



Finance & Public Administration

REFERENCE COMMITTEE.

Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme.

Mindful of the terms of reference relating to the above inquiry, the following comments are submitted. These comments relate to our experience in attempting to obtain funding under the above programme. The success or otherwise of our submission is not relevant. The comments are submitted in the spirit of co operation with the Committee to make the grant process more user friendly and to show the need for applicants to gain better communication with those responsible for the determination of allocation of funds.

1(a) Decisions to fund or not to fund particular projects.

While criteria used to determine funding decisions are rather a mystery, one would also question the common sense knowledge and impartiality of the decision maker. However, in relation to both Regional Partnerships and Sustainable Regions programmes, the ability to secure acceptance by the regional committee to at least have submissions advance beyond the regional level, is extremely difficult. The guidelines set down by the funding department seem to be different to those set down by the regional committees. In the case of Sustainable Regions, the local regional committee seems to set its own areas of priority. These are not known until much time and effort has been expended in preparing a submission under the guidelines set down by the funding department. The lack of knowledge, visionary awareness and impartiality of the regional assessment committees is detrimental to the success of many submissions.

1(b) Recommendations of Area Consultative Committees.

In some cases, these recommendations seem to be made of geographical location rather than quality and content of the submission. From our experience, we have had an opinion given before the actual document has passed through the assessment committee. In this same case, a member of the ACC staff contacted the applicant to submit a detailed description of the project, how the components would work and what was the function of the provider of the seed product. This document was needed so that the assessment committee could make a decision on the proposal. This is not the only time that the assessment committee and/or the staff in the ACC office were unable to understand the basic content of the proposal. Perhaps more thought could go into the selection of people to take a place on the Consultative committees at both operational and community level.

1(c) Recommendations of departmental officers and recommendations from any other sources including from other agencies or other levels of government.

This would seem to be in internal issue. However, it is essential that officers offering recommendations or otherwise are fully cognizant of the issues and any relevant impacts that relate to the submission and the area in which the project is to operate. There is also a need for those officers to be totally impartial. If they identify any

person or issue about which they cannot be objective, they must refrain from offering any comment and declare their area of interest or personal issue.

1(d) This relates to the above 1(c)

1(e) The criteria used to take the decision to fund projects.

Bearing in mind the comments in 1(c) and 1(d), the relevant funding criteria should be firm and conclusive. It is difficult to prepare a submission with the advertised criteria in mind and then have it changed at the Regional level.

Does the Regional ACC have the authority to change this criteria?

Can the Regional ACC loosely interpret the criteria in order to accept or reject submissions?

Why do submissions have to pass through the ACC? This does not apply to all funding programmes.

1(f) The transparency and accountability of the process and outcomes.

The transparency of the decision process is rather blurred. The advice received by the applicant is just a bland statement that the application was unsuccessful. Perhaps an explanation as to why the application was unsuccessful, giving the applicant an opportunity to re-apply. Such an explanation would also give the applicant an insight as to where future applications could address the cause of the lack of success.

The accountability of the process does not exist. The applicant is given the impression that the decision should not be questioned. There is also a lack of communication in relation to areas where the assessing officer assumes certain outcomes and bases the decision on that assumption. In many cases, the assumption is incorrect and therefore the decision is flawed. We are all human, the applicants are not the only ones to make mistakes.

1(g) The mechanism for authorizing the funding of projects.

Once the application is submitted, there is little information on the progress of the application through the assessment period. A glaring example of this relates to one of our projects. I refer to the attachment to this submission that is a diarised account of the progress of a particular application.

The first query was made on 19/11/03 to the CEO of the ACC, through to 26/3/04 when we were told that a decision would be made in two to three weeks. Entries from the 16/4/0 to 23/4/04 where we were advised we were unsuccessful and after discussion we were told to re-submit.

The second set of entries relates to that re-submitted document. From 12/7.04 to 10/09/04 where again we entered into the election period and consequently our submission had to await the outcome of the election. During that time, the Consultant employed by the Wide Bay Burnett Regional Organisation of Councils (WBBROC) approached members of our Organisation to discuss where we were at with our

application. He agreed that our proposal was similar to what would be the basis for any application submitted on account of the WBBROC.

Later during that period, a teleconference was held with this Consultant and the President, Secretary and Manager of our IT Centre. During this conference, the Consultant asked our Members if we would withdraw our application in order to give the WBBROC application a better chance of success. Naturally, we refused.

Shortly after the outcome of the election, we were advised that our application was unsuccessful and an indication that we should not re-apply. I believe the diary entries will explain all.

