Final report.

Evaluation of the NSW Environmental Trust's Restoration and Rehabilitation Program.

December 2023.

Contents

Executive summary

The Environmental Trust's Restoration and Rehabilitation Program funds projects that contribute to the ongoing sustainable management and stewardship of significant environmental assets and services in NSW. Over 1,000 projects have been funded since the first grant in 1991.

The last evaluation of the Program was conducted in 2017 and Nexus was engaged to evaluate the Program's performance in the five years since that evaluation. Since 2017, a total of 192 projects have been funded for a total of over $20m or approximately $4m per year. The 192 funded organisations represent just under one-half of the organisations that applied for funding.

Broadly, the objectives of this evaluation were to:

- determine whether the Program has achieved its intended outcomes

- inform future iterations of the Program.

This evaluation was a multi-method evaluation comprising:

- the collation and analysis of background information and data on the Program

- consultations with a range of stakeholders including Trust staff, representatives of funded organisations, unsuccessful grant recipients, members of the expert panel that reviews grant applications and independent experts who review projects' milestone reports

- an online survey of grant recipients

- an assessment of the Program's administration against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide.

Our consultations revealed overwhelming support for the Program and its long-standing contribution to local environmental restoration and rehabilitation. The evaluation identified several strengths of the Program administration:

- the visibility of the Program in the sector and the unique niche it occupies in environmental grants funding

- the multi-year grants that are available to facilitate environmental restoration and rehabilitation

- the transparent and robust application process

- the focus on community capacity building

- the support and flexibility of Trust staff

- the consistency of the Program's administration with the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide.

These strengths provide a strong foundation for the ongoing evolution of the Program and our 29 recommendations have been grouped into three categories; Program design, Program outcomes and Program administration.

Program design

A fundamental challenge for the Program is that many of the intended environmental outcomes can only be achieved in the longer-term, beyond the funding period of individual projects. The Trust has developed a draft program logic to articulate the relationship between project <u>outputs</u> and program <u>outcomes</u>. We recommend that a modified version of the program logic be formally adopted and used to inform the allocation of Program funds and to strengthen the Program's monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

The evaluation also proposes reforms to the funding arrangements including:

- a needs analysis to guide the identification of environmental restoration and rehabilitation priorities across the State

- a stream for longer, five-year grants for organisations that have a successful track record and can demonstrate measurable environmental outcomes to maximise the sustainability of project gains

- annual adjustments of funding amounts for inflation

- a pilot of maintenance grants to facilitate the transition of successful project outputs into longer-term outcomes.

Since the 2017 evaluation, the Trust has introduced reforms to the allocation of funding across the State and to attract applications from new organisations. However, these reforms have only been partly successful such that, for example, there remains an over-representation of grants to northern NSW region. To diversify the pool of funded organisations and the geographical spread of funding, we propose the needs analysis be complemented by a systematic strategy to promote the Program to address identified local restoration and rehabilitation priorities, including capacity building for potential grant recipients.

Recommendation 1. It is recommended that the Trust amend the draft program logic to more clearly align with the wording of the Environmental Trust strategic plan, to draw an explicit distinction between project-specific intermediate outcomes and longer-term program outcomes and to incorporate project outputs.

Recommendation 2. It is recommended that the Trust formally adopt the draft program logic and incorporate it in its Restoration and Rehabilitation Program guidelines and accompanying resources.

Recommendation 3. It is recommended that the Trust review or update the needs analysis of local restoration and rehabilitation priorities that was undertaken following the 2017 evaluation of the program.

Recommendation 4. It is recommended that the Program be redesigned to provide for a stream of funding for five years that is available for organisations that have a successful track record in managing projects and can provide evidence that they will achieve measurable environmental outcomes with continued funding at key milestones dependent upon the outcomes of independent reviews, including site visits.

Recommendation 5. It is recommended that the Trust include an annual adjustment to account for inflation in multi-year grants.

Recommendation 6. It is recommended that the Trust pilot and evaluate maintenance grants for successfully completed projects to maintain restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

Recommendation 7. It is recommended that the Trust design and implement a strategy to target identified environmental restoration and rehabilitation priorities to promote the Program and attract new grant applicants.

Recommendation 8. It is recommended that the Program promotion include targeted pre-application capacity building for potential applicants, including resources and training in grant writing.

