the broader Regional Events Package were:

- Supporting recovery from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, including those placed on business and community activity and unique regional impacts such as the closure of interstate borders
- A need to disburse funding quickly
- Success of past programs with similar focus on social recovery from external shocks, such as the Drought Stimulus Package.

These drivers were reflected in the formal objectives of the program, which were to:

- 'reconnect communities by facilitating the delivery of events that promote greater social cohesion, bringing people together to create improved social outcomes' (Program guidelines)
- 'facilitate economic recovery in regional NSW by stimulating activity in the events, hospitality, and accommodation sectors, all of which have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, providing opportunities for an immediate revenue boost' (Program guidelines)

Both these explicit objectives and the program's operational focus on rapid stimulus were consistent with overarching vision put forward in the *COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy* which included goals around job creation, community engagement, and support for events in regional NSW.

The program was developed quickly and informed by gap analysis, review of past programs and effective consultation, but not relevant research
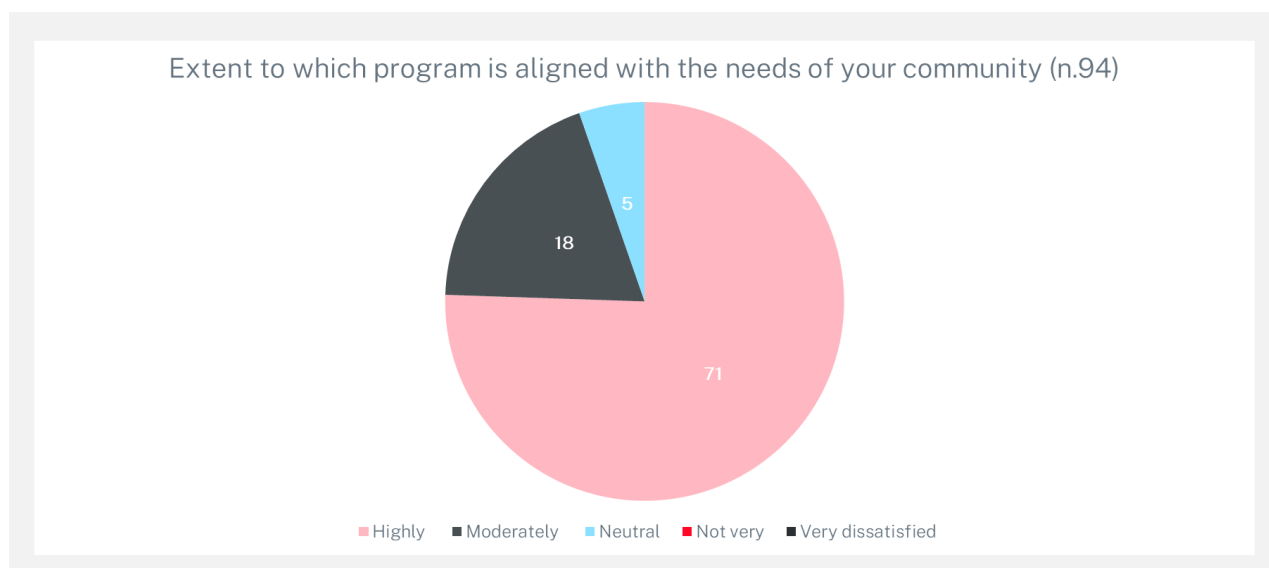
The program was developed quickly in response to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated closures. Funding was allocated in late October 2021 and the proposed program guidelines and funding allocations were put forward for approval on 23 November 2021. Program governance documents, including application form and assessment methodology, received final approval on 9 April 2022 after the advertised opening date for the fund on 7 April 2022. Though not best practice, given there were no substantive changes made to the documents between program launch and 9 April 2022, and no applications were submitted during that time, this delay did not have a material impact on program delivery.

The rationale for the program was based on an informal gap analysis of the broader Regional Events Package and strategic landscape. This identified an opportunity for funding to support smaller, community-based events with a focus on local connection rather than large attendances or attracting well-known performers. Councils were seen as the most effective actor for both disbursing funds quickly and delivering small-scale events that would bring people together.

This approach was also informed by the successful delivery of similar past programs, including the Drought Stimulus Package and Bushfire Community and Economic Recovery Fund. Research on social or economic recovery from social isolation or other shocks was not included in the program design due to time constraints, meaning that other possible alternatives to events were not considered. Targeted consultation was conducted with the Regional Development Network, the Cross-Border Commissioner and Local Government NSW. Issues identified by these stakeholders were included in the program design, including those relating to council readiness, timing, eligible costs and event types, grant conditions and funding allocation.

Program objectives were supported by recipients and aligned with community needs

The program was well-received by the target audience. When surveyed, grantees felt that the program was aligned to the needs of their communities (see Figure 5).

Extent to which program is aligned with the needs of your community (n.94)

71
18
5

■Highly ■Moderately ■Neutral ■Not very ■Very dissatisfied

Figure 5: Perceived alignment with community needs

Grantees indicated that they understood and agreed with the need for social and economic recovery following the pandemic.

> *'We face a number of challenges (and opportunities) in the region, and this will help to begin the process of addressing them.' (Applicant survey)*

It was clear that many of the events funded through the program would not have been held without the support provided:

'We wouldn't have been able to do this, it wouldn't have been possible, and I think from a community and cultural and interactive perspective, people in [name of town], would not have been able to see something like this.' (P6)

Finding 1.2: Councils used the program to meet evolving local needs, especially those of smaller communities and disaster effected areas

Grantees adapted the program to meet local needs, including those of smaller communities and disaster affected areas

In interviews, it was clear that grantees understood the primary focus of the program was to support community connection, however responding to COVID-19 and associated restrictions was not the only driver of council proposals. Disaster recovery, connecting smaller or more remote communities, building sustainable connection with communities, and providing cultural opportunities all emerged as rationales for council proposals.

'You know the state government obviously had had its intentions, which was around, let's get people back out socializing again, let's get people connecting. So that was their priority. Whereas our priority is the long game[...] that we want to have ongoing touch points with people that are relevant and resonant and meaningful, so we didn't want to just throw something together. We wanted it to[...] raise our profile, help us build our reputation and connect our community rather than just bring people out.' (P10)

Some councils specifically noted that the program allowed them to develop or support events for small, outlying villages that they would not ordinarily have capacity to provide. A recurring theme a conscious effort to be equitable when deciding on event locations to enable smaller towns, villages and remote communities to both access and benefit economically from the program. For example, one grantee explained that their LGA:

'[...] has a number of villages in the shire that are outside the main town of [name] itself. We wanted to give them all their opportunity... that's what regional or rural councils find difficult to do, things that support the villages...in an equal way to the larger base location... we've got 10,000 people in the town and there's another 2,500 people who are in the rural areas. And that includes 6 villages, so we would always look to do events that are spread over a range of villages.' (P5)

This theme was particularly salient in the responses of entities with more remote locations difficult to include in other programs. Similarly, councils in disaster affected areas adapted the program to support the communities within their LGA that had been most impacted. While the timing of the fund– opening soon after flooding hit some areas - was a challenge for some grantees, several explained how they adapted programs to respond to evolving needs. One grantee described changing plans to redirect efforts to one particularly impacted community:

'... we're doing a variation for [name of town], they were basically cut off from the rest of the Shire due to landslides. So [we aimed to encourage] visitation within their community or from people outside of their communities... reconnecting within their communities and providing some support in that way.' (P7)

Grantees were aware that the program was not aimed at these issues, but the program provided sufficient flexibility to meet emerging needs:

'It [the grant program] wasn't related to the recent natural disaster we had, but there was certainly a lot of crossovers with impacts... so it just naturally seemed to line up. We had more applications that came from areas that had been really impacted by the natural disaster.' (P3)

Councils recognised the benefit the program would have on local businesses

While councils typically chose events based on their likely impact on community outcomes rather than economic goals, most also recognised the positive impact the program would have on local economies. Some businesses were involved in event selection and provided in-kind support, but largely businesses benefited through direct procurement or increased local economic activity. For example, some grantees explained that local restaurants benefitted by way of patronage following attendances at evening or night events; others as the providers of event equipment, with one grantee stating:

> 'We've tried to keep everything local with food vendors, stall holders, everything was all within the max 100km radius... we've had great feedback on how much money they've made at all of our events.' (P4)

Alignment with local plans or strategies was not a key aim for grantees but part of broader goals

While recipients felt the program helped them to address community needs, they typically did not frame this response as deliberate alignment with part of a discrete strategy or plan. In interviews, no respondents referred to a local Community Plan or Disability Inclusion and Action Plan as a key consideration. Some councils did speak about having a series of planned or regular events in their area, or a collection of ideas for future events, but none referred to a coordinated or overarching strategy in selecting their events.

Councils did see the fund as an opportunity to achieve other goals. In particular, the program was used to attract visitors both within LGAs and from out of the local area. Councils also used the fund to showcase their area, raise their profile and build stronger connections with their community. For example, grantees told us that:

> '... we normally would have attracted 2,000 people and this is now attracting 5,000...' (P8)

> 'It brought a lot to our community. It extended our reach. It helped us reach new audiences. It helped us raise our profile.' (P10)

Evaluation domain 2: Program design

	Findings
✓	F2.1: The program design aligned with the focus on rapid stimulus.
⟳	F2.2: Assumptions regarding council capacity, community capacity and local context did not reflect on the ground realities.
⟳	F2.3: The program was effective in providing recipients with flexibility to respond to local context, but this had unintended consequences of increasing grantee administrative burden and risk exposure.
⟳	F2.4: Program timeframes and eligibility event/costs criteria supported rapid program roll-out, but negatively impacted on community engagement, application quality, and event delivery
	Recommendations for future programs
→	R2.1: Consult with EDMs and APMs to tailor program materials and better understand local context and capacity
→	R2.2: For programs with non-competitive funding allocations, consider engaging councils as program partners through a contractual arrangement.
→	R2.3: Design program timeframes to suit the unique needs of the program in terms of both application and delivery, specifically: • Where council as a recipient is expected to select projects to be funded within the grant, allow at least six months for community consultation, planning and approvals, and • At least 12 months for program delivery.

Finding 2.1: The program design aligned with the focus on rapid stimulus

The funding model was largely effective in distributing funds to communities quickly, with processes in place to facilitate equitable funding allocations.

The aim of providing fast, timely stimulus to regional communities following the pandemic was a key consideration in decisions regarding the design of the program. Several operational choices aimed to both simplify and expedite the funding process that aligned with this objective, including:

- Adopting a non-competitive, closed funding process with direct invitation to eligible applicants
- Removing potential barriers to submission, such as requiring co-contributions or endorsements
- Use of the application as funding deed
- Allocating responsibility for project approval to Director level rather than an assessment panel or the Deputy Premier

- Providing 80% of funding allocation on execution of the agreement, with the balance to be paid on completion

Similarly, the assessment criteria were simple with appropriate constraints on proposed events. Local procurement was also encouraged in the program guidelines as a means of stimulating local business activity.

The funding model effectively allocated funding to LGAs on a per capita basis, with additional funds provided to border communities, in line with the program's rationale. The advice of the Cross-Border Commissioner to factor in the capacity of smaller, remote communities to spend the funds within the proposed timeframe was incorporated, as was advice from LGNSW around preventing clashes with local government elections.

Finding 2.2: Assumptions regarding council and community capacity, and local context did not reflect on the ground realities

The program aimed to utilise existing council capacity to quickly fund and implement suitable events

A key design decision was to limit eligibility to local councils in regional NSW, Regional Development Australia (RDA) in the unincorporated Far West and the Lord Howe Island Board (LGAs). By engaging LGAs as the contact point for DRNSW, the program aimed to expediate the delivery of funds and streamline contract management by working with trusted intermediaries. In interviews with DRNSW staff, it was clear that councils were identified as the preferred funding recipient on the understanding that they had:

- existing events or plans for new events that could be delivered in partnership with their communities
- the capacity and capability to administer funds to third parties
- capacity to coordinate the events or readily engage additional resources to do this on their behalf

Interviews with councils identified that these assumptions were not always accurate in some key respects. Broadly, councils found it challenging to develop a program of events that was equitable, feasible and commensurate with their grant allocation within the timeframes provided. This was particularly challenging for those organisations without existing event management expertise, assets or plans, and for those managing other priorities, including disaster recovery.

