

Process and early outcome evaluation of NSW bushfire recovery programs (BLER Stage 2 and BIRP Phase 2)

Prepared by Nous Group for
Department of Regional NSW

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Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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1 Executive Summary

The Department of Regional New South Wales (the Department) engaged Nous Group (Nous) to conduct a process and early outcome evaluation of two programs within its Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Package:

- Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund Stage 2 (BLER Stage 2) – open and competitive funding to support economic and social recovery; and
- Bushfire Industry Recovery Program Stream 2 (BIRP Stream 2)– open and competitive funding for larger and medium-long term industry projects to support sector development.

Both programs were co-funded with the Australian Government. The evaluation aimed to understand how well the programs were designed, administered and implemented, and how this may impact their achievement of intended outcomes. A secondary purpose was to gain insights that could be applied to improve future recovery grants programs.

In addition, the Audit Office of NSW released a performance audit focusing on the administration of the overarching BLER program – *Bushfire recovery grants* (the Audit) on 2 February 2023. Part of the Audit assessed the process by which BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) were designed, administered and awarded. This evaluation draws on findings made by the Audit but does not intend to duplicate this work.

Nous conducted a mixed-methods evaluation that drew on Department-held program documents and data, as well as primary research, including a survey of grantees and interviews with Departmental stakeholders and a sample of grantees.

While each program was evaluated separately, there are useful synergies and comparisons to be made between the two programs which provide learnings for the Department in future recovery program design and delivery. These findings are presented in the Executive Summary, and then each program is explored separately in detail, with a chapter dedicated to each program.

The joint findings are grouped into three categories:

1. **Program design and administration.** The extent to which the programs were designed appropriately to meet their intended objectives, and how effectively and efficiently the process was administered.
2. **Delivery support.** The BLER (Stage 2) program used two forms of delivery support which the evaluation explored for their appropriateness and effectiveness. The first was project management or assurance provided by NSW Public Works for some infrastructure projects, where the grantee was deemed as having insufficient capacity or capability to deliver the project. The second was a 'Hypercare' model of support whereby the Bushfire Recovery Team remain engaged with the grantees throughout delivery.
3. **Early outcomes and preparedness for evaluation.** This is both the extent to which there is evidence of outcomes being achieved through the programs, as well as the preparedness of the programs to be evaluated in the future for impact and value for money.

1.1 Program design and administration

Both programs were oversubscribed and have a high degree of grantee satisfaction

The programs each received a significant volume of applications, with total requests for funding far beyond the program allocation. This suggests both a high level of need for the programs and appropriate promotion approaches.

For BLER (Stage 2), a \$250 million was initially made available for projects.¹ Following the closing date, and given the high degree of oversubscription, it was decided that \$50 million would be reallocated from Stage 3, bringing the total pool available for funding to \$300 million. However, only \$283 million in funding was allocated to projects,² leaving \$17 million unallocated.

It was later decided that \$45.6 million in uncommitted BLER funds would be reallocated from BLER (Stage 3) to BLER (Stage 1) and BLER (Stage 2), due to rising cost escalations.³

For BIRP (Stream 2), \$73 million was allocated to 51 projects.⁴

While both programs are ongoing, grantees report a high degree of satisfaction with the grant. BIRP (Stream 2) participants were particularly satisfied. Some BIRP (Stream 2) grantees described the funding as a 'lifeline' that enabled them to rebuild their businesses at a time when they were considering 'hard decisions' about their future.

The design of each program was appropriate to achieve their intended outcomes

The broad scope of BLER (Stage 2) enabled communities to seek funding for projects that best suited the needs of their community. There was some negative feedback from grantees regarding the competitive nature of the program, and some projects were questioned for their direct link to bushfire recovery. The evaluation found both the scope of the projects funded, and the competitive nature of the program to be appropriate. This was due to the program being the second round of recovery funding (so immediate priority projects had already been directly funded), and appropriate risk mitigations were in place to ensure equity of funding across Local Government Areas (LGAs). However, future competitive funds in a recovery context may consider how to best communicate the intent of the program, seek community input regarding their priorities, and institute a two-stage assessment process to enable ineligible applicants to be notified as early as possible.

The scope of BIRP (Stream 2) funding was well designed, using appropriate evidence to determine the target industries, and including industry stakeholders in the Guideline design to ensure the program was fit for purpose. The program aimed to support broad sector recovery and resilience, and it was originally intended to do this through a mixture of projects for individual businesses as well as those who support the broader sector. In the end, the majority of project applications, and consequently funded projects, were to support individual business recovery and resilience in the target sectors. This will likely still have the desired effect, as the aggregate outcomes of individual businesses will support overall sector strength.

Lengthy or delayed grant timeframes are particularly sensitive in recovery programs

Grantees from both programs reported challenges due to long delays in application timeframes, announcement, and funding deed negotiation. While the application, assessment and announcement timeframes were generally reasonable in terms of the volume and depth of assessments the Department had to conduct, there is an added pressure to be as efficient as possible for recovery programs. This was compounded in the bushfire recovery, due to the long nature of the event which affected different communities months apart. This meant that communities were ready for funding at different times. For some, the roll out felt too late and the application window too long, whereas for others, any shorter and they would have struggled to prepare their applications. This is a challenge for the Department to consider in future long-run disaster events, with rolling applications or staged processes with nominal allocations for each community perhaps being possible solutions.

¹ NSW Government, Briefing for the Deputy Premier: BN21/1868 'Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund Stage 2 – Assessments and Approvals', NSW, 2021.

² Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, 2023.

³ NSW Government, Briefing operational Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund – Variation requests for additional funds (re-allocation of Stage 3 funds), NSW, 2022.

⁴ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, 2023.

1.2 Delivery support

NSW Public Works support for some projects has merit, but needs refinement in execution

For BLER (Stage 2), the assessment panel believed that some infrastructure projects would require additional support in the delivery of the project to be successful, due to limited applicant project management or delivery capability or capacity. As the inclusion of NSW Public Works project management support had recently been successful for the Regional Stimulus Package, it was decided that rather than reject otherwise worthy applications, NSW Public Works support should be included as a funding condition for these projects.

Projects with this funding condition had one of two forms of support imposed – project management or project assurance. The cost of project management was funded from the grant amount provided to the grantee, while the cost of project assurance support was funded by the Department.

As the role of NSW Public Works was not determined in the design stage, it was consequently not included in the Guidelines. This meant many grantees were disgruntled by this condition of funding, the demands this placed on their time, and the impact to project budget. There was also mixed feedback from grantees regarding the usefulness of the NSW Public Works support. While some greatly appreciated the support, others felt that it was not necessarily providing them with value for money (particularly where it was being funded from their project budget). The evaluation heard that NSW Public Works capacity was stretched to deliver across the total number of projects, and some grantees may be justified in their claims that the support and benefit they received was not necessarily commensurate with the cost to the project budget.

The Department also found that some grantees had higher capacity to manage their project than was originally anticipated during the assessment phase. For these projects, the level of support was adjusted.

Ultimately, the concept of providing NSW Public Works support to projects that otherwise have merit, but are a significant delivery risk, is valid and should be considered for other recovery programs. However, in future, the possibility of this as a funding condition should be made clear in the Guidelines, the level of support imposed should be carefully agreed with the grantee, and support provided by NSW Public Works must be commensurate with the fees charged and impost of the extra layer of management.

The Hypercare model, with greater role clarity, is sensible for recovery and other programs with higher risk

BLER (Stage 2) projects were provided an increased level of support from the Bushfire Recovery Team than is typical in most programs run by the Department. Generally, once the application assessment process is finalised and all applicants are notified, the relevant program team hands over the program to the Grants Management Office (GMO). The GMO then manages the funding deed negotiation, progress reporting, payments, and any contract variations that need to occur. The Economic Development Manager may conduct site visits and have some interaction with the grantee. Meanwhile the program team has usually moved on to the design and administration of the next program.

For BLER (Stage 2) it was decided that the Bushfire Recovery Team should remain involved with the program throughout delivery, to support grantees as they navigated the additional complexities of bushfire recovery in the midst of COVID-19, and for some communities, floods. It aimed to provide practical advice, problem solving and capacity building for organisations whose capacity was stretched under the multitude of challenges, and those less familiar with recovery grant funding. Support from the Bushfire Recovery Team was applied alongside and in addition the NSW Public Works support.

While sound in intent, the continued involvement of the Bushfire Recovery Team throughout delivery in addition to the GMO, the Economic Development Manager and in some cases NSW Public Works, created confusion internally and for grantees. At times, the key contact point was unclear, and some grantees felt they received conflicting advice from the Department, particularly in relation to contract variation opportunities. However, in consultations and at survey, respondents considered the high level of support beneficial and helpful in managing challenges and facilitating project delivery.

On the other hand, BIRP (Stream 2) grantees did not receive the Hypercare model. BIRP (Stream 2) grantees, being primarily private businesses, were generally less familiar with grant funding. Many suggested that greater proactive engagement from the Department would have been welcome. For instance, grantees indicated that they would appreciate greater communication from the Department, especially when they experienced delays to milestone reporting or difficulties during project delivery.

Going forward, the Hypercare model should be considered for complex projects and those where the grantee has little experience interacting with government. However, it requires a clear determination of roles and responsibilities within the Department, and ensuring the program team delivers a distinct value add to the grantee, compared to the other parts of the Department. It is recommended that the model sees the relevant program team contact be the main point of contact for the grantee, and they connect the grantee with other parts of the Department as required.

1.3 Early outcomes and preparedness for evaluation

Community empowerment was a commonly described outcome of the programs, alongside those expected

Due to the low rate of project completion at this stage of implementation, there is little outcomes data held by the Department. However, the survey of grantees found that respondents had high confidence in their projects achieving the intended outcomes.

For BLER (Stage 2) projects, 65 per cent of survey respondents reported that they received support suited to their needs. In addition, 46 per cent of survey respondents reported that this was contributing to the long-term outcome of community participation in support programs, and 43 per cent survey respondents reported that this was contributing the long-term outcome of businesses become more financially resilient.

For BIRP (Stream 2) projects, 61 per cent of survey respondents reported that the grant had already assisted them to improve their operations, and 70 per cent reported that ongoing jobs had been retained due to the grant.

This means both programs appear to be on track to achieve their intended outcomes. Of note, is that one of the most valued and reported outcomes for grantees exists outside the scope of program guidelines. In response to the question 'What is the biggest difference the grant has made?' in the survey, most BLER (Stage 2) respondents identified community empowerment as the biggest difference made by the program.

In consultations, community resilience was reported as a common yet hard-to-quantify output for BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) grantees. This is likely to be due to regional business strength, growth, and diversification having a spillover effect in improving community confidence during bushfire recovery.

This positive, yet unintended outcome, highlights that an avenue for community voices to be voiced, heard, and understood in the aftermath of a disaster may enhance recovery efficiency and engagement. Attention paid to delivering community empowerment can support achievement of both the social and economic dimensions of grant recovery outcomes.

There are opportunities to improve outcome reporting to better support the outcomes evaluation.

Progress reports that are completed by grantees in both programs are focused on the extent to which project milestones have been met, rather than outcomes that are being achieved. This means grantees are only asked to report on outcomes at the conclusion of their project. This reporting approach was established for two reasons. Firstly, there was a deliberate effort to ensure the reporting for grantees was as straightforward as possible, to reduce any further burden to grantees. Secondly, the Department did not have the same level of internal evaluation resourcing that it does now, so the Bushfire Recovery Team did not receive advice about outcome data collection.

This reporting approach is problematic because it means grantees may not be collecting appropriate outcome data along the way and therefore may be unable to effectively report at the end. Due to the low rate of project completion at the time of writing, and significant time extensions for projects in both programs, it is recommended that progress reporting is reviewed and updated to include outcomes reporting to better set up the programs for an outcome and value for money evaluation in the future.

1.4 Considerations for future recovery programs

The process and early outcome evaluation of BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) has highlighted four considerations for the design and administration of future disaster recovery grant programs.

1. Establish mechanisms to respond to community priorities through competitive processes

Given the effective use of evidence and consultation to inform the design of BIRP (Stream 2), there is an opportunity to incorporate a more community-orientated engagement process that better identifies community needs during the recovery grant program design. This would better allow improved tailoring of the program and increased community understanding of the intent and process – particularly where it is to be competitive.

As part of this consultation, the Department should consider target communities' readiness to be involved in competitive grant funding applications. This could include consideration of the time since they were impacted by the disaster and the degree of coordination and resilience in the community to allow them to take advantage of the opportunity for funding. For those that were not ready, nominal funding allocations could be set aside to give them more time.

2. Better manage grantee expectations through communication

Throughout the administration of the program, there were several points where additional communication with grantees could have better managed their expectations and mitigated their concerns. It can be difficult for the Department to provide detailed information while assessment processes are ongoing, but the lack of any communication of updates was unsettling for many grantees.

To better manage grantee expectations, the Department could implement more structured communications during the application and assessment stage, including providing updates when applications were deemed ineligible or moved through to the next round of the assessment process.

3. Consider new models of delivery support

The project delivery support model for BLER (Stage 2), both in terms of the 'Hypercare' model for all grantees and NSW Public Works support for infrastructure projects, offers promise for better enabling project success. With refinement, particularly in clarifying the overlapping roles and points of contact for each team under the Hypercare model, and better negotiating and delivering on the NSW Public Works support, both models should be considered and planned for in the design stage of some future recovery programs.

4. Build evaluation into the design of grants programs

This is increasingly becoming standard practice for the Department as it enhances its internal evaluation function. Notwithstanding the need to reduce reporting burden for grantees receiving recovery assistance, better signalling the need for outcome data collection and provision of guidance for grantees to manage this process will significantly increase the quality of a future outcome evaluation.

Care should be taken to ensure the outcome data is linked to the program logic, and only the most important and realistic outcomes for grantees to report on are being asked in progress and completion reports.

2 Background to the programs

2.1 Bushfire recovery grants overview

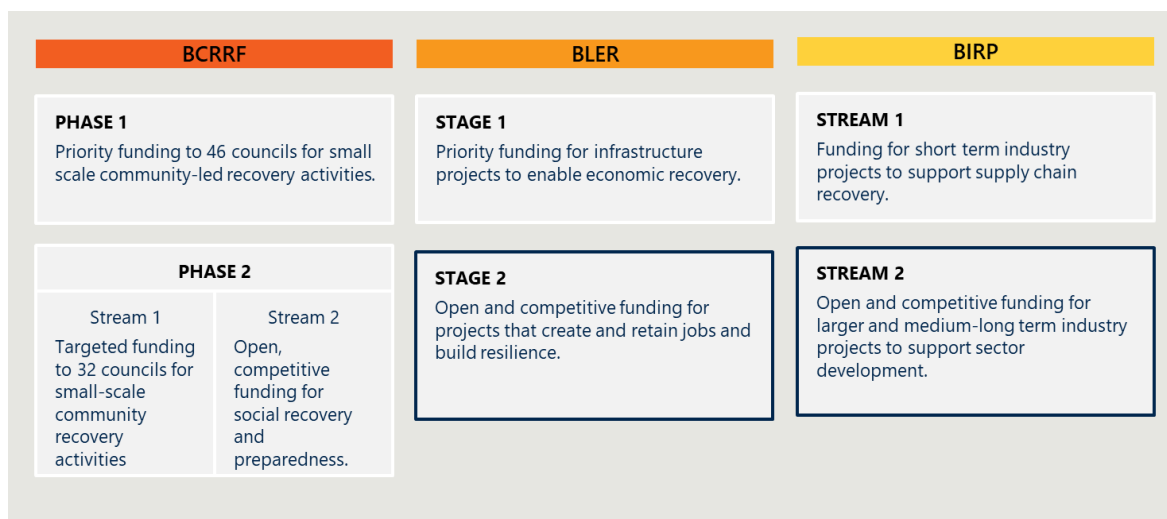
The 2019-2020 bushfires had a significant economic, social and environmental impact on regional communities in NSW. To help communities respond, recover and build resilience to future disasters, the NSW Government implemented a \$4.4 billion suite of bushfire recovery programs, co-funded with the Australian Government through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). The NSW Government investment was \$3 billion.

The three key programs in the package included:

- The Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund (BCRRF); grants to councils in bushfire-impacted Local Government Areas (LGAs) to support immediate recovery needs.
- The Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) Fund; grants to support larger-scale and longer-term recovery needs.
- The Bushfire Industry Recovery Package (BIRP); grants to support key industries to rebuild, recover and regrow.

Figure 1 provides a summary of these programs and their purpose. BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) are in scope for this evaluation and are detailed further below.

Figure 1 | Overview of regional NSW bushfire recovery grants programs



2.1.1 BLER (Stage 2) aims to stimulate economic and social recovery and strengthen community resilience

BLER (Stage 2) was an open competitive grants program that aimed to create and retain jobs in regional areas and build resilience and readiness for future bushfires in local government areas (LGAs) affected by the bushfire⁵. The program opened in October 2020 and provided \$283 million in funding across 195 projects.

⁵ LGAs included in the DRFA bushfire emergency declaration.

Applicants were required to hold an Australian Business Number (ABN), Australian Company Number (ACN) or be registered with New South Wales Fair Trading under the Associations Incorporation Act 2009 or an equivalent Act. They also had to be either a: council, joint organisation of councils, not-for-profit organisation, research or academic organisations, state government corporation or local Aboriginal Land Council.

To be eligible projects needed to demonstrate they were:

- To be delivered in an eligible Local Government Area (LGA)
- Supporting the recovery of the local community's economy, social well-being, environment or improve resilience to future natural disasters.
- Able to commence within six months of funding deed execution by the Department and complete projects by 30 June 2023. This was later revised to 30 June 2024 and then 30 June 2025 for some projects.
- Aligned with one of the following categories: enabling infrastructure, industry and business development, social development, natural environment, and resource development and built environment adaption.

2.1.2 BIRP (Stream 2) aims to support key industry recovery and resilience

BIRP (Stream 2) was an open competitive grants program that aimed to build industry sustainability, increase value-add production, support supply chain efficiencies, product diversification and market expansion. The program opened in mid-2020 and provided \$73 million in funding to 51 projects for completion by 30 June 2024.

Applicants for BIRP (Stream 2) were required to:

- hold an ABN or another identifier
- demonstrate required skills and capacity to deliver the project
- have been impacted by bushfires from August 2019 onwards or represent impacted members
- be financially viable.

Eligible applicants were businesses in the forestry, horticulture and agriculture industries or businesses who were in the close supply or value chain of these industries. Eligible applicants also included incorporated industry associations, co-operatives, local councils and other organisations with a sector-wide purpose in these industries.

Projects were required to fulfil the following criteria:

- have a primary focus on the retention and creation of jobs
- build industry sustainability, support or increase value-add production, supply-chain efficiencies, product diversification, market expansion or other activities that will support sustainable jobs including sector-wide professionalisation or business development with a focus on productivity, sustainability and growth
- be sustainable without continued government investment
- align with the relevant Bushfire Industry Recovery Plan or industry led recovery plan
- align with existing New South Wales Government policies and strategies

- have a minimum co-contribution of 50 per cent of the total project cost. Co-contributions could be direct cash and in-kind contributions to the project. Costs already incurred by businesses for eligible activities (and not already claimed/paid under another state or other government program or insurance) could also be deemed as a co-contribution. Co-contributions of lower than 50 per cent were considered in extenuating circumstances
- be able to commence within 12 months from announcement.

3 Purpose and methodology of the evaluation

3.1 Evaluation purpose

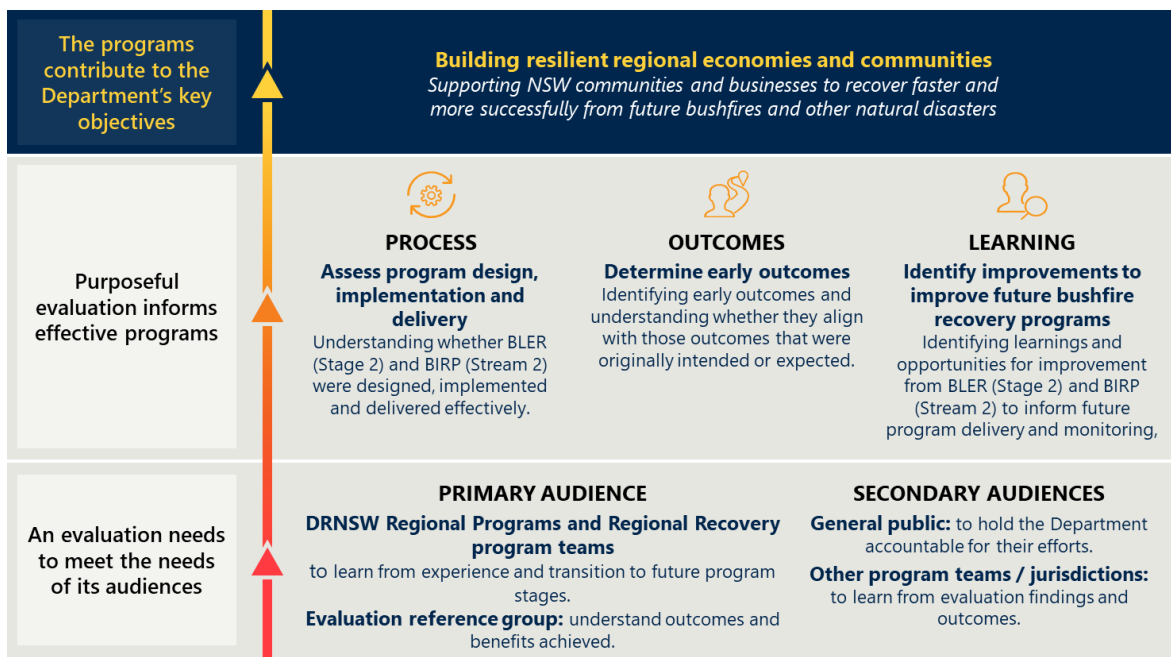
The Department engaged Nous Group (Nous) to conduct a process and early outcomes evaluation of BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2). The two programs, while distinct in terms of the primary beneficiaries and types of activities they fund, are similar enough in their intent, process, and implementation timeframe to be evaluated together.

The evaluation was conducted between December 2022 and April 2023 and built from past work such as the National Bushfire Recovery Fund (NBF) evaluation and other evaluations of bushfire recovery programs commissioned by the Department. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to understand how the implementation of the programs may impact outcomes. Specifically, the evaluation assessed the appropriateness and effectiveness of the delivery support model, ongoing reporting, and preparedness for an outcomes evaluation.

The secondary purpose of this evaluation is to deepen the Department’s understanding of how it can support NSW communities and businesses to recover faster and more successfully from future bushfires and other natural disasters. As part of this, the evaluation identified learnings to inform practical improvements to future grant programs in order to maximise value for grantees and the Department.

Figure 2 illustrates the purpose of the evaluation with regards to the Department’s key objective.

Figure 2 | Purpose of the evaluation



3.2 Evaluation scope

The recent Audit of the Bushfire Recovery Grants assessed how effectively the Department designed and administered the NSW Bushfire Recovery Programs⁶. This evaluation does not seek to replicate this examination, but rather build on these findings with a focus on how well the programs were implemented (with consideration of the type and quality of support provided through the delivery phase), early outcomes and learnings that could be applied to improve future emergency grants programs.

The aims of this evaluation were to determine:

- How well were BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) designed, implemented and delivered?
- What are the early outcomes of BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2)?
- What learnings from BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) could be applied to improve future grants programs?

The evaluation scope included 10 domains, and took a particular focus on areas not already assessed by the Audit:

1. Overview of program results
2. Program design
3. Program administration
4. Application assessment process
5. Funding deed negotiation
6. Project delivery support model
7. Monitoring and evaluation
8. Effectiveness
9. Efficiency
10. Appropriateness.