- 1(h) This issue is a matter for the government. However, it is our belief that we should be able to contact our local parliamentary representatives to either lobby on our behalf or at least enquire as to the progress of our application. If this is not acceptable, why do we have representatives in parliament? As to this, does parliament run the country or do the departmental bureaucrats?
 - 1(i) This issue is outside the applicants' area of expertise and a matter for internal monitoring.
2. The future administration of similar programmes is a matter for Government Ministers and their departments. However, proper accountability of Departmental personnel should be a priority. Comments made in this submission apply to all areas of accountability and assessment of submissions and the allocation of funds on the basis of positive impact on those communities who apply. All areas of the country have the right to apply for assistance. The decision should not be made on whether or not the area has a high density of population or whether it is a rural community working to make a difference to its future economic growth.

3. General Comments.

In relation to the Sustainable Regions Programme, in light of our experience, perhaps it would be more appropriate to change the name of the programme. The name in itself is misleading. To explain;

Statistically, Monto is the largest beef producing Shire in South-east Queensland. When this programme was first advertised, our local Stock & Station agent requested assistance to apply for funding to upgrade his sale yards to enable him to become EU accredited. He was also aware that the NLIS programme would be implemented in the foreseeable future. He was prepared to provide \$50,000.00 in cash so he applied for \$30,000.00. The application was submitted. He received the reply advising him that the Regional panel did not consider it appropriate for that programme. There is no other similar facility in his area of contact with farmers. His activities for the year were included and the possible impact new legislation would have if his yards could not comply at the time of implementation

Now the NLIS programme is to be enacted in July. Would you consider he was realistic in his view that his project suited the Sustainable Regions programme?

Second case in point.

We applied to Sustainable Regions for the funding to implement the Cybertown Project. This Project would provide Broadband access, as well as mobile phone type access across 98% of the populated area of the Wide Bay – Burnett Region. Other activities included in the project were training in e-commerce and e-business and a Community Benefit fund. The training would also include training on the technical side in order to ensure that a quality service would be provided at all times. As a not-for profit Organisation, any money received after expenses have been covered, would have been channeled into a fund for the Community to access for small projects. This was to have been under the administration of the Queensland Public Trustee.

After lengthy discussions with the Co-ordinator of the programme at the time, he agreed to accept the proposal as he believed it came under the appropriate guidelines.

When the present Co-ordinator took over, he was again approached as the submission was in hand and we believed we were doing the right thing by making him aware of the influence this project could have on the whole Wide Bay – Burnett Region. His reply was along the lines that it did not fit with the Regional panel's guidelines. As ICT was not on the panel's list of priorities, he believed that our application should have gone to Networking the Nation. (His email reply is attached.)

Our Vice President is the Secretary of the Burnett Inland Economic Development Organisation Inc. (BIEDO). Approximately 2 – 3 months later, it was announced at a BIEDO meeting, that WB2020 had applied for funding to Sustainable Regions to create a portal for the Region. It was believed that this application would be successful in the New Year. I can assure you that it was. If ICT was not a priority for the Regional panel, perhaps you could explain the difference between our application and that of WB2020. I would have believed that both came under the mantle of ICT.

Another problem is the expectation of the funding bodies that any administration funding is not really required. Where a person is to be employed, it seems to be the belief that administration work should be done by volunteers. In some cases they provide 50% of the requested funding to employ a part time co-ordinator. However, it is still expected that the applicant will produce the same outcomes. Again we go back to the volunteer. How can any project be successful, if the co-ordination is ad hoc and relies on various volunteers who may or may not understand the principles of the project.

When a not-for-profit Organisation applies for funds for a project, one of the underlying reasons is to provide employment for one or more people. If a project is to be sustainable, or to provide employment, it should not be expected that the work will be done by volunteers. Many hours are already expended in volunteer work in rural communities. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life, if one wishes to survive and provide for one's family, one has to pay for the very things that will sustain life. The essentials of life cannot be obtained by good will nor can the Organisation ensure the sustainability of a project. If the cost of wages and add – on costs is not included in the financial plan, the very credibility of the Organisation and the financial planning process is non

existent. It is our belief that to submit an application under those circumstances would be extremely negligent and irresponsible.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our concerns to you. It is essential that Government Grants should continue. It is, however, essential that regional assessment panels and regional officers become more aware of the regions over which they are presiding, and that a more educated and futuristic approach should be applied to projects being submitted.

Panel members should make themselves aware of the activities and potential of their regions. It is no longer appropriate that positions on these regional panels should be taken up by people who are only involved in their own shires or that there should be an expectation that Local Government Representatives are the fount of all knowledge about the region. Panel members should endeavour to acquire knowledge that extends over the whole region and they should be known and recognized throughout the whole region. This leads to the question, "Do panel members actually communicate outside their recognized meeting times"?

These comments are submitted in a spirit of co-operation with a view to ensuring applicants concerns are addressed through your panel.



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