Program outcomes

The Trust has evolved its monitoring and evaluation systems and we recommend these be built upon by preparing an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework for inclusion in the Program guidelines. This framework would clarify the respective roles and responsibilities in monitoring and evaluation and address some confusion about the monitoring and evaluation budget provided to grant recipients.

The evaluation also proposes reforms to the monitoring and evaluation of the Program including:

- improvements to the reporting and aggregation of outputs and outcome measures

- the introduction of a risk-based cycle of a limited number of annual project reviews and longer-term post-project evaluations involving site visits conducted by independent technical experts

- a needs analysis of Grants Branch staff to target professional development in monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendation 9. It is recommended that the Trust develop an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework, for inclusion in the Program guidelines, that sets out the respective roles and responsibilities of Trust staff, funded organisations and independent reviewers in project and program monitoring, evaluation and reporting, including the use of dedicated funds for monitoring and reporting in Program grants.

Recommendation 10. It is recommended that the Trust incorporate the outcome measures recommended in the revised Restoration and Rehabilitation Program monitoring and evaluation framework in its monitoring directory.

Recommendation 11. It is recommended that the Trust continue work on the aggregation and reporting of project outputs and outcomes.

Recommendation 12. It is recommended that the Trust review and enhance its resource materials to differentiate between outputs and outcomes in the workplan when selecting project measures.

Recommendation 13. It is recommended that the Trust update the Program guidelines, outcome measures and independent review process to gather the sustainability of outcomes more systematically.

Recommendation 14. It is recommended that the Trust introduce a risk-based program of a limited number of annual project reviews conducted by independent technical experts and involving site visits.

> **Recommendation 15.** It is recommended that the Trust introduce a program of a limited number of annual post-project evaluations involving site visits conducted by independent technical experts to determine the longer-term sustainability of environmental restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.
>
> **Recommendation 16.** It is recommended that the Trust undertake a needs analysis of Grants Branch staff to target professional development in monitoring and evaluation.

Program administration

Our analysis of the Program administration against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide identified that most aspects meet the requirements of the Guide and that the Program administration is robust and transparent. However, the evaluation has proposed improvements, including:

- refinement of the program guidelines to adopt plain English terms
- the provision of feedback to unsuccessful applicants
- streamlining funded organisations' reporting and work planning obligations
- reviewing the practice of paying the final instalment of grant allocations to grant recipients prior to reviewing a final report and financial acquittals.

While the introduction of the grants management system since the last evaluation was welcomed as a step forward by grant recipients and Trust staff, the system is seen as difficult to use, cumbersome and does not readily provide even basic information. The evaluation had to rely on time and resource-intensive manual interrogation of the database to extract even fundamental funding information. Accordingly, we recommend the Trust conduct a cost-benefit analysis of transitioning to the SmartyGrants grants management platform, which is being introduced across NSW government agencies from January 2024.

The evaluation also identifies improvement for better integration of the independent experts who sit on the technical review committee and review projects' progress.

> **Recommendation 17.** It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct benchmarking to compare the level of administrative support across the Branch's programs.
>
> **Recommendation 18.** It is recommended that the Program application process be reviewed to adopt plain English terms, clear definitions of technical terms and to remove information that is not necessary for review by the TRC in making recommendations to the Trust on funding decisions.
>
> **Recommendation 19.** It is recommended that a system be introduced for ensuring that those unsuccessful applicants who seek feedback are provided specific feedback on their application and referred to the Program's capability building initiatives.
>
> **Recommendation 20.** It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the Program's reporting obligations to reduce the administrative burden on funded organisations, consistent with the proportionality principle in the NSW Government's grants funding guidelines.

Recommendation 21. It is recommended that the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program guidelines be modified so that final project reports are comprehensive end-of-project reports setting out the achievements of projects, rather than one of a series of milestone reports.

Recommendation 22. It is recommended that the Trust review its practice of paying the final instalment of grant allocations to grant recipients prior to reviewing a final report and financial acquittals.

Recommendation 23. It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the work plans process to reduce the administrative burden on Trust staff and grant recipients.

Recommendation 24. It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the transition to the SmartyGrants platform versus the upgrade and ongoing maintenance of the in-house Grants Management System.

