

## Accessibility

- 3.1 The development of straightforward program guidelines is a start, but once a program structure has been put in place, focus must then be turned to ensuring that it is accessible to all applicants. Applying for funding should be as easy as possible and assistance with the development of applications forthcoming.

### **Does the application process need to be so complex?**

- 3.2 Community feedback to this Committee consistently stressed the level of complication and uncertainty involved in the RPP application process. Delays in assessment and approval were cited as problematic, as was a lack of transparency and certainty in connection with application approvals. In practice, delays and subsequent increases in cost threatened the viability of projects and also reduced the degree to which the program was seen as fair and above-board by applicants and associated parties.<sup>1</sup>
- 3.3 The ANAO expressed similar concerns, citing delays and project cost increases and the adequacy of the actions of the former administering Department (Department of Transport and Regional Services

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1 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 37.

- (DOTARS) relating to due diligence, financial management and departmental procedures.<sup>2</sup>
- 3.4 Any replacement program needs to be less complex than its predecessor. However, the Committee is aware that a reduction in complexity should not come at the expense of obtaining quality information about a proposed project for the purpose of fulfilling the legal expectation under the *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997* that good value for money is obtained for expenditure from the public purse.<sup>3</sup>
- 3.5 There is a balance to be struck between reduced complexity and adequate scrutiny. Several of the Committee's recommendations focused on this issue. In supporting the need for an easier application process, the Committee endorsed a proposal to differentiate between grant applications on the basis of the amount of money sought from the program.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.6 This will increase access to the program for applicants and rationalise administrative work-loads, and management of risk, by applying a greater level of scrutiny where projects involve a greater contribution from the federal government. The result should be an enhanced capacity by the administering department to process applications, and to perform other administrative processes associated with the program, in a timely fashion.<sup>5</sup>
- 3.7 To achieve this, the Committee recommended that applications be separated into three streams: those seeking less than \$50,000 in contribution from the program, those seeking between \$50,000 and

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2 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 37.

3 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 39.

4 Recommendation 13, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 41.

5 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 41.

\$250,000, and those seeking more than \$250,000.<sup>6</sup> Not only would scrutiny be commensurate with the level of funding being sought, but also the complexity of the application form. As a result, an organisation seeking \$5000, for example, could expect to fill out a relatively straightforward application form, which in turn would be assessed thoroughly, but quickly, by the administering department in a funding round (noted in Chapter 2), thereby guaranteeing timely funding announcements.

- 3.8 To answer the questions posed by this section: There are times when application processes do not need to be as complex, and there are times when they do. It is reasonable to expect that a request for a large sum of public money be handled differently than one for a relatively small amount. The principles of due diligence should be applied to every application but the process can vary in complexity, thereby ensuring an accessible, or less complex, program application process for all applicants, regardless of the amount of money being sought.

## How can we help?

- 3.9 No matter how simple an application process is made, there will always be a need for applicant assistance. A funding program is essentially a service offered to a target area or group. Public perception about the program will be based, in part, on the nature of an applicant's interaction with the program administrators.
- 3.10 In the case of the RPP, many applicants expressed satisfaction with the assistance they received from ACCs (now RDA) during the development of applications and dissatisfaction with the process once their application was submitted to the National Office for assessment.<sup>7</sup>
- 3.11 ACC representatives were perceived to have local and regional knowledge as well as an understanding of the RPP. Dealings with DOTARS, however, often left applicants feeling as if they were not

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6 Recommendation 14, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 41.

7 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 24.

appropriately consulted or given feedback on the status of their application.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the Committee received evidence from the DITRDLG suggesting that 80 per cent of RPP applications received by the department through ACCs were not complete, thereby creating more work for the department.<sup>9</sup>

- 3.12 There are two questions to consider when examining the issue of applicant assistance: how may applicants be assisted, and by whom?
- 3.13 In its interim report, the Committee outlined some fundamental information that should always be provided to applicants – well-prepared guidelines, web-based information and contact information. Promotion of the program should continue to be done through RDA; government websites, including GrantsLINK; media releases announcing approval for funding applications; and mail-outs from, or direct contact with, Members or Senators.<sup>10</sup>
- 3.14 The Committee also endorsed the use of an EOI process to develop applications. EOIs would be accepted throughout the year, independently of the program’s funding rounds, and would receive feedback and assistance sufficient to allow further development of an application, or to allow applicants to approach another, more suitable program. This information would be on file and constitute part of the evidence upon which assessments were made of those projects which develop into applications.<sup>11</sup>
- 3.15 At the core of the Committee’s recommendations about applicant assistance is the assumption that in any program, applicants feel supported and that they are being treated fairly. Sufficient information being disseminated, and mechanisms such as an EOI

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8 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 24.

9 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 25.

10 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 25.

11 Recommendation 18, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 47.

process, will assist in both regards. Ultimately, however, people will make the difference.

3.16 The question of who would assist applicants through this process has posed some challenges. The Committee was not asked to inquire into the future role of RDA, and as such, has limited itself to reporting on the information it received and making some recommendations framed around options for the Government to consider. The Committee presented two options:

- formally charge RDA with the role of assisting applicants to develop their EOIs into an application; or
- allow the administering department to undertake this role utilising either a regional field officer in each region or an officer allocated a specific region from either the national office or a regional office (where available).<sup>12</sup>

3.17 Central to both choices is the notion that strong applicant assistance derives, in part, from a familiarity with local communities, regions and an ability to nurture relationships in those areas. This was seen as the strength of ACCs and regional departmental offices.

3.18 By its nature, RDA will have the advantage of regional and local community familiarity and so it will be up to the Government to decide if it envisions a role for RDA in assisting applicants to funding programs. Should the Government choose to implement a program utilising a departmental assistance process, then the administering department should overcome its lack of regional familiarity by:

...assigning adequate resources to manage the program for particular regions, allowing them to develop and retain that expertise with respect to those regions.<sup>13</sup>

3.19 Regardless of how the Government ultimately decides to provide assistance to funding applicants, the need for good customer service will remain. Customer service is the cornerstone of the Committee's principle of accessibility and the program's administrators should

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12 Recommendation 8, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 28.

13 Recommendations 16 & 17, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Funding Regional and Local Community Infrastructure: Proposals for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program, Interim Report*, November 2008, p. 45.

strive to ensure that applicants have been provided with useful knowledge and ample assistance in formulating their application.

## Conclusion

- 3.20 Much of the Committee's public consultations for this inquiry centred on the issue of accessibility. Not surprisingly, community/government interaction during the RPP was a major issue of concern and the success of any future program will be based, in part, on how these challenges have been overcome. In response, the Government should remain focused on the needs of applicants when designing and administering a new regional funding program.
- 3.21 Communities and regions want a funding program that is accessible. They need access to useful information through a variety of sources and access to an application development process which places an emphasis on personal support provided by knowledgeable staff.

### **Recommendation 4**

- 3.22 **The Committee recommends that the Government, in establishing a new regional infrastructure funding program, considers the needs of program applicants and ensures that the program is accessible by providing useful information through a variety of sources and access to an application development process which places an emphasis on personal support provided by knowledgeable staff.**