Council response was limited by insufficient organisational capacity and existing commitments, including the implementation of local disaster response efforts

There was significant variation in internal capacity to manage an event-focused grant program between councils. Of the 10 councils interviewed, only2 reported having internal staff focused on event management. Responsibility for the program did not seem to have a natural 'fit' within organisational structures – some councils allocated coordination of the funding to community teams, while others placed it with economic development or tourism officers. Often junior staff were allocated responsibility for delivery.

There were distinct differences between councils who had existing staff with event management experience, and those where this responsibility was delegated to someone new to this area of work. Although many events were delivered by community organisations, grantees discussed the need to guide their community stakeholders. This required internal expertise in event management to draw upon, noting that some councils used grant funds to boost capacity by employing an additional resource to help coordinate the grant and related events:

'I'm in the economic development department and we've also got our community development team and typically they deliver our events. But they said they didn't have the capacity..., so they were going to turn it down...' (P9)

'... we have two people that work in the events area here within Council, but that's purely just for managing events... so it's quite a heavy workload [when these new events and liaison with community were added] within that two-person team. So... we gave them additional resource with regards to administering the grant once we had the approvals for those select events we chose to run' (P3)

Several grantees explained that their organisations were already experiencing capacity constraints prior to the program being offered, including from existing grant programs and natural disaster responses. Although most were eager to take up the funding, some councils found responding to the opportunity difficult given finite resources had already been allocated to other projects. Some grantees indicated their capacity to respond within the grant application timeframe and coordinate the events was limited, with one stating:

'And because we were still coming out of that flood process wise, there was just grants flying around left front and centre. So yeah, and from memory at that time we had another 4 grant programs that we were working on, and they had multiple applications in within them as well' (P3)

Inclusion of coordination costs was welcomed by grantees but not feasible to be utilised in all cases

The program team recognised that both the amount of funding and delivery timeframes would be challenging for some recipients. One measure taken to mitigate this risk was the inclusion of administration-related costs, such as employment of an event coordinator, as eligible costs under the program. Due to limited access to data (see section 4.2), it is unclear as to the proportion of councils who included program administration in their budgets. Data is available for only 7 recipients. Of these, an average of $31,518 was spent on program administration costs, or 15.7% of allocated funds.

The program guidelines were clear that these costs could be accrued from the opening of applications to allow additional resources required to complete applications. One interviewee explained that he used the funding for extra administrative support, but that the short turnaround for both the application and event delivery meant that it was not worth onboarding a new staff member to coordinate events given the limits that would still apply around financial approval delegations. Those grantees that utilised this option expressed their appreciation in interviews. Additional staff resources were used to provide event coordination, contract management and community engagement. Some recipients identified this as particularly important given the liaison and support required by community organisations:

'And that's the thing that we found having a person who's funded from the grant funding... She's been very good because she's gone out and held the hand of a lot of the organizations... and she [has been able to see] where things could fall down, and she's been able to pick up that...' (P5)

It was noted that an application form field to identify costs that were not event specific, including those associated with administration of the grant, was not available when completing the budget. It was identified that this would have been helpful for accurately formatting and acquitting the budget:

'... [a] recommendation that I would probably have is that there wasn't a separate page to put costs that span the entire program, which would have been really, really helpful, like for example funding [name of person's] position which she helped deliver across all the events.' (P7)

Council staff found stakeholder management resource intensive

Many interviewees spoke about the challenges of managing relationships with local organisations, including the time required to ensure grant conditions were met. Several grantees shared insights into the additional resourcing required once funding was allocated. For example, one grantee spoke about the time spent in liaison with event deliverers and managing the budgets for each event:

> '…it was the stakeholder management that took the longest time so then I've got 8 organisations I've gotta deal with. [...] it's a negotiation… so there's a lot of to and fro and then, you know, estimating the costs…' (P9)

Some challenges were specific to the local context, relationships with community organisations and the broader population. Grantees discussed needing to be careful in the way in which they communicated the grant opportunity and their role in supporting event delivery, to ensure they were seen as being equitable in their approach and decisions:

> 'Us managing the events on behalf of other event organisers. So I guess being the [conduit] for actually rolling out that…so that caught us on the hop a little bit in terms because… being a smaller council but one that's located in a really creative region [with many interested parties].' (P3)

Most grantees who were interviewed stated they would apply if a similar grant was offered in the future, but several had reservations due to the time commitment. One grantee noted that due to the administrative and event coordination burden, if they had been asked during the early implementation phase about applying in the future, they may have declined the offer. However, after seeing the positive impact on their community, they felt that they would apply should a similar type of grant be made available again.

Finding 2.3: The program was effective in providing recipients with flexibility to respond to local context, but this had unintended consequences of increasing grantee administrative burden and risk exposure

Flexibility was prioritised in program design, but contractual flexibility could have been strengthened

Interviews with DRNSW internal stakeholders emphasised that the program was intended to be flexible. The program team recognised that delivery would be challenging for some councils given their existing commitments. As such, the program was designed to provide scope for flexibility in key respects, including:

- significant allocated funding, without limits on the number, size, distribution or funding per event,
- 80% funding allocation provided up front, with 20% to be provided on project completion,
- the broad scope of eligible costs, including marketing and event coordination, and express permission that these costs could be accrued from when the program was first announced, rather than after funding execution,
- broad assessment criteria,
- opportunity to provide events directly or fund community groups as appropriate.

Internal stakeholders suggested that for future programs with similar objectives, further flexibility could be provided by enabling the description of broad plans at application stage, reducing the detail required in the application and providing greater scope for grantees to move funds between events within their allocated budget (see Section 4: 'Program Administration' for more detail).

Grantees were able to meet community engagement requirements in different ways, but there was evidence that risk mitigation was prioritised by some grantees over benefit maximisation

The program was designed to require community and business involvement, but the terms or extent of this involvement was not specified in the program guidelines. As a result, grantees employed a range of context-appropriate mechanisms to decide on preferred events that ranged from highly controlled to very broad engagement. Approaches included entirely internal deliberations among council staff, to targeted community consultation, involvement of councillors, and extensive expression of interest (EOI) processes.

In interviews, some council representatives identified the main rationale for their preferred approach was minimising risk rather than maximising potential benefits. For example, one interviewee spoke about choosing an event on the basis on managing grant acquittals:

> 'It was sort of a round table discussion between the general manager, the manager of tourism promotion and myself... I suppose rather than choosing the best use of money, we chose the easiest course of action for the acquittal.' (P8)

Some grantees sought out community feedback to inform their internal decision making, including both information from local business groups and community leaders. Other councils drew on prior discussions or a pre-existing 'wish list' of options, deciding to take an internal decision-making process without community consultation, drawing on previously identified council priorities:

> 'We had done budgets for a festival and we'd had planning meetings and it was always like well whenever we can find a funding source, let's make it happen.' (P10)

The relationship between council as the grant-holder and their community was an important factor in how decisions about events were made. Several council representatives indicated the need to balance community expectations with program parameters. Ideas put forward by the community often needed to be revised to fit the program requirements although they were largely aligned:

> '... There were a couple that you had to tone down a little bit and [say] the budget is not going to cover that. And that's not going to fit into the guidelines. But essentially, these events were what the community asked for.' (P2)

Councils adopted expression of interest processes to manage community interest fairly

The size of the funding allocated meant that councils often had to manage significant local interest. As a result, several decided upon the strategy of an expression of interest (EOI) being opened up to community organisations. While the rationale was aimed at an equitable and appropriate distribution of funds for events, some grantees described the EOI process as resource intensive, generating 40-80 submissions, each of which needed to be reviewed and assessed.

> 'We couldn't just pick one or start with one event, we'd just be crucified, absolutely crucified and we [identified that] we needed to run an EOI process...we didn't believe that we could go just out to a handful of selected people and just say hey, could you run some events for us on our behalf under this allocation and we'll do the application. We needed to run an EOI process. Then we had 75 people [submit an EOI].' (P3)

While some grantees used the criteria in the program guidelines as the basis of the EOI, others added additional criteria to ensure the response led to events that were manageable. This included adding minimum funding amount requirements in order to avoid very large numbers of small events which would have been untenable to coordinate and administer. Other grantees who had not used this approach noted this as a lesson they had learnt through this

process, noting they may put clearer parameters around EOI criteria in order to avoid large numbers of submissions for very small events in future:

> 'We gave a lot of smaller amounts of money out to a variety of groups, and... I suppose that was perhaps a mistake on our part, it just makes it a little bit too awkward. We need more robust projects rather than [names of small local events].' (P5)

Councils were concerned about capacity to deliver and financial risks

The decision to make only councils eligible for funding, combined with the limited internal capacity of councils to manage event programs, meant that they became de facto grants managers for their local areas. Their responsibilities included financial oversight, stakeholder management and event selection. In interviews, several council representatives felt their organisation did not have the capacity to take on these responsibilities and were concerned about risk.

One grantee said they had been told by DRNSW representatives that funding was not provided directly to community organisations because of the risks associated with contracting multiple, often small organisations that do not have robust governance structures. The grantee noted this resulted in the risk management of such issues being passed onto the councils who received the grant.

These issues indicate a broader concern from councils in relation to the Department, as they felt the onus of responsibility had been passed to them. Several interviewees mentioned that decision-makers within their organisation – both executive staff and elected representatives – were reluctant to approve or endorse event funding commitments while awaiting the outcome of the application process due to concerns that they could not cover costs if the grant was not paid. While interviewees recognised the risk was low given the funding was an allocation for the LGA, this conservative approach made progressing event plans while awaiting official outcome notification challenging:

> '... I probably [wouldn't have gone ahead] if it was one of those ones where we apply and then we wait... So that's why I said to the councillor here, look, I'm 90 to 95% confident that the funding will come through, but there is still a possibility that they will say no for whatever reason, but we need to make that decision because we need to, to book it and pay a deposit.' (P6)

Program timeframes also created risk for grantees. Concerns about booking event suppliers and performers without an agreement in place were magnified by the tension between the short window to deliver events and the much longer typical lead time for booking performers. Several interviewees spoke of their concerns about having to cancel events if funding was not forthcoming, for example:

> 'And sometimes you get scared about that, knowing that could blow my budget if you at the acquittal process, you say no, that was no good. Give me $60,000 back and well, that's my whole [...] budget for the year' (P9)

Grantees proposed DRNSW consider providing direct funding to community groups

Responses from grantees to evaluation surveys and during interviews suggested that in future rounds, the DRNSW consider providing funding directly to community groups rather than via local government. Where this perspective arose, grantees typically reasoned that by DRNSW managing the allocation of funding per event there would be more robust, well-considered proposals received, while alleviating the administrative burdens of community consultation or managing local EOI processes for councils:

> 'I'm not sure if the department would ever consider opening [the grant] up to incorporated groups in general but having maybe like a minimum funding that's available [per event]... you know, it's challenging when you do like heaps and heaps of small events...' (P7)

An alternative identified by two interviewees was to split the funding into two pools, with an allocation for councils of a particular budget size and another, competitive pool for community organisations to apply for. Both noted this as being a similar approach to their understanding of the Stronger Country Communities Fund. One interviewee stated:

'That the applications for the bigger projects the Council wants to support should be done by Council, but the community organisation should do their own applications, as is the case with stronger country communities... From my perspective, if this program was going to continue and you're looking to fund future rounds... where these funds are going to be available for the community events, maybe the community organisations should have the ability to apply directly for funding...' (P5)

Finding 2.4: Program timeframes and eligible events/costs criteria supported rapid program roll-out, but negatively impacted on community engagement, application quality, and event delivery

Longer application window or advance notice of program needed for improved application quality

As noted above, the focus on rapid stimulus resulted in the application period window being a significant challenge for many councils. Councils found the timeframe short for the process of community consultation, event selection processes and application submission. Program timeframes impacted on grantees and event delivery in three key respects:

- The original completion date of 31 March 2023 meant events that were scheduled between April - July (inclusive) were ineligible.
- The window for applications to be submitted was too short given the extent of community consultation councils engaged in to identify events and distribute funds.
- The overall program window was too short for councils to develop or expand major events, or to secure some performers and other suppliers.

