

# Albury-Wodonga Area Consultative Committee

## Senate Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme

### Terms of reference



Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee makes the following submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme:

- (1) The administration of the Regional Partnerships Programme and the Sustainable Regions programme**, with particular reference to the process by which projects are proposed, considered and approved for funding, including:

*Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee (AWACC) administers the Regional Partnerships Programme through a structured project management approach involving adherence to guidelines and principles as set down for the organisation.*

*AWACC is guided by its funding agreement with the Commonwealth, the Guidelines and Ministerial Statement as set down, its Constitution, Business Plan and Strategic Plan, all of which contain contractual obligations and guidance.*

*AWACC's Project Management guidelines, under which it administers projects, forms an integral part of the operational function of the AWACC and cover such issues as:*

- *Development of applications, monitoring of projects, assessment of applications*
- *Evaluation of tenders, procurement guidelines, ethics and fair dealing*

*In addition, AWACC observes policy as set down in the ACC handbook regarding transparency, governance, conflicts of interest and processes.*

*The ACC's involvement in administration of projects, within the current DOTARS guidelines, is maintained to ensure the project remains in accordance with the application and any special conditions met.*

*The proposal of a project may take considerable time to develop. The ACC generally works with the proponent in order to fully develop a project*

*application that has an appropriate structure, observes good governance and will involve suitable stakeholders.*

*At AWACC the development of a project application normally involves the following steps:*

- a. Proponent contacts AWACC with a project idea*
- b. An initial discussion takes place with the proponent to ascertain whether the project is likely to fall within RP guidelines for funding*
- c. If it is potentially suitable for funding, the proponent is asked to provide an 'Expression of Interest' (EOI) enabling further assessment of the suitability of the proposed project.*
- d. If the project outline provided in the EOI is likely to fall within RP guidelines for funding then further discussions will take place with the proponent in terms of:*
  - i. Validity of identified need*
  - ii. Funding sources and contributions*
  - iii. Community commitment to the project and/or its origin*
  - iv. Partnerships involved in the project*

*Consistent with Programme guidelines, AWACC may be able to provide constructive input into the project development process such as other potential partners, budget considerations, issues of retrospectivity and alignment to AWACC Regional Strategy. Input may also be sought from DOTARS staff as to whether there are any additional areas to be considered such as duplication, previous funding approvals or rejections of similar projects, funding proportions and overall suitability.*

*The Programme Sub-Committee of AWACC meets formally with the ACC executive to fully discuss all proposals. A formal agenda is issued to enable all matters to be dealt with in an appropriate manner. Conflict of interest is declared by members if appropriate and dealt with in accordance with AWACC/ DOTARS policy.*

*Members are provided with project information and given feedback as to potential issues and ranking of the project.*

- e. It is then recommended that the proponent prepares a draft application for funding, and provides a copy of that application to AWACC for further consideration.*

*When a draft application is received, further discussions will take place with the ACC and the proponent organisation in order to ensure the validity of the information contained in the application, including the commitment of the partners to the project, Local Government support and any issues of potential duplication. There is frequently a need for greater detail to be incorporated into the project itself, particularly in terms of methodology, demonstrated need, work plan/timetable, budget, outcomes and methods of future evaluation.*

*Further information may need to be provided to the Programme Sub-Committee and feedback obtained in terms of ranking.*

- f. Attention will also be given to the presentation style of the project including grammar, spelling etc. Budgets are checked and validated within the limits of the information provided by the proponent.*
- g. A final draft of the application will then be received from the proponent prior to their final submission of the application online. The proponent may make the final submission online prior to AWACC having an opportunity to assess whether any further development is required.*
- h. On occasions AWACC assists proponents with the input of the application into the TRAX system online. This occurs only when proponents experience difficulties with online access, or are unfamiliar with internet and word processing systems, or have no access to internet facilities.*
- i. Once the project has been submitted into TRAX, and allocated to AWACC for comment, the final details of the project are brought to the formal attention of the members of the Programme Sub-Committee either in a meeting, or by the circulation of a précis and return comment. The final project ranking and comment is then input into the TRAX system for assessment by DOTARS.*

#### **Reference to the process by which projects are considered**

*Projects are considered against the ACC's Strategic Regional Plan, Local Government priorities and the demonstrated need of the community.*

*The ACC also reviews the level of support for the project from both a cash and in-kind perspective.*

#### **Reference to the process by which projects are approved**

*The ACC has no direct involvement in the DOTARS approval process. The ACC simply makes a recommendation and gives a suitable ranking having regard for the Programme guidelines and regional priorities. On occasions DOTARS will request additional information from the proponent, and AWACC may be asked to assist in obtaining this information.*

*AWACC is not usually aware of the progression of the assessment process in relation to individual projects unless additional information is sought by DOTARS.*

*AWACC is normally informed by the relevant Federal Member that a project has been approved for funding.*

