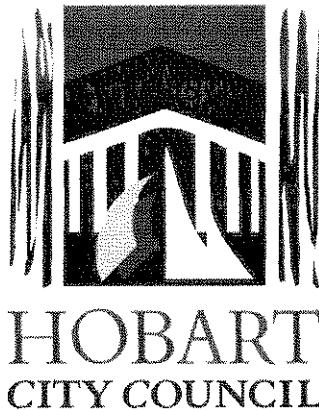# A NEW REGIONAL AND LOCAL COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM

A Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government

HOBART
CITY COUNCIL

Hobart City Council

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SECTION 1:   A Framework for the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program

1.   **What is the purpose and objectives of the program?**

- What should the overarching purpose and objectives of the new program be?

   Any new program should assist communities to plan for and deliver infrastructure requirements that meet community's current and future identified needs.

- Where are the gaps in community infrastructure funding?

   This would of course depend upon the context of the area or region being considered. While Hobart is a regional hub and service provider, given its capital city status, the previous regional infrastructure program was one of the few funding programs available to the Hobart City Council to support its work in meeting regional infrastructure needs.

- How should community infrastructure be defined for the purpose of the new Federal program?

   The definition of infrastructure should be treated with flexibility, including hard and soft infrastructure within the physical, environment, economic and social context in which the proposed project will take place. A key consideration should be identified community needs and priorities.

- Should the Australian government's regional funding program be targeted?

   Any new program should be targeted to meet identified needs and priorities. A focus on broader regional benefits should also apply if applicable.

- How should regional be defined?

   Any definition of 'regional' needs to be broad, encompassing and holistic. It needs to respond to both remote and more populated regional communities. It is critical that this definition captures a regional capital city, such as Hobart that serves as an important provider of services and infrastructure in a regional context. It should be noted that Tasmania was treated as one 'regional area' within the previous funding program.

- What outcomes should be met?

   Target outcomes should be based on community needs and priorities, as established by, and with, the relevant community and other stakeholders.

- What information needs to be included in an Australian government policy statement in order for the objectives of a regional development funding program to be clearly understood by all stakeholders?

   Clear and succinct information, accessible to all, within a well defined policy framework, supported by understandable guidelines.

- Should a new program be focused on providing funding for projects, which promote the growth of regional communities (job creation) or the livability of regional communities?

  Both; these are not mutually exclusive and would be seen to be interactive and co-dependant.

- Once specific funding objectives have been set is there scope for developing a program model which has in place, or allows for the creation of sub- programs which can be used to target specific areas of need as they arise?

  Yes; though this should not lead to unnecessary administrative complexity, diminishing the capacity of the program to respond to diverse needs and a wide range of project types.

2.   What eligibility criteria should apply?

- Who should be eligible to apply for the new Regional Funding Program?

  Local government, including collective regional entities; not-for-profit community based organisations.   There should also be an opportunity for private sector entities to apply, but only within the context of wider community or local government based project groups or consortiums, and under strict guidelines.

- Should private for-profit enterprises be allowed to receive funding under the new program?

  Yes, under certain conditions and subject to strict guidelines - see above.

- Should the Australian government provide funds to less viable, risky projects?

  Funding should be provided to projects for which the need has been identified and substantiated.   In saying this; funding could be provided to facilitate further research or planning analysis, to determine the viability of projects that propose or require innovative solutions to complex and challenging infrastructure issues. In other words, innovation should be embraced, but in properly supported context.

- Should priorities be given to different types of regions eg. urban, rural, remote, water catchment areas, agriculture areas?

  In the regional context, urban areas (such as regional towns) are under increasing pressure from population concentration and service and infrastructure demand.   Again, clearly demonstrated identified need should be a critical consideration, within the context of existing State and Commonwealth Government support for these areas.

- Given the program will be a discretionary grants program, what expectations should applications have of the published eligibility criteria?

  It is critical that any new program has clearly defined criteria so that applicants understand the eligibility or otherwise of their funding proposals.

3.   **How will the new funding program work with State Government regional development funding programs?**

- In establishing the framework for a new regional development funding program, how does the government avoid duplication with other Federal, state or local funding projects; and how can a new program work in cooperation with other funding programs?

   There are limited examples of this type of funding program in the Tasmanian context. These would be the Tasmanian Community Fund, Road Safety Fund and funding available through Sport and Recreation Tasmania.

- What involvement should State regional bodies have in prioritising or assessing projects?

   There is a clear need for regional bodies to work with key stakeholders, including the relevant State Government.