Delivery timeframe meant that some existing events were ineligible

The short lead-in time, lack of advance notice to enable comprehensive planning and the relatively short period for event delivery resulted in events to be held in or after April 2023, (post the advertised March 2023 completion date) as being rendered ineligible. Although an extension to 31 January 2024 was subsequently made available, a number of grantees had not included some existing events in their application as they were of the understanding that they must be delivered before the original March 2023 timeframe:

'Some of our big sustainable events weren't eligible which was a shame. Would have been great to be able to give back to those events who have continued despite adversity or some that hadn't been able to run for the past few years rather than creating new events.' (Applicant survey)

Council-run selection processes require additional time

As outlined above, many councils ran expression of interest processes or developed event proposals in collaboration with organisations in their communities. Others explained that they required the endorsement of their council before submitting their application. This resulted in a struggle to align their application development with the schedule of council meetings. Some grantees felt the community consultation process was rushed by the length of the application window, and that ideas would have been more fully developed and less likely to require change if they had had more time:

'... some of the projects that ended up being put forward here, which weren't absolutely well fleshed out properly...I think I think a lot of them were sort of expanded thought bubbles.' (P5)

To undertake such a process rigorously, one grantee suggested the ideal amount of lead in time would be approximately 6 months:

... if [EOI to community] was going to happen again, I would like probably almost a six-month time period to actually get those EOIs and [...] to pull together the application.' (P8)

Council approval time requirements should be considered, including Development Application (DA) approvals, for new or expanded events

Both new and significant expansions to existing events were seen as infeasible for some councils because of the time required for internal approvals. Several of these internal approval processes emerged through interviews as incompatible with the program's focus on rapid stimulus.

Some grantees explained that their organisation required the proposed list of events be endorsed by councillors prior to application submission, so staff were reliant on a council meeting occurring prior to the deadline. Others explained the impact of planning controls on developing new events. Grantees discussed the need for Development Applications (DA) for events of particular size or scope.

A recurring theme was the inability to fast track such DAs, and the load already being managed by council personnel in terms of pre-existing DA's awaiting processing and approval. Regulations vary by LGA, from attendance-based restrictions to location, impact on traffic and the need for DA approvals for larger events. Several interviewees noted that large, new events required DA approval that could not be guaranteed within application or delivery timeframes so those events were not considered:

'... what site and what traffic management might be required as well. So one of our elements of our EOI is asking those applicants to actually consider what could actually be delivered within the time frame which was the end of March... so two of those events, which would have required quite a significant DA, just couldn't... have occurred at that point in time when we made the decision.' (P3)

... I want to mention is the time frame for approval. So for me to get DA for an event within, you know less than six months is crazy... if you're lucky, you'll get it done in three months and it gives you no time to get organized, and the risk is there... that was the other reason why I tried to avoid new events, because the approval process was just too long and too hard. (P9)

The amount of lead in time needed to secure event suppliers, including performers, and obtain quotes

The need for funding to be secured and confirmed well before the event dates was identified as key to being able to book suppliers in advance. This was particularly pertinent when aiming to secure the services of performers, with one grantee stating:

... [we need] a longer lead time and adherence to making the announcements in a timely fashion. [An ideal lead in time of...] I'd say minimum of six months... in the world like in the performing arts, where usually programming is [ideally] 12 to 18 months in advance. So for example... we knew that was the only date that [well known performer] was available. She had a weekend off her run in the musical [name of musical]... she had [only] one Saturday night in the year. (P10)

Some other grantees discussed trying to align new events with those for which performers had already been booked in the region. Longer lead times would enable planning and coordination, including leveraging existing events and expanding access to other communities

within their regions. Early completion reports also indicate that short lead-in times made securing support from NSW Police required for large events a challenge for some grantees.

Councils spoke about the difficulties community groups had with estimating costs in advance, and the subsequent challenges managing variations to those proposals. One suggestion was to remove the detail required in the application process and request recipients to nominate events and acquit costs in an iterative manner. This approach would allow for more responsive planning and community involvement in event development (see Finding 4.4 for more detail).

Restrictions on admission fees improved accessibility and attendance but limited event sustainability

The program guidelines specified that events had to be 'free or low cost'. In interviews, several grantees raised concerns with this requirement (see Finding 3.2 for further detail). A common issue was that free events made it more likely ticketholders would not attend. The problem of 'no-shows' was particularly challenging for events with limited capacity. One grantee responded by changing from free tickets to a nominal fee for attendants to secure their place, stating:

> 'If we put on a free event, people will say it's a great thing... but there isn't an incentive for them to turn up. And that incentive is I haven't put any money into it at all. The first one we charged nothing and had 50% of the people who booked didn't turn up for the bus on the morning... The following two trips we asked for a $10 fee...Just to secure your place and we had one person pull out of the next two trips.' (P5)

Another grantee described a strategy of requiring attendees to register to reserve a seat, while making it clear that if seats were not filled by a certain time they would be opened up for general admission:

> 'So gates opened at... 11:30 - 12 o'clock and we said after half an hour then we will open up for anyone for any space that there is. So... if someone chose not to come because it was free it doesn't matter if they got the tickets or not... After that the gates will be open for anyone who wants to come down.' (P6)

More broadly, some interviewees were concerned that not charging a fee established an expectation that (i) community events could always be free, and (ii) that the work that contributed to their production (including that of coordinators and artists) should also be provided for free. Specifically, stakeholders were concerned that entirely free events set an unrealistic expectation for future council activities.

Some limits on event types and eligible costs caused frustration

Several interviewees mentioned that excluding events held on public holidays and religious holidays was a challenge for councils, especially those with limited existing event options and resources. Some suggested that such days were important to their community and aligned well with the program objectives around community connection:

> '[would have liked to do something...] around New Years, even Australia Day... the community would like that. I think that was excluded as well as Australia Day and a few others. There would have been opportunities we probably could have included if they were allowable.' (P9)

When interviewed, one grantee expressed confusion that while the program aimed to encourage economic stimulation and support local businesses, they were advised of the inability to hold events in privately run premises:

> 'Felt it curious that... we were actively encouraged to employ local private enterprise people to deliver events... but when it came to the live and local, I was told I could not have a music act in a private business... I couldn't understand what the difference was than if we were directly employing local businesses?' (P10)

Evaluation domain 3: Program administration

	Findings
	F3.1: The program was effectively promoted to the target audience, but some messaging was unclear.
	F3.2: The program guidelines were clear for the most part, with applicants only contacting DRNSW staff for clarification regarding eligible costs and admission charges.
	F3.3: Support from Program Team and Economic Development Network was responsive and knowledgeable
	Finding 3.4: Effective governance and probity processes were developed and applied

Finding 3.1: The program was effectively promoted to the target audience, but some messaging was unclear

Comprehensive program documentation was prepared and approved, including a project plan and probity plan. The target audience of eligible applicants was councils in regional NSW, Regional Development Far West and the Lord Howe Island Board. All eligible entities received direct communications inviting them to apply. Applications were received from all but two eligible entities, one of which withdrew prior to execution of the funding agreement.

The program was advertised directly to eligible applicants through letters to council contacts and informal outreach from Regional Development Network representatives. The majority of applicant survey respondents (n=94) reported they had heard about the grant directly from a DRNSW communication or from a DRNSW Economic Development Manager (see Figure 6) and that this was their preferred means of notification.

> 'By receiving direct communication from the Department of Regional NSW, I am assured that all the information I read is true and accurate. It also shows that the Department is proactive and wants people to apply for these grants.' (Applicant survey)

How survey respondents heard about the program (n=94)
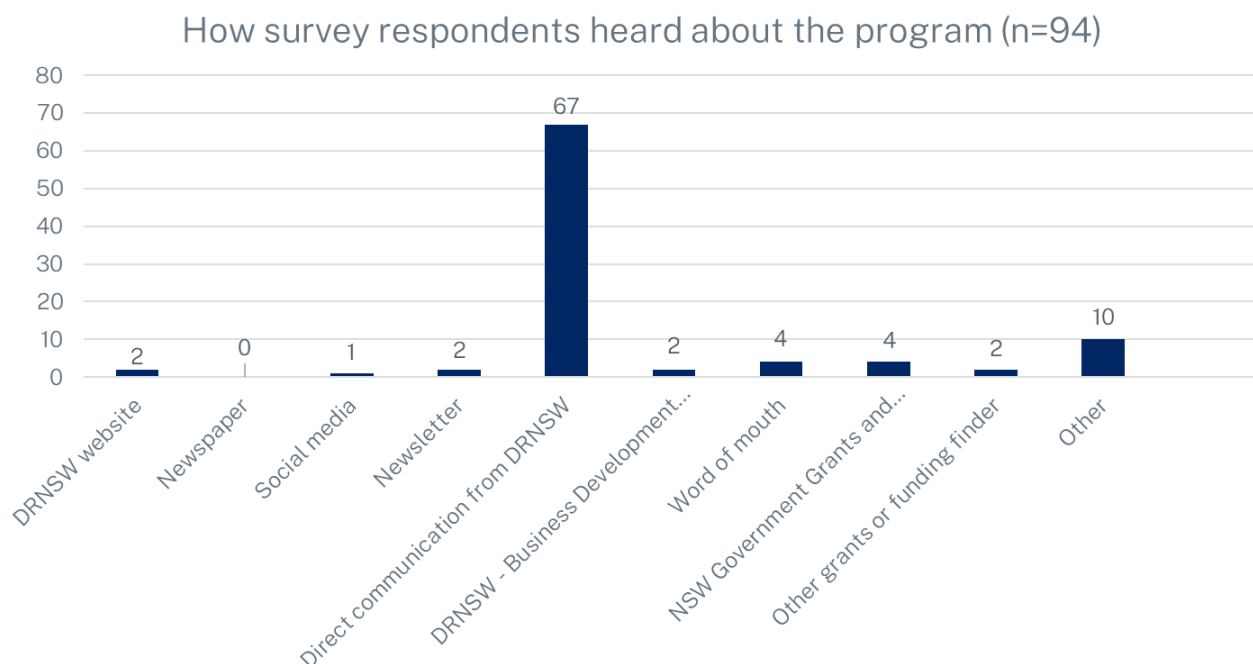
Figure 6: Communication medium for applicants

The guidelines were clear regarding eligible entities, but several ineligible entities began applications in SmartyGrants, including 4 who submitted applications (see Figure 7). Internal DRNSW stakeholders suggested that social media messaging might have inadvertently created this confusion with wording such as 'funding for community events' leading them to believe that they could apply directly. Council communications might have also contributed to this belief. A request to withdraw the social media promotion was made as soon as this issue was recognised.