3.2.1 Data collection and analysis

The evaluation used a mixed method design informed by the BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) program logics (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The following considerations informed Nous' conduct of this evaluation:

- The need to minimise burden on communities and grantees who are over-consulted and may still be responding to successive challenges and emergencies.
- The need to avoid duplication of the recent Audit, released on 2 February 2023, which focused on the design, administration and awarding of the bushfire recovery grants.

Mixed methods data collection and analysis enabled triangulation of evaluation findings. Central to Nous' approach was to utilise insights obtained from the available secondary data through an early review of program documentation and data analysis. Analysis was primarily performed on data that was accurate as of 30 May 2022 (for BLER (Stage 2)) and as of the 7 December 2022 (for BIRP (Stream 2)). Building on these insights, stakeholder engagement was tailored to minimise burden on grantees through asking only those questions required to build a richer and more nuanced picture of the evaluation.

Following desktop analysis, all grantees were invited to take part in a survey, achieving a response rate of 59 per cent for BLER (Stage 2) grantees and 49 per cent for BIRP (Stream 2). Grantees from each program

⁶ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, 2023.

were identified for targeted consultation using a stratified sampling approach based on the project type or industry, intensity of support, location, project status, applicant type and NSW Public Works involvement (if applicable).

Figure 3 provides an overview of data collection activities conducted as part of the evaluation.

Figure 3 | Data collection activities



More details of the sampling approach, data collection and analysis are available at Appendix D.

4 BLER (Stage 2) Findings

4.1 Overview of program results

4.1.1 BLER (Stage 2) successfully distributed all available grant funding to projects in bushfire impacted communities

In total, 652 applications were submitted for BLER (Stage 2) requesting a total of \$1.6 billion and ultimately \$283 million was distributed across 195 successful applications. \$45.6 million was later approved to be redirected from BLER (Stage 3) to address critical cost escalations across BLER (Stage 1) and BLER (Stage 2) projects. The process to reallocate these additional funds is still underway at the time of writing, and is occurring on a project-by-project basis.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the program results. More than half of BLER (Stage 2) funding was awarded to infrastructure projects (\$165 million out of \$283 million), which covered a broad range of projects, such as the restoration of roads affected by bushfires and the development of facilities that support community development.

Figure 4 | Overview of BLER (Stage 2) program results⁷



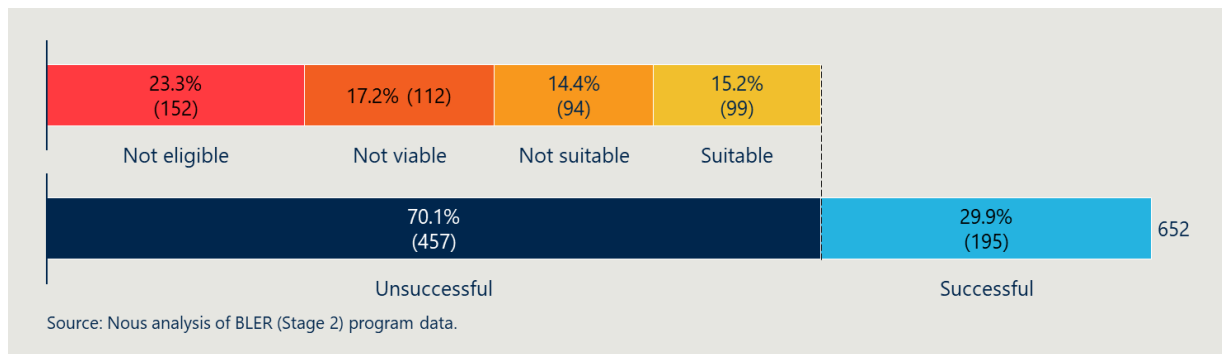
4.1.2 The program was oversubscribed

Shown in Figure 5, 70 per cent of applications were unsuccessful, with most being considered ineligible, unviable, or unsuitable. Almost one in four applications were ineligible, which suggests that many applicants did not understand the eligibility criteria in the Guidelines. This suggests that the Guidelines did not properly articulate or communicate the criteria for eligibility to applicants.

15 per cent of applications were found eligible, suitable and viable, but were not successful. These suitable projects were likely in LGAs that had already reached their nominal allocation and were of lower priority than the successful projects in that region. The approach of the Department to nominal funding is explained further in Section 4.1.4.

⁷ 'Deed negotiation' reference the time between deed creation and deed signature as recorded in the SmartyGrants database; 'co-funded' reference financial co-contributions of all types that were contributed towards total project funds; 'recipients' reference BLER (Stage 2) grantee survey outputs (n=89).

Figure 5 | BLER (Stage 2) application outcomes

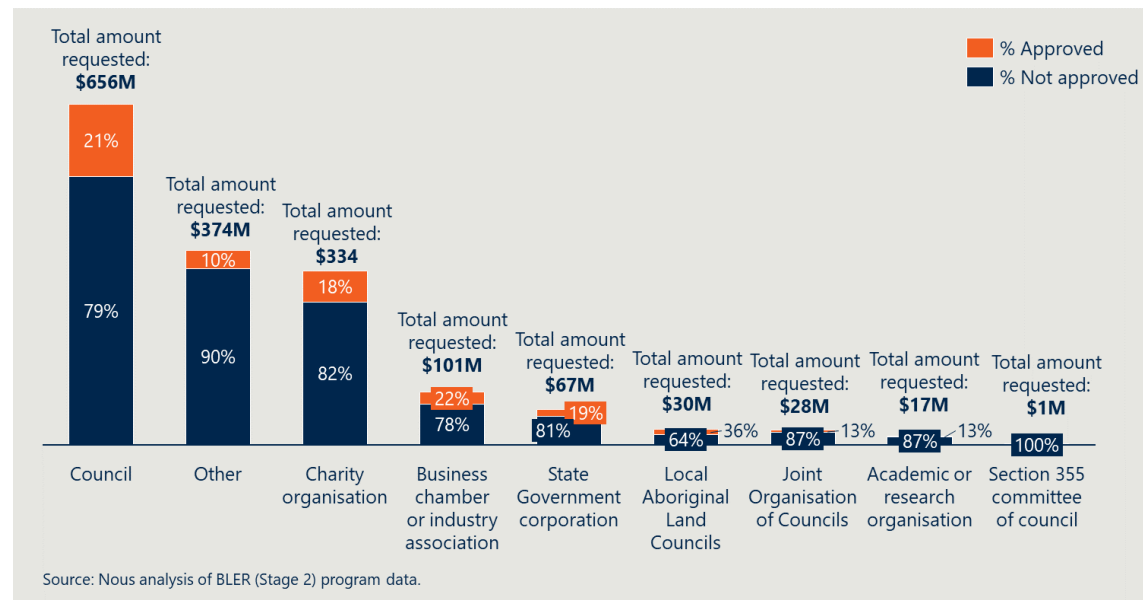


Most funding was allocated to local government councils

Local councils and charity organisations submitted 62 per cent of all applications and received 79 per cent of all funding. This is aligned with the goals of BLER (Stage 2) as local councils have the most experience in delivering grant-funded projects to benefit the community. Figure 6 provides the breakdown of funding requested and approved by applicant type.

The next largest group of successful applicants were the group of 'Other', which included many community-based organisations. They submitted 24 per cent of applications and, received 13 per cent of all funding.

Figure 6 | Funding requested and approved by organisation type



4.1.3 While most projects were less than \$2 million in value, there was a large distribution

The median project funding totalled \$0.8 million while the average funding was \$1.5 million. The lower median value indicates there was a large number of smaller projects. While the maximum grant amount available was \$20 million for infrastructure projects and \$4 million for all other categories, most projects requested grants at the lower end of the available funding threshold. All but one grant was provided the full amount of funding requested in their application.

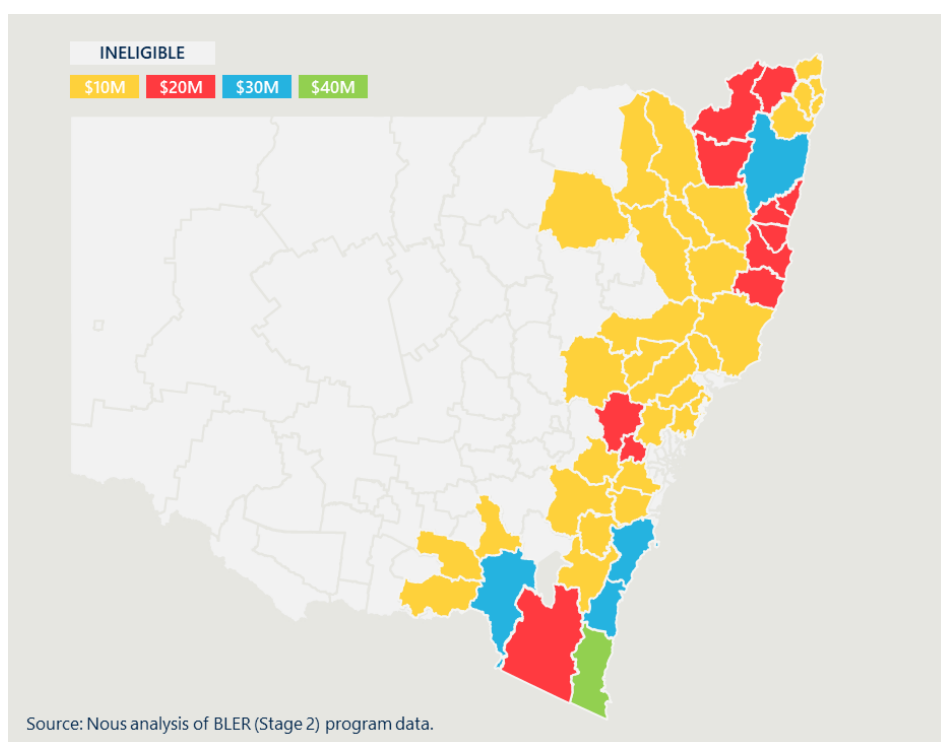
4.1.4 All eligible communities received funding, with more funding provided to those with higher bushfire impact

Each bushfire-affected LGA had a nominal amount of funding allocated to it by the Department in the design stage of the program, based on the level of bushfire impact they had experienced. All 47 eligible LGAs received funding, with increased funding distributed across the north and south coast, which had higher average bushfire impacts.⁸ Bega Council, which was the third most bushfire affected LGA, received the most BLER (Stage 2) funding with \$34.4 million across 14 projects.

Beyond nominal allocation and bushfire impact, the geographical spread of funding allocation was also dependent on factors such as the amount of funding each region received in BLER (Stage 1), the number of applications and the amount of funding requested. Initially, the full \$300 million of available funding was not awarded because there were not enough suitable projects to meet nominal allocations in some regions. This funding was set aside for future projects in a proposed third stage and was later reinvested to address cost escalations and delays in existing projects.

Figure 7 shows the distribution of initial BLER (Stage 2) funding across NSW LGAs.

Figure 7 | BLER (Stage 2) funding distribution by LGA



4.2 Program design

4.2.1 The program design was appropriate, but the Guidelines lacked transparency in some areas

BLER (Stage 2) was purposefully designed as a longer-term recovery program within the suite of NSW bushfire response and recovery initiatives. It was intended to enable communities to undertake projects that would stimulate local economic recovery while also creating enabling infrastructure, industry and

⁸ BLER Notional Allocation Options, Department of Regional New South Wales, 2021.

business development, social development, natural environment and resource development and built environment adaptation.

The broad scope of BLER (Stage 2) provided flexibility for communities to choose projects best suited to their needs. The scope of the funding was broad, which enabled it to cover a wide variety of projects and provided flexibility for communities to identify projects best suited to their needs. The eligible applicants (council, joint organisation of councils, not-for-profit organisation, research or academic organisations, state government corporation or local Aboriginal Land Council) were the appropriate organisations to identify and deliver these types of projects.

It was "amazing that community groups were meeting within 2-3 months of fires. 7 months out, we were ready. [We] identified major projects that we would seek funding for."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

The Guidelines included appropriate minimum and maximum funding amounts for the different project types:

- **Infrastructure projects** were required to seek a minimum of \$400,000 with a maximum available grant of \$20 million.
- **Environmental projects** including rehabilitation, remediation and resilience improvements were required to seek a minimum of \$200,000 with a maximum available grant of \$4 million.
- **Social, business and environmental education programs** were required to seek a minimum of \$200,000 with a maximum available grant of \$4 million.

The recent Audit found that the process by which BLER (Stream 2) was designed broadly aligned to good practice principles.⁹

Figure 8 presents an assessment of BLER (Stage 2) and identifies areas in which the design of BLER (Stage 2) met or fell short of good practice.¹⁰

⁹ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, 2023.

¹⁰ The principles align with the Grants Administration Guide which was released in September 2022 and is based on a more contemporary understanding of good practice than was available during program design.

Figure 8 | Good practice principles

PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Robust planning and design		The design of the program is appropriate to meet its intended objectives and additional documentation was created to assist the assessment process internally. However, guidelines lacked transparency in some areas.
Collaboration and partnership		The program was designed and administered in partnership with the Australian Government. However, there was limited engagement with stakeholders outside of government during the design of the program, such as those impacted by the bushfires. This decision was made because a large number of external stakeholders were also eligible applicants.
Proportionality		The program was the later stage of a broader funding initiative which was tailored to the expected stage of recovery. Consideration was given to the different stages of recovery across communities and the short assessment and announcement timeframes were designed to facilitate faster provision of funding for recovery. Application requirements were tailored to project type and size.
An outcomes orientation		Planning was designed and implemented with a focus on achieving outcomes and benefits consistent with government objectives. However, the theory of change and program logic were not established in the design stage, which meant the link between inputs and activities to expected outcomes was not always clear.
Achieving value with relevant money		Financial risks for the program were actively managed. The assessment process was robust and included financial health assessments and prospective cost-benefit analysis for projects requesting over \$5 million.
Governance and accountability		Program governance was appropriate and decisions were clearly documented.
Probity and transparency		The recent audit indicated the probity arrangements were implemented by the Department, but conflicts of interest were not clearly identified throughout the process. The role of the former Deputy Premier, ministers and MPs was also not adequately described in the guidelines.

BLER (Stage 2) was assessed against the good practice principles using a four-point system:

	Aligned to good practice		Somewhat aligned to good practice
	Mostly aligned to good practice		Not aligned to good practice

Four key challenges emerge where BLER (Stage 2) design diverged from best practice:

1. **Assessment process detail omitted from program guidelines.** The recent Audit noted concerns about the transparency of the BLER (Stage 2) as the program guidelines did not sufficiently document or explain the full extent of the application process. Undocumented processes included the consideration that was given to the types of projects funded and the amount of funding allocated to projects through BLER (Stage 1), the review of state and federal members of parliament and the sign off required by the Deputy Premier¹¹.
2. **Lack of engagement with non-government stakeholders.** Greater engagement with bushfire-affected community would have better placed the program to meet community needs and improved awareness of target projects and eligibility criteria for potential applicants.

¹¹ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

3. **Lack of consideration for outcomes and evaluation during design.** A suitable outcomes framework or program logic was not developed as part of the BLER (Stage 2) design. As a result, the Department missed the opportunity to align project reporting with data collection. Monitoring and evaluation is discussed further in Section 4.7.
4. **Insufficient transparency regarding conflicts of interest and those involved in assessment process.** Some staff did not submit conflict of interest declarations prior to beginning the assessment process, while others did not submit declarations at all. As a result, the Department was unable to design and implement appropriate mitigation strategies for relevant staff as required. The guidelines also did not articulate the roles of the Deputy Premier, Ministers and MPs in providing feedback on applications prior to their review by the assessment panel.

4.2.2 The competitive nature of the program was appropriate, but this could have been better communicated to applicants

BLER (Stage 1) was a direct-allocation grant process for priority projects, while BLER (Stage 2) was competitive with broad eligibility. Under Stage 1, funding was allocated based on a prioritisation of existing project plans from local councils. In Stage 2 applicants applied through a single-stage process and funding was approved using a robust assessment process.

Competitive programs can be inefficient, and at times inappropriate in recovery programs, due to the potential for wasted effort for unsuccessful applicants, delays to recovery efforts as applicants await the result (particularly if they are then unsuccessful), and the pressure and angst of drafting an application post disaster¹².

Some successful BLER (Stage 2) survey respondents conveyed they felt it was inappropriate to have competitive processes for disaster recovery funding.

However, the evaluation found the competitive process was appropriate for BLER (Stage 2) for the following reasons:

- The program was rolled out in the later stages of recovery efforts following a series of direct-funded projects in highly impacted LGAs. This means communities were out of the immediate response phase, and high-priority projects had already been funded. As a result, the program was intended to fund projects that contributed to longer-term recovery.
- Competitive rounds enable the Department to surface and identify a range of worthy projects that may not come to light through direct-funding. This also improves transparency in funding allocation.
- Each eligible LGA had a nominal allocation of funding assigned to it by the Department, based on a model of impact for social, economic and environmental factors, as discussed in Section 4.1.4. This was put in place to mitigate the risk that better-resourced communities who may have more capacity and expertise in grant applications would have a higher success-rate in the assessment process. This nominal allocation was not communicated to the stakeholders, but served as an internal check to ensure equity across LGAs.

This is aligned to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, which includes provisions to support projects that enable communities to self-mobilise to meet their needs in a coordinated way¹³.

While the evaluation found the process to be appropriate, there are ways to improve the level of satisfaction of stakeholders, which could be considered in future recovery programs:

- Increased community engagement at the design phase to clarify the program intent, and to gain a deeper understanding of the priorities for each LGA.

¹² Australian Government, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2020.

¹³ Australian Government, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2020.

- Ensure Guidelines are as clear as possible, to reduce the number of ineligible applications.
- Conduct a two-stage application process. This would allow ineligible applications to be ruled out quickly and remove the wait-time for these applicants to find out they were unsuccessful. It could also enable a community consultation process on the shortlist of projects for that region.
- Communicate the rationale for the competitive process and the mitigations in place to ensure equity.

Recommendations

- Plan evaluation approach, including development of program logic and outcomes monitoring framework during program design and align data collection requirements to outcomes.
- Detail all elements of the assessment process in funding Guidelines.
- More strategic communication to develop community understanding of the rationale for the grants program and its design, both if competitive (as some groups will spend time on unsuccessful applications) and if targeted (as some groups will not have the opportunity to apply).
- Greater engagement with affected communities to enable a more community driven process in identifying and screening projects. This would also support promotion of the program and a clearer understanding of eligibility criteria.

4.3 Program administration

4.3.1 Public facing timelines were met, but increased communication may reduce applicant angst

The unexpectedly high volume of applications created delays for the Department in assessing and approving applications. The intended assessment period was January-May 2021, but assessments were continued through June 2021. The Department was required to redeploy resources to complete assessments prior to the announcement date. Despite this, the Department met the date for public announcement of funding which had been stated as 'From June 2021', and the Department made the announcements on 30 June 2021.

Most applications (96 per cent) were submitted in January 2021. Some applications were submitted as early as November 2020. The Guidelines also allowed for late applications in extenuating circumstances with the final application submitted in late February 2021. For most grantees, there was a five-month window from application to announcement. However, the bushfires took place over several months from August 2019 and communities that did not receive funding for economic recovery as part of earlier programs experienced an extended period without grant funding support. In consultation, some grantees felt that the time allowed between application and announcement was too long. Others highlighted the lack of communication from the Department during assessment, which created additional uncertainty for communities attempting to plan their recovery.

"It took ten or eleven months to be in a position to start applying for money. Then a couple of months to apply. Then four to five months to hear a decision. A lot of time that elapsed is in governments' hands."

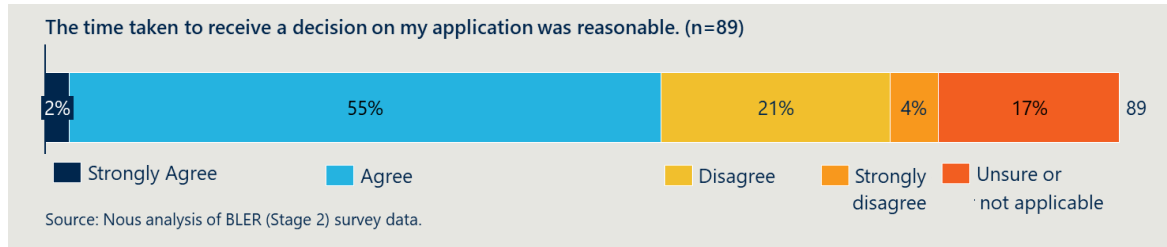
– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

We received "very little communication from Department. [We] only received acknowledgement that it had been received."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

Despite the lack of communication, grantees acknowledged the challenges faced by the Department and most agreed that the time taken to assess their application was reasonable. Figure 9 presents grantees view on whether assessment timeframes were reasonable. Again, while this is a reasonable process and timeframes, a two-stage assessment process may have reduced the wait time for the majority of unsuccessful applicants.

Figure 9 | BLER (Stage 2) survey respondent view of whether assessment timeframes were reasonable



The intended project delivery timeframes were extended twice to accommodate grantee delivery challenges

The Department intended for all projects to be completed by 30 June 2023. This was extended to 30 June 2024 following community feedback that the original timeframes were too short and challenging to meet in the context of ongoing emergencies and delays, price escalation and limited availability of workers.¹⁴ In early 2023, these timeframes were extended again to 30 June 2025 on a case-by-case basis for certain projects.

Timeframes to deliver the programs were mandated under the DFRA. Extensions to the allowable time limit were requested by the Department, for which approval was required from the Australian Government.

Given the high demand, and the challenged posed by ongoing emergencies, including COVID-19 and floods in many of regional NSW communities, these extended timeframes are reasonable.

Figure 10 presents the intended and actual program timelines.

Figure 10 | Intended and actual timeframes for BLER (Stage 2)



¹⁴ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

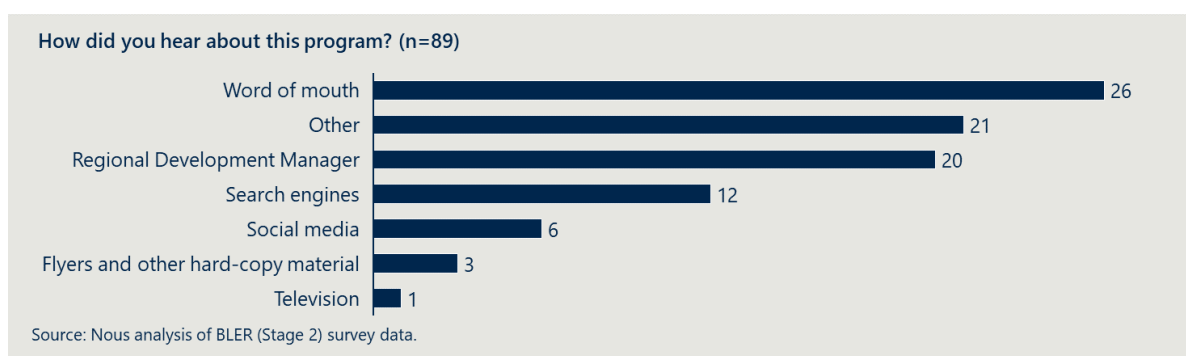
4.3.2 BLER (Stage 2) was widely and successfully promoted

The Department developed a communications plan that included key messages and planned communications activities for target communities and key stakeholders¹⁵. In consultation, all BLER (Stage 2) grantees indicated the program was effectively promoted to regional communities.