Recommendation 25. It is recommended that the Trust explore options for more regular interaction through the funding cycle with the independent reviewers.

Implementation of the recommendations

Responsibility for implementing approved recommendations nominally rests with the team administering the program. However, the Program administration has only one dedicated officer and is just one of a portfolio of seven programs managed by the team. An imposing business as usual workload detracts from the team's ability to introduce improvements to the Program's systems and administration, including some outstanding recommendations from the 2017 evaluation. We therefore recommend the Trust allocate resources for the engagement of a short-term project manager to coordinate implementation of the approved recommendations of this evaluation, guided by an implementation plan and a cross-Branch governance group.

Recommendation 26. It is recommended that the Trust allocate resources for the engagement of a short-term project manager to implement approved recommendations of this evaluation.

Recommendation 27. It is recommended that the proposed project manager to coordinate implementation of the approved recommendations of this evaluation develop an implementation plan informed by the information in Table 6.

Recommendation 28. It is recommended that a governance group comprising representatives from across the Grants Branch be established to oversee the implementation of approved recommendations of this evaluation.

Recommendation 29. It is recommended that the Program team develops a strategy, including a structured communications plan, for implementing the approved recommendations of this review.

Introduction

> **The NSW Environmental Trust is an independent statutory body that supports projects which enhance New South Wales's environment. It was established under the *Environmental Trust Act 1998* and administers grants across a diverse range of programs, including contestable grants, major projects, and various NSW Government initiatives.**

The Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Program (the Program) is one of the contestable grants programs administered by the NSW Environmental Trust (the Trust). Grants of up to $200,000 are awarded for projects that contribute to the ongoing sustainable management and stewardship of significant environmental assets and services in New South Wales. The Program has been in operation since 1990, initially under the *Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Trust Act 1990*, with the first grants awarded in 1991. Since inception, the Program has funded over 1,000 projects worth a total value of nearly $90 million. There are around 150 - 200 active grants in this program at any one time.

All of the Trust's contestable grants programs are independently evaluated to assess their effectiveness and the Program was the focus of an evaluation completed in June 2017. In June 2023 the Trust engaged Nexus to evaluate the Program's performance in the five years since the last evaluation in 2017 (i.e. from 2018 to 2021-22). Broadly, the aims of the evaluation were to:

- determine whether the Program has achieved its intended outcomes
- inform future iterations of the Program.

The evaluation was also required to assess the Program's compliance with the Premier and Cabinet Grant Administration Guide (the Guide), issued on 19 September 2022[1]. Compliance with the Guide is a legislative requirement under clause 31 of Schedule 1 to the *Government Sector Finance Act 2018*. All grants undertaken on and from 19 September 2022, are required to implement practices and procedures consistent with the principles and mandatory requirements in the Guide.

Terms of reference

The Restoration and Rehabilitation Program evaluation plan has five key evaluation questions and 26 sub-questions (Appendix 1: Key evaluation questions and sub-questions).

Table 1 summarises the five key evaluation questions into three focus areas - program design, program outcomes and program administration - noting that some of the questions cover more than one of these three aspects. These focus areas provide the basis for the report's discussion and recommendations in Sections 4 to 6.

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[1] https://arp.nsw.gov.au/m2022-07-grants-administration-guide/

Table 1: Key evaluation questions

EVALUATION FOCUS AREAS	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
Program design	• How effective is the Program delivery and design? • How equitable is the Program?
Program outcomes	• How enduring are the Program outcomes?
Program administration	• How efficiently is the Program being delivered? • How appropriately positioned and resourced is the Program?

Overview of this report

This report is structured as follows:

- **section 1** provides an overview of the Program

- **section 2** describes the evaluation methods

- **section 3** discusses the Program's strengths

- **section 4** discusses the design of the Program

- **section 5** analyses the outcomes of the Program

- **section 6** considers program administration issues

- **section 7** provides a brief conclusion and proposes a strategy for implementing the recommendations of this evaluation

- **section 8** provides a short conclusion

- **section 9** lists the recommendations in Sections 4 to 7.