Applications by ineligible organisations (n=62)
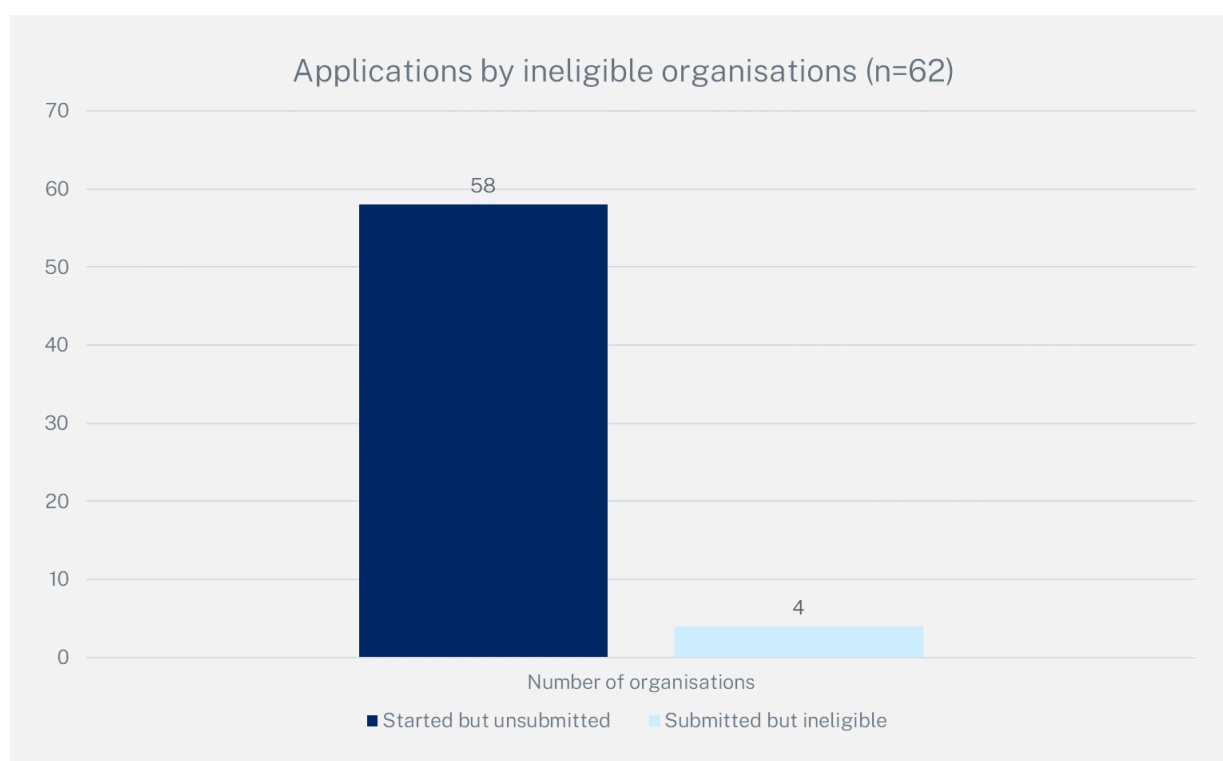
Figure 7: Ineligible applicants by submission status

Finding 3.2: The program guidelines were clear for the most part, with applicants only contacting DRNSW staff for clarification regarding eligible costs and admission charges

Overall, grantees found the program guidelines clear and easy to follow

Across both surveys and interviews, grantees reported finding the guidelines particularly clear and straightforward in comparison to other programs. The majority of survey respondents (92.6%) reported to have found the program guidelines to be either very or somewhat helpful (see Figure 8). Similarly, in interviews, several grantees described the program guidelines and application process as particularly straightforward in comparison to other grant programs.
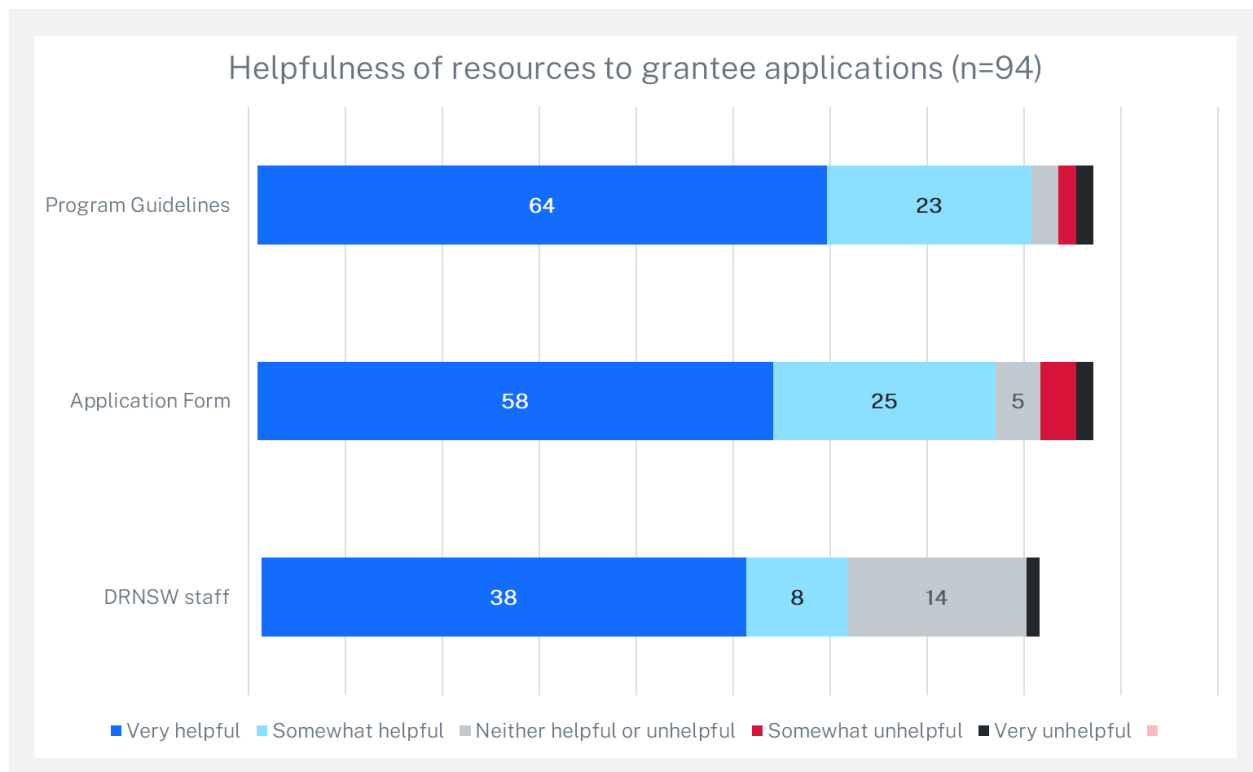

Figure 8: Helpfulness of resources provided

Some key program elements required further clarification from DRNSW staff

Some aspects of the program were not sufficiently articulated in the guidelines and required clarification from the program team and Economic Development Managers. In interviews, grantees referenced queries in relation to **eligible costs** such as the purchase of re-usable event-specific equipment, and the inclusion of events with a religious component, such as annual community Christmas carols.

The most prominent point of confusion raised in interviews related to how much councils or organisers could charge for event attendance, and specifically the requirement that events be **'free or low cost'**. This condition was identified in the program guidelines, but 'low cost' was not defined.

One interviewee spoke about seeking confirmation of possible ticket costs to include as a contingency in her organisation's proposed budget and the impact that unclear responses had on her organisation's ability to secure performers:

> '... Deal breakers were not specified... for example, [the guidelines] said free or low-cost events... the grant givers had a clear view of what was low cost, which didn't necessarily align with ours... I did have one meeting with [a DRNSW representative] ... and I was saying,

alright so what is low cost? And I was told definitely under $20.00…and then when I submitted the grant, it was then sent back and said no, no, $20.00 is too much. So it wasn't actually specified so in the end it was holding up the process so much that we were losing all of our headline acts because they were saying, is this going to go ahead or is it not?' (P10)

Grantee interviews identified a number of other areas of the application process of which some applicants were not clear on what was expected of them. These included:

- The level and type of detail required in applications, and in particular that the program did not require extensive explanations of events or budgets.

- What key information or documents were required (such as evidence of current public liability insurance), especially given that the application would become the funding agreement.

- Clearer guidance for grantees around their grant management responsibilities, including obtaining consent from owners for use of property as event venues.

Certain terms caused confusion and need clearer definition.

Two terms caused confusion for some applications. The first was the term 'project', with a theme from applicant interviews being that they did not recognise the program intended the term 'project' to mean the delivery of multiple events within a given timeframe; with the events being components of the 'project' rather than the project itself.

Another aspect of the guidelines which may require review was a lack of clarity regarding the term 'community events'. The original wording intended to describe a process of council and community working together, rather than councils sub-contracting to community organisations. One internal stakeholder highlighted the original expectation was that events would be organised with community rather than run by community organisations, stating:

'… [this was] not what this program is meant to be. Councils run events. That's who we were funding. [In] a perfect world I'd say that's a requirement [the] council is to run the event.' (DRNSW internal interviewee)

Finding 3.3: Support from Program Team and Economic Development Network was responsive and knowledgeable

Overall, gratitude for the support of DRNSW staff was a key theme across both interviews and survey responses. The majority of applicant survey respondents valued the support of DRNSW staff, including members of the program team and of the Economic Development Network with 84% reporting DRNSW staff support had been either helpful or very helpful, with one commenting:

'Have found some of the guidelines somewhat ambiguous, and after talking to staff who have clarified the guidelines/requirements… Staff have been extremely helpful with quick response times and clear answers.' (Applicant survey)

In interviews, several grantees noted the support provided by Economic Development Managers (EDMs), identifying the value of the relationship with their local EDMs who understood the local context. A Microsoft Teams channel was used to provide ready access to 'Questions and Answers' for EDMs, leading to the development of a FAQ resource for EDMs. The support received from EDMs included informal feedback on ideas and eligibility during the application process, and approaches to managing community expectations through an expression of interest process:

'... the [EDM] that we had from regional NSW... was great. She called us straight up and ... [gave] a bit of guidance for what kind of things you can do or... can't do... I often spoke to her and said how about this?... Does that kind of fit?... she was a really good resource for us to use through that application process...' (P6)

Other grantees felt that personalised support was less relevant for this particular program because their need to focus on administrative tasks related to submitting the application on behalf of community groups. One internal stakeholder also suggested that the degree of involvement by EDMs in providing support varied between locations from low to highly engaged.

Finding 3.4: Effective governance and probity processes were developed and applied

A clear governance and probity framework was put in place, with clearly articulated roles and responsibilities. This included a probity plan, decision logs, enquiry log and 'lessons learnt' document. A review of the Probity Verification Statement indicates that the program was carried out in a fair and equitable manner, in line with approved policies.

Both the program team and GMF staff were able to respond flexibly to changing demands, including requests for extensions to the application closing date and requests for further information. A fact sheet was developed and published on the DRNSW website in response to common queries, and business rule adopted to allow for owner's consent documentation to be provided post-application but prior to an event taking place to expedite the assessment process.

Evaluation domain 4: Program application and contracting processes

	Findings
	F4.1: Applicants found the application process easy to follow but the 'all-in-one' approach created challenges for both applicants and assessment.
	F4.2 The 'all-in-one application form' approach created significant internal challenges for reporting.
	F4.3: The combined funding application and agreement streamlined the contract negotiation process, but any errors in grantee documentation for one or more events delayed contract finalisation for all events included under the project.
	F4.4: Due to the tight program timelines, any delays in notification of outcomes of applications, variation and promotional assets approvals created risks for event delivery and stress for grantees and community partners.
	Recommendations for future programs
	R4.1: Ensure documents used to capture any reportable data, such as budgets, location, audience or outcomes are managed through SmartyGrants rather than external sources such as spreadsheets.
	R4.2: For programs with multiple projects under a single applicant, consider the use of an over-arching application with individual projects entered into Smarty Grants with an identifier enabling linkage to the application for accurate tracking and reporting.
	R4.3: Where a combined application form and funding deed is used, ensure subject matter experts (such as GMF) review documentation such as insurances and landholder consent at the application stage to avoid delays.
	R4.4: For low-risk projects, allow grantees to manage minor changes without requiring formal contract variations. These parameters should be clearly articulated internally and with grantees.
	R4.5: For programs with multiple events, ensure the application form includes fields for project wide costs and budget items that are not event specific, such as project coordination and support.

Finding 4.1: Applicants found the application process easy to follow but the 'all-in-one' approach created challenges for both applicants and assessment

The application process employed by CEP was distinct from other programs in 2 important aspects. Firstly, the program used a single application form for all projects which in this case consisted of multiple events. Secondly, information used in the application form was used as the basis for the funding agreement, rather than a separate contract being agreed through a negotiation process. Both decisions were aimed at improving the speed of application processing in service of the broader goal of disbursing funds quickly to communities to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

'All-in-one' form slowed assessment and payment

Despite these design decisions, the 'all-in-one' approach created significant internal challenges that delayed payment. As CEP was a non-competitive fund with simple, met/not met assessment criteria, the implications of the 'all-in-one' approach on merit decisions were not considered. Despite this, assessment was a lengthy process.