Figure 11 presents the different ways in which applicants heard about BLER (Stage 2). Most grantees heard about it through word-of-mouth and many heard about it via the GrantsConnect mailing list (captured under 'Other').

The successful promotion of the program is further evidenced by its significant oversubscription.

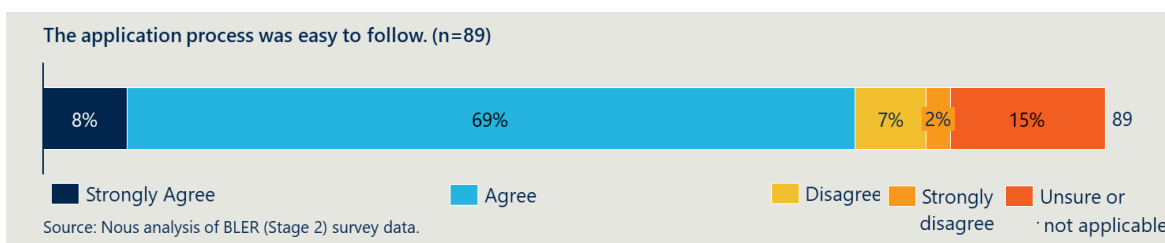
Figure 11 | How survey respondents heard about BLER (Stage 2)¹⁶



4.3.3 The application process was appropriate and easy to follow for most applicants

Application requirements differed by the amount of funding requested. Projects seeking between \$200,000 and \$1 million required an application form and project plan. Projects seeking over \$1 million in funding also completed a business case. This differentiated approach is appropriate to ensure processes are commensurate with value and risk. Most grantees found the application process easy to follow. In the survey, 75 per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the relevant question, as illustrated in Figure 12 below.

Figure 12 | Whether the application process was easy to follow



Some grantees required additional support to apply

In consultation, most grantees agreed that sufficient information was available to develop applications. Where grantees required assistance, some contacted the Department for support (15 per cent at survey) and others hired external grant writers (16 per cent at survey).

¹⁵ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

¹⁶ Surveys were distributed prior to name change from 'Regional Development Manager' to 'Economic Development Manager'



“The application process was not onerous because the grant writer [we employed] was familiar working with us.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

“[I] did a course on grant applications - this helped because it helped me to understand how questions are framed and the type of questions people are looking for.”

Although the application process was generally easy to follow, some applicants found it onerous and did not have the capability to develop grants in-house.



“Consideration needs to be given to organisations, especially Aboriginal entities that may not have the relevant skills to complete complex funding applications and may not have the funds to employ a consultant to complete funding applications.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

Grant writing capability may account for the increased likelihood of successful application from local councils compared to charity, not-for-profit or community organisations. In consultation, grantees from community-based organisations described relying on their previous personal experience in administrative work or grant applications, unrelated to their role within the organisation. Given the sample only included successful applicants, this may indicate a need for greater support and information during the application process for community-led projects.

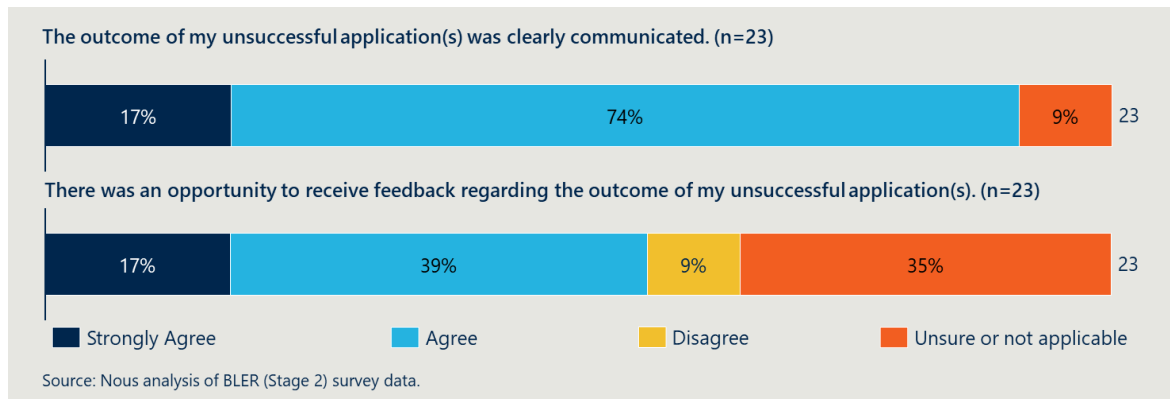
Given relatively few applicants contacted the Department for assistance to develop their application, there may need to be greater communication of the support that is available in the application phase.

4.3.4 The results of unsuccessful applications were clearly communicated, but not all applicants were aware of the opportunity for feedback

Grantees who took part in the survey were asked whether they had also submitted any unsuccessful applications. Of the 23 respondents who had also submitted unsuccessful applications, almost all agreed the outcome of their application had been clearly provided. In consultation, grantees reported they received this communication via email, but it did not include the reason their application was unsuccessful. Grantees had the opportunity to request more detailed feedback, but only 56 per cent of those surveyed agreed that this was available, which indicates that others were unaware. This is highlighted in Figure 13. Upon request, grantees received detailed feedback, including why their application was unsuccessful and details of other funding programs that might be suitable¹⁷.

¹⁷ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

Figure 13 | Departmental communication about unsuccessful applications



Recommendations

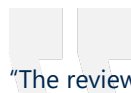
- Improve communication with applicants to ensure that they are aware they can access detailed feedback.

4.4 Application assessment process

4.4.1 Application assessment was robust and conducted by an appropriate panel

Program documentation evidences an extensive application assessment process, including ensuring that assessors were appropriate and well-informed. The recent Audit found that the Department developed a clear assessment process and that decision making was well-documented. Despite this, the assessment process was more extensive than the published guidelines, which did not adequately describe the role of the Deputy Premier or state and federal ministers who provided advice based on their understanding of their communities’ needs.

The Audit identified gaps in the recording of transparency data as at least 17 staff involved in the assessment process had not submitted a conflict of interest declaration. In consultation, a minority of grantees expressed concern about the integrity of the application assessment process. They felt that quality assurance was insufficient to ensure that assessors were appropriately qualified and impartial.



“The review process lacked transparency ... [and] the credentials of people who conducted the review could have been better communicated.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

Recommendations

- Tighten processes to ensure that conflict of interest is appropriately managed. This should include active monitoring of conflict of interest declarations.

4.5 Funding deed negotiation

4.5.1 Delays in funding deed negotiation impacted project delivery

Funding deed negotiations took more than four months for most applicants, which surprised many grantees. Given the Guidelines originally stipulated that projects must be completed by 30 June 2023, many projects had planned to commence delivery quickly. Delays in funding negotiation delayed the start date for these projects and caused additional administrative burden in coordinating with involved stakeholders and contractors.

Figure 14 details the time taken for funding deeds to be finalised, following the announcement of project outcomes.

Figure 14 | Funding deed negotiation timeframes



Internal stakeholders cited challenges related to the ongoing management of other disaster responses from the communities as well as difficulties in obtaining local council approvals for projects that required infrastructure development as the key reasons for lengthy delays in funding deed execution.

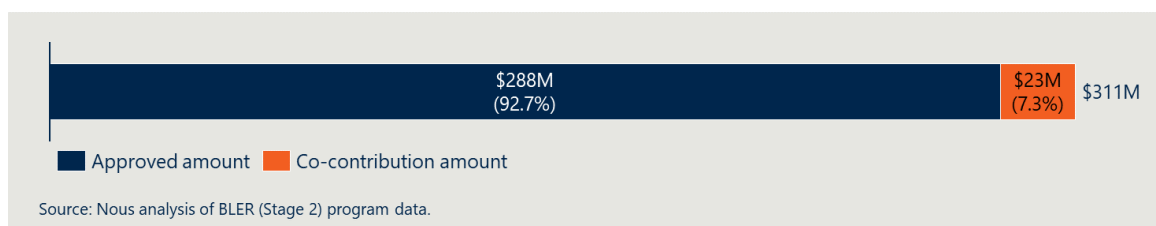
There is a balance to strike between the level of detail and due diligence required in the application and assessment stage, and what is left to be clarified at funding deed negotiation. While streamlining the application and assessment stage can speed up that stage, it can cause complications for funding deed negotiation. At the same time, there is an imperative to not create an overly burdensome process for grantees who may not be successful. Seeking advice from GMO regarding the likely challenges in funding deed negotiations, and the minimum amount of information that is reasonable to require at application stage to minimise these challenges is suggested.

4.5.2 Nearly half of all projects provided a co-contribution of funds, but they were small in value

The program guidelines encouraged applicants to make a financial co-contribution in support of their application, but they were not an eligibility requirement. Co-contributions could come from community funds, in-kind support, local government funds and funding from other NSW Government or Australian Government programs. Co-contributions were voluntarily provided in 45 per cent of successful projects.

Figure 15 presents the proportion of project funding provide by BLER (Stage 2) and by grantee co-contributions.

Figure 15 | Proportion of BLER (Stage 2) co-contribution



Applications that included co-contributions were required to provide evidence that they were secured in order to inform the assessment of project viability. Some grantees found this challenging, particularly those with limited previous experience working in applying for government grants. In consultation, they described challenges in confirming informal contributions and did not understand the standard of evidence required. This created confusion during deed negotiations and added administrative burden.

"Contingency money was used ... but the process [to obtain it] was informal – just through the phone ... it would be hard for me to go back and find any relevant evidence."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

Recommendations

- Provide more targeted support to applicants (such as local community organisations) that do not have experience in delivering grant-funded projects to ensure they understand evidential requirements.

4.6 Project delivery

4.6.1 BLER (Stage 2) projects received an elevated level of support from the Department

During BLER (Stage 2) project delivery, two models of support were implemented in an attempt to bolster project success. These included:

- **NSW Public Works assurance or project management.** This was provided/ allocated to some infrastructure projects to fill capacity or capability gaps in project delivery. The type and intensity of support was initially determined at the assessment phase, with consideration of project delivery risks and capacity of the grantee to deliver. This model of support was first trialled through the Regional Stimulus Package, during which the additional support was particularly beneficial for organisations in the private sector.
- **'Hypercare' from the Bushfire Recovery Team.** This was developed during the rollout of BLER (Stage 2) and included adopting a hands-on approach with grantees, and liaising between grantees and other teams where necessary.

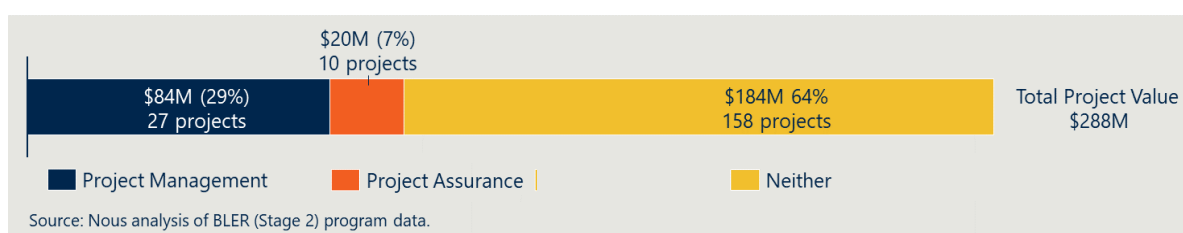
These models of support, and their appropriateness and effectiveness for BLER (Stage 2) and other recovery programs is discussed in this section.

4.6.2 NSW Public Works support for some projects has merit, but needs refinement to improve the quality of support provided

The inclusion of NSW Public Works support for BLER (Stage 2) projects was not conceived until during the assessment process. During the assessment process, it became clear to the panel that some worthy projects would need to be declined due to the applicant project management capability or capacity receiving a low score. The involvement of NSW Public Works was beneficial as part of the Regional Stimulus Package, so the Department decided to include NSW Public Works support as a condition of funding for these projects, rather than reject the application. NSW Public Works support was included as a funding condition for 40 projects. This came as a surprise the grantees, as it was not stated in the Guidelines as a possibility.

Figure 16 details the number of projects that received NSW Public Works support.

Figure 16 | Number of BLER (Stage 2) projects serviced by NSW Public Works*



NSW Public Works support was intended to supplement grantees' capability and capacity to manage their projects. NSW Public Works project managers and assurance managers directly own certain aspects of project delivery. NSW Public Works provide project assurance and management under a Service Level Agreement with the Regional Recovery Branch (which includes the Bushfire Recovery Team):

- **Project assurance** includes coaching and mentoring that complements grantees' project managers and compiling project reporting data. The Department pays for these services directly and they do not impact on project budgets. Across BLER (Stage 2), 10 projects were assigned project assurance.
- **Project management**, which includes two types of services. The provision of **project management oversight support**, during which a NSW Public Works project manager maintains oversight of a junior project manager selected by the grantee. Alternatively NSW Public Works has day-to-day accountability for managing the project through the **end-to-end project management** service. Across BLER (Stage 2), 27 projects were assigned project management. The cost of these services is paid out of project funding.

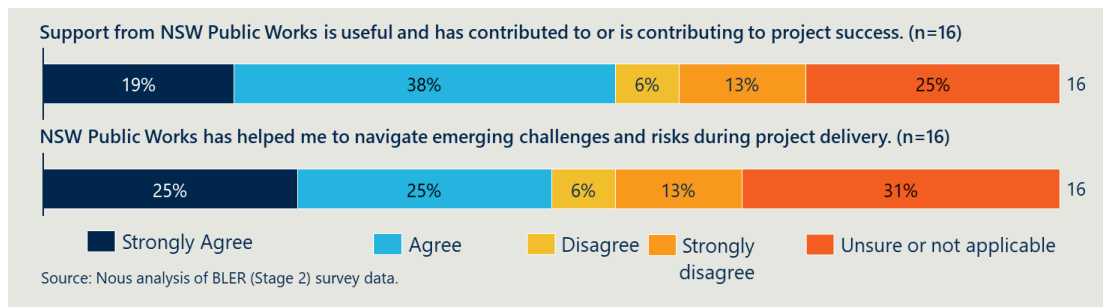
These funding conditions were assigned during the assessment panel, and later further negotiated with the grantees. Internal and external stakeholders noted that some of the original determinations of projects requiring support from NSW Public Works may not have been correct. For four NSW Public Works projects, additional review during project delivery identified that the applicants had the capacity and capability to deliver the project themselves. This led to NSW Public Works scaling back the level of support they provided and their involvement with certain projects. This suggests that the Department may be able to better assess the capacity of grantees during the assessment stage, and that there is an opportunity to conduct more in-depth negotiations with grantees regarding the involvement of NSW Public Works.

Grantees were split over whether NSW Public Works involvement was value-for-money

At survey, respondents generally considered NSW Public Works support to be useful and contribute to project success, as illustrated in Figure 17.

*Total amount allocated to projects service by NSW Public Works based on Service Level Agreement between Bushfire Recovery Team and NSW Public Works

Figure 17 | Utility of NSW Public Works support to support project delivery.



Some grantees found the involvement of NSW Public Works to be very beneficial, appreciating the oversight and management support.



“Public Works is absolutely integral, given we are dealing with an awful lot of money and delivering a built infrastructure project.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

“Public Works directly overseeing our project and trickle-feeding the cash is a really good way to have oversight over our funding.”

In consultations, some grantees raised concerns that that NSW Public Works project management was a poor use of their grant funding. Given project management drew on project funding, these grantees would have preferred to employ or contract their own project manager. As of April 2023, the amount charged to grantees in project management support totalled \$2.1 million. This equates to an average spend of \$78,000 per project and an average of 3 per cent across projects, which is reasonable.

For these grantees, the cost associated with project management support depleted the funding for their project, which they felt they may have been able to spend more effectively. Some grantees also found that the involvement of an extra party increased the time and effort required to deliver the project. As a result, not all grantees had a positive experience, so there is an opportunity to improve the level and consistency of support across all projects receiving NSW Public Works support.

External and internal stakeholders noted that NSW Public Works capacity was stretched to deliver across the total number of projects, which may have contributed to the grantee perception of a lack of quality support.



“It has cost us a considerable amount of money to pay for a project management team ... these funds would have been better utilised to further develop the actual project infrastructure or provide much needed administrative support.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

“Public Works involvement in our projects is an additional layer of reporting and bureaucracy. They hold the funds and have been late in releasing them.”

Feedback from grantees was more positive about project assurance, which was funded by the Department and did not impact project budgets. The Service Level Agreement between the Bushfire Recovery Team and NSW Public Works sets a maximum allocation of \$150,000 for project assurance support towards each

of the 10 projects that receive it. As of July 2022, only 6.6 per cent of the \$1.5 million available for project assurance support has been utilised. This equates to an average spend of \$9,900 per project and it is unlikely that the full allocation will be expended for some projects. Going forward, it may be sensible for NSW Public Works to set a project assurance fees cap based on a proportion of project budget, rather than a flat cap for all projects.

Internal stakeholders are less convinced of the value of project assurance because the role is limited to general oversight and mentoring. However, given the relatively low spend in the context of the total grant funding amount, if grantees are satisfied and derive value from assurance, then this is an appropriate use of Departmental funding.

Current governance and accountability arrangements within NSW Public Works limit capacity to manage project delivery support capacity and quality assurance

Representatives from the Bushfire Recovery Team and GMO were sometimes dissatisfied with the quality of support provided by the NSW Public Works project managers and assurance managers. These managers are not held to account by the NSW Public Works Grant Program Assurance Team (GPAT), whom the Bushfire Recovery Team pays. As a result, when the Bushfire Recovery Team is not satisfied with the quality of service provided by managers from NSW Public Works, they are unable to prompt GPAT to take action and hold these managers to account. Specifically, the internal governance within NSW Public Works is structured such that the Bushfire Recovery Team cannot seek redress directly with GPAT, whom the Service Level Agreement is with. This then leading to variations in the quality of service provided to the Bushfire Recovery Team and GMO.

On balance, NSW Public Works support for some projects has merit with refinement to the model

Despite the mixed feedback from internal stakeholders and grantees, on balance, the view was that NSW Public Works support is beneficial to improve project success for high value and risk projects where the grantee has limited capability or capacity. The key improvements to the model for future use are:

- Deciding in the program design stage that NSW Public Works support may be required, and therefore including it as a possibility in the Guidelines
- Improved assessment of grantee delivery capability and capacity and subsequent negotiation of the appropriate level of support.
- Ensuring NSW Public Works has the capacity to deliver the required level of project management support, and that the project assurance delivers distinct value over and above the Hypercare model.

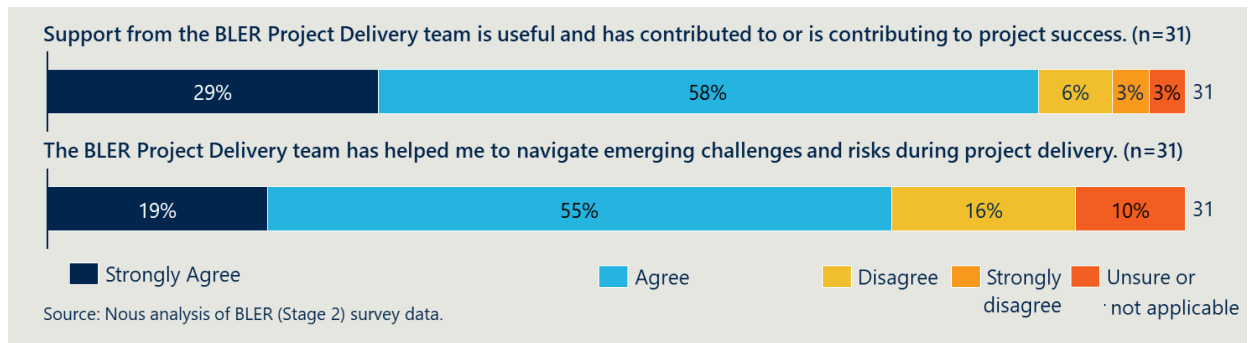
4.6.3 Additional support from the Department is sensible for recovery programs, but requires greater role clarity

The Hypercare model was established during BLER (Stage 2) project delivery to provide an additional layer of support given the communities experiences with ongoing emergencies and the high risk of continued delays. Under this model, the Bushfire Recovery Team took on additional responsibilities in maintaining a direct relationship with the grantee, problem solving challenges and providing advice. This included assisting with reporting requirements, clarifying project scope, timelines and milestones, and assisting with variations prior to submission to the GMO.

Grantees found the additional support from the Bushfire Recovery Team useful. One internal stakeholder noted that the model seems particularly useful for reactive (i.e. set up in response to a disaster) grant programs, such as the BLER (Stage 2), and programs involving grass-root or community organisations who may have relatively little experience engaging with government. Within BLER (Stage 2), it is most beneficial for projects that are particularly complex and for grantees with little project delivery capability.

Figure 18 details survey respondent agreement that the support contributed to project success and helped them navigate challenges and risks.

Figure 18 | Bushfire Recovery Team usefulness in supporting project delivery



The Hypercare model was developed informally and iterated over time. This meant that some grantees and internal stakeholders did not always understand the roles of the different stakeholders.

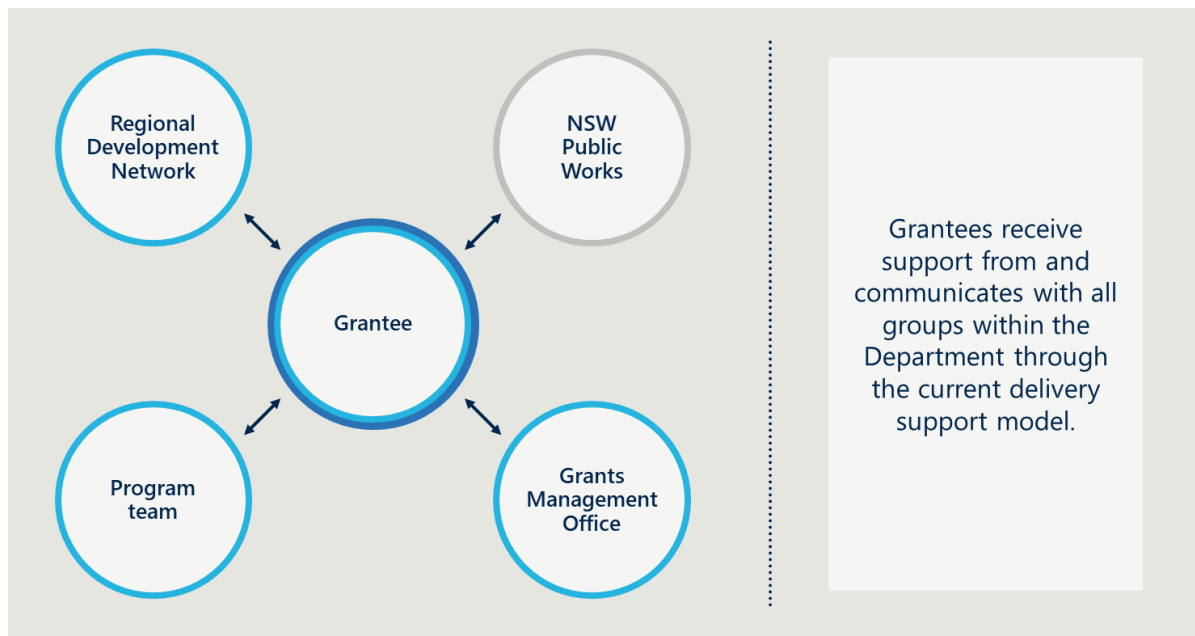
Table 1 presents the primary roles of each group.