1. Overview of the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program

The Restoration and Rehabilitation Program is one of 17 programs funded by the NSW Environmental Trust. The funding for these programs is aligned with the *NSW Environmental Trust Strategic Plan 2020–24[2]*, which identifies three overarching priorities for the Trust's funding programs:

1. strengthening NSW's natural environment
2. supporting native species and their habitats
3. reducing human-induced impacts on the environment.

The Restoration and Rehabilitation Program is a statutory requirement of the Trust and the Program objectives are to:

- improve and protect the quality of ecosystems and environmental assets managed by community groups, land managers and stakeholders
- enhance the management of environmental assets by facilitating the development of environmental expertise and stronger partnerships between individuals, community groups, governments and industry
- provide an appropriate, effective, and sustainable mechanism to deliver government policy, priorities and outcomes.

Organisations eligible to apply for grants funded through the Program include:

- community groups and organisations
- incorporated associations
- not-for-profit organisations
- non-commercial cooperatives
- local councils
- state government agencies and entities.

Several brief case studies of projects completed through the Program are included in Appendix 2.

1.1 Restoration and Rehabilitation Program logic

One of the recommendations of the 2017 evaluation of the Program was to develop and implement a new formal program logic that articulates objectives, expected outcomes and performance indicators. The program logic was intended to more clearly target the core issues of restoration and rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems and community capacity building.

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[2] https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Funding-and-support/Environmental-Trust/environmental-trust-strategic-plan-202024.pdf

The Trust subsequently commissioned the development of a draft program logic, which is shown in Figure 1. The program logic aligns to the Branch's overall Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Framework (MERI) framework and includes a number of codes that were assigned to each area of work:

- NE stands for outcomes/outputs associated with natural environment

- A stands for change in culture

- P stands for people to represent change in behaviour and level of awareness

- E stands for employment outcomes. See Appendix 3 for further details.

Some key points about the program logic to highlight are:

- it shows three broad areas of work carried out by grant recipients: actual restoration and rehabilitation; provision of infrastructure for restoration and rehabilitation; and community engagement and education for restoration and rehabilitation

- it distinguishes between longer-term restoration and rehabilitation *program outcomes* and *intermediate outcomes* which flow more directly from individual funded projects

- community engagement and capability building are intermediate program outcomes because they are seen to contribute to the sustainability of environmental outcomes, above and beyond individual projects.

The draft program logic is intended to provide a basis for the Program's monitoring and evaluation system including the development of work plans for monitoring project progress and the identification of project outcomes.

1.2 Grants awarded 2018 to 2021-22

As shown in Table 2, since 2018 the Program has funded 192 projects through grants of up to $200,000 worth a total value of close to $20 million, or approximately $4 million per year.

Table 2: Grants funded 2018-2022[3]

	2018	2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	Total
Applications received	136	83	68	67	74	**428**
Unsuccessful applicants	86	39	33	36	39	**233**
Withdrawn applications	1	1	1	0	0	**3**
Funded organisations	49	43	34	31	35	**192**
Value of funded grants (in million $)	4.4	3.7	3.1	4.4	4.8	**20.4**
Projects completed (Jul 23)	32	20	12	0	0	**64**

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[3] Unsuccessful applicants include those applications received that were ineligible. Withdrawn application figures were provided by DPE October 2023 and are available for the periods shown only. For consistency, annual grants are reported as per the Trust: 2017-2018 is stated as "2018", 2018-2019 is stated as "2019". Subsequent grant rounds are stated as financial years.