While the original intention was that applications were to be reviewed as they were received, most applications were not submitted until the closing date. Only 24.7% of applications were submitted before the original closing date of 24 June 2022, while 64.5% were submitted between 24 June 2022 and the extended closing date of 8 July 2022. A further 7.5% were submitted after the extended closing date.

This 'flood' of submissions caused a significant backlog of assessment for the program team. While the guidelines had stated a turnaround time of 20 working days from submission to assessment and approval, the average time taken from submission to approval was 39.1 days. GMF representatives noted that a significant number of applications required revisions to be made to applications due to incorrect or missing documentation. Where there were issues with one event within an application (such as ineligible costs or missing documentation), the grouping of all events into that application meant that approval for the entire package of events was delayed.

These issues were limited to the assessment process, with only 4 days on average taken to finalise funding agreements following application approval. As a result, most payment was made in September and October, rather than immediately following the application closing date (see Figure 9).
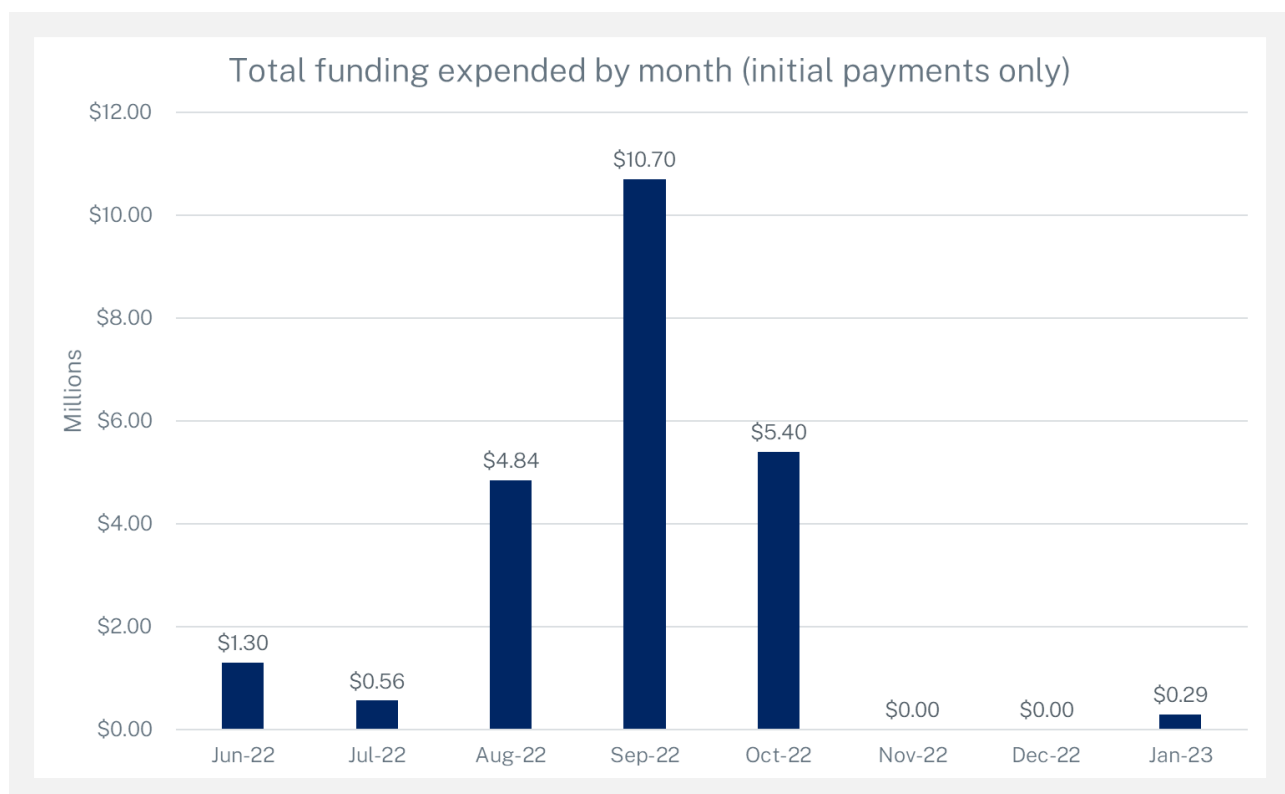
Figure 9: Total grant funding paid by month (initial payment of 80% on execution only)

Two internal stakeholders explained that the original intention was to keep the application form 'simple' but as the program developed, it became more complex, with one stakeholder saying that the process *'lost its purpose to be simple'*. Overall, most applicants were positive about the application form and associated processes (see Figure 10). This was reflected in

several supportive comments made by survey respondents, noting the application form was easy to understand, follow and provided guidance, with one applicant stating:

> 'The program guidelines and application form provided the framework for the planning of our event. It steered us towards a meaningful event focused on reconnecting our community.' (Applicant survey)

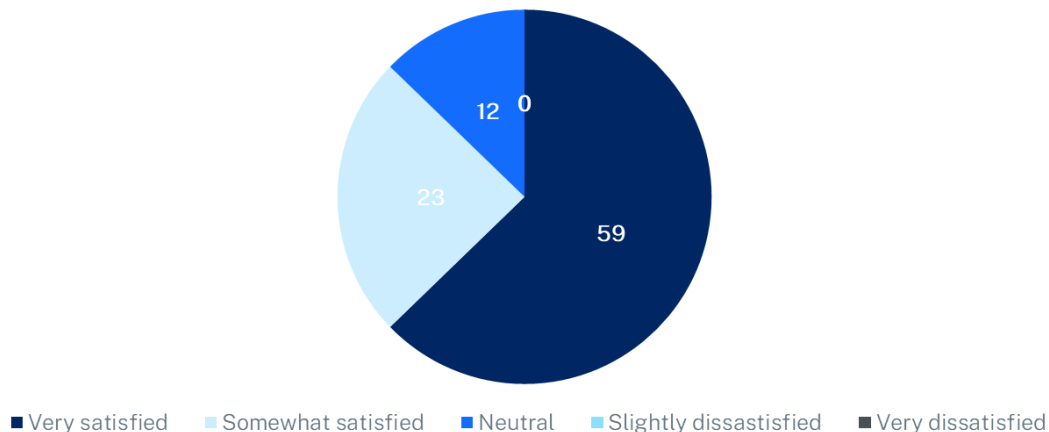Overall satisfaction with application experience (n.94)

Figure 10: Overall satisfaction with application experience

Challenges with use of an 'all-in-one' application form for a program with uncapped numbers and community-run events

The effort to reduce duplication was recognised by grantees. While some noted that aspects of the application form were somewhat repetitive, the response to the 'all-in-one' approach was largely positive, with one applicant stating:

> 'I didn't mind it at all, because otherwise we'd be doing 6 individual applications…and all the upfront information would be the same…' (P3)

One applicant noted that combining events within the same application (and subsequently the agreement) meant that if there was underspend in one event (e.g. because it did not go ahead) those funds could be reallocated to another event (rather than having to return the funds). While this was noted by DRNSW staff to have been the intention, it was identified that the ability to manage minor variations locally was not well understood by many grantees and other DRNSW staff (see Finding 4.4 below).

Although most scores from survey respondents indicated they had found the application form to be 'helpful', several used the opportunity to provide comments on the length or suitability of the 'all-in-one' form for their needs, with 2 indicating the application was too long/time consuming. Two other applicants reported the application form was not adequately tailored to the program, with one stating some of the fields did not apply, and another stating:

> 'The application does not cater towards extensive multiple small community events' (Applicant survey).

In interviews, 2 major reasons for this frustration emerged. The first was the combination of an 'all-in-one' form and events being uncapped in number. The application form was built to include a maximum of 10 events, in line with the expectations of the program team. Despite this intention, the number of events applicants included in some single applications far exceeded these expectations. 27 eligible applications included more than 10 events, with 35 events being the maximum.

The program team adapted by offering the option of applicants submitting the details of additional projects via a separate document (spreadsheet), but this became significant pain

point for applicants. Grantees pointed out that the separate document did not have the same functionality as the standard form. In particular, the supplementary document made allocating venue coordinates difficult and did not allow multiple answers to some questions.

> *'The fact that we had to have a separate spreadsheet for anything over 10 events… it slowed down the process because you are swapping from an [online] environment… to going on an Excel spreadsheet… if that could have been addressed and we could have had that one entrance portal for all [events].' (P5)*

The second major challenge for applicants was that while the 'all-in-one' approach allowed councils to collate numerous proposals into a single application, it did not provide flexibility to respond to the diversity of events and organisers. Given that many events were community-run, councils required community groups to contribute information to sections of the form. Some councils indicated that managing the quality of these inputs was challenging. For example:

> *'The application form was a standard design that is fine for council projects but can be difficult to negotiate when inputting information provided by a community organisation.' (Applicant survey)*

Finding 4.2: The 'all-in-one application form' approach created significant internal challenges for reporting

There were challenges in reporting on the program. In particular, the decision to limit each SmartyGrants application form to 10 events, with further events detailed in supplementary attachments (such as spreadsheets), meant that data on these events could not be accessed easily and data quality was poor.

The impact of this was significant. Specifically, it meant that the Department could not meet the requirements of the *Grants Administration Guide* (the *Guide*) and required Ministerial approval for a policy exemption. The *Guide* came into effect on 19 September 2022. While CEP design, application and assessment had already begun, some application approvals and contracting continued past this date. As such, the program was required to comply with the requirements laid out in the *Guide*, including those relating to data publication.

Under section 6.5 'Publishing grant information' and Appendix A of the *Guide*, officials must publish both the funding amount awarded to a grantee, and the figure awarded to any 'downstream' recipients (such as community groups, in the case of CEP) within 45 days of grant agreements taking effect. While overall data on grants awarded to primary recipients was published on the DRNSW and NSW Grants and Funding websites on 16 December 2022, it did not include details of secondary or 'downstream' recipients.

As a means of addressing this issue, GMF staff manually set up an additional searchable administration form for each application, including retrieving data from the supplementary attachments. This was resource intensive and time consuming, with the estimated time taken being approximately 30 hours. Interviewees from multiple teams suggested that more effective solutions could have been planned and applied had there been less of an imperative to distribute funds quickly.

Potential solutions identified to overcome administrative and reporting challenges

Both technical and strategic options were identified to prevent similar issues arising in the future. Internal stakeholders noted that future programs could allocate an identifier for each event within the existing SmartyGrants system linked to the overarching application. This would enable data retrieval and filtering by event for accurate reporting of event numbers and details.

The new 'SmartyFile' functionality may also provide some of the benefits for applicants that the 'all-in-one' form sought to offer, including reduced duplication and administrative burden.

Applicants will be able to establish a central base of documentation that apply across programs and applications, such as public liability insurance. This approach would also support separate applications per event.

To some extent, the problems identified above could also be mitigated through program design decisions. Internal stakeholders recognised that placing limitations (a 'cap') on the number of events in an application and requiring separate applications would support reporting requirements. This could be done directly, or indirectly through a requirement for events to have a minimum budget.

Alternatively, the technical solutions above could be applied in conjunction with a comprehensive 'umbrella' agreement with each council incorporating all events. This would both reduce administrative burdens and, if requirements were tailored to event scope, budget and risk, provide councils with greater flexibility to deliver outcomes. It was suggested by one internal stakeholder that the original plans for CEP resembled this approach, with grantees to be encouraged to view their project as a series of events and that minor changes within that scope would not require contract variations. It appears that due to staff changes, this approach was not understood by other DRNSW staff nor many grantees.

There were also some general aspects of the form that grantees suggested could be improved, such as:

- Moving the checklist of required inclusions from the end of the form to the top, for easy reference.

- Allowing digital signatures (rather than physical signatures).