Table 1 | Key stakeholder groups in BLER (Stage 2) project delivery

Key group	Role and responsibilities
Grants Management Office (GMO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing, negotiating and approving initial funding deeds Processing contract changes due to delays in project delivery.
Bushfire Recovery Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guiding grantees to the appropriate Departmental support Providing general assistance and guidance for less experienced grantees Conducting site visits
NSW Public Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing project management and project assurance support Completing quarterly reports on behalf of the grantee.
Regional Development Network (Economic Development Managers (EDM))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining regular contact with local communities and assisting in their liaison with government Conducting site visits Identifying projects through engagement with local councils and communities.

Figure 19 illustrates the interaction between grantees and stakeholders involved to support project delivery.

Figure 19 | Current model for BLER (Stage 2) teams supporting project delivery



Depending on the project and the relationships involved, the main point of contact for the grantee could be a representative from the Bushfire Recovery Team, the Regional Development Network or NSW Public Works. Between these stakeholders, there was a lack of clarity where roles intersected which made it harder for grantees to know who they should contact. This was particularly true of NSW Public Works and the Bushfire Recovery Team as many processes were developed informally over time. Despite the generally positive feedback from grantees who accessed additional support from the Bushfire Recovery Team, others felt confused and did not receive the benefits.

"Changes in personnel, limited contact options, difficulties with understanding hierarchy or structure of who is who."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

"We figured it out as we went along. There was no hard copy on who to go to. Throughout the process, [we] learnt who to go to for help. This was not clear initially."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

"I was reached out [to] by someone from the Department, but the individual did not show up ... [there was] no dedicated person in contrast to other grants with regular meetings."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

In some cases, the overlap between roles of the different teams supporting grantees led to conflicting advice between teams. Both internal and grantee consultations identified cases in which GMO did not accept variation requests from grantees, despite the grantee receiving support from the Bushfire Recovery Team to submit the variation request. Conflicting advice across teams adds complexity for project teams and is the cause of significant frustration.

“The main issue was that there were a number of people providing advice hence no consistent messaging.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

“From point of progressing application, [we] had a person from the Department ... when we got money, had to recombine the applications, although originally, we were told to split it into two applications.”

Internal stakeholders also noted tension between some Economic Development Managers in the Regional Development Network and the Bushfire Recovery Team. Some Economic Development Managers tend to have strong established relationships with the grantee, and the role of the Bushfire Recovery Team in the relationship was unclear.

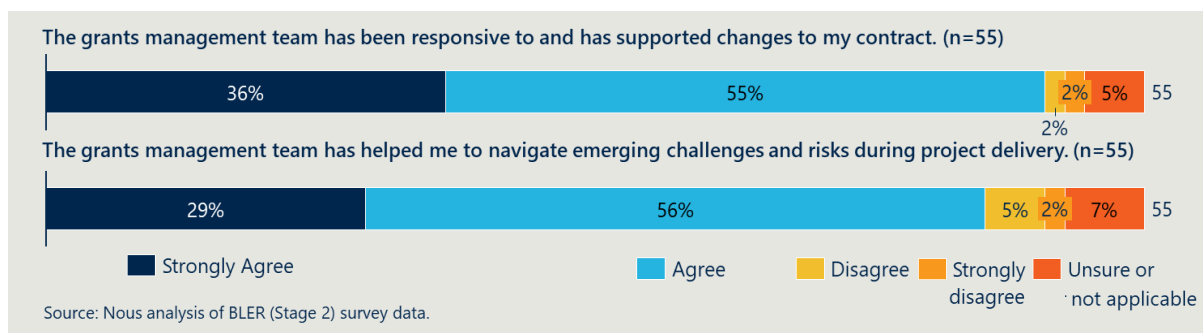
Internal stakeholder feedback suggests that the primary relationship, and the role of each stakeholder for each project was bedded down over time, but could have been better identified and communicated from commencement.

4.6.4 The GMO was efficient and responsive to grantees’ needs

The GMO was responsible for managing contract variations, milestone reporting, projects acquittals, and providing general assistance for grantees upon request. As of 30 May 2022, 36 per cent of grantees had submitted a request. Most contract changes were for time extensions processed due to COVID-19, multiple natural disaster emergencies, rising product costs, and labour shortages creating barriers to implementation, especially for infrastructure-based projects.

GMO was described by most grantees as efficient. Grantees’ perspective of GMO’s responsiveness in supporting changes to contract, and helpful assistance in managing project delivery challenges is shown in Figure 20. However, GMO’s fixed contractual approach and limited contact with grantees led many to access support from the Bushfire Recovery Team in variation preparation and submission. This created challenges when advice differed between the two groups. Clearer direction in the assignment of variation support responsibilities for all parties may help mitigate confusion and reduce duplicative workloads.

Figure 20 | Utility of GMO to support contract changes and project delivery.



Recommendations

- More clearly communicate changes to Guidelines to applicants.
- Better reflect all available conditions for grantees in Guidelines.
- Enhance assessment of project management capability and capacity to improve targeting of supports.
- Adopt and articulate clearer roles in enhanced support models

4.7 Monitoring and evaluation

4.7.1 Progress reporting was streamlined to reduce burden on grantees, which inadvertently reduced the accuracy of outcomes monitoring

During the design of BLER (Stage 2), the Department ensured the monitoring and reporting requirements for grantees were not burdensome nor onerous. Internal stakeholders noted that the design was informed by the need to minimize burden on communities dealing with the trauma and ongoing effects of the bushfires, including a significant number of volunteer, not-for-profit and community-based organisations. Consequently, application and reporting processes was designed to focus on easily collected project delivery outputs rather than term outcome measures.

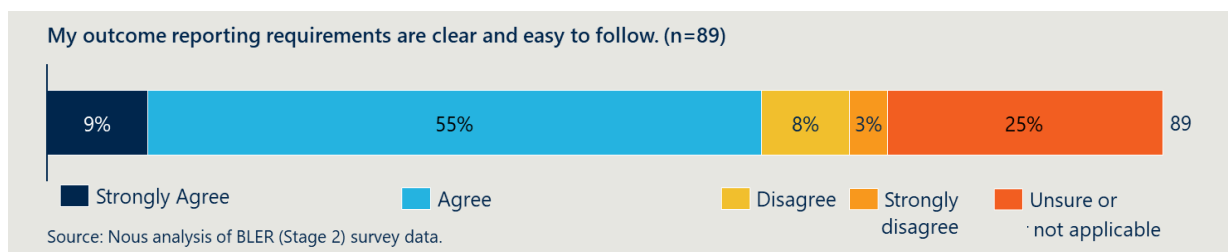


“Focus on reporting ‘what you delivered’, rather than asking ‘is what you delivered aligned with what we intended.’”

– Internal stakeholder

Many grantees agreed that there were requirements were clear and easy to follow, as illustrated in Figure 21.

Figure 21 | Respondent view of whether reporting requirements were clear and easy to follow for BLER (Stage 2)¹⁸



For those grantees whose projects involved NSW Public Works, the associated project manager or project assurance manager was responsible for completing and submitting reports on behalf of the grantee. This significantly reduced the burden on grantees.

There are opportunities to improve outcome reporting to better support the outcomes evaluation

Due to the way in which the monitoring and reporting requirements were designed, the data required to enable a robust outcomes evaluation is not being routinely collected. Progress reporting features qualitative and ‘free-text responses’, which means grantees may not be collecting appropriate data during the duration of project delivery. In addition, grantees are only asked to report on outcomes at the conclusion of their project. The Department, as a result, has limited oversight of projects and their delivery status, due to the way in which reporting is currently designed.

There is also no differentiation of grantees with respect their outcome reporting requirements. All grantees are required to report the same information through milestones, and there is no consideration of the type nor size of project. For particularly large projects, there is no way for the Department to monitor long-term outcomes post-completion of projects.

¹⁸ Most grantees are yet to complete project completion reports, so respondents of this survey question mostly considered their experience with progress reporting.

The categorisation of projects is inconsistent

The Department is unable to monitor nor report on the outcomes arising from different types of projects, especially as the difference between the five categories of project is not clear. The guidelines describe the five types of project categories, which are outlined in Section 2.

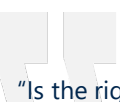
Specifically, the example projects in the enabling infrastructure category overlap with the example projects in the social development and built environment categories. For instance, an example project in the social development project category is that of 'community hall upgrades and other critical social infrastructure'. In the built environment adaption category, examples projects of 'community refuge centres' and 'fire resistant infrastructure' overlap with the enabling infrastructure category.

The Snowy Valleys emergency evacuation centre and multipurpose facility project was deemed built environment adaption, yet it involves the construction of an indoor sports and events facility, which can be turned into an evacuation centre during emergencies. In addition, another project saw upgrades to and the installation of new community infrastructure in three Goulburn Mulwaree LGA villages. This project was classified as social development, despite being heavily focused on infrastructure.

The overlap of project categories creates challenges for future outcomes evaluation. The Department can disaggregate by project type, but this distinguishment is not very meaningful because there are projects that align with more than one category. Hence, it is not possible to derive meaningful insights regarding the outcomes for different types of projects.

4.7.2 The reporting requirements for NSW Public Works are extensive

The monitoring and reporting requirements for NSW Public Works projects are considerably higher than to other grantees. NSW Public Works is required to collect large amounts and a wide variety of data relating to projects it manages. However, the purpose and use of this data is not clear, as noted by an external stakeholder. The usefulness of this data is also questioned because the data is only being collected for projects managed by NSW Public Works, and not for other projects being delivered through BLER (Stage 2) without NSW Public Works involvement.



"Is the right data being collected? PW is collecting a lot. Not sure where it is all going."

– External stakeholder

Internal stakeholders noted that the template through which NSW Public Works submits reports was repurposed and duplicated from another grant program. As a result, data is being collected that is not necessarily relevant nor useful for BLER (Stage 2).

4.7.3 There are sometimes delays in reporting to the Australian Government

BLER (Stage 2) was a joint initiative between the NSW Government and the Australian Government with funding announced under the DFRA. Up to \$540 million in grant funding across all stages of the BLER programs were coordinated between NSW Government and Australian Government in a 50:50 commitment. The NSW Government is required to report expenditure and financial data to the Australian Government on a quarterly basis, but there is no requirement to report on outcomes. In consultations, one internal stakeholder noted that reporting requirements were subject to negotiation in the design stage and were limited to what was achievable.

Internal and external stakeholders also noted that delays in reporting from NSW Public Works impact on other teams' ability to fulfil reporting obligations on time, including reporting to the Australian Government

Recommendations

- Modify grantee progress reports to better support the outcomes evaluation, while maintaining a low reporting burden for recipients. This will allow grantees to effectively report at the end of their project, setting the Department up for a more effective and robust outcomes evaluation.
- Implement requirement for grantees to collect data on a routine and sample basis. Provision of supports to set up data collection activities should take place at the beginning of the project delivery, but there is still an opportunity to enable this for those projects which are yet to begin.
- Implement different reporting requirements for larger and more influential projects. For instance, requiring the grantees associated with larger projects to deliver monitoring, evaluation and learning plans, to ensure they are working towards and achieving intended outcomes.
- Design methods through which the Department can monitor outcomes of projects post-completion. This may be through additional requirements in the funding deed, where the grantee may have to be involved years after the project has been completed, for relatively low-burden engagements, such as interviews or surveys.
- Better delineate between categories that projects fall into. More specific descriptions and criteria regarding projects will allow the Department to investigate whether or not there are trends in outcomes for different project types.
- Clarify and explore the reasoning behind NSW Public Works' data collection. Specifically, the Department should reconsider whether or not they should collect data that does not have a clear use, especially with respect to the end-of-program outcomes evaluation. Limiting excessive data collection requirements can reduce the burden on NSW Public Works into the future.

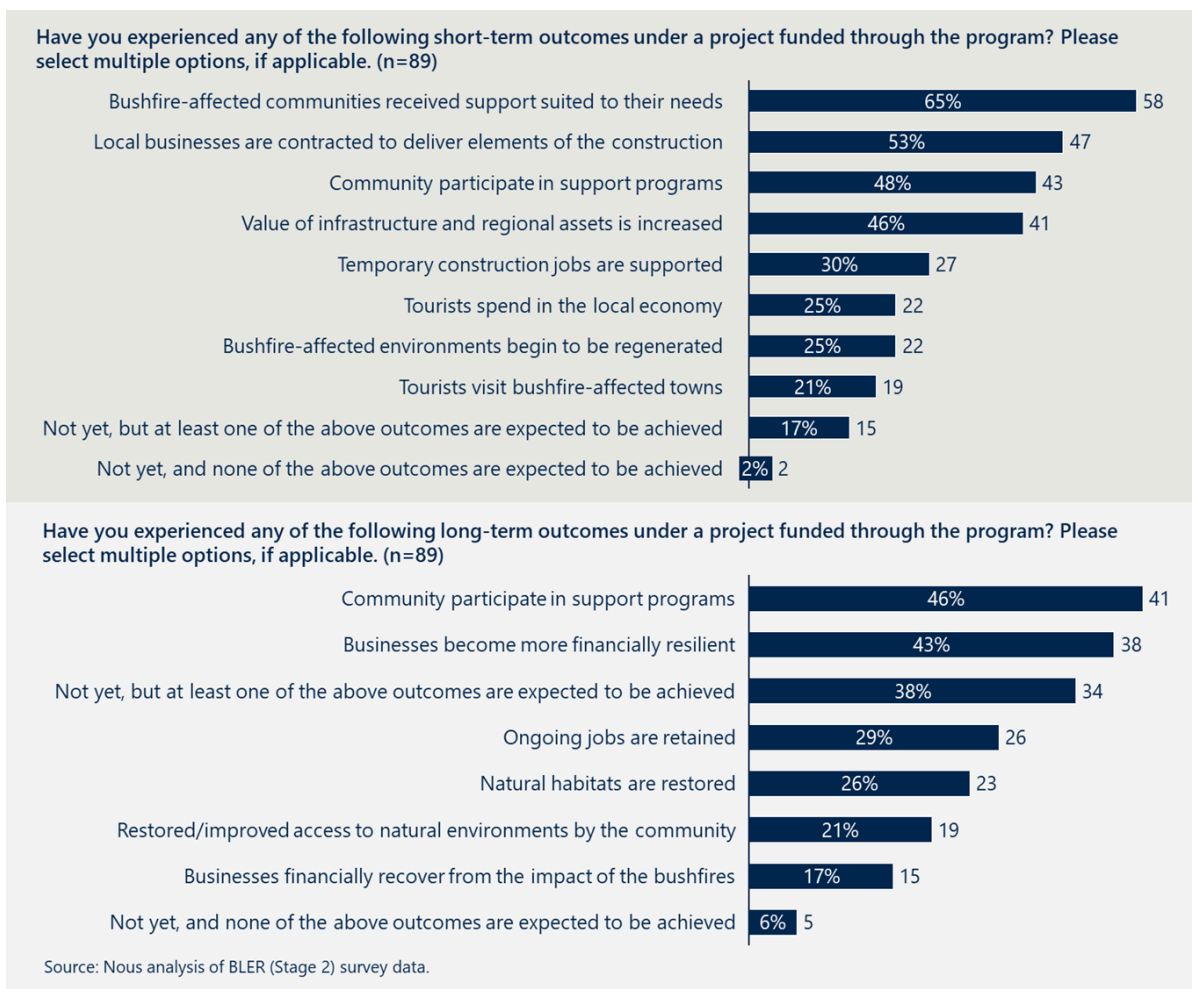
4.8 Effectiveness

4.8.1 Despite delays, BLER (Stage 2) projects are expected to achieve the intended program outcomes

Due to delays in project delivery, few outcomes reports have been finalised for projects in BLER (Stage 2). However, at survey, respondents indicated that their projects were contributing to the intended outcomes under BLER (Stage 2). In the short term, the most common outcomes are bushfire-affected communities receiving supports suited to their needs, local businesses being contracted in construction and community participation. The primary longer term outcomes include increased community participation in support programs and improved financial resilience of businesses in the community.

At survey, some respondents (6 per cent) did not expect their project to contribute to any of the long-term outcomes.

Figure 22 | Short- and long-term project outcomes anticipated by grantees



In consultation, grantees frequently commented on value of the grant in enabling community recovery. Without the additional funding, many grantees considered it unlikely they would be able to deliver the project at all, even with reduced scope. Others identified that the project enabled them to achieve a larger scale and deliver more benefits to their communities. Internal stakeholders also considered BLER (Stage 2) to be on track to achieve its intended outcomes. Those working within the BLER Bushfire Recovery Team note that, as projects progress, they are starting to see real impact for communities and ‘good news’ stories.

“Ecological restoration is a long-term process, which requires resources for a duration longer than most grant programs. The BLER grant has been instrumental in contribution to ecosystem recovery post bushfires. We will continue to work to restore the area beyond the end of the BLER grant with support from NSW Environmental Trust, local landholders, WWF and others to ensure the benefits are enduring. Thanks to the NSW and Australian Governments for supporting this worthwhile project.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

“Our project is based around social enterprise...The grant helped with expanding on our existing work - training young people who are doing it tough and connecting them back into the community. They then take the skills and training and use that for good in the community. The impact we create is not only in town but in many regions. [The project allowed us to] grow bigger footprints... and have more impact across NSW.”

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

4.8.2 The program has empowered communities to respond to and recover from future bushfire emergencies

Although not an explicitly intended outcome, community empowerment was a key theme in grantee consultations. Across consultations, many grantees described the primary difference made by their grant funding in terms of benefits to the community and an increase in community hope and resilience. Grantees described the importance of the program for their communities in ensuring they did not feel 'forgotten' or 'left behind' despite ongoing challenges such as COVID-19 and more recent disasters.

"We have been able to assist the local economy to recover from the bushfires and we have also addressed recovery of physical assets and mental health of the community."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

"Bolstered resilience in the community by providing a foundation for recovery."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

4.9 Efficiency

4.9.1 There are opportunities to improve the efficiency of bushfire grants administration

Despite generally good practice in grants administration, there are opportunities for greater efficiency in BLER (Stage 2). Inefficiencies in administration are largely related to duplication of effort across the teams supporting project delivery and unexpectedly high demand for recovery grants. Grantees currently interact with multiple key groups across the Department, such as the Bushfire Recovery Team, GMO and the Regional Development Network. The large number of touchpoints may be necessary due to the diverse supports available but adds complexity for grantees. As noted in Section 4.6.3, some grantees received conflicting advice from these different groups which resulted in additional delays and a worse experience for the grantee. In addition, the Department faced resourcing challenges while delivering BLER (Stage 2). Staffing was insufficient to assess the unexpectedly high volume of applications received, which created delays and reduced communication to applicants during assessment.

"Main difficulty in administering ... [is] resource requirements. Original estimation was based on 300 applications, ended up with 600 ... have to estimate resources based on what they believe is market needs."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

"Did not understand early the amount of funding and the resourcing requirements for the on-the-ground staffing to be able to support program ... [there was] inconsistent staffing."

– BLER (Stage 2) grantee

4.10 Recommendations to improve BLER (Stage 2)

DOMAIN	RECOMMENDATION
Program design	Plan evaluation approach, including development of program logic and outcomes monitoring framework during program design and align data collection requirements to outcomes.
	Detail all elements of the assessment process in funding guidelines.
	More strategic communication to develop community understanding of the rationale for the grants program and its design, both if competitive (as some groups will spend time on unsuccessful applications) and if targeted (as some groups will not have the opportunity to apply).
	Greater engagement with affected communities to enable a more community driven process in identifying and screening projects. This would also support promotion of the program and a clearer understanding of eligibility criteria.
Program administration	Improve communication with applicants to ensure that they are aware they can access detailed feedback.
Application assessment process	Tighten processes to ensure that conflict of interest is appropriately managed. This should include active monitoring of conflict of interest declarations.
Funding deed negotiation	Provide more targeted support to applicants (such as local community organisations) that do not have experience in delivering grant-funded projects to ensure they understand evidential requirements.
Project delivery	More clearly communicate changes to Guidelines to applicants.
	Better reflect all available conditions for grantees in Guidelines.
	Enhance assessment of project management capability and capacity to improve targeting of supports.
	Adopt and articulate clearer roles in enhanced support models
Monitoring and evaluation	Modify progress reports to better support the outcomes evaluation, while maintaining a low reporting burden for recipients. This will allow grantees to effectively report at the end of their project, setting the Department up for a more effective and robust outcomes evaluation.
	Implement requirement for grantees to collect data on a routine and sample basis. Common data collection activities include interviews and surveys with those engaging with and who have interacted with infrastructure, for instance, that has been delivered through funding. Provision of supports to set up data collection activities should take place at the beginning of the project delivery, but there is still an opportunity to enable this for those projects which are yet to begin.
	Implement different reporting requirements for larger and more influential projects. For instance, requiring the grantees associated with larger projects to deliver monitoring, evaluation and learning plans, to ensure they are working towards and achieving intended outcomes.
	Design methods through which the Department can monitor outcomes of projects post-completion. This may be through additional requirements in the funding deed, where the grantee may have to be involved years after the project has been completed, for relatively low-burden engagements, such as interviews or surveys.
	Better delineate between categories that projects fall into. More specific descriptions and criteria regarding projects will allow the Department to investigate whether or not there are trends in outcomes for different project types.
	Clarify and explore the reasoning behind NSW Public Works' data collection. Specifically, the Department should reconsider whether or not they should collect data that does not have a clear use, especially with respect to the end-of-program outcomes evaluation. Limiting excessive data collection requirements can reduce the burden on NSW Public Works into the future.

5 BIRP (Stream 2) Findings

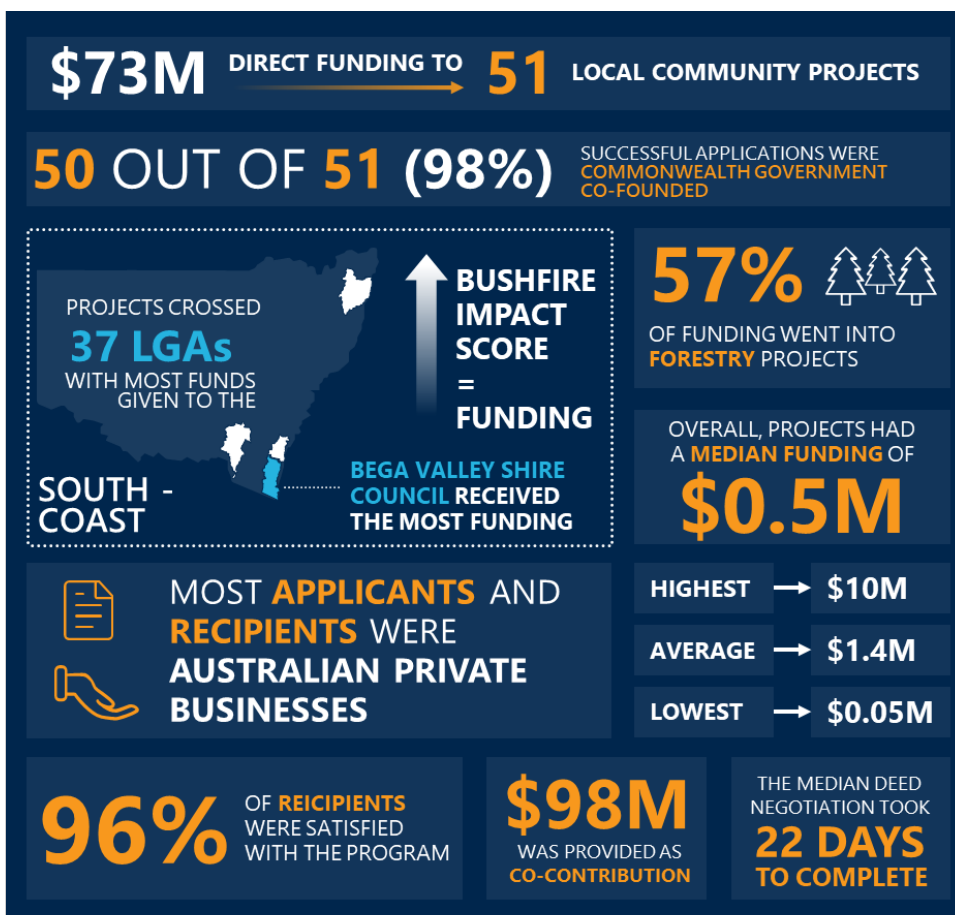
5.1 Overview of program results

5.1.1 BIRP (Stream 2) successfully distributed all available grant funding

In total, 178 applications were submitted for BIRP (Stream 2) requesting a total of \$276 million and ultimately \$73 million was distributed across 51 successful applications; 49 of these projects (\$72.3 million) were co-funded by the Australian Government. More than half of BIRP (Stream 2) funding was awarded to forestry projects (\$42 million out of \$73 million), which included projects such as sawmill equipment and production line improvements and investment in more resilient and sustainable approaches. The median project funding totalled \$0.5 million while the average funding was \$1.4 million. This indicates there were more smaller projects. The maximum grant amount requested \$10 million but most projects requested grants at the lower end of the available funding threshold. Project grants in viticulture and aquaculture tended to be smaller than the other sectors.