4.   **How will the new funding program work with Local Government infrastructure funding and planning both at a regional and individual council level?**

- How can the Australian government best engage with existing local and regional organisations on the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program?

   Working closely with local government, local government regional groupings (such as the Southern Tasmanian Councils Authority), and the relevant local government peak body (such as the Local Government Association of Tasmania), would be beneficial.

- How can a new program best coordinate regional objectives between federal, state and local agencies?

   Working through regional development groups and networks to facilitate effective stakeholder and partner organisation communication is a recommended option. Again; working closely with local government, local government regional groupings (such as the Southern Tasmanian Councils Authority), and the relevant local government peak body (such as the Local Government Association of Tasmania) is critical.

- Are projects that cross (Area Consultative Committees) ACC regional boundaries considered?

   In Tasmania there was only one Area Consultative Committee (ACC), so regional boundaries did not apply. This structure was effective delivering a 'whole of state response', giving consideration to the diverse needs of the three major regions in the Tasmanian context.

- Can collaborative, multi-region projects be encouraged?

   This is seen to be a critical consideration and a key outcome of any new program.

5. **How will the new funding program work with the new Regional Development Australia Network?**

- What will the role of RDAs be in assisting and assessing applications for the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Fund.

  The role of RDAs should be very similar to the role of the RAAs in the previous program structure. This should include a high level of understanding of local needs and the capacity to be flexible. The RDA model should however, be more proactive in identifying potential projects.

- How should future relations be pursued between new RDA Committees and state and local governments? What mechanisms could be utilised or put into place to enhance communication and cooperative between the RDA Committees and state and local government over project priorities?

  Improve communication and awareness of the RDA Committee and Network role and activities.

- Will there be a requirement for Strategic Regional Plan to be developed by RDA Network?

  No, this work can be undertaken by the relevant State Government or possibly the relevant local government grouping. The RDA Network should be aware of this work and be able to identify supporting funding proposals that build upon, or respond to the needs or opportunities identified in existing strategic regional plans.

6. **How will the fund be promoted?**

- Was information about the RPP adequately dispersed? How can we ensure all potential applicants have knowledge about and have access to the future regional development funding program?

  Promotion was somewhat limited.

- How should the objectives of the program be documented and communicated to all stakeholders? Were the objectives and criteria of the RPP easy to understand?

  Objectives of the RPP were not clear. Nor was the role and function of the former ACC understood in the broader community. The RAA had a relatively low community profile and presence. This said, once engaged in the development of the Hobart City Council's funding submission for the development of the Hobart Health and Wellbeing Centre for Older People, the RAA was highly responsive and supportive.

SECTION 2: Applications and Assessments

1. **Who should assess applications initially and who should recommend that the application progress?**

   • What assessment process would you like to see for the Regional Funding Program?

   A funding program that is in line with standard governmental funding programs, with the application of clear and easily understood eligibility and assessment criteria, decision making processes and time-lines, with a high level of transparency and accountability.

   • Who should be assessing applications initially – ACCs, Regional Officers, Federal Departmental Officers, other bodies, or a combination of these?

   The assessment process should include the RDA local office in the first instance, in consultation with the relevant Commonwealth Government local office, with reference to an expert panel at the appropriate assessment stage.

   • When should external viability assessments be sought?

   On a case by case needs basis.

   • In assessing applications, what should be the role of local Members and Senators?

   No role in the assessment process is suggested. Local Members and Senators could however, have an important role in being advocates for projects, and in facilitating linkages at a local level that may assist the development of these projects.

   • How should State Regional Development bodies be involved?

   It is suggested that is occur on an 'as needs' basis.

   • How can local government be involved?

   Consultation with local government is important in terms of project endorsement, the provision of comment and advice in regard to project alignment with relevant local government strategic plans. Often local government will be a project partner anyway. It is also suggested that the operation of RDA Boards would be enhanced through inclusion of local government representation.

   • Under the previous RPP, the ACCs had a dual role:

   ➢ promoting and facilitating projects, including application development; and

   ➢ providing advice to the Australian Government on applications in their region.

   • Was there a conflict of interest with ACCs providing assistance for applications and being the assessor?

   There was no experience of this in the context of the Hobart City Council's grant application for the Hobart Health and Wellbeing Centre for Older People.

2.   Who should make the final decision?

- Who should be making final decisions on applications – Federal Departmental Officers, regional bodies, Ministers, or other bodies?

  It is suggested that any new funding program would be best assessed by an expert panel supported by Commonwealth Government departmental staff with a recommendation going to the Minister for 'sign-off'. This said; there could be opportunity for smaller grants to be assessed at a local level.