Figure 1: Draft Restoration and Rehabilitation program logic
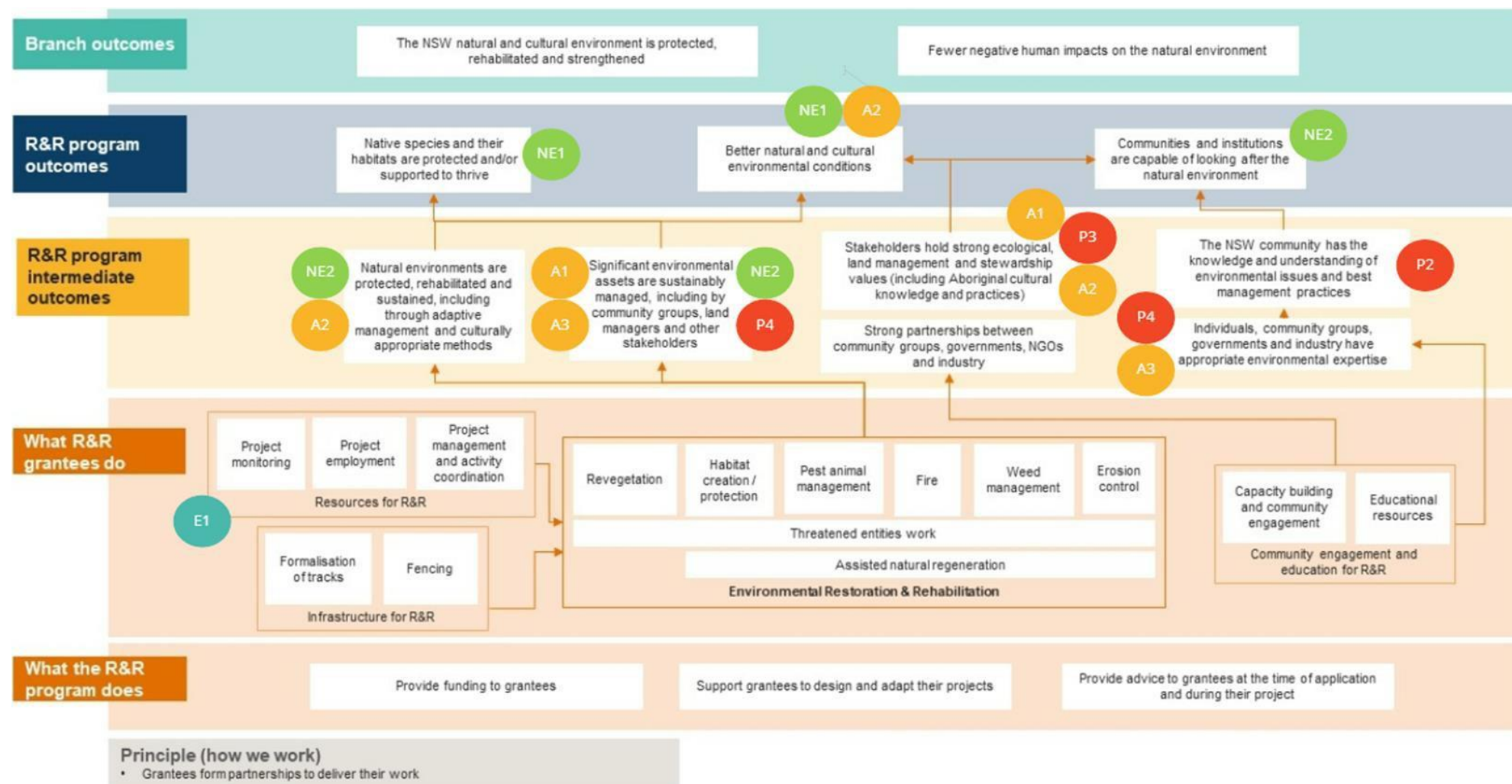
For the period 2018 to 2019 there were two streams of funding: Community Grants and State and Local Government grants. During this period a total of 126 organisations were funded. The majority (58%) of these were community organisations, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of grants by type 2018-2020

	2018	2019	2019-2020	TOTAL
Community	23	24	26	**73**
Government	26	19	8	**53**
Total	**49**	**43**	**34**	**126**

From 2020 to 2021, the Community and Government streams were combined and two new tiers (or streams) of funding were introduced:

- tier 1: $50K to $115K in total for "new organisations" to the grants process for projects of 2-3 years duration (with a total allocation of approximately $1,000,000)

- tier 2: $50K to $170K in total for "experienced organisations", with previous experience as grant recipients and for projects of 3-4 years duration (with a total allocation of approximately $3,000,000).

Table 4 shows that approximately $9.2m was allocated across the two tiers to 66 organisations in the 2020-21 and 2020-2022 grant periods. The majority (79%) of organisations were funded under tier (stream) 2 ("experienced organisations").