Figure 23 provides an overview of the program results.

Figure 23| Overview of BIRP (Stream 2) results*



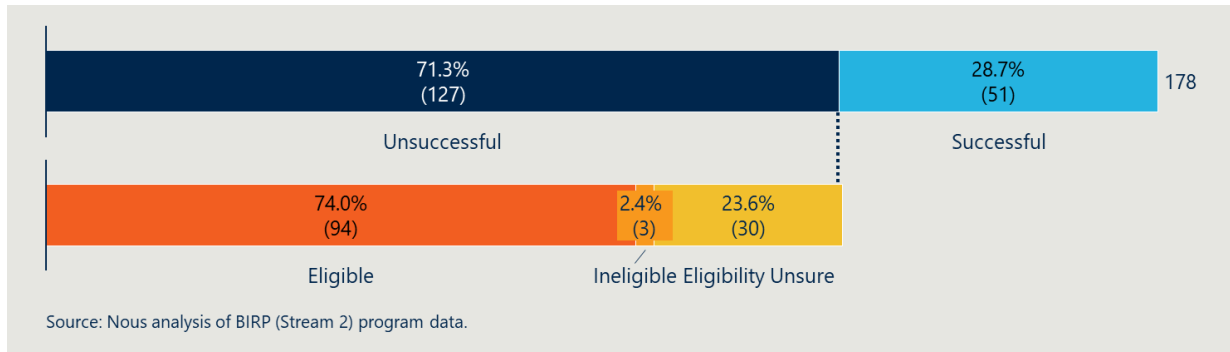
* 'Deed negotiation' reference the time between deed creation and deed signature as recorded in the SmartyGrants database; 'co-funded' reference financial co-contributions of all types that were contributed towards total project funds; 'recipients' reference BLER (Stage 2) grantee survey outputs (n=89).

5.1.2 The program was oversubscribed

178 applications were submitted for BIRP (Stream 2) requesting a total of \$276 million, which was 378 per cent more than the available allocation. Shown in Figure 24, 71 per cent of applications were unsuccessful. Almost one in four of the unsuccessful applications were eligible for funding. These applications may have been lower priority than the successful applicants, but indicate that the available funding may not have been adequate to meet the need.

24 per cent of unsuccessful applications had 'unsure eligibility', indicating that Guidelines may have lacked clarity for assessors.

Figure 24 | BIRP (Stream 2) application outcomes



Most funding was allocated to private businesses

Figure 25 provides the breakdown of successful applications by organisation type. Most applications were submitted by Australian private businesses, and consequently received most of the program's funding. This meant that the funding supported individual business recovery, which in aggregate supports the recovery of target sectors. However, there were far fewer projects that aimed to support sector-wide resilience as the primary goal.

In both survey results and consultations with grantees, some also expressed concern regarding the limitation of the program funding in supporting smaller businesses across more impacted LGAs.

"Many businesses missed out on applications, so [there may have been] a need for more funding spread across regions. Larger businesses seemed to be preferred where a multitude of small business together [could have] employed similar numbers."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Figure 25 | Approved BIRP (Stream 2) applications funding by organisation type (n=51)



5.1.3 Funding was distributed to those LGAs heavily affected by bushfires

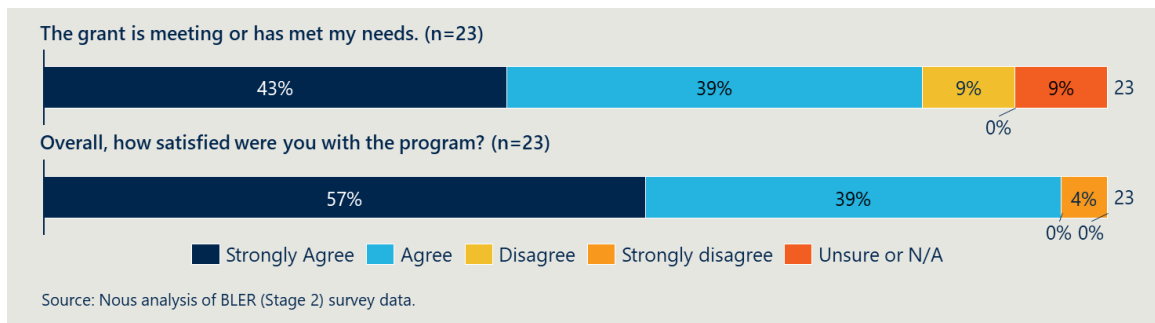
The BIRP (Stream 2) Guidelines did not detail specific eligible LGAs. Instead, applicants had to demonstrate that they were impacted by bushfires from August 2019 onwards. This was in part due to the inclusion of the viticulture industry, for whom smoke taint affected their business despite not being located in a technically bushfire-affected LGA.

Snowy Valleys received substantially more funds in comparison to other LGAs (\$35.5 million across 12 projects).

5.1.4 Grantees were generally highly satisfied with the program

Most grantees were satisfied with the BIRP (Stream 2) program overall and felt that it met their needs, which is represented in survey feedback shown in Figure 26. In consultation with grantees, most interviewees expressed satisfaction and gratefulness when asked about the differences that the grant funding had made to their project(s). Moreover, some also considered the funding as a 'lifeline' that enabled them to rebuild their businesses at a time when they were considering 'hard decisions' about their future.

Figure 26 | Respondent view of whether the grant will meet or has met their need(s) and of whether they were satisfied with the BIRP (Stream 2) program overall



5.2 Program design

5.2.1 The design of the program was appropriate to achieve the intended outcomes, with sufficient input from industry

BIRP (Stream 2) was designed to support recovery of target industries following the impact of the bushfires. It was intended to support industry-wide recovery and rebuilding, with a focus on job creation through funding projects that build industry sustainability, increase value-add production, support supply-chain efficiencies, product diversification and market expansion. Target industries were forestry, horticulture and agriculture (aquaculture, dairy, viticulture and apiculture). The identification of these industries was evidence-based, and the design of the Guidelines was informed by relevant stakeholders in these industries to ensure the types of support would be fit-for-purpose.

Applicants could be incorporated industry associations, co-operatives, local councils or other organisations with sector-wide purpose in a target industry. As the focus of the program was on industry recovery, these type of applicants were appropriate because they are aligned with and support growth of the target industries.

The recent Audit found that the guidelines contained general program information, eligibility and selection criteria, and the application and assessment processes. Design of the guidelines and the program was informed by engagement with industry representatives and subject matter experts, with a particular

focus on the impact of the bushfires to respective sector. As a result, it adhered to the requirements described in the Department of Premier and Cabinet’s ‘Good Practice Guide to Grants Administration’.¹⁹ Figure 27 presents an assessment of BIRP (Stream 2) administration against good practice principles.²⁰

Figure 27 | Good practice principles

PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT	RATIONALE
Robust planning and design		The design of the program is appropriate to meet its intended objectives. Further detail could have been included in the guidelines, such as with regard to the criteria for project eligibility.
Collaboration and partnership		Key stakeholders from industry were engaged during design. The program was originally designed by the NSW Government so that funding could be provided to bushfire-impacted regions without relying on Commonwealth funding. However, the Australian Government was only then involved when it was decided that BIRP (Stream 2) would be funded from the BLER program.
Proportionality		The program was tailored to support the recovery and resilience of target industries. There were nominal allocations internally to ensure fair distribution of funds to industries depending on their bushfire impact.
An outcomes orientation		Planning was designed and implemented with a focus on achieving outcomes and benefits consistent with government objectives. However, the theory of change and program logic were not established in the design stage, which meant the link between inputs and activities to expected outcomes was not always clear.
Achieving value with relevant money		The assessment process was effective and a cost-benefit analysis was completed for all applications. The assessment panel included key stakeholders such as those from industry.
Governance and accountability		Rationales behind decision-making during the assessment process were well documented.
Probity and transparency		A probity advisor was engaged by the Department and a probity plan was established, but conflicts of interest were not recorded effectively or managed appropriately. A communications plan or strategy for engaging with stakeholders was also not developed.

BIRP (Stream 2) was assessed against the good practice principles using a four-point system:

	Aligned to good practice		Somewhat aligned to good practice
	Mostly aligned to good practice		Not aligned to good practice

There are three areas where BIRP (Stream 2) design diverged from best practice:

- Lack of involvement from the Australian Government during program design.** There was sufficient consultation with industry stakeholders during the design of the program. The program was funded through the Local Economic Recovery Program, which is jointly administered with the Australian Government. However, the Australian Government was not involved in the design of the program.
- Lack of consideration for reporting and outcomes during design.** A suitable outcomes framework or program logic was not developed as part of the BIRP (Stream 2) design. Milestone reporting also

¹⁹ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

²⁰ The principles align with the Grants Administration Guide which was released in September 2022 and is based on a more contemporary understanding of good practice than was available during program design.

does not incorporate outcomes reporting. Monitoring and evaluation is discussed further in Section 5.7.

- Conflicts of interest were not effectively monitored or managed.** Despite requiring conflict of interest declarations from staff who worked on assessment and approval processes, eight staff did not submit a declaration. One conflict of interest was declared, but there is no evidence as to how it was managed. A conflict of interest declarations register was also not appropriately maintained, and the completed version of the register was lost. A communications plan or strategy for engaging with stakeholders was also not developed.

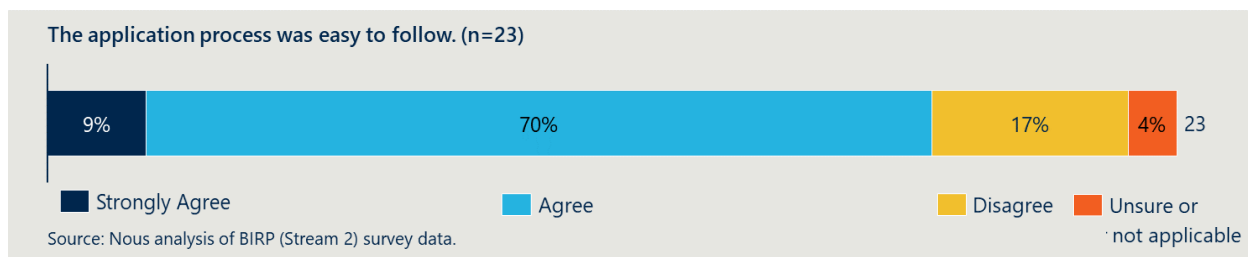
5.2.2 While the competitive application process was appropriate, less experienced applicants require additional support

BIRP (Stream 2) was administered through an open-competitive grant process. This was appropriate, considering the grant aimed to support recovery and resilience of target industries following the bushfires. The open-competitive process allowed government to decipher and identify which projects would provide the most value and benefit for their benefit, and ultimately contribute to the broader goal of the program.

Despite this, the process proved difficult for applicants of the program, who were generally less experienced and 'in-the-know' as to the grant application process. The target grantees were businesses, which differs to other grant programs, where most grantees are from councils or organisations with experience applying for grants.

Most grantees surveyed agreed that the application process was easy to follow, as highlighted in Figure 28.

Figure 28 | Respondent view of whether reporting requirements were clear and easy to follow for BIRP (Stream 2)*



However, some grantees disagreed, who found the application requirements onerous and complex, with significant time investment needed to complete the application. One grantee found the application requirements to be reasonable but noted that the requirements would have been difficult to adhere to for anyone with relatively little experience applying for grants.

"There are flaws in [this] grant's approach – there were lots of information [needed] and repetitive questions. A balance is needed."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"Documentation requirements were extensive, which is fair and reasonable but would have been very challenging for anyone without a government project background (given the timeframe for submission)."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"[We needed] help with understanding exactly what was required. The problem with a generic form, is that questions need to be so broad to cater for just about any situation."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

This mixed feedback may be driven in part by the fact that while there were different application requirements depending on the level of funding being requested²¹, there was no differentiation of applicants in the program guidelines for BIRP (Stream 2) with regards to their project type or industry.

“The application was essentially for a project with infrastructure – [the] budget [was] too detailed: projection for the following two years were impossible to make with certainty. Invoicing process [was] confusing”.

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“Although the application form was relatively easy to fill, the template was more aligned with projects involving construction [and] building.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Few grantees engaged professional grant writers, but many sought application help from the Department

Only 13 per cent of applicants were supported by external grant writers during the application process. Of the survey respondents, all those who engaged external grant writers were businesses.

However, some grantees did receive support from the Department when applying for the program. At survey, 35 per cent of respondents indicated that they accessed and were supported by Departmental staff during the application process, which allowed them to understand the application requirements and submit a higher quality application as a result.

Support from the Department included clarification on the purpose of questions and the type of evidence required for certain application questions.

“When we needed additional support, I inquired with a person who made some internal inquiries and put me in contact with another person to go over certain aspects of the application process.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“The Department gave some feedback on what some of the sections required and then it was relatively straightforward.”

As many grantees were impacted by the bushfires, the level of detail required in the application may have not been appropriate, given the limited capacity of grantees to engage. Finding ways to balance the collection of sufficient information during the application process with the burden placed on grantees is an ongoing difficulty for disaster recovery programs.

“Documentation requirements were extensive, which is fair and reasonable but would have been very challenging for anyone without a government project background (given the timeframe for submission).”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

²¹ Applicants requesting between \$50,000 and \$5 million were not required to submit a business case, while applicants requesting over \$5 million in funding were required to.

“While the steps in the process were clear, it took four of our group, including one with advanced IT skills, helped by a BEC to put the application together and load it. We spent 6 weeks on the application and over 100 hours of volunteer time to complete it.”

Recommendations

- Better differentiate applicants with regards to their project type and industry, including different requirements during the application phase.
- Ensure conflicts of interest are documented appropriately and managed effectively.
- Plan evaluation approach, including development of program logic and outcomes monitoring framework during program design and align data collection requirements to outcomes.
- Plan to provide increased support and to engage with less experienced applicants, especially during competitive open-round processes. Applicants with little experience applying for grants may not understand requirements or have the capacity to fulfil requirements in full.

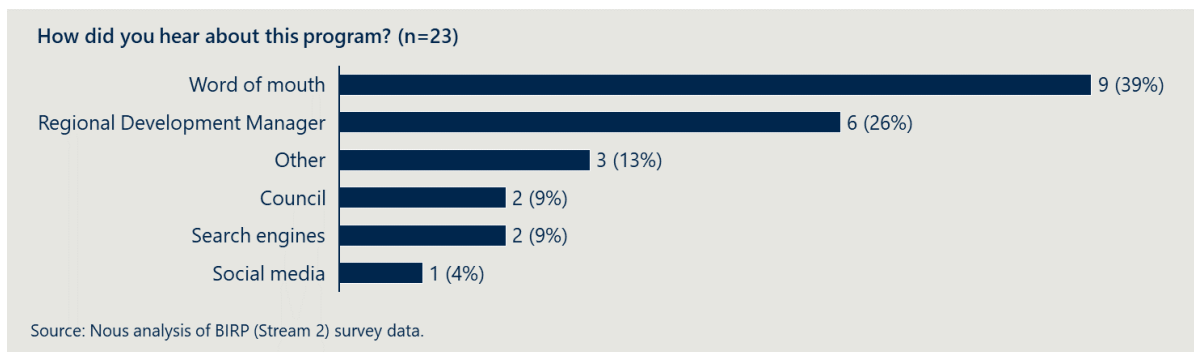
5.3 Program administration

5.3.1 BIRP (Stream 2) was widely promoted to applicants

Program availability was widely promoted within communities via word of mouth or via Regional Development Managers, as seen in Figure 29.

Other methods for communicating with applicants included via social media, industry mailouts and ministerial press releases.²² The Department also conducted a number of webinars, which informed a list of frequently asked questions, which was subsequently published on the Department’s BIRP (Stream 2) information page.

Figure 29 | Respondent view of how they heard about the BIRP (Stream 2) program²³



5.3.2 The announcement of outcomes was delayed

The intended assessment period for BIRP (Stream 2) was between July 2020 and August 2020, with announcement of successful applications from September 2020 onwards. The Department received more applications than originally expected, so assessments continued through to December 2020.

²² Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

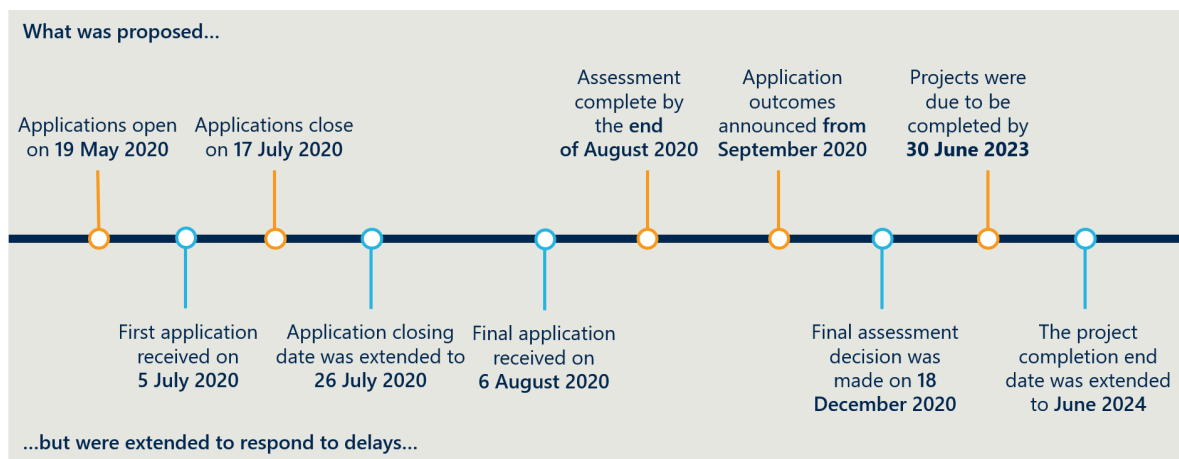
²³ Surveys were distributed prior to name change from ‘Regional Development Manager’ to ‘Economic Development Manager’

The closing date for applications was also extended from the 17 July 2020 to the 26 July 2020. 19 applications were received past this date, as the Department did note in the guidelines that late applications may be accepted at their sole discretion.

The final decision date for applications was on the 18 December 2020, although an application was withdrawn on the 11 January 2020, despite being approved for funding. As a result, there was an average period of 104 days between application and announcement.

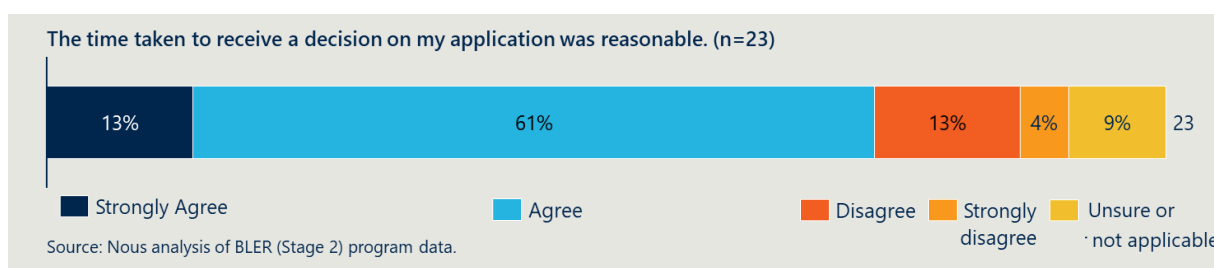
Figure 30 presents the intended and actual program timelines. This diagram also shows that the project completion date has been extended by the Department.

Figure 30 | High-level timeline for BIRP (Stream 2)



Despite this delay, 74 per cent of grantees agreed that the time taken to receive an application decision was reasonable during the survey. The breakdown of answers to this question are provided in Figure 31 below.

Figure 31 | BIRP (Stream 2) survey respondent view of whether application timeframes were reasonable



One contributing factor to the positive response from grantees to the time taken to receive an outcome on their application may have been the fact that many grantees conveyed a sense of gratefulness during consultation. As applicants were generally newer to the grant application process, they were more appreciative of the fact that they received funding.

“Without this grant, would only have been able to do half of the project ... very grateful to be successful in the grant application process.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“Without [the grant], with the difficulties with Covid and harsh weather conditions, it wouldn't have been possible.”

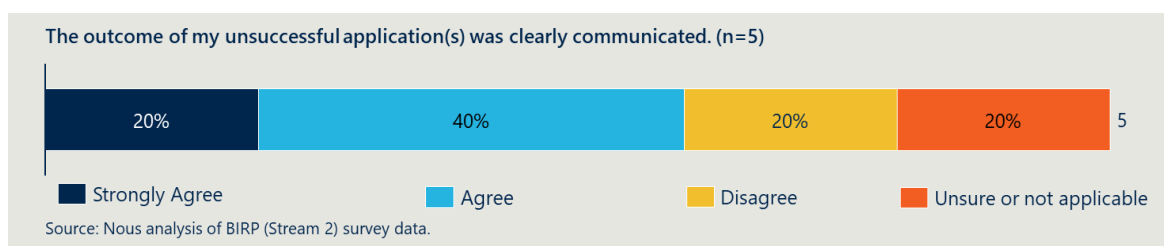
5.3.3 The Department could have better explained the reasoning behind unsuccessful applications

Out of those grantees surveyed, only five also submitted unsuccessful applications in addition to successful ones. It is unclear as to whether or not most applicants were aware of the opportunities for feedback on unsuccessful application outcomes.

Despite this, the feedback provided by the Department on unsuccessful applications tended to be relatively vague and unspecific. During calls with applicants, a general feedback script was used to inform them about the results of their unsuccessful application. No information specific the application was included, so the feedback was brief and generic.²⁴

As a result, there is an opportunity for the Department to tailor feedback to applications and to better explain to applicants the reasons for which their application did not progress.

Figure 32 | Respondent view of whether unsuccessful application outcomes were clearly communicated for BIRP (Stream 2)



Recommendations

- Provide detailed and tailored feedback regarding unsuccessful applications.
- Find opportunities to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications as early as possible (such as when applications are ineligible).

5.4 Applicant assessment process

5.4.1 The application assessment process involved key groups, but some funding decisions are unclear per the Guidelines

The BIRP (Stream 2) program guidelines could have been clearer and contained more details about the assessment process. Two key stages involving eligibility, viability and strategic alignment review, followed by application assessment were intended to be undertaken for all applications. However, the Guidelines did not detail the priority of different levels of assessment, resulting in the need for internally developed informal rules to standardise the assessment process.