*If funding is not approved, AWACC is informed by letter from DOTARS.*

*AWACC's role is not to draft the initial application but to facilitate the development of the project idea towards a full application.*

*The usual practice is for the proponent to provide an Expression of Interest comprising basic information to allow the AWACC to respond to feedback as to whether or not the project will fall within the guidelines for the funding Programme.*

*Initial information is then provided to the ACC's Programme Sub-Committee to enable an initial determination on a priority ranking for the project.*

*If the project is considered suitable for funding, the proponent is then asked to provide an initial draft application.*

**(a) Decisions to fund or not to fund particular projects;**

*A formal meeting is held with the ACC Programme Sub-Committee to assess project applications. The Programme Sub-Committee may suggest changes that need to be made or enhancements that may strengthen the project. Committee are then asked to rank the project individually and then come to a consensus whether or not the project is to be recommended for funding.*

*When a project fails to meet the criteria for funding the Committee advises the ACC staff, giving reasons for declining the project against Programme guidelines. The ACC executive subsequently advises the proponent.*

*The ACC is only able to make recommendations and provide a ranking to DOTARS based on the information provided, and has no involvement in rescinding applications that have been submitted electronically.*

*The final decision as to whether or not to fund a project is not taken at the local ACC level.*

**(b) The recommendations of Area Consultative Committees;**

*AWACC Programme Sub-Committee documents its recommendations and the ranking of projects through formal minutes of the Programme Sub-Committee meeting. Project rankings are then submitted to DOTARS for final project assessment.*

*The ACC ranks projects in accordance with the identified regional priorities as set out in its Regional Strategic Plan, or in response to events and regional conditions.*

**(c) The recommendations of departmental officers and recommendations from any other sources including from other agencies or other levels of government;**

*From an AWACC perspective, Departmental officers are involved in the development of the project to the extent where they may suggest improvements or complementary avenues for funding. In addition the departmental officers assess the viability of the project idea and make a final recommendation to the delegate.*

*Letters of support for the project are normally reviewed by the Department and considered in the context of the demonstrated need. Letters of support may be provided for a project from a variety of sources including State Government Departments, Local Government, Community and Service organisations.*

**(d) the nature and extent of the respective roles of the administering department, minister and parliamentary secretary, other ministers and parliamentary secretaries, other senators or members and their advisers and staff in the process of selection of successful applications;**

*The ACC is not involved in any further role in the decision making process. AWACC does not have direct contact with the officers mentioned beyond the level of the Regional Manager of DOTARS, i.e. Melbourne Office.*

**(e) The criteria used to take the decision to fund projects;**

*The ACC is guided by the Ministerial Statement of Priorities and its Charter and considers their content in the context of the Programme. The ACC is also governed by its Strategic Regional Plan Business Plan, Key Performance Indicators and Objectives. The Strategic Regional Plan is the result of stakeholder consultation to identify potential project funding activity and needs. AWACC identifies significant regional priorities in the wider region in its Strategic Regional Plan. The project rankings provided by AWACC to DOTARS are aligned with community and/or council priorities and the demonstrated need of a project within the community.*

*Projects are assessed by the AWACC Programme Sub-Committee which agrees an appropriate ranking after considering eligibility criteria together with regional priorities. The Committee agrees on a project ranking for recommendation to the Department.*

*Projects must be broadly consistent with the key objectives of the AWACC Strategic Regional Plan to be allocated a 'medium' or 'high' ranking. If the project meets the criteria, but not the Strategic Regional Plan, then it may be allocated a 'low' ranking. The final decision on eligibility for funding is not taken at AWACC level, but by the Minister's office following recommendations of DOTARS regional staff.*

**(f) The transparency and accountability of the process and outcomes;**

*AWACC considers that the processes undertaken by their Committee and staff are transparent and accountable. The formal agenda to assess projects under Regional Partnerships at a local level is through formal meetings. Conduct of meetings is guided by AWACC procedures and practices, and documented accordingly.*

**(g) the mechanism for authorising the funding of projects;**

*AWACC's understanding is that funding of projects is authorised by the Minister after consultation with relevant DOTARS staff. AWACC is not directly involved in this part of the process.*

**(h) the constitutionality, legality and propriety of any practices whereby any members of either House of Parliament are excluded from committees, boards or other bodies involved in the consideration of proposed projects, or coerced or threatened in an effort to prevent them from freely communicating with their constituents;**

*AWACC has no knowledge of any such practices.*

**(i) whether the operation of the Programme is consistent with the Auditor-General's 'Better Practice Guide for the Administration of Grants', and is subject to sufficient independent audit.**

*AWACC is unable to comment.*

**(2) With respect to the future administration of similar Programmes, any safeguards or guidelines which might be put in place to ensure proper accountability for the expenditure of public money, particularly the appropriate arrangements for independent audit of the funding of projects.**

*AWACC would suggest that the principles and practices it has in place could assist if implemented on a broader scale.*

**(3) Any related matters.**

There are no related matters AWACC wishes to raise.