- Allowing applicants to confirm landholder consent after venues were booked, rather than in application (when events are not held on Council-owned land).

There were also specific suggestions about how the all-in-one form could be improved for future rounds. These suggestions focused on making the form more navigable given its size, including:

- Retaining the combined form but separating the events into different pages would improve useability.

- Alternatively, providing an option to filter by event or otherwise navigate between events rather than having to scroll through a long webpage.

- Including an option in the form to identify costs that span the whole program (such as event coordination).

Finding 4.3: The combined funding application and agreement streamlined the contract negotiation process, but errors in grantee documentation for one or more events delayed contract finalisation for all events included under the project

Unlike most programs, the application form was used as the funding agreement rather than successful applicants engaging in a contract negotiation process. The difference between funding 'agreement' and 'deed', is that a deed is a legal contract with details 'locked in' whereas, an agreement has more flexibility but does not have the same legal weight if issues needed to be addressed. This change removed the standard post-approval negotiation process and expedited outcome notification for applicants.

SmartyGrants data indicates that these changes did support speedy notification for applicants, with an average of only 4 working days between application approval and contract execution. Of the grantees who participated in interviews, some recognised these benefits, with one interviewee suggesting that such changes would allow work to commence more quickly.

Risk of delays where grantee documentation was not complete at the application stage

The combination of the 'all-in-one' form becoming the funding agreement without a mediating negotiation process meant that minor issues with individual events impacted the delivery of other events within the application. For example, if one piece of documentation (such as site owner consent) was not provided with the application or if one event was ineligible, the full suite of events included in the application were delayed. Incorrect signatures were another potential error. It should be noted that some applicants did not realise the application form would also act as the funding agreement, although this was specified in both the program guidelines and the name of the form, which may have impacted on their attention to detail in terms of documentation required.

As these issues arose at the assessment stage, they did not have a major impact on the time taken to finalise agreement. As per above, on average the time taken from assessment approval to funding agreement was only 4 working days.

Some grantee documentation deficits were not identified early in the process and double handling occurred due to the program team reviewing and then checking with GMF when unsure if the documentation met requirements. Where a combined application form and funding deed is used in future, these issues can be avoided by ensuring subject matter experts (such as GMF) are used in the review of documentation such as insurances and landholder consent at the application stage.

Finding 4.4: Due to the tight program timelines, any delays in notification of outcomes of applications, variation and promotional assets approvals created risks for event delivery

Notification delays impacted event delivery

Most interviewees did not mention delays around notification of application outcomes or receiving funding. However, for those who did experience delays in notification of application outcome and other approvals there was a significant flow-on effect. One grantee reported that their application took nearly a month from lodgement to funding approval when the guidance was 7-10 days (due errors in documentation). This was problematic because the grantee's first event was scheduled for late August and the council's policy is to not commit to contracts with suppliers until the funding agreement is signed, leaving small businesses holding the risk.

A number of grantees described the consequences of delays in confirmation of approval outcome notification, including outcomes of application, variation requests and promotional assets approvals. The impacts included needing to reschedule some events, inability to lock in performers/event resources, reduction in time period to promote events, and stress described as being experienced by grantees and community group partners. One interviewee described the need to reschedule events or consider cancelling due to delays. Despite being reminded that the funding was provided as an allocation rather than competitively, the grantee was hesitant to proceed with event related bookings until the funding agreement had been formally signed off:

> 'So it was like a game of chess. It was like, who's going to move next? And am I going to be the one that ends up being [in trouble] at the end?' (P10)

While support during the variation process was appreciated, turnaround time for variations was a pain point for some grantees

Grantees noted in interviews and surveys that the support and guidance received during the variation process had been helpful and the documentation was not onerous. Where variations to an application were required before funding could be finalised however, processing time

made delivering initial projects challenging, especially given the need to contract suppliers and promote events.

Three interviewees provided descriptions of the time taken for variations to be processed as a significant frustration. One grantee spoke about having to postpone and rescope an event due to risk of flooding, for which they sought a budget variation covering sunk costs and a name change. The variation took 2 months to finalise, creating significant uncertainty and leading to a further extension. Another grantee indicated that he would not seek a variation for changes to an upcoming event because he did not expect to receive a response quickly enough after past delays. Several grantees spoke about variation delays leading to difficulty promoting events. One interviewee said:

> 'I was at the point where we had to commit and pay deposits and that was tricky… you know, we're four weeks out before we got the final confirmation. So then we really had four weeks of promotion announcements […] it did put some pressure on us. But you know it was worth it.' (P6)

A further pain point was noted to be delays in obtaining approval for branding of event promotion resources. Some grantees identified this impacting on the lead in time which was then available to properly promote their event to target audiences. Another grantee described the variation process as 'painful' because the variation request form only allowed the user to submit up to three variations, requiring a second form to be submitted to include a fourth (or further) variation.

Application approach resulted in variations

Many grantees required variations to their agreements during the program delivery period due to a variety of factors, including the inherent uncertainty of event delivery, third-party event management, and the breadth of projects delivered. There were differences in the approach taken by applicants when completing the application form which impacted on variation requests. Some grantees provided detailed applications and may not have been aware of the scope for a broad application with an indicative budget, such as number of events, details of planned event types across a particular timeframe, naming of LGAs (rather than specific locations which may not have been confirmed at time of application) within a total budget.

Originally, the program was designed to allow grantees to manage minor changes to events within their application without the need for a variation, but this did not occur due to internal understanding being lost with the redeployment of staff. By keeping detail requirements broad in the application, those designing the program had originally aimed to reduce the planning burden on applicants and speed up applications, with one internal stakeholder stating:

> … for example five events in this region and they didn't know the particulars [at time of application]. They would still get the 80% up front on a sort of loose budget if you like and then… before they claim their last 20%… there would be a touch point back with programs [team] as the assessor and the approver to say that the works were all eligible. So that was always the intent, that…[they] wouldn't have given us an exact budget at the time [of application]. (DRNSW internal stakeholder interviewee).

Management of changes within certain parameters by grantees without the need for formal variation approval would have provided flexibility and removed the administrative and time burden for both grantees and DRNSW personnel. Concerns and questions regarding the need for variations resulted in multiple queries being fielded by DRNSW staff, with one staff member stating:

> 'I probably have maybe 10 different related enquiries relating to this a week, which is unusual given that it's contracted and… we're not doing completions or anything yet' (Internal stakeholder interviewee).

It is recommended that for future similar programs, DRNSW be notified of minor changes and that these be recorded in an administration form rather than requiring a formal variation approval process. Further mechanisms to track project implementation and monitor risk could include progress reports and touchpoints with grantees rather than multiple variations. It was acknowledged that these learnings will be useful for future rounds and other grant programs.

Inconsistent understanding of variation requirements between grantees

It was clear that not all grantees understood what project changes required DRNSW approval of variations to their agreements. Several interviewees spoke about managing minor budget movements across events without seeking a variation, with one grantee stating:

> *'I'm taking the common-sense approach and you know that's a scary thing to do some days'* (P2).

More typically, grantees believed that agreement variations were required for minor budget movements from those originally estimated in the application. Likewise, some grantees sought formal approval for variations to event locations while others managed this locally if the event remained within the LGA, such as when the location changed due to rain or flood. This was a key concern for several grantees who indicated they would welcome clarity and flexibility to enable the grantee to manage minor changes themselves.

Agreement variation requests indicate aspects of the program were not sufficiently flexible

Where variations were required, they were often driven by the impact of weather events (including in already disaster-effected areas such as the Central West and Northern Rivers regions), changing venues, availability of performers and providers, and cost changes from prior estimates. One key challenge that emerged through stakeholder feedback was the difficulty estimating budgets in advance, including non-council event organisers asking to charge admission fees to cover costs.

Some of the need for variations (such as those relating to definitions of entry fees) could have been prevented with the inclusion of more detailed conditions in the program guidelines. Provision for other changes, such as easily anticipated modifications to date, name, and minor budget reallocations, could be more clearly delegated to councils in future programs.

Evaluation domain 5: Monitoring and evaluation

	Findings
	F5.1: Reporting requirements were appropriate for larger events but created significant administrative burden for projects with multiple small, community delivered events.
	F5.2: Grantees utilised a range of outcomes measurement strategies depending on the type of event and organisational capacity and skills.
	Recommendations for future programs
	R5.1: Consider a tiered approach to reporting requirements for event programs with a range of event types and size, i.e. less detailed reporting for small scale events of a certain budget threshold and more detailed reporting for larger 'marquee' events.

Finding 5.1: Reporting requirements were appropriate for larger events but created significant administrative burden for projects with multiple small, community delivered events

While not a focus of interviews or the survey, some grantees spoke about the level of reporting required. Most responses indicated that reporting requirements were appropriate for a grant of this size. Where there was frustration, it related to managing the reporting, acquittal and data collection requirements for many smaller events, with one grantee stating:

> '…while the application process was fine, for small community events in remote areas I think the monitoring and evaluation criteria is somewhat excessive.' (Applicant survey)

For further information regarding the rationale around a tiered approach, please refer to 'Section 2: Program Design'.

Progress reports may have been beneficial when tracking progress of those receiving time extensions.

In the combined application form and funding agreement, grantees were notified that they could be required to provide a progress report. This option was not utilised for this program, however internal interviewees identified the potential benefits of using progress reporting instead of agreement variations. It was observed that this approach would provide greater scope for flexibility for programs with councils managing third-party providers, i.e., when extensions were approved a progress report requirement could have been noted.

Inclusion of an applicant survey within the application form resulted in high response rates but should be better tailored in future

Unlike other programs, a link to an initial applicant evaluation survey was included in the application form. This resulted in a very high response rate, but generated frustration from respondents because it included questions that were not tailored to the program. Applicants were required to tick a box indicating they had completed the survey prior to submitting their application. Six respondents noted that some questions in the survey referred to the contracting stage of the process, which they had not yet reached. These items were removed when the issue was identified. The survey question sets for pre- and post-contracting stage have now been revised to avoid this issue for future programs.

Finding 5.2 Grantees utilised a range of outcomes measurement strategies depending on the type of event and organisational capacity and skills

Grantees shared information about the way in which they sought to measure outcomes and impact of the events held as a result of the grant. This ranged from the use of validated measures and surveys, survey questions recommended by DRNSW and methods for recording attendance at events. While the event attendee survey questions provided by DRNSW were identified as useful, some grantees added questions to obtain information they felt to be of value.

Some grantees described innovative strategies for measuring event outcomes. One grantee described the use of 'counters' technology to record the number of mobile phones as a proxy for the number of people attending the event. While this was seen as a user-friendly approach to measuring attendance, it was noted some attendees may not have carried a mobile phone such as young children. It did however demonstrate when unique individuals had returned to the event with the grantee observing '... *we can now estimate over 70,000 people came through over the four-week period' (P6).*

One grantee reported early attendee satisfaction results as being highly positive. The same grantee had utilised a validated survey for social impact measurement, identifying the power of the evidence collected at that point in time:

> '... *the satisfaction results in terms of sense of community and connection were like 88-94%... like they were right up there... we used a social impact tool called [name of instrument] and the evidence is there about how people appreciated that opportunity...it [the data] is incredibly powerful.' (P10)*

Councils were keen to showcase their work and learn from peers

Grantees with less experience in project outcomes monitoring and evaluation would benefit from additional guidance, including case studies of approaches taken by other councils which appropriately aligned to the program objectives. Several grantees offered to provide further details should these be beneficial as case studies for grantees of similar programs in the future. The concept of case studies to be made available to future grant applicants as exemplars with the inclusion of lessons learnt through experience was identified as valuable, with one grantee stating:

> *I would be very, very keen to hear about some of the other events and how they went about, you know... it would be great to hear, to improve the way that we do things and look at how other [grantees] have done with the funding... like case studies and that sort of stuff. (P8)*

Early outcomes

Outputs, social outcomes and economic outcomes

	Findings
✓	F6.1: Existing events were enhanced, and a variety of new events were delivered that would not otherwise have occurred.
✓	F6.2: Early data indicate events were well received and had a positive impact on community connection.
✓	F6.3: Some events will not be sustainable without further funding and community expectations may not be met in future, creating reputational risk for councils.
✓	F6.4: The program created different forms of community connection, including between local community members, between councils and local businesses and community organisations, and with visitors to the region.
✓	F6.5: The program provided opportunities for council innovation and capacity building, addressing geographic inequity and community recovery following natural disasters.
✓	F6.6: The program generated increased economic activity, including direct benefits for local businesses in the event and hospitality sectors, and increased visitation
	Considerations for future programs
→	In programs aimed at supporting community connectedness, clearly articulate the types of social outcomes anticipated to facilitate impact measurement.
→	Share case studies of good project practice for the recipients of future programs such as strategies to improve community awareness of accessibility and inclusion.
→	Consider allowing reasonable admission fees and for grantees to retain surpluses for similar programs in the future to support the continuation and sustainability of community-based events.