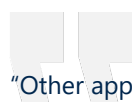
Key groups included in the assessment panel included representatives from the NSW Public Works and Regional Development Network, the Department of Primary Industries and NSW Treasury, as well as an independent probity advisor and independent NSW Government representative. Internal consultation showed that viability assessor training was provided to the panel members to ensure assessment consistency between NSW Public Works and the Department of Primary Industries. The panel was

²⁴ Audit Office of New South Wales, Bushfire Recovery Grants Performance Audit, NSW, 2023.

encouraged to take into consideration the individual merits of each project against the program criteria as well as how it fit in a package of projects that will support overall industry recovery.

However, eligibility and suitability requirements as detailed in the Guidelines were not completely adhered to when determining application outcomes. As a result, funding was provided for one ineligible project, nine projects with uncertain eligibility and five projects which were deemed unsuitable. Despite a minimum co-contribution of 50 per cent of the total project cost being stipulated as an eligibility criterion, two applications without an appropriate Commonwealth co-contribution were approved for funding. Further, one approved project lacked a viability assessment. As such, the incoherence of the program's Stage 1 application processes may have reduced the integrity of program outcomes.

Moreover, grantees in consultations revealed that that they did not have confidence in the integrity of application assessment process. This was exacerbated by some grantees' unfamiliarity with government grant processes and unawareness of outcomes feedback availability upon request.



"Other applications I helped applied for were also deserving and equally in need... They were only rejected because of their smaller [project] size."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Recommendations

- Detail the priority of different levels of assessment in the guidelines.
- Ensure assessment processes fully adhere to eligibility and suitability requirements, or modify eligibility and suitability requirements in guidelines to be less stringent.

5.5 Funding deed negotiation

5.5.1 Funding deed negotiation was inefficient for the Department and grantees

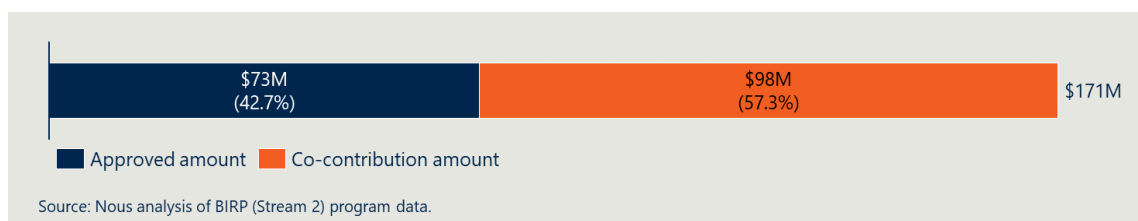
It took, on average, 141 days to finalise the funding deed following the announcement of successful applications for projects. Finalised funding deeds are now in place for all projects. While this is comparable to similar programs run by the Department, in a recovery context this length of time is more sensitive for grantees.

Some grantees were surprised as to how long it took to negotiate the funding deed following outcomes announcement. This was exacerbated by conflicting information as program guidelines specified that projects must be able to commence within 12 months from announcement. Deed negotiation timeframes may have been delayed due to insufficient information collected during the application process, and the GMO needing to develop processes internally due to a lack of specificity in the guidelines. There was an opportunity to manage the expectations of grantees for BIRP (Stream 2), especially for those who are less experienced when interacting with government. In addition, grantees may have benefited from increased communication and a more hands-on approach from the Department during the negotiation process.

5.5.2 Some projects did not strictly adhere to co-contribution eligibility requirement

The program required co-contributions at a minimum of 50 per cent of the total project cost, but this was not strictly adhered to. On average, applicants sought two sources of Commonwealth co-contributions per project to meet eligibility requirements. On average, \$1.9 million per project was added to total funds as Commonwealth co-contribution, as shown in Figure 33.

Figure 33 | Proportion of BIRP (Stream 2) co-contribution



However, one application without a Commonwealth co-contribution of 50 per cent was approved for funding, which deviates from the Guideline eligibility criteria. Four projects with 'invalid' or 'valid unsure' Commonwealth co-contributions were also approved. This indicates that Guideline and application assessment criteria were ambiguous for the assessment panel, or that eligibility criteria integrity was inadequately framed in the context of the program.

In consultation with grantees, it was acknowledged that the program's co-contribution approach helped attract additional project funding but was more difficult to achieve for smaller entities. This may have caused potentially impactful projects supporting program objectives to be missed in application.

"The grant has been pivotal to attract co-funding from industry and all sectors (Government, University, private)."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"The funding has allowed us to design and implement quite ambitious projects. It has also enabled a really good report with different partners and there have been a lot of synergies."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"The funding is 50/50 grant / equity. It is often difficult for small businesses to go to their bank and borrow matched funding ... We would invest a further \$1,000,000 in our business provided we didn't have to continually place our home on the line as security."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Recommendations

- Consider the required detail collected during the application process to ensure that funding negotiation timeframes are as efficient as possible.
- Increase communication and use a more hands-on approach with grantees less experienced with government grant funding.

5.6 Project delivery support model

5.6.1 BIRP (Stream 2) projects received 'standard' support from the Department

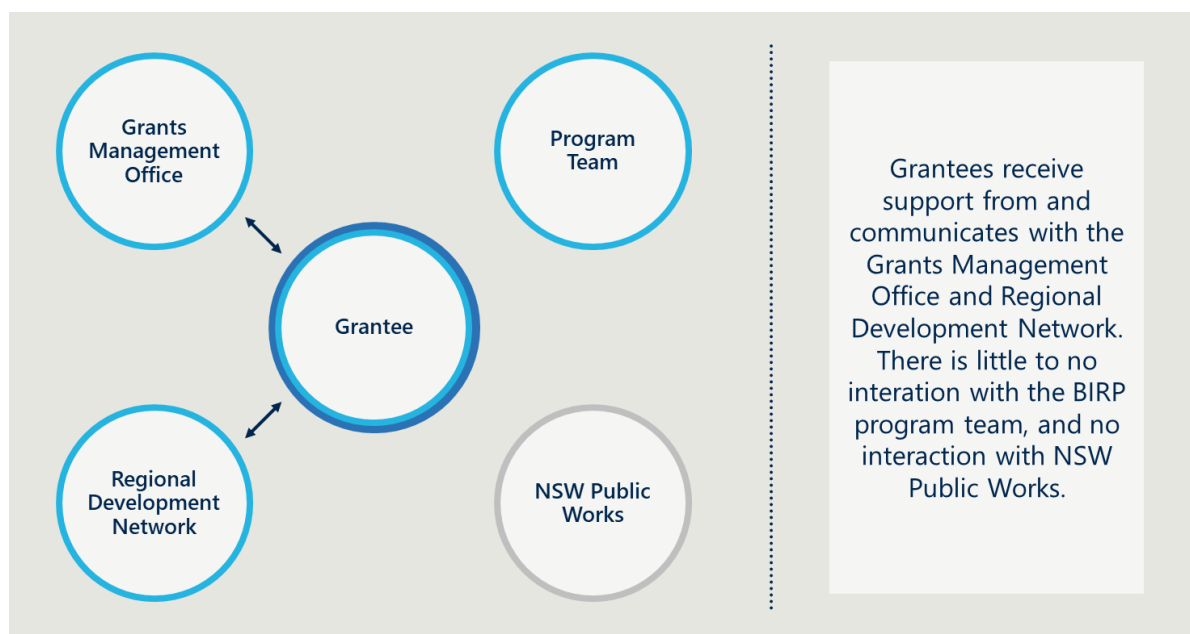
During the delivery of projects in BIRP (Stream 2), there were two key groups involved to support grantees, as illustrated in Figure 324.

As is usual practice for programs administered by the Department, the primary relationship for the grantee was with the GMO. EDM officers under the Regional Development Network had more or less involvement during project delivery, depending on the strength of their relationship with the grantee.

The Bushfire Recovery Team took a relatively hands-off approach, with very minimal contact with grantees. The Bushfire Recovery Team became involved during occurrences or one-off events, such as media releases and participation. The light-touch approach during the administration of BIRP (Stream 2) required fewer resources from DRNSW, compared to BLER (Stage 2).

In addition, NSW Public Works was not involved.

Figure 34 | Current model for BIRP (Stream 2) teams supporting project delivery



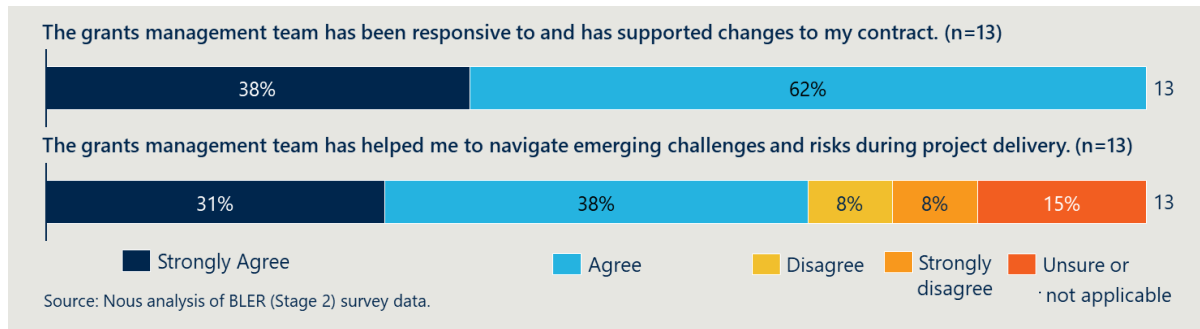
5.6.2 Grantees were satisfied with the service provided by GMO

The GMO was responsible for managing contract variations, milestone reporting, projects acquittals, and providing general assistance for grantees upon request.

As of 30 May 2022, 36 per cent of grantees had submitted a contract variation request. Most contract changes were for time extensions processed due to COVID-19, multiple natural disaster emergencies, rising product costs, and labour shortages creating barriers to implementation, especially for infrastructure-based projects.

- The GMO was described by most grantees as efficient. Grantees' perspective of GMO's responsiveness in supporting changes to contracts, and helpful assistance in managing project delivery challenges is shown in Figure 35. However, the GMO's fixed contractual approach and limited contact with grantees led many to access support from the Bushfire Recovery Team in variation preparation and submission. This created challenges when advice differed between the two groups. Clearer direction in the assignment of variation support responsibilities for all parties may help mitigate confusion and reduce duplicative workloads.

Figure 35 | Respondent view of whether GMO has been effective in supporting grantees during project delivery



Some grantees were not satisfied with the level of engagement from the GMO

The GMO was supportive of contract changes in consideration of COVID-19, multiple natural disaster emergencies, rising product costs, and labour shortages. However, during consultation, some grantees noted that there was a lack of consistent and proactive engagement from the GMO. There was also not widespread understanding as to the ways in which the GMO can assist grantees with respect to emerging risks and barriers to project delivery. Some grantees would have appreciated more consistent support with a single point of contact.



“The GMO was quite helpful but I often had difficulty getting onto the people tasked with helping me. This was frustrating at times.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

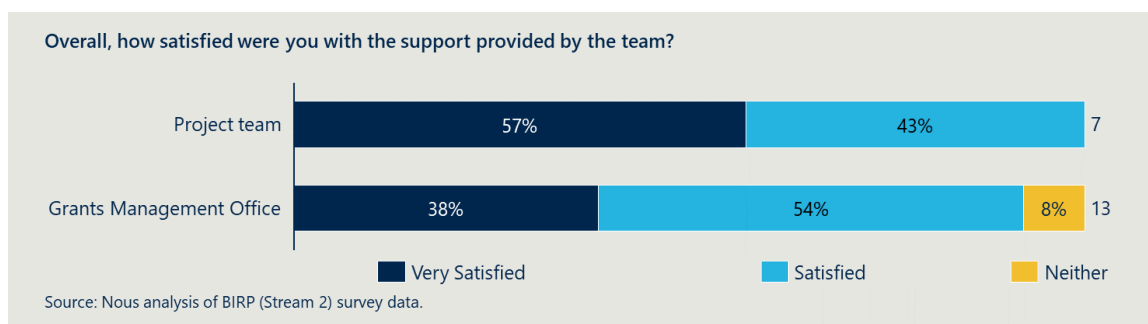
“The GMO have responded timely to requests but there has been no proactive engagement regarding emerging challenges and risks during the project delivery.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

5.6.3 BIRP (Stream 2) grantees may have benefited from more support

Most grantees were satisfied with the supports and assistance they received from GMO and the Bushfire Recovery Team, as illustrated in Figure 36.

Figure 36 | Respondent view of whether they were satisfied with the assistance provided by each support team



However, many grantees noted that increased engagement and support from the Department would have been helpful during project delivery. During consultation, grantees commented that there was little contact with Department, even when grantees faced difficulties or delays to milestone reporting.

“In the end, if you have not reached milestone, you need to click this button, but no one ever got in touch with me.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“No contact with [the] Department ... not a slur on them, but I have heard from them with the exception of once.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“[There was] very little support ... did not know who to contact ... [we were] unsure about help, and whether it was available if needed.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Recommendations

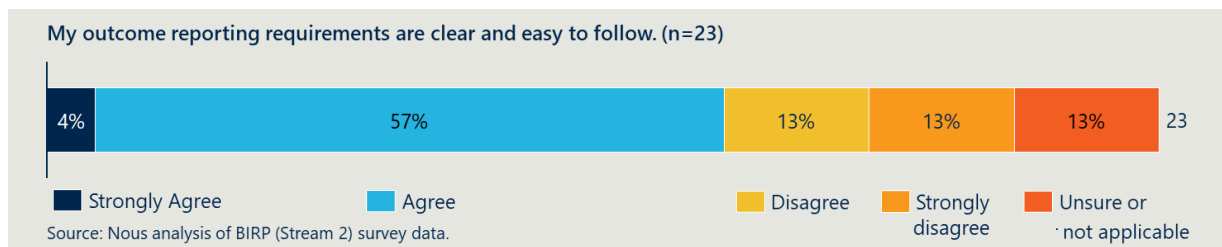
- Engage consistently with grantees and increase the level of support provided, where resourcing allows. This may be through increased involvement from the BIRP (Stream 2) Bushfire Recovery Team or more consistent engagement from GMO.

5.7 Monitoring and evaluation

5.7.1 There were mixed views as to the ease of reporting

Through consultation, grantees expressed varying views with respect to their ability to adhere to their reporting requirements. Over 60 per cent of grantees agreed that reporting requirements were clear and easy to follow, as illustrated in Figure 37, but over 25 per cent of grantees did not agree.

Figure 37 | Respondent view of whether reporting requirements were clear and easy to follow for BIRP (Stream 2)



There is an opportunity to communicate the requirements of the final completion report to grantees in advance of project completion

Many grantees believe that the progress reporting requirements under BIRP (Stream 2) were easy to follow and understand, but not necessarily sufficient for them to report on outcomes in the long-term. Specifically, they did not feel that the information being collected through milestone reporting allowed

them to reflect upon and accurately indicate how their project is progressing. As a result, grantees feel there is limited oversight from the Department as to their project and its delivery status.

In addition, grantees are not aware of the type of documentation and data required in the completion report, so they may not be collecting and compiling all the required information during project delivery.

There is also no differentiation of grantees with respect their outcome reporting requirements. All grantees are required to report the same information through milestones, and there is no consideration of the type nor size of project.

“The online portal, SmartyGrants is totally inadequate to report progress on. It gives no opportunity to explain what we have done, what is delayed, and more importantly, what money is not spent but is committed. I've found that I just can't use it and have sent in written reports with a spreadsheet explaining our financial reporting instead. Its been really stressful.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“No idea what I need to collect for acquittal stage ... to be honest, this is quite concerning.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“It would be preferable to have draft acquittal reports at the start of the project to ensure documentation is progressively captured that meets the end of project reporting requirements.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Recommendations

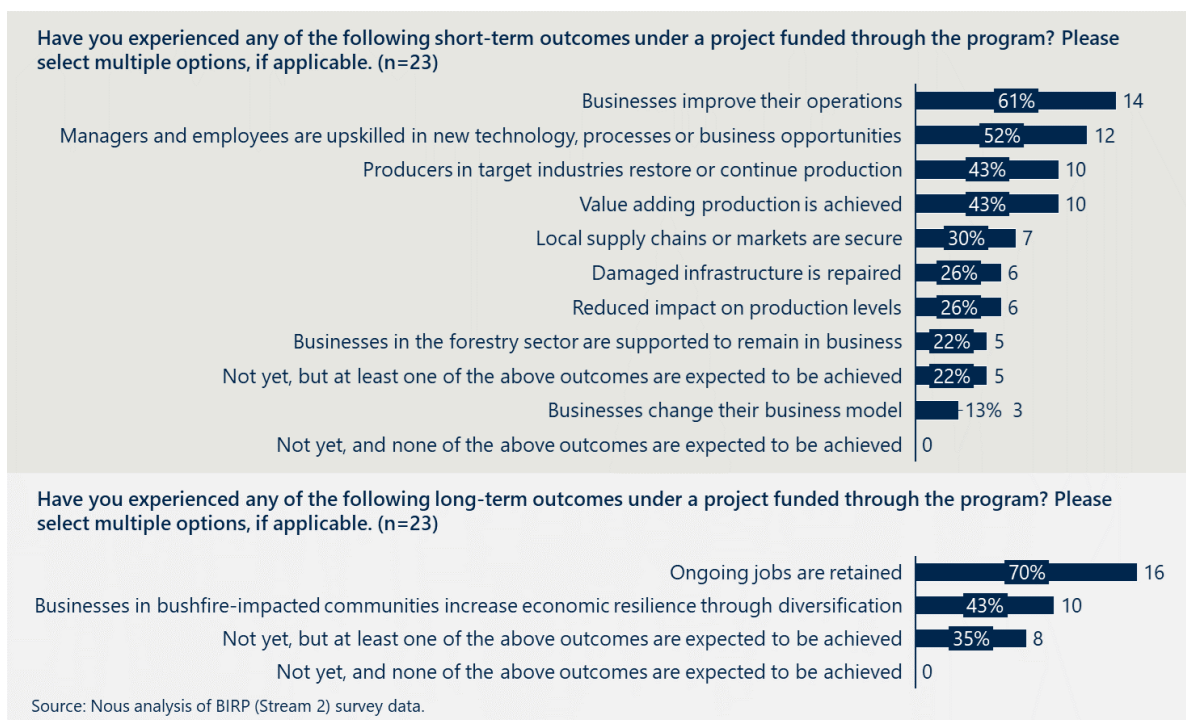
- Establish a way through which the Department can signal the data required in completion reports, so as to prompt grantees to monitor and collect this data while delivering the project. This will allow grantees to better report on outcomes, enabling more effective outcomes evaluation.
- Enhance and increase the level of engagement with grantees, to better understand the project and its delivery status. This may be through on-site visits or more regular reporting.
- The Department should also consider requiring grantees to collect data on a routine and sample basis. Data collection activities may be replicated across industries, and may involve collecting the financial and operational data of those organisations involved. Analysis of this data yields insight as to the economic benefits of those businesses and industries involved, due to the program.

5.8 Effectiveness

5.8.1 BIRP (Stream 2) is reportedly contributing to and broadly achieving its intended short-term outcomes

All grantees indicated that their projects are contributing to those short-term outcomes intended under BIRP (Stream 2). Grantees were asked whether or not their project or projects were contributing to those short-term outcomes outlined in the Bushfire Recovery Programs Monitoring and Evaluation Plan. The most common short-term outcome that projects are contributing to is that of businesses improving their operations, while the second most common outcome is that of managers and employees upskilling in new technology, processes or business opportunities. The top five responses to the relevant survey question are outlined in Figure 38.

Figure 38 | Long- and short-term project outcomes anticipated by grantees



Many grantees indicated that the grant significantly improved business capacity and capabilities, which often resulted in follow-on employment opportunities and retention of existing jobs, as well increased customer bases. This has positive flow-on benefits for the industry in which they operated, contributing not only to future industry profitability, but also to its long-term resilience.

“This grant has enabled Hunter Valley Wine & Tourism Association to drive the recovery efforts post Bushfire retaining local jobs to ensure the industry remains viable in the longer term.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“Enabled us to improve and introduce new technologies and increase job opportunities.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

“We have been able to build a small scale but world class production facility that acts as showcase for what can be achieved. Potential customers come through and see what we are doing and then want to do something similar. Our plant is also used as an R&D test bed for further pellet value adding activities.”

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

Internal stakeholders also highlighted that BIRP (Stream 2) was critical to supporting target industries and their long-term sustainability following the impact of the bushfires. Without the provision of funding, the recovery of these industries would have been significantly delayed.

5.8.2 Although most projects are not complete, most grantees believe their project is on track to achieve its intended long-term outcomes

Many projects are not complete for BIRP (Stream 2), so it is not possible to confirm whether or not the intended long-term outcomes will be achieved. However, grantees were asked whether or not their project or projects were contributing to those long-term outcomes outlined in the Bushfire Recovery Programs Monitoring and Evaluation Plan.

The most common long-term outcome that projects are contributing to is that of ongoing jobs being retained, while the second most common long-term outcome is that of businesses in bushfire-impacted communities increasing their economic resilience through diversification. All grantees indicated that they expect their project to contribute to one or both of these outcomes.

However, some grantees did note that they were uncertain as to whether or not their project will achieve one of these long-term outcomes in the desired timeframe. Barriers are impeding project delivery, such as the impact of recurring emergencies and disasters, and financing concerns due to cost escalations.



"We haven't launched far enough into [the project] to be able to undertake reporting. We haven't gone anywhere near our end goal."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"We've had very little support... we've hit brick walls in terms of financing ... it makes it hard knowing that we have not delivered [any of our project goals] yet."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"We are still in the relatively early stages of the grant (particularly considering the delays due to COVID, flooding and the varroa outbreak) and that has delayed our outputs."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

5.8.3 The program was reportedly instrumental to business recovery

Many grantees were grateful because they received funding for their projects. Funding was integral to successful completion of some projects and the longer-term recovery of businesses and industries in certain communities. During consultation, it was clear that grantees appreciated and valued the support from the Department, as their projects had significant benefits for the confidence and recovery of their communities.



"We are incredibly grateful to the government for the grant. It has been a game changer for our small regional wine industry. We have been able to bring our aspirations to reality."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"We are grateful to funding ... as it has made a measurable difference, to us and community. Recovery would have been a slow process and ... the business may have suffered accordingly."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

"Thank you for the opportunity to obtain this grant which has assisted us to improve our resilience into the future."

– BIRP (Stream 2) grantee

5.9 Efficiency

5.9.1 Limited Departmental resources are devoted to BIRP (Stream 2)

There were only two key groups involved in administration of the program after the assessment and approval phase. These groups were the GMO, who engaged with grantees in a relatively transactional manner, and the EDMs from the Regional Development Network, whose interaction with the grantee was more or less frequent depending on the nature of the relationship.

Grantees did express dissatisfaction at time with the lack of engagement from the Department, which is explained further in Section 5.10.

However, grantees reported a high degree of satisfaction with the program. At survey, 96 per cent of respondents indicated that they were 'Satisfied' or 'Very satisfied'. 82 per cent of respondents also indicated that the grant has or will meet their needs. To add to this, many grantees expressed gratitude and were appreciative of the fact that they received funding. All grantees believe their project is on track to achieve at least one of the intended long-term outcomes of the program.

As a result, the Department is on track to achieve the goal of the program despite relatively little engagement with grantees. This indicates the current process to administer the grants is relatively efficient.