- How can the final decision be made more transparent?

  Again, use of clear and understandable eligibility and selection criteria, with expert panel evaluation/assessment, certainly for large scale project submissions would go a long way to promoting transparency.

3.   What should be the timeframes for assessment and final decisions?

- If an assessment process is to be rigorous and transparent, can final decisions be made within shorter timeframes than the RPP? How can the timeliness of application assessments be improved?

  The provision of and adherence to clear, fixed (where appropriate) and reportable funding program timelines, for lodgment, initial assessment, Ministerial approval, announcement and release of funds would be beneficial.

  It is suggested that any smaller grant stream have fixed submission dates and that larger grants be subject to no fixed submission date. This would allow for the development of funding submissions for large and complex projects that require multiple stakeholder sign-off, and the securing of complimentary funding or other project investment.

4.   How should decisions be communicated and by whom?

- How can we improve the transparency of the assessment process?

  As noted above.

- What information do applicants need to help understand the assessment process?

  Information on who made the decision, preferably with some indication on what basis a decision was made. The opportunity for a post evaluation debrief, particularly for unsuccessful funding applications, perhaps with the local RDA would also be of some benefit.

- How should successful and unsuccessful projects be communicated?

  It is suggested that the details of all unsuccessful and successful applications be published in some form, and this should be provided to all applicants and posted on the relevant departmental website and promoted through the RDA Network.

5. How will projects be funded?

- How should the size of a grant be determined?

  On the quantum funding request, which itself should be based on a clear analysis of the applicable needs and costs. Consideration of other funding sought or secured, including matching or partnership funding, or investment would also be an important consideration. Consideration of other competing projects within the local, regional and national context would also be important in determining the value of the grant recommended.

- Would open or closed funding rounds make applications and assessments easier to manage more timely assessments?

  An open grant round for more significant projects, while more difficult to administer, and could provide a greater capacity to 'capture' projects as they evolve. As noted above, a fixed round for smaller projects, could deliver better management outcomes for this type of grant application.

6. How should applications be submitted?

- Do you prefer an on-line or hard-copy application process?

  Both options are appropriate and should be offered, though any new process would need to be mindful of the needs of remote or otherwise disadvantaged communities.

- Who did you submit your applications through?

  ACC / DOTARS.

- Who should receive the application?

  The application should be submitted to the local office of the relevant Commonwealth Department, or RDA Network representative. This would allow for 'checking' at a local level.

7. What assistance should be available to applicants?

- How can the application process be made simpler?

  The process was not an issue for the Hobart City Council.

- Were applicants happy with assistance they received in making applications to the Regional Partnerships Program?

  The Hobart City Council received excellent support in the development and submission of our funding application for the Hobart Health and Wellbeing Centre for Older People.

- Was the process of making applications to the Regional Partnerships Program easy? What made it easy or difficult?

  Easy, without qualification.

8. What information should be contained in a funding application?

- What should be the essential features of an application to the new Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program?

- Should there be prerequisites that must be met before an application will be considered? for example, incorporation, planning permission, matching funding etc

  This would be dependent upon the scope and scale of the project. Planning (land use development approvals) should not be a requirement at application stage, but stakeholder and landlord approvals should have been secured. This said; flexibility is a critical consideration. Whilst some applicants may not be incorporated, there should be a minimum requirement for the project to be 'hosted' by an appropriate auspicing organisation with incorporated status.

- Should there be an opportunity at any stage in the process for applicants to submit additional information?

  Yes, this is important particularly for those projects that have multi-stakeholder or partner involvement or where supplementary funding has been sought, but where the timeline for the decision making process associated with this funding may occur after the submission of the funding application.

SECTION 3. Management of Funding Agreements

1. How should the funding agreement be monitored

- What kinds of performance monitoring mechanisms should be contained in a new funding agreement?

  A simple reporting process is required, against established targets and objectives and clear benchmarks.

- Do different types of projects require different performance measures?

  Of course; these should be defined by the nature of the project and could relate to measurable social, economic or environmental outputs.

- Should there be a regular audit program for projects and if so how often should that occur?

  Yes this should occur for due diligence reasons. However, the cost of financial auditing should be factored into grant allocations and for smaller grants should not impact upon the capacity to deliver the project within budget.

- How can a project's effectiveness best be measured?

  It is felt that the 'legacy' of a project will be the key measure the project's ultimate effectiveness or success. This could be considered within the context of the project's economic, environmental, or social outcomes.