Outputs and community response

The analysis of the early outputs and outcomes generated by the program is based on data provided by grantees at the time of the grant application, applicant survey responses and qualitative data from the interviews conducted with a sample of grantees.

It should be noted that the early outputs and outcomes contained in this report are indicative only, with a comprehensive outcomes evaluation to be conducted following the completion of approximately 75% of projects. This is scheduled to occur following the close of the extension completion date of 1 January 2024. At time of writing, 15 completion and acquittal reports (16%) had been submitted.

Finding 6.1: Existing events were enhanced, and a variety of new events were delivered that would not otherwise have occurred

Program enabled new events and enhanced existing events

Approximately 43% of events proposed by applicants had not been run before, with the other 57% being existing events. Though data on grantees with greater than 10 events is limited (see section 4.1), a sample of available data indicates that approximately 350 new events were run through the support of the program.

This data was reflected in interviews with grantees, who spoke about their dual aims for the funding. Several explained that the funding enabled them to make existing events bigger and better, noting that without the grant such events would have either not occurred or would have been significantly smaller in scope:

> *'It used to just be sort of in the park on the side of the road... and the community would come together. There was a lot more promotion [with the funding] ... we had three live bands and full stage and just more kids rides and more activities and things like that, that they wouldn't have had without the funding and the support' (P4)*

> *'And there was another one out there... which is an annual event as well. And they always wanting to make it bigger and bigger. So it was easy for me to reach out to him and say, look, we've got this opportunity.' (P9)*

The dual aims of this approach articulated by grantees were to provide a high-quality event for local community members, while attracting more visitors to the town, with a flow on effect for the town's economy. Some of the new events had been in planning stages for some time, effectively being on a wish list for when suitable funding became available:

> *'... all of the other events were new events, so they were events that the community had been considering, things that we talked about over a period of time. They would have never had the funding to be able to do that... They are brand new events for the community and really being well patronised and well appreciated across the community as well.' (P2)*

While many grantees utilised the funds to enhance existing events, often in combination with holding some new events, one grantee appeared to have misunderstood the eligibility criteria. They appeared to have not realised the funding could be used to enhance existing events, stating: *'this [funding] called for people to come up with new events that hadn't been done before.' (P5)*

Wide variety of events developed

'Events' came in all shapes and sizes. Some involved outdoor community events, festivals, performances and street fairs, while others utilised the funds to enable community participation activities. One grantee described community members being invited to attend a 'make a piece of art' event which was subsequently put on display. Community engagement

was reported both in regard to participation, and in visiting the display throughout the event period to see artworks other community members had created:

'Community engagement with a very visible public outcome. And so you know, when you went to see the exhibition, everybody would be in there going oh, that's my [artwork]. And that's my friend's. And that's nanas... breaking down barriers to encouraging people to attend...' (P10)

Another grantee described the use of the CEP funding to conduct a program whereby children from local schools worked with musicians to write and perform songs. The performance was recorded and subsequently shown at a series of screenings to engage more members of the community:

'They worked with the kids, and they produced a series of songs which the kids then learnt and then they performed at a local venue in [name of town]. It was just so beautiful and so moving and... obviously on the night itself performing them and.... they are actually going to screen them over four times... coming up at the end of March, which is sort of at the end of our 12-month period. So that's a really lovely thing to do for the community.' (P3)

The program provided an opportunity for innovation

Multiple grantees mentioned that the program provided an unusual opportunity to 'test' a new event concept or idea. These grantees explained that ordinarily, councils are risk averse and would not take-on the risk of committing funding to an event without a history of success. Funding also provided an opportunity to gather insights to inform future event planning:

'... it also gave everyone a chance to test and try out a few things. So what's succeeded and what didn't.' (P9)

'It was one of those things that I had been having ongoing conversations... saying this is what we want to do... so I knew what the local appetite was, but it would have actually taken up more than half probably of my annual programming budget... this was a brilliant opportunity to test the long-held strategy and hope and dream of testing - testing the venue and vitally the audience engagement...' (P10)

Finding 6.2. Early data indicate events were well received and had a positive impact on community connection

Councils reported positive feedback from community members

During the period of the interviews, grantees were at various stages of implementation. Some were close to completing delivery of the events funded by CEP, while others had a number of events yet to be delivered. Of the events that had been delivered to date, grantees provided anecdotal reports of positive impact, including:

'... [we] got some really good community feedback on all of them... the three that have gone ahead have been really successful as well.' (P1)

'... everyone's loved them. It's just been so welcomed by the community, there was obviously a need for something like this, not only post floods, but post COVID. Yeah, just the feedback has been extremely positive.' (P7)

Grantees described impact in terms of a range of outcome areas. These included social outcomes, with one grantee stating:

'So they don't often have the opportunity to bring everybody together. So I think the impact, if we look at well-being, the social outcomes, that type of thing is significant...' (P2)

Appetite for ongoing support for and continuation of community events

While grantees recognised that CEP was designed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was consistent support for a program of this type to be offered in the future, to support the sustainability of events which facilitate community connection on an ongoing basis. For example:

> '… to me it seems as though it should be a program that actually is funded on an ongoing basis to build that community cohesion… or at least the way that we've used it has done that.' (P8)

Interviewees described the events developed through the program as being valuable new community assets that should be delivered again for their communities. Multiple grantees spoke of wanting to leverage off the success of events during the funding period and build upon the momentum with plans to run some of the events on an annual basis. An example is a grantee who was inspired by the success of the annual Parkes Elvis festival, hoping to build a similar initiative in their community:

> 'The Parkes Elvis festival [is a] classic example… everyone thought it was a just a complete joke the first year and 70 people turned up. They had it again the next year and got a bit of funding. Double that number turned up and look at it now. [Thousands of] people a year […] because they're able to capitalise on success by looking for additional funding and so on.' (P5).

Events were an opportunity to demonstrate and grow community capacity

Several interviewees spoke about the program as an opportunity to prove what their communities could achieve when funding is available. The opportunity for community members to put forward ideas for events enabled through CEP was also seen as important – giving a voice to community and increasing confidence in having their ideas heard and responded to.:

> 'It was nice for them to see what we can offer and that […] we can get these numbers to town. I think people sort of sometimes hesitate to put an idea forward because it might not go or get off the ground, but to see what the [name] Festival and to have our Main Street packed during the street party was something no one expected. We didn't expect [the response] we had in that first year out and just to showcase what we can do and all our different groups, community groups can come together and do.' (P4)

A number of grantees noted that the grant provided an opportunity to build community capacity for future events. Some interviewees spoke of this in terms of an investment of their time in upskilling community members to enable readiness for future opportunities.

> 'it's also recognising that we're building their skills as well… so that has a value and will return… back to Council. [It will] be very beneficial down the road. So recognising we are scaling [up] our community in some areas.' (P3)

The concept of building community capacity extended to building awareness and understanding of accessibility and inclusion (A&I) as part of event planning and delivery:

> 'we've had a lot of positive feedback, especially on the [A&I] training that a lot of event organisers have never kind of considered that kind of angle of running an event previously, so it is really good to have access to that [A&I] training to use for these events and to take the knowledge forward for future.' (P7)

Finding 6.3 Some events will not be sustainable without further funding and community expectations may not be met in future, creating reputational risk for councils

Future events and community expectations

A range of issues were raised by grantees regarding the sustainability of events and how to best manage community expectations. Interviewees spoke about the challenge of budgeting and providing events at ticket prices reflective of the true cost of the event without a grant program to subsidise ticket prices similar to the CEP:

> 'If we do this again in future and we have to go, OK, well, you know, you came for like $9 to the last festival. This one's going to cost you $99.00, because that's what it really costs to [run...] we are worried about everyone going well I'm not coming out for that because last time I got in for 9 bucks.' (P10)

Some councils had used funds to expand upon existing events, seeking to make these bigger and better for the community following the difficulties of the pandemic and natural disasters. They indicated concern that community members may expect the same standard of events into the future:

> 'But I do have a concern... all three of those events will benefit significantly by this funding and the crowd numbers at each of those three events will benefit significantly by this funding. But what happens next year?' (P5)

Restrictions on admission fees limited opportunity for ongoing sustainability

As mentioned above, the program restricted ticket prices to 'low amount' and grantees were not allowed to generate a surplus to carry forward – all revenue from the 'low ticket price' was required to be acquitted against costs associated with events held within the approved CEP applications. Some grantees were disappointed with these restrictions. They felt that a modest ticket price and 'banking' some funds would have enabled them to plan, prepare and book performers and other suppliers in advance of the next event. One interviewee suggested asking event attendees to provide a donation which could be used towards the cost of the following year's event/s.

Such was the commitment to the continuation of well received events, some grantees described plans to seek sponsorship to ensure the sustainability of future events in case similar funding was not available in the future:

> 'I would do it again in a heartbeat, but we would really have to look at some kind of ticketed process [...] if you look at the amount of money we spent versus the economic value, that was significant... and you know, if we were to do it again, we will need some kind of sponsorship.' (P6)

> 'We'll have another program of events on next year. They [will try to] secure funding through a few different sources... some of those like smaller community festivals, I know some of them want them to be kind of like an annual event [but] it will depend on if [they are] able to secure some other funding or sponsors.' (P7)

Allowing reasonable admission fees and not-for-profit operators (including councils) to generate surpluses should be considered for similar programs in the future. This change would help beneficiaries spread risk across multiple years and long-term planning and investment.

Social and community outcomes

Finding 6.4: The program created different forms of community connection, including between local community members, between councils and local businesses and community organisations, and with visitors to the region

The program supported community connection

The main focus of the program was on supporting community connection. Specifically, the program aimed to *'reconnect communities by facilitating the delivery of events that promote greater social cohesion, bringing people together to create improved social outcomes'* (Program guidelines).

Early evidence from interviews with grant recipients indicate that the program was effective in helping communities reconnect following COVID-19 restrictions and natural disasters. Four broad types of 'connection' emerged from interviews:

- Connection between event attendees
- Connection between councils and community groups
- Connection between larger population centres and smaller or outlying communities
- Connection between community members and health/social services

Not all these forms of connection were evident across all interviews and their relative extent cannot be estimated without further data. Such forms of connection however do align well with the overarching objectives of the program and the expectations of the program designers. Further examination of the types and quality of community connection enabled through this program will be explored in the outcomes evaluation scheduled for 2024.