5.10 Recommendations to improve BIRP (Stream 2)

DOMAIN	RECOMMENDATION
Program design	Better differentiate applicants with regards to their project type and industry, including different requirements during the application phase.
	Plan evaluation approach, including development of program logic and outcomes monitoring framework during program design and align data collection requirements to outcomes.
	Plan to provide increased support and to engage with less experienced applicants, especially during competitive open-round processes. Applicants with little experience applying for grants may not understand requirements or have the capacity to fulfil requirements in full.
Program administration	Provide detailed and tailored feedback regarding unsuccessful applications.
	Find opportunities to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications in a short timeframe (such as when applications are ineligible).
Applicant assessment process	Detail the priority of different levels of assessment in the guidelines.
	Ensure assessment processes fully adhere to eligibility and suitability requirements, or modify eligibility and suitability requirements in guidelines to be less stringent.
	Ensure conflicts of interest are documented appropriately and managed effectively.
Funding deed negotiation	Consider the required detail collected during the application process to ensure that funding negotiation timeframes are as efficient as possible.
	Increase communication and use a more hands-on approach with grantees less experienced with government grant funding.
Project delivery support model	Engage consistently with grantees and increase the level of support provided, where resourcing allows. This may be through increased involvement from the BIRP (Stream 2) Bushfire Recovery Team or more consistent engagement from GMO
Monitoring and evaluation	Establish a way through which the Department can signal the data required in completion reports, so as to prompt grantees to monitor and collect this data while delivering the project. This will allow grantees to better report on outcomes, enabling more effective outcomes evaluation.
	Enhance and increase the level of engagement with grantees, to better understand the project and its delivery status. This may be through on-site visits or more regular reporting.
	The Department should also consider requiring grantees to collect data on a routine and sample basis. Data collection activities may be replicated across industries, and may involve collecting the financial and operational data of those organisations involved. Analysis of this data yields insight as to the economic benefits of those businesses and industries involved, due to the program.

6 Considerations for future disaster recovery grant programs

The process and early outcome evaluation of BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) has highlighted four considerations for the design and administration of future disaster recovery grant programs.

6.1.1 Establish mechanisms to respond to community priorities through competitive processes

Given the effective use of evidence and consultation to inform the design of BIRP (Stream 2), there is an opportunity to incorporate a more community-orientated engagement process to better understand community needs in all recovery grant programs. This would improve tailoring of the program and increased community understanding of the intent and process.

As part of this consultation, the Department should consider target communities' readiness to be involved in competitive grant funding applications. This could include consideration of the time since they were impacted by the disaster and the degree of coordination and resilience in the community to allow them to take advantage of the opportunity for funding. For those that were not ready, nominal funding allocations could be set aside to give them more time.

6.1.2 Better manage grantee expectations through communication

Throughout the administration of the program, there were several points where additional communication with grantees could have better managed their expectations and mitigated their concerns. Grantees received notification when the application and assessment period was extended. However, during this period, there was no communication about grants that were progressing or had been screened out due to eligibility. This meant that applicants experienced an extended period of uncertainty about their project. Grantees did not have a sound understanding of the process following the announcements of successful projects. During the application period, the Department provided information about the grant guidelines, including webinars with potential applications. However, after announcement, grantees were not sufficiently aware of timelines for the funding deed process. In consultation, many grantees felt there were long periods where they were unaware of what was happening and often viewed it as Departmental delays rather than part of the grants administration process.

Similarly, as NSW Public Works' role was developed during the program, applicants were unaware of their involvement until funding deed negotiations. In consultation, grantees did not have a good understanding of why some projects required NSW Public Works support and others did not. This caused some grantees to negatively view NSW Public Works, particularly if they were receiving project management, as this came out of their grant funding.

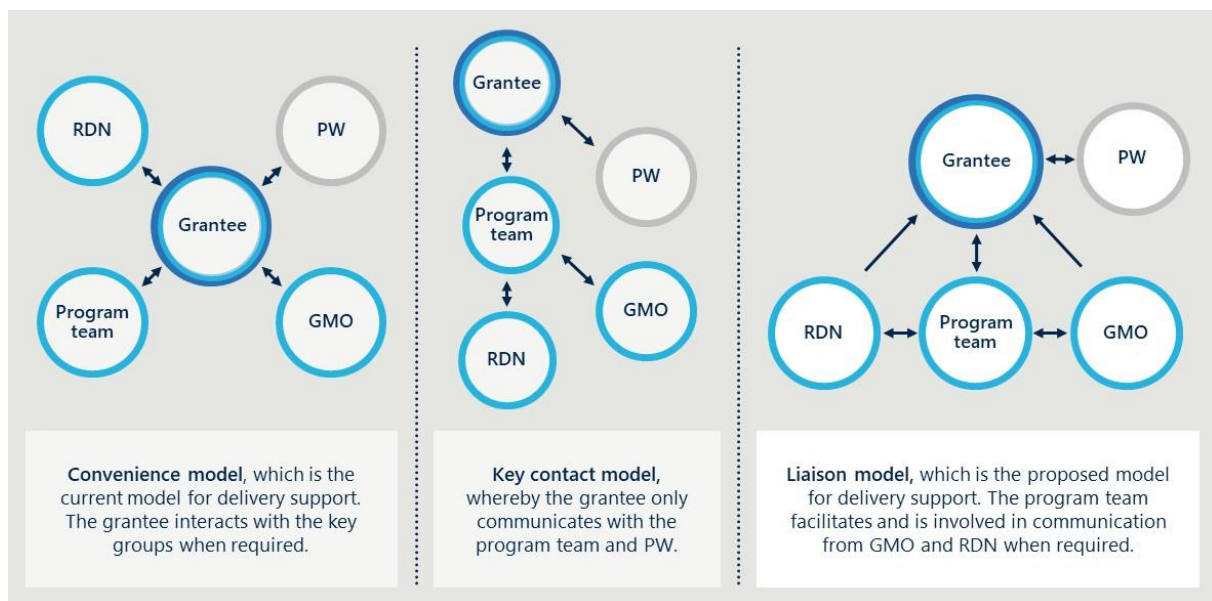
To better manage grantee expectations, the Department could implement more structured communications during the application and assessment stage, including providing updates when applications were deemed ineligible or moved through to the next round of the assessment process. Program guidelines should be well-established in advance to act as a clear source of truth for grantees. When changes are required, they should be communicated to all grantees, including what changes have been made, why they have been made, how they could affect grantees and where they can access further information.

6.1.3 Consider new models of delivery support

The project delivery support model for BLER (Stage 2), both in terms of the 'Hypercare' model for all grantees and NSW Public Works support for infrastructure projects, offers promise for better enabling project success. With refinement, particularly in clarifying the overlapping roles and points of contact for each team under the Hypercare model, and better negotiating and delivering on the NSW Public Works support, both models should be considered and planned for in the design stage of future recovery programs.

For future recovery programs, the Department may wish to consider alternative models to reduce complexity for grantees. Figure 39 outlines the three different models of delivery support. The liaison model may be most effective for future recovery programs. In this model, the Bushfire Recovery Team facilitates contact between grantees and the Regional Development Network (RDN) and the GMO. Through this model, the Bushfire Recovery Team takes responsibility for holding in-depth knowledge of the grantee's project and facilitating linkage with required supports. As a result, other key groups such as the GMO, receive the same information regarding the project, but liaise with the Bushfire Recovery Team about certain decisions (for example, concerning variations). If involved, NSW Public Works maintains responsibility for regular contact around project management and/or assurance.

Figure 39 | Options for delivery support model



Through this model, there is also an opportunity for the Department to consider additional and alternative methods of engagement and communication with grantees during implementation. Communication should also be timely and frequent, so that grantees do not feel like they have been 'forgotten' and that the Department is aware of and understanding of the current progress and state of the project.

6.1.4 Build evaluation into the design of grants programs

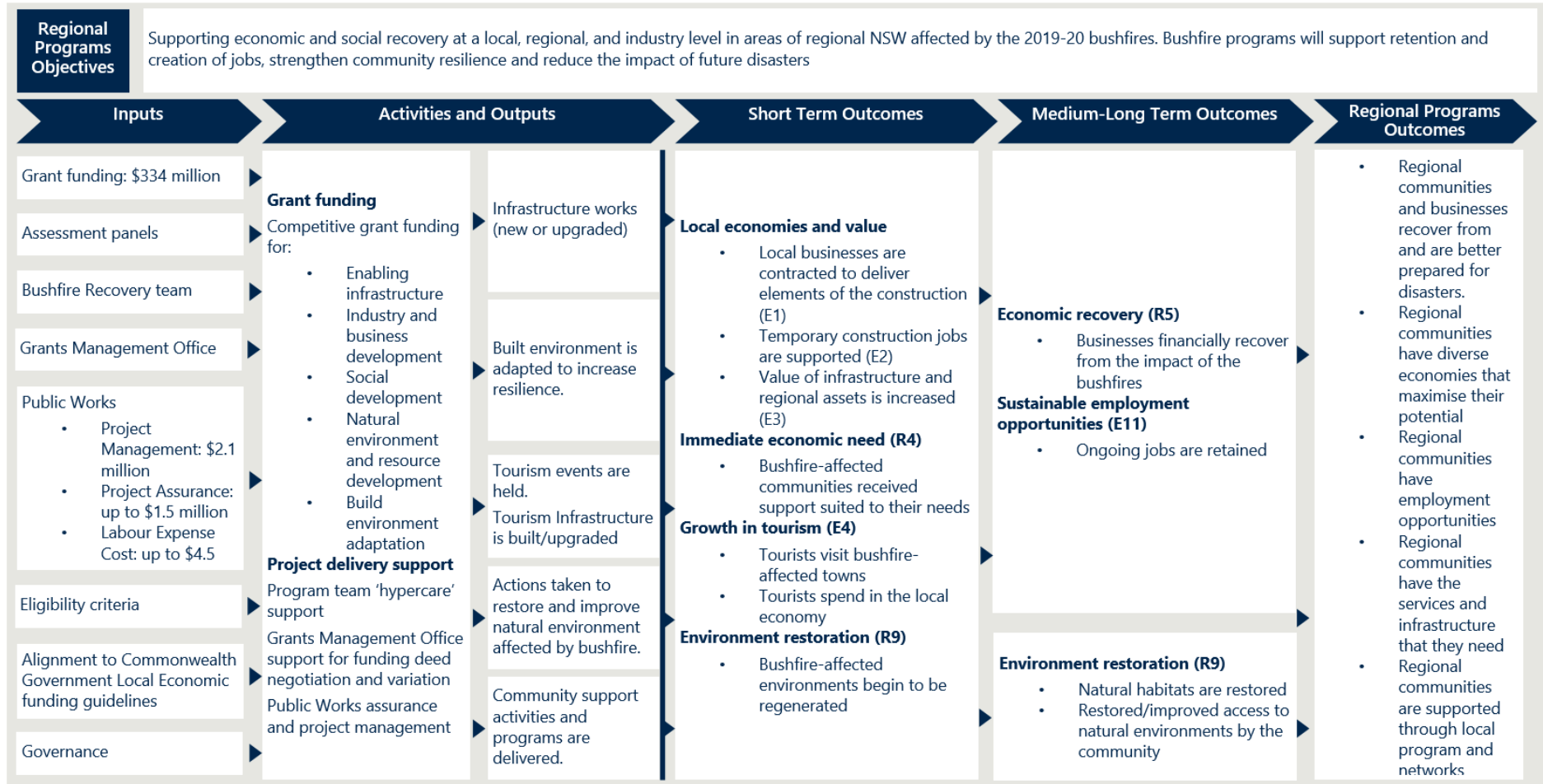
Neither program included a program logic or sufficient outcomes monitoring and reporting measures. These should be established in the design stage of the program and provide a starting point for development through identifying the desired impact. Design stage planning for the evaluation also enables the implementation of appropriate data collection measures and provides an opportunity for the Department to build them into business as usual administration. Notwithstanding the need to reduce reporting burden for grantees receiving recovery assistance, better signalling the need for outcome data collection and encouraging this habit through progress reports will significantly increase the quality of a future outcome evaluation. Care should be taken to ensure the outcome data is linked to the program

logic, and only the most important and realistic outcomes for grantees to report on are being asked in progress and completion reports.

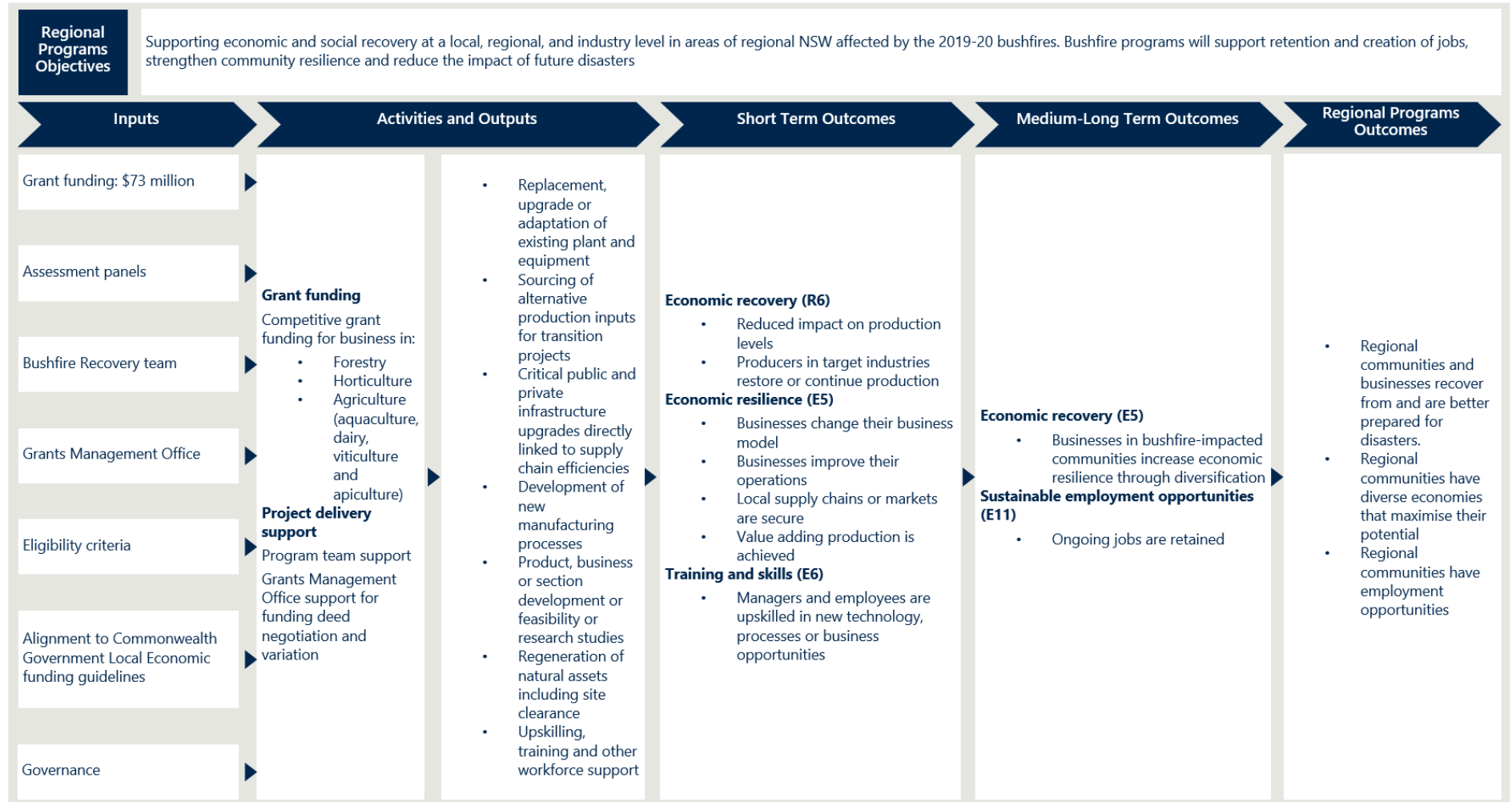
It is noted that this is increasingly becoming standard practice for the Department as it enhances its internal evaluation function.

Beyond evaluation, there are a number of data fields that the Department is required to collect to meet its reporting obligations. There is a clear need for all involved teams to understand what data they are collecting and how it is used. This should also serve as a guide for developing reporting tools and progress updates.

Appendix A BLER (Stage 2) program logic



Appendix B BIRP (Stream 2) program logic



Appendix C Data collection plans

To ensure the key activities support answers to the KEQs, Nous mapped each KEQ to a source across the process and early outcomes evaluations.

Figure 41 provides the data collection for the process evaluation.

Figure 41 | Process evaluation data collection plan

PROCESS EVALUATION		PROGRAM DOCUMENTATION	PROGRAM REPORTING	EXTERNAL INTERVIEWS	RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS	
KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS		PROGRAM DATA	INTERNAL INTERVIEWS	RECIPIENT QUESTIONNAIRE		
1	• What was the subscription level of the programs?		✓			
	• What was the split of organisations (BLER) and business types (BIRP) that received funding?		✓			
	• What was the median value project?		✓			
	• What was the geographic spread of recipients?		✓			
	• Was funding used in a way that aligned with the intended program objectives and outcomes?	✓	✓			
	• What was the overall satisfaction rate of recipients?			✓	✓	✓
2	• To what extent did the program reflect evidence of need?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	• To what extent did the program parameters support the intended objectives and outcomes?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	• What are the advantages and disadvantages of competitive-based programs for recipients?			✓	✓	✓
	• What were the constraints the design had to meet? i.e. funding envelope, timeframes etc.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	• Were the proposed program timelines met? Were they appropriate?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	• Was the program team resourced to meet the administration needs?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	• Were administrative arrangements appropriate in the context of this program? Including consideration of the ease with which applicants could apply.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	• How were the programs promoted?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	• To what extent did the program guidelines enable objective assessment?	✓		✓		
	• To what extent was the membership and preparation of the assessment panels appropriate?	✓		✓		
	• How many recipients engaged professional grant writers?			✓	✓	✓
5	• To what extent was the application and assessment process commensurate with the level of funding applied for?			✓	✓	✓
	• Was the progression from approval of application to finalised funding deed efficient for DRNSW and applicant?			✓	✓	✓
	• How were PW conditions for infrastructure projects agreed? How efficient was this process?			✓	✓	✓
	• How were co-contributions managed in the deed development?			✓	✓	✓
6	• Were the deeds set up to enable effective ongoing management?			✓	✓	✓
	• Were the right areas of DRNSW involved to support project implementation? What was the role of each area, and how well did they intersect/complement each other?			✓	✓	✓
	• To what extent has the PW assurance benefited project delivery?			✓	✓	✓
	• To what extent has PW-management improved project likelihood of success?			✓	✓	✓
	• What types and intensity of support was provided to the projects by the program teams? To what extent did this improve the project outcomes?			✓	✓	✓
	• How did GMO support throughout the program assist projects?			✓	✓	✓
	• To what extent is this delivery support model an appropriate and cost-effective approach for disaster recovery programs?			✓	✓	✓
7	• What was the quality of baseline data collected at the application stage?		✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Are the reporting requirements commensurate with the risk and value of the programs? Including consideration of government reporting requirements.		✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Are the PW reporting requirements working well?		✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Are the reporting requirements likely to enable effective outcomes evaluation?		✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 42 provides the data collection plan for the early outcomes evaluation.

Figure 42 | Early outcomes evaluation data collection plan

EARLY OUTCOMES EVALUATION		PROGRAM DOCUMENTATION	PROGRAM REPORTING	EXTERNAL INTERVIEWS	RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS		
		PROGRAM DATA	INTERNAL INTERVIEWS	RECIPIENT QUESTIONNAIRE			
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BLER: To what extent have BLER (Stage 2) grants contributed to short-term outcomes of improved infrastructure, short-term jobs, increased tourism spend, improved environmental regeneration and/or social infrastructure? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BIRP: To what extent have BIRP (Stream 2) grants contributed to short-term outcomes of reduced impact on production, faster recovery in production, more resilient business models, strengthened local supply chains, increased value-adding and new skills for managers and employees? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are the longer-term outcomes for BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) likely to be achieved? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been the major barriers to BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) achieving outcomes? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have there been unexpected outcomes from BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2)? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the value of expenditure represent value for money for the New South Wales Government, given the likely outcomes achieved? 		✓	✓			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent was the process to administer the grants efficient for DRNSW? 		✓	✓			
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can be learned from each program for future bushfire recovery programs? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can be learned about from each program for other disaster recovery programs? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can be learned about co-funded programs? 		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix D Data collection

D.1 Program data and document review

Nous drew from the Department's program data and document, to inform our answer to the KEQs. Nous reviewed documentation to extract key information and insights, which supported answers to the process evaluation KEQs. Program documents informed our understanding of implementation progress, and satisfaction with the overall grant administration process. This will support our assessment of the monitoring and evaluation process (i.e, the KEQs corresponding to the eighth domain), as well as of early outcomes.

Program documentation included:

- The template application form for BLER (Stage 2)
- The template quarterly progress report for BLER (Stage 2)
- Guidance notes on outcome reporting obligations for grantees, and example project outcome measures to inform applicants for BLER (Stage 2)
- The program guidelines for BLER
- The program guidelines for BIRP Sector Development Grants
- Program guidance notes
- Assessment panel notes
- Deputy Premier, Executive Director, Secretary briefings
- NSW Public Works Service Level Agreement
- Key statistics relating to the bushfire recovery programs
- Bushfire Recovery Programs Monitoring and Evaluation Plan
- Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018.
- Quarterly progress reports
- Project progress surveys completed for BLER (Stage 2)
- Project Control Group meeting minutes for BLER (Stage 2)
- Completion reports that have been completed for BIRP (Stream 2)

D.2 Consultations

All grant grantees engagement was undertaken with successful applicants. Given the significant time lapse since applicants would have gone through the application process and the negative experience of failing to receive funding, Nous and the Department decided that unsuccessful applicants would not be directly engaged. As a result, insights in relation to applicant satisfaction with the process may be positively skewed. However, some successful applicants also submitted unsuccessful applications. To minimise this, Nous designed the grantee survey to also ask questions applicable to the unsuccessful applicant experience.

Engagement with key stakeholders complemented the insights obtained from the desktop review and data analysis. Activities was built from awareness of the broader stakeholder context to ensure that information and questions are positioned most effectively to elicit non-biased and valuable responses for the evaluation. All interviews were voluntary and confidential.

- **Engagement with internal stakeholders** - Initial engagement involved internal stakeholders. Specifically, Nous engaged with the BLER and BIRP program teams and GMO to deepen understanding of the respective programs and the administrative processes involved.
- **Engagement with external government stakeholders** - Nous engaged with external stakeholders, such as those from Reconstruction NSW and NSW Public Works. These stakeholders had knowledge relating to the administration and design of the programs.
- **Engagement with grant grantees through interviews** - Nous engaged with grant grantees via targeted interviews. The sample audience for both modes of engagement were developed through the application of specific criteria (exclusionary criteria for the grantee survey and inclusionary criteria for the targeted interview). The application of this criteria reduced the number of grant grantees that Nous engages with, minimising total stakeholder burden and effort.

A semi-structured interview approach was used, providing a standard form to all interviews for comparative metrics, whilst also providing space for inductive learnings and insights. Interview guides was also be developed, with consideration of the unique context of each stakeholder and their LGA.

Specifically, Nous understood the need to employ a tailored and trauma-informed approach to these engagements. They are aware that many stakeholders have applied for and been participants in other grant programs and the evaluations that followed.

Table 2 | List of consulted internal and external stakeholders

Group	Stakeholders	Mode of engagement
Internal stakeholders		
Recovery programs management and senior executives	Chris Presland	30 min individual interview (via Teams)
	Jono Wheaton	30 min individual interview (via Teams)
	Michael Peattie	30 min individual interview (via Teams)
	Raph Miller (Director)	30 min individual interview (via Teams)
	Emma Ready (Director)	1 hr individual interview (via Teams)
	Jo McGoldrick,	1 hr individual interview (via Teams)
BLER Program Team	Deneka Lay, Bronwyn Morgan, Nicole McNamara	1 hr small group interview (via Teams)
BIRP Program Team	Amanda Cameron, Stacey Kerr	1 hr small group interview (via Teams)
Grants Management Office	Kate Moodley, Angela Tutty	1 hr small group interview (via Teams)
External stakeholders		
NSW Public Works	Stewart McRae	1 hr individual interview (via Teams)
Reconstruction NSW	Adam Tran	30 min individual interview (via Teams)

D.2.1 Grantee consultation sampling approach

Nous conducted targeted consultation with grantees from select projects. Nous developed an approach to creating a stratified sample for both programs. The project inclusionary criteria for consultations included geographic region, grant size and the type of project approved. The exclusionary criteria for consultations included over-consulted groups and grantees who were dealing with other emergencies at the time of contact. Based on the data received, preference was given to projects that were marked as completed. No preference was given to projects in which their proposed end dates had been reached without the project being marked as being completed.

Figure 43 illustrates the proposed sampling approach for BLER (Stage 2), while Figure 44 illustrates the proposed sampling approach for BIRP (Stream 2). Sample representations of the BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) are presented in Figure 43 and Figure 44 respectively.

A total of 27 projects grantees were invited to 30-minute interviews via email. An interview guide was provided to grantees prior to the interview. The purpose of engagement questions asked was to determine grantees' experience of applying for and implementing the grant, and the outcomes being achieved. Focus on support provided by the Department. In conjunction with the program-wide data analysis, this number of interviews aimed to best demonstrate grantee experience and indication of outcomes.

Out of the 20 BLER (Stage 2) grantees contacted via email, 17 grantees were virtually interviewed. Out of the ten BIRP (Stream 2) grantees, 7 grantees were virtually interviewed.

Figure 43 | Sampling approach for BLER (Stage 2) projects

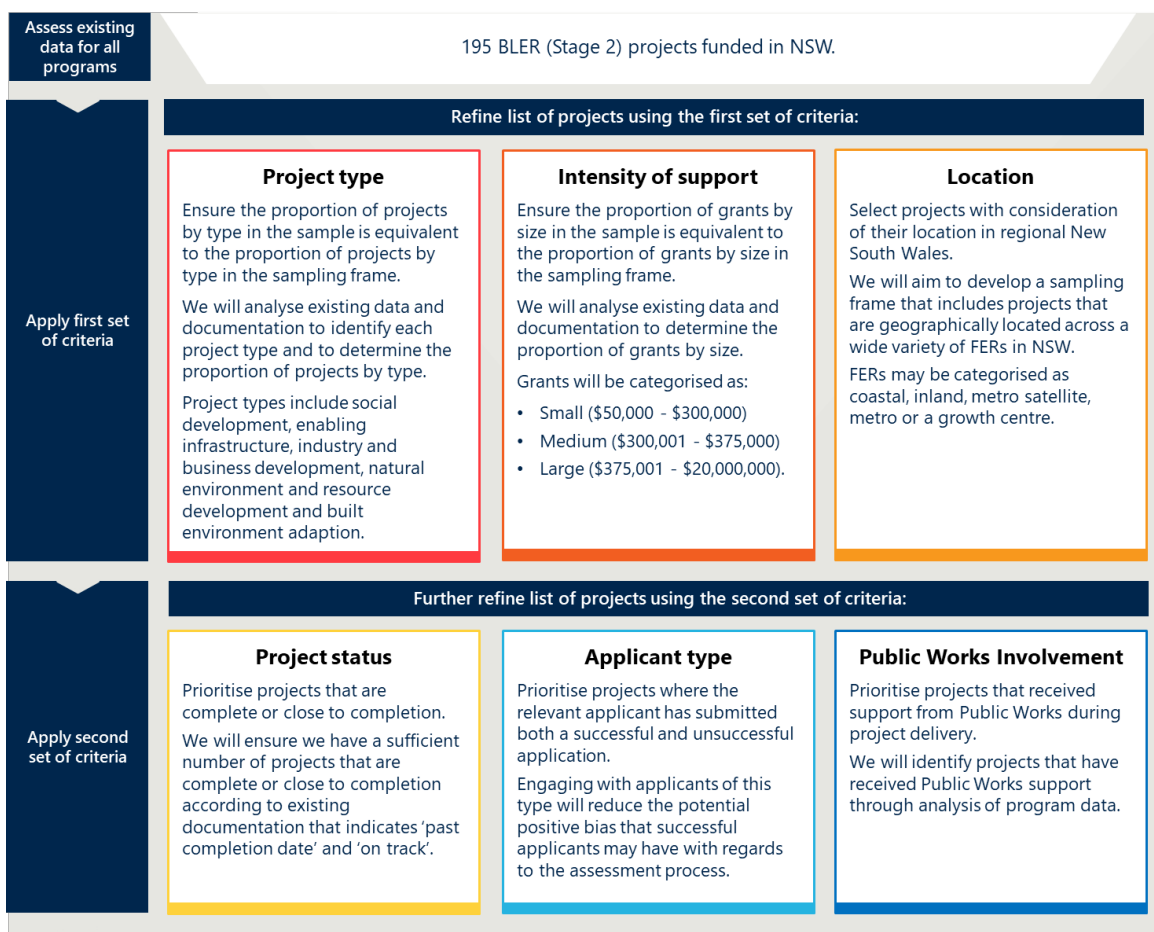
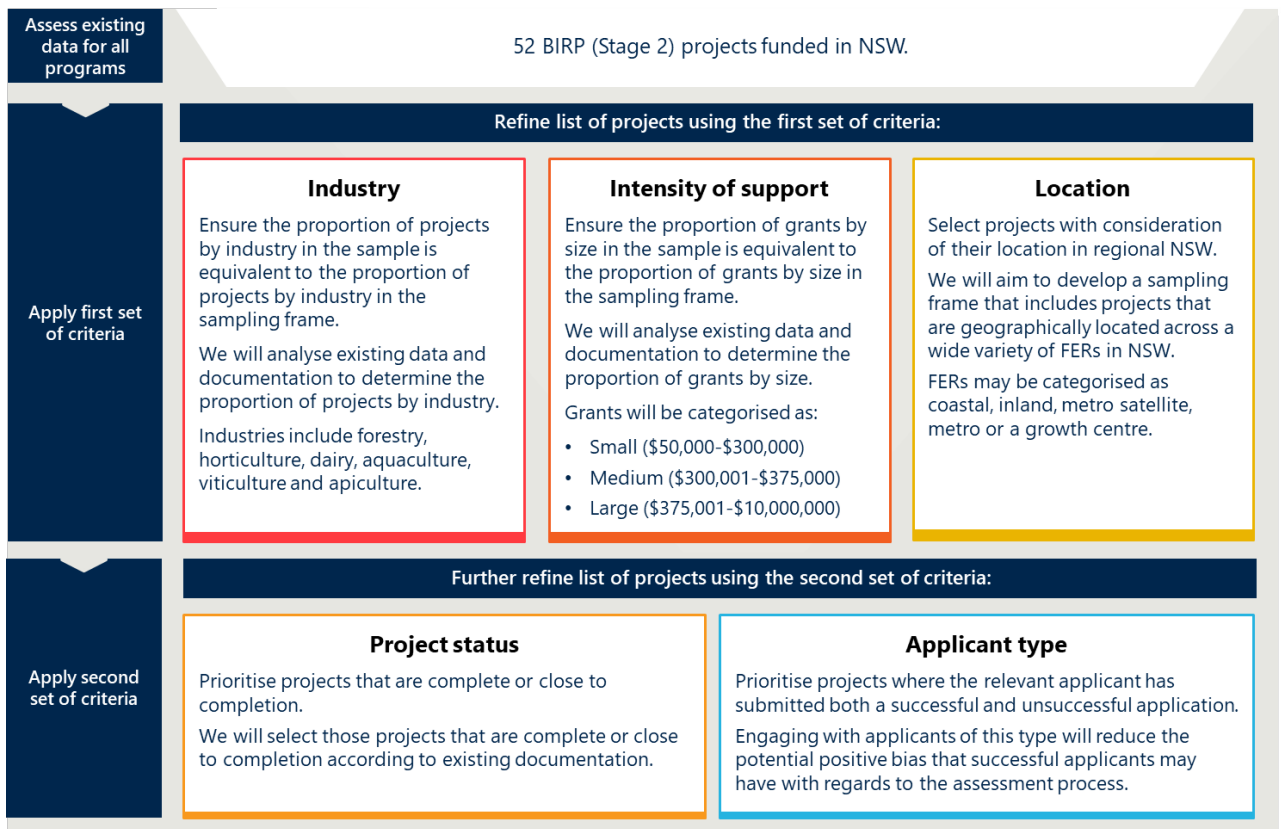


Figure 44 | Sampling approach for BIRP (Stream 2) projects



D.2.2 Survey

All BLER (Stage 2) and BIRP (Stream 2) grantees were invited to take part in the survey. The survey aimed to deepen the evaluation’s understanding of the grantee’s satisfaction with the process, and outcomes achieved through funded projects. Nous designed the survey and provided promotional emails and materials to the Department, along with the survey link, for distribution via email. The survey was designed and completed through MS Forms with questions answered using a mixture of multi-choice selections, rating scales and open-text responses.

Survey response rates

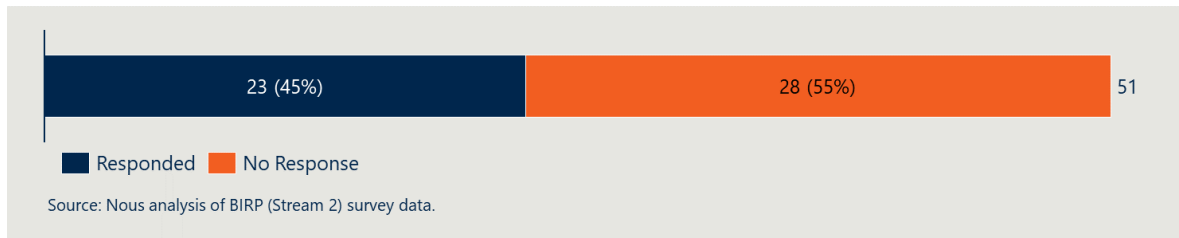
Between 14 February and 3 April 2023, 89 submitted responses were collected from the BLER (Stage 2) grantee survey, as illustrated in Figure 45.

Figure 45 | BLER (Stage 2) survey response rate



Between 14 February and 28 February 2023, 23 submitted responses were collected from the BIRP (Stream 2) grantee survey, as illustrated in Figure 46.

Figure 46 | BIRP (Stream 2) survey response rate



Appendix E BLER (Stage 2) survey questions

Question	Response
<p>Project application process</p> <p>Section text: These questions relate to the process you went through to apply for the grant. We understand this was quite some time ago now, and you may not have been personally involved, or be able to recall clearly. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.</p>	
1. What organisation type were your applications submitted under?	<p>Multiple choice:</p> <p>A – Council</p> <p>B – Section 355 committee of council</p> <p>C – Joint Organisation of Councils</p> <p>D – Charity organisation</p> <p>E – Business chamber or industry association</p> <p>F – Academic or research organisation</p> <p>G – State Government corporation</p> <p>H – Local Aboriginal Land Councils</p> <p>I – Other</p>
2. How did you hear about this program?	<p>Multiple choice:</p> <p>A – Word of mouth</p> <p>B – Search engines</p> <p>C – Social media</p> <p>D – Television</p> <p>E – Flyers and other hard-copy material</p> <p>F – Business Development Manager or Regional Development Manager</p> <p>G – Other</p>
3. Did you receive assistance from any of the following parties to develop your application?	<p>A – Departmental staff</p> <p>B – External grant writer</p> <p>C – Both</p> <p>D – Neither</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
4. Were any of your applications unsuccessful?	<p>Multiple choice:</p> <p>A – Yes</p> <p>B – No</p> <p>C – Unsure</p>
5. The outcome of my application was clearly communicated.	<p>Please consider your experience with regard to your unsuccessful application(s).</p> <p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>

Question	Response
6. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your experience with regard to your unsuccessful application(s). Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
7. There was an opportunity to receive feedback regarding the outcome of my application.	
8. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your general experience with the application process, if you submitted multiple applications. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
9. The application process was easy to follow.	
10. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your general experience, if you submitted multiple applications. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
11. The time taken to receive a decision on my application was reasonable.	
12. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Project establishment and implementation

Section text: These questions relate to any supports or assistance you may have received during project delivery. We know that this process may still be ongoing, so please answer based on your experience to date. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.

Support from the grants management team

13. Did you receive any support from the grants management team during delivery of your project(s)?	<p>Radio buttons:</p> <p>A – Yes B – No C – Unsure</p>
14. What support has the grants management team provided during the delivery of your project(s)?	<p>Multiple selection possible:</p> <p>A – Contract management (i.e. variations) B – Other C – Unsure or not applicable</p>

Question	Response
15. Please provide a brief description of what the support includes or included.	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received grants management support.</p> <p>16. The grants management team has helped me to navigate emerging challenges and risks during project delivery.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
17. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received grants management support.</p> <p>18. The grants management team has been responsive to and has supported changes to my contract.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
19. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
20. Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided by the grants management team?	<p>A – Very satisfied</p> <p>B – Satisfied</p> <p>C – Neither</p> <p>D – Dissatisfied</p> <p>E – Very dissatisfied</p>
21. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
Support from the BLER Project Delivery team	
22. Did you receive any support from the BLER Project Delivery team during delivery of your project(s)?	<p>Radio buttons:</p> <p>A – Yes</p> <p>B – No</p> <p>C – Unsure</p>
23. What support has the BLER Project Delivery team provided during the delivery of your project(s)?	<p>Multiple selection possible:</p> <p>A – Reporting assistance</p> <p>B – Implementation advice</p> <p>C – Other</p> <p>D – Unsure or not applicable</p>

Question	Response
24. Please provide a brief description of what the support includes or included.	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received BLER Project Delivery team support.</p> <p>25. Support from the BLER Project Delivery team is useful and has contributed to or is contributing to project success.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
26. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received BLER Project Delivery team support.</p> <p>27. The BLER Project Delivery team has helped me to navigate emerging challenges and risks during project delivery.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
28. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
29. Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided by the BLER Project Delivery team?	<p>A – Very satisfied</p> <p>B – Satisfied</p> <p>C – Neither</p> <p>D – Dissatisfied</p> <p>E – Very dissatisfied</p>
30. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
Support from Public Works	
31. Did you receive funding for an infrastructure-related project?	<p>Multiple choice:</p> <p>A – Yes</p> <p>B – No</p> <p>C – Unsure</p>
32. What support has Public Works provided during the delivery of your infrastructure-related project(s)?	<p>A – Assurance</p> <p>B – Project management</p> <p>C – Other</p> <p>D – Unsure or not applicable</p>

Question	Response
33. Please provide a brief description of what the support includes or included.	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received Public Works support.</p> <p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
34. Support from Public Works is useful and has contributed to or is contributing to project success.	
35. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received Public Works support.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
36. Public Works has helped me to navigate emerging challenges and risks during project delivery.	
37. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
38. Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided by Public Works?	<p>A – Very satisfied</p> <p>B – Satisfied</p> <p>C – Neither</p> <p>D – Dissatisfied</p> <p>E – Very dissatisfied</p>
39. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Project outcomes

Section text: These questions relate to the outcomes of the project(s) funded through the program. We understand that the project(s) may not yet be completed, so please answer to the best of your ability, based on your experience to date. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.

<p>Please consider your general experience, if you have multiple BLER Stage 2 projects.</p> <p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
40. The grant is meeting or has met my needs.	
41. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Question	Response
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>42. My outcome reporting requirements are clear and easy to follow.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>43. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>44. I feel supported by the Department to report on project outcomes.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>45. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>46. Have you experienced any of the following short-term outcomes under a project funded through the program?</p>	<p>A – Local businesses are contracted to deliver elements of the construction B – Temporary construction jobs are supported C – Value of infrastructure and regional assets is increased D – Bushfire-affected communities received support suited to their needs E – Tourists visit bushfire-affected towns F – Tourists spend in the local economy G – Bushfire-affected environments begin to be regenerated H - Community participate in support programs I – Not yet, but at least one of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved I – Not yet, and none of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved</p>
<p>47. Please provide more detail regarding your response, including quantifying the outcomes where possible.</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>48. Have you experienced any of the following long-term outcomes under a project funded through the program?</p>	<p>A – Businesses financially recover from the impact of the bushfires B – Businesses become more financially resilient C – Ongoing jobs are retained D – Natural habitats are restored E – Restored/improved access to natural environments by the community F – Community participate in support programs</p>

Question	Response
	<p>G – Not yet, but at least one of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved</p> <p>H – Not yet, and none of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved</p>
<p>49. Please provide more detail regarding your response including quantifying the outcomes where possible.</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Overall impressions</p> <p>Section text: These questions aim to capture your overall reflections and view on the program. Please feel free to comment on any themes or factors that were not explored in the survey.</p>	
<p>50. Overall, how satisfied were you with the program?</p>	<p>A – Very satisfied</p> <p>B – Satisfied</p> <p>C – Neither</p> <p>D – Dissatisfied</p> <p>E – Very dissatisfied</p>
<p>51. What is the biggest difference that the grant has made for you?</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>52. Do you have any final comments or reflections? (optional)</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>

Appendix F BIRP (Stream 2) survey questions

Question	Response
Project application process Section text: These questions relate to the process you went through to apply for the grant. We understand this was quite some time ago now, and you may not have been personally involved, or be able to recall clearly. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.	
1. What organisation type were your applications submitted under?	Multiple choice: A – Business B – Academic C – Local council D – Trust E – Partnership F – Other
2. How did you hear about this program?	Multiple choice: A – Word of mouth B – Search engines C – Social media D – Television E – Flyers and other hard-copy material F – Business Development Manager or Regional Development Manager G – Council H – Other
3. Did you receive assistance from any of the following parties to develop your application?	A – Departmental staff B – External grant writer C – Both D – Neither E – Unsure or not applicable
4. Were any of your applications unsuccessful?	Multiple choice: A – Yes B – No C – Unsure
Please consider your experience with regard to your unsuccessful application(s). Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.	
5. The outcome of my application was clearly communicated.	A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable
6. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Question	Response
<p>Please consider your experience with regard to your unsuccessful application(s). Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>7. There was an opportunity to receive feedback regarding the outcome of my application.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>8. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your general experience with the application process, if you submitted multiple applications. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>9. The application process was easy to follow.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>10. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	[Open-text response]
<p>Please consider your general experience, if you submitted multiple applications. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>11. The time taken to receive a decision on my application was reasonable.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>12. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	[Open-text response]

Project establishment and implementation

Section text: These questions relate to any supports or assistance you may have received during project delivery. We know that this process may still be ongoing, so please answer based on your experience to date. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.

Support from the grants management team

<p>13. Did you receive any support from the grants management team during delivery of your project(s)?</p>	<p>Radio buttons: A – Yes B – No C – Unsure</p>
<p>14. What support has the grants management team provided during the delivery of your project(s)?</p>	<p>Multiple selection possible: A – Contract management (i.e. variations) B – Other C – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>15. Please provide a brief description of what the support includes or included.</p>	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	A – Strongly Agree

Question	Response
<p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received grants management support.</p> <p>16. The grants management team has helped me to navigate emerging challenges and risks during project delivery.</p>	<p>B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>17. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received grants management support.</p> <p>18. The grants management team has been responsive to and has supported changes to my contract.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>19. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>20. Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided by the grants management team?</p>	<p>A – Very satisfied B – Satisfied C – Neither D – Dissatisfied E – Very dissatisfied</p>
<p>21. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Support from the BIRP Project Delivery team</p>	
<p>22. Did you receive any support from the BIRP Project Delivery team during delivery of your project(s)?</p>	<p>Radio buttons: A – Yes B – No C – Unsure</p>
<p>23. What support has the BIRP Project Delivery team provided during the delivery of your project(s)?</p>	<p>Multiple selection possible: A – Reporting assistance B – Implementation advice C – Other D – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>24. Please provide a brief description of what the support includes or included.</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received BIRP Project Delivery team support.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree</p>

Question	Response
25. Support from the BIRP Project Delivery team is useful and has contributed to or is contributing to project success.	E – Unsure or not applicable
26. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>Please consider your experience with regard to the project(s) that received BIRP Project Delivery team support.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
27. The BIRP Project Delivery team has helped me to navigate emerging challenges and risks during project delivery.	E – Unsure or not applicable
28. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
29. Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided by the BIRP Project Delivery team?	<p>A – Very satisfied</p> <p>B – Satisfied</p> <p>C – Neither</p> <p>D – Dissatisfied</p> <p>E – Very dissatisfied</p>
30. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Project outcomes

Section text: These questions relate to the outcomes of the project(s) funded through the program. We understand that the project(s) may not yet be completed, so please answer to the best of your ability, based on your experience to date. Just answer the questions you can, and select 'unsure' or 'not applicable' as required.

<p>Please consider your general experience, if you have multiple BIRP Stream 2 projects.</p> <p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
31. The grant is meeting or has met my needs.	E – Unsure or not applicable
32. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree</p> <p>B – Agree</p> <p>C – Disagree</p> <p>D – Strongly Disagree</p> <p>E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
33. My outcome reporting requirements are clear and easy to follow.	E – Unsure or not applicable
34. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).	[Open-text response]

Question	Response
<p>Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.</p> <p>35. I feel supported by the Department to report on project outcomes.</p>	<p>A – Strongly Agree B – Agree C – Disagree D – Strongly Disagree E – Unsure or not applicable</p>
<p>36. Please provide more detail regarding your response (optional).</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>37. Have you experienced any of the following short-term outcomes under a project funded through the program?</p>	<p>A – Damaged infrastructure is repaired B – Businesses in the forestry sector are supported to remain in business C – Reduced impact on production levels D – Producers in target industries restore or continue production E – Businesses change their business model F – Businesses improve their operations G – Local supply chains or markets are secure H – Value adding production is achieved I – Managers and employees are upskilled in new technology, processes or business opportunities J – Not yet, but at least one of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved K – Not yet, and none of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved</p>
<p>38. Please provide more detail regarding your response, including quantifying the outcomes where possible.</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>39. Have you experienced any of the following long-term outcomes under a project funded through the program?</p>	<p>A – Businesses in bushfire-impacted communities increase economic resilience through diversification B – Ongoing jobs are retained C – Not yet, but at least one of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved D – Not yet, and none of the above outcomes are expected to be achieved</p>
<p>40. Please provide more detail regarding your response, including quantifying the outcomes where possible</p>	<p>[Open-text response]</p>
<p>Overall impressions</p> <p>Section text: These questions aim to capture your overall reflections and view on the program. Please feel free to comment on any themes or factors that were not explored in the survey.</p>	
<p>41. Overall, how satisfied were you with the program?</p>	<p>A – Very satisfied B – Satisfied C – Neither D – Dissatisfied</p>

Question	Response
	E – Very dissatisfied
42. What is the biggest difference that the grant has made for you?	[Open-text response]
43. Do you have any final comments or reflections? (optional)	[Open-text response]