Early indications of positive social outcomes

Grantees described impact in terms of a range of social outcome areas, including connectedness, though these were often not clearly articulated. For example:

> *So they don't often have the opportunity to bring everybody together. So I think the impact, if we look at well-being, the social outcomes, that type of thing is significant.' (P2)*

The document review identified a lack of clarity regarding the types of social outcomes anticipated as a consequence of the program. A recommendation of this evaluation is to provide clearer direction to applicants as to the focus and expected impact of the program to facilitate the measurement of meaningful outcomes. For example:

- Improved community cohesion and sense of belonging
- Increased levels of community pride
- Improved person to person connection within communities
- Improved connections between marginalised community members or areas and broader community (social inclusion)

Connection with health and social services

Despite the lack of clarity regarding the terms 'community connection' or 'social outcomes', the concept of 'connection' described by interviewees extended to facilitating connection between community and services. One grantee spoke about utilising the event as a 'catalyst' to make health and social services accessible to community members by being together at the event:

'It's also an opportunity for us to get service providers up there as well. So when we know that we're running an event up there, we'll contact mental health, dental, all of those community service providers [not for profit community support organisations, local health district, toy library] that can go up there, so...an opportunity to provide that support... for the community to get a lot more back out of that other than just the event as well... It's the catalyst that brought them all together.' (P2)

Strengthening councils' connections within the community

The program was also described as strengthening relationships between council staff and their communities. All interviewees reported engaging with community organisations. Beyond working to manage and deliver events, councils engaged with groups not directly involved or benefitting from events including local nursing homes, charities, schools and business groups such as Chambers of Commerce. One interviewee spoke about the way in which the need to develop the events had pushed his organisation to establish new relationships with other public entities in the area.

Finding 6.5: The program provided opportunities for council innovation and capacity building, addressing geographic inequity and community recovery following natural disasters

Reconnecting in the context of both the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters

Reconnection after the disconnection experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic was a primary objective of the CEP grant program. Reports from those interviewed indicated that in many cases this primary objective was being met:

'It was kind of nice at that point in time when we've all kind of started to come out of COVID people actually came out, which is the whole point of that exact funding was to get people out... and see, you know, adults, all sitting along the side... chatting with each other while all the kids are playing... it was quite incredible.' (P6)

Grantees considered strategies aimed at facilitating connection across an array of community demographics and population groups when working with communities to design and deliver events. This included holding events that crossed different times of the day:

'The whole point with this particular project was it was 24/7 so it didn't matter if you were a healthcare worker working shifts, if you were out at the mines, if you had young kids, young family, you could go there anytime day or night and visit... because it ran for four weeks, the ability to have so many people in the community to come down... at least once.' (P6)

Grantees described CEP as providing an opportunity to support the recovery of groups within their communities that had been affected by natural disasters, especially flooding. One grantee described this in terms of an opportunity to support the 'healing' of the community:

'... so we can get those parents all back in the community back and just have that beautiful circle of healing or gets out to our community which is sensational [...] that's been an amazing event.' (P3)

Events provided valuable opportunities to facilitate engagement in cultural activities

Promoting access to culture and opportunity to participate in the arts were not articulated objectives of the program but were evident in many proposed events. Several examples were mentioned by grantees in interviews, such as community members collaborating in public art pieces under the leadership of a local ceramicist, free attendance at performances by well-known musicians, and the opportunity for young people to learn from local songwriters.

Equity: providing opportunity for smaller towns and outlying communities was a common focus

A recurring theme was noted to be a conscious effort to be equitable when deciding on event locations to enable smaller towns, villages and remote communities to both access and benefit economically from events. The rationale for such an approach included grantees seeking to showcase what is possible when delivering events in smaller communities. Delivering events in remote communities presented additional challenges, nonetheless several grantees identified how important it is to recognise and provide for remote communities by including a focus on 'remote' in the event planning and providing flexibility to enable implementation in these settings.

> 'We tried to cover off our whole area, so we've got townships in [name of towns], and they were our remote community so…we were trying to spread the funding throughout the LGA for whatever events we could do.' (P9)

One grantee discussed the challenge this can create when seeking to be equitable across multiple remote locations that are significantly spread across considerable distances. The grantee described how important it is to include such communities, particularly in light of challenges such communities have experienced in recent years:

> 'So considering this was only [funding amount] for the whole area…realistically, you've got a very small amount of money for each community event… It was such a positive for the area and I can't tell you enough how it made a difference to these [communities].' (P2)

Accessibility and inclusion were considerations for some grantees

Grantees were encouraged to make events accessible and inclusive, and aligned to their organisation's Disability Inclusion Action Plan and Community Strategic Plan. This, however, was not a focus of the assessment process and data pertaining to accessibility and inclusivity was not included in the application form making it difficult to evaluate the extent to which this was factored into event planning decisions.

Despite this, interviewed grantees emphasised different ways they had sought to make their events inclusive. One interviewee explained that accessibility was an important consideration in their event planning decisions, including the selection of an all-hours art piece that would enable participation by a broad cross section of the community:

> '… we wanted to make sure it was fully accessible… [including] what you have for kids with disabilities and sensory processing stuff… so we looked at all the different groups because… it has to be accessible to everybody and that was my driver' (P6)

This grantee went on to describe planning the event to enable participation across age ranges and various demographics, providing a platform for community connection:

> '… some aged care facilities and we put on a morning tea one morning so they can still come down… we even had the library do a rhyme time down there [at the event site]… so we kind of interacted with a lot of different groups in order to connect everyone together at the same time.' (P6)

Another grantee described the evolution of their thinking from initial plans to hold an event with a focus on access for people living with a disability, to deciding to take a proactive approach by ensuring the planned events held were accessible for all. This was a new approach for this council supported by the CEP grant:

> '… and we have a Community Development Officer for inclusion. So she focuses a lot on you know, programming and services which are for people with disability. So we were [looking for] … an event within the kind of disability sector that we can support or and then we got to talking well, what if we actually made all of the events as accessible… it's something that

we haven't really focused on as much in the past and we thought it was maybe a good opportunity to see how it would go and kind of incorporate more of a focus on that.' (P7)

The grantee went on to describe the implementation of a plan to not only hold accessible events, but to build community capacity and understanding of awareness of the needs of community members living with a disability through a series of workshops. Such an approach is one example of building community capacity which will be leveraged and promote positive longer-term outcomes for community members in the future.

Economic outcomes

Finding 6. 6: The program generated increased economic activity, including direct benefits for local businesses in the event and hospitality sectors, and increased visitation

Early evidence demonstrates the program supported economic outcomes

Supporting economic recovery and job creation by providing stimulus to regional businesses was a focus of the program early in the design phase. Though internal consultation suggested that the program's contribution towards economic recovery and specifically job creation would be limited, the program guidelines stated that it aimed to: 'facilitate economic recovery in regional NSW by stimulating activity in the events, hospitality, and accommodation sectors, all of which have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, providing opportunities for an immediate revenue boost' (Program guidelines).

Interview and application data suggests the program broadly met this objective, though the scale of the impact cannot be determined without further data which will be collected at the completion report stage and through the outcomes evaluation scheduled for 2024. Data available at the time of this report indicates the presence of three specific economic impacts:

- Direct revenue injection for events-focused and hospitality businesses

- Indirect revenue generation for local businesses due to greater economic activity and changed consumption patterns

- Increased visitation from out of the local area

Benefits for local businesses: event and hospitality sectors were direct beneficiaries of funding

Local businesses were engaged in event planning and delivery in many LGAs, particularly when the council staff managing the grant worked in positions with a focus on economic development. Two interviewees described working closely with their respective local Chambers of Commerce:

> '[We] worked very closely with the local community and Chamber of Commerce… [for example] because [the events] were held at night, people were able to go to their favourite restaurant next to the little town centre as well… So that worked really well; there was also business support through [provision of equipment for] audio.' (P3)

Unlike some programs, the program guidelines encouraged but did not require grantees to preference local suppliers. Grantees spoke of prioritising local businesses where possible:

> 'We've tried to keep everything local with food vendors, stall holders, everything was all within the max 100km radius… we've had great feedback on how much money they've made at all of our events.' (P4)

Supporting local businesses in the events and hospitality sectors that had been particularly impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions was identified as a priority by some interviewees:

> '… especially supporting small local businesses like catering… and that kind of thing have definitely received a lot of business from this grant that they would not have normally received. Food trucks and that kind of thing as well, that we're out of action for a couple of years for COVID.' (P7)

Wider local economies benefitted from increased economic activity

Events funded under the program also generated economic activity in surrounding regional towns. For example, one grantee stated local business owners had reported increased revenue as a result of a major new festival being held in their town:

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> *'We've had some pretty massive feedback from the local shops... one from a particular business owner that doesn't generally comment or anything like that...for the weekend of [event] after years of drought and plague, they have never seen such a good trade as they did on that weekend. And that was just one, one business in the town.' (P4)*

Several grantees indicated that events had encouraged local community members to return to previous consumption patterns, such as eating out at local restaurants and shopping in local stores. Local charities such as Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs also benefitted from fundraising opportunities at these events.

Visitation: Anecdotal evidence identified that larger events generated increased tourism

Out of area visitation was not a focus of the program and recipients were not required to collect tourism data, however several interviewees spoke about events funded under the program as having a positive impact on generating tourism:

> *'... and even I heard from the visitor Information Centre yesterday, they've been getting phone calls from people outside of the area that are actually coming to the region. So it's going to have a tourism benefit as well, that's not the main focus of it, but it's certainly a great spin off.' (P8)*

One council reported having commenced their own economic evaluation of a key event funded through CEP, reporting the economic value as follows:

> *'And we estimate with all the figures that we've got, we think that [event name] was a roundabout $4.8 million in economic value into the region.' (P6)*

Some interviewees hoped that through the events attracting visitors to their region, that this would have an ongoing effect and generate return visitation:

> *'... the economic benefit that the accommodation was booked out., It was pretty, pretty amazing. So they're hoping we can do it again this year and continue. (P4)*

Appendix A: Document Review

Reference	Document
RDOC21/93909	CEP – Monitoring and Evaluation Plan
RDOC21/98726	CEP – Assessment Form
RDOC21/93167	CEP – Assessment Methodology
RDOC21/82485	CEP – Probity Plan
RDOC21/98375	CEP – Risk Register
BN21/6084	Reconnecting Regional NSW – Community Events Program and Country Shows Support Package Guidelines
RDOC21/84457	Community Events Program – Funding Model
RDOC22/4894	Community Events Program – Funding Model – Deputy Secretary query 23 November 2021
RDOC21/84454	Community Events Program – Program Guidelines
RDOC23/14087	DRNSW CEP Probity Verification Statement
RDOC22/47569	CEP Allocation Letters to Councils
RDOC22/75706	CEP Events 11-30 assessment spreadsheet
RDOC22/67876	CEP More than 10 Events Workbook
BN21/6805	Briefing – Approval of Reconnecting Regional NSW – Community Events Program governance documents
RDOC22/138456	CEP – Community Events Program Specific Program Variation Rule
BN22/7245	Briefing – Reconnecting Regional NSW – Community Events Program event delivery extension
BN22/8000	Briefing – Approval for policy exemption to the Grants Administration Guide
RDOC21/97471	Regional Recovery Package – Community Events Program (CEP) Fact Sheet
BN22/7245	Community Events Program project completion date extension
RDOC22/91712	Community Events Program – social campaign results

Appendix B: Staff and applicant surveys and interviews

Tier	Population size	Allocation	Eligible LGAs and areas	Additional allocation if cross-border LGA	Number of cross-border LGAs
1	Up to 999 residents	$47,930	2	N/A	N/A
2	1000 to 4999 residents	$119,826	16	$31,028	3
3	5000 to 29,999 residents	$239,651	51	$62,057	18
4	30,000 to 69,999 residents	$287,582	16	$74,468	7
5	70,000 to 199,999 residents	$311,547	8	$80,674	1
6	200,000 residents or greater	$335,512	2	N/A	0
Totals		$22,000,000	95	$1,812,057	29

Appendix C: Summary - Thematic analysis of interview data (external stakeholders)

The following themes and sub-themes are drawn from interviews with external stakeholders.

Theme	Council in the middle	Choosing and managing events	Equity and inclusiveness	Stakeholder reflections
Sub-themes	Direct to community	Event selection: EOI or not	Smaller/remote communities	Economic and other impacts
	Stakeholder management	New vs enhancing existing	Accessibility and inclusion	Reconnection (post covid-19 and natural disasters)
	Risk management	Event promotion	Community readiness	Measuring impact
	Council capacity	Weather-related challenges	Natural disasters	Enabling innovation
	Community capacity	Pros and cons of 'free' events		
	Sustainability and expectations			

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More information

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