Table 4: Number of grants by type 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 (combined)[4]

	#	$	% OF TOTAL	AVERAGE/GRANT
Tier/stream 1	20	$1,975,721	21%	$98,786
Tier/stream 2	46	$7,219,569	79%	$156,947
Total	**66**	**$9,195,290**	**100%**	**$139,323**

Figure 2 and Figure 3 present heat maps showing the total number of Program grants awarded per geographical region[5] and the total value of those grants by region respectively between 2018 and 2021–2022 (see Appendix 4 for the data table). The figures show that:

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[4] For 2020-21, $4.4m was allocated across the two tiers to 31 organisations. The majority (71%) of the organisations were funded under tier 2 which accounted for just under 80% of the funds allocated that year. For 2020-2022, a total of 24 organisations were funded, with the majority (68%) experienced organisations funded under stream (tier) 2, accounting for over three-quarters (78%) of the total funding.
[5] https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/regional-delivery/nsw-government-regional-boundaries

- approximately 37% of funding was allocated to the North Coast region[6] which represents approximately 4% of the total NSW landmass[7] and approximately 6.4% of the total NSW population[8]

- approximately 13% of funding was allocated to the Western region (combining Central West and Orana with Far West region) which (combined) represents approximately 31% of the total NSW landmass[9] and an estimated 3.7% of the NSW population

- with approximately 6% of funding, the Sydney region represents 3.8% NSW landmass[10] and approximately 65% NSW population[11] with the lowest average grant value ($68,482)[12]

- approximately 14% of funds were allocated to the Southeast & Tablelands region with the highest average value per grant of $106,480.

Figure 2: Number of Program grants per region, 2018 to 2021-22

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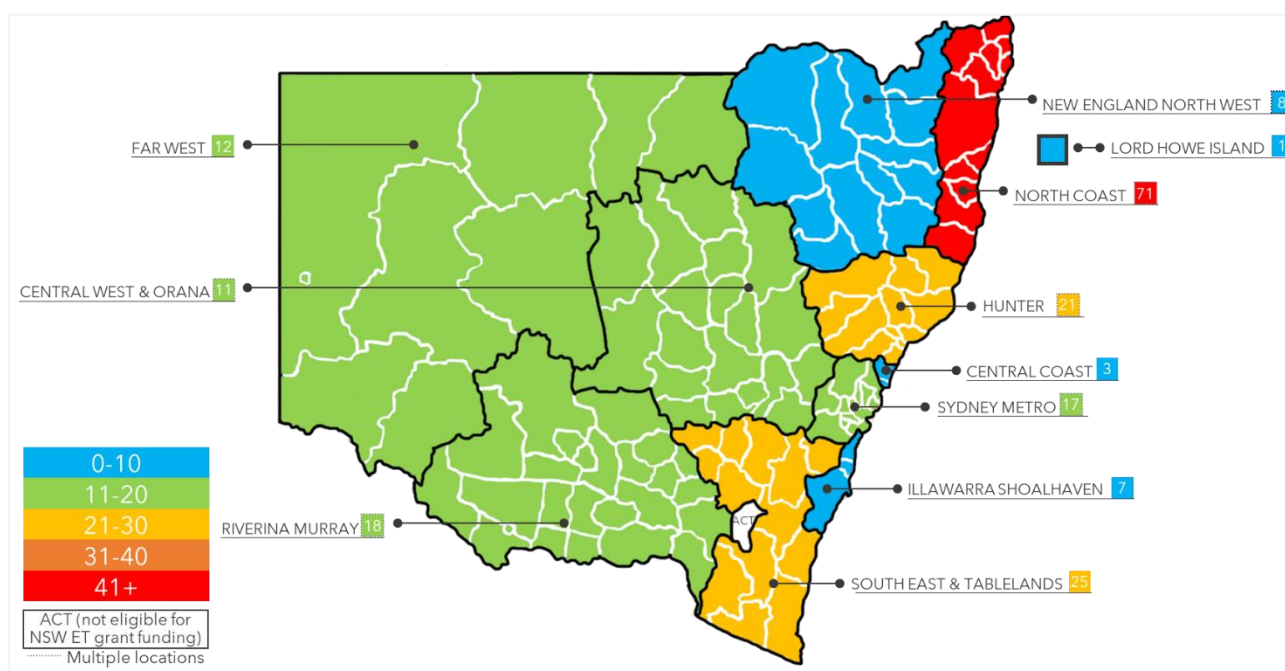
[6] North Coast geographic region covers approximately 32,047 square kilometres: https://hnc.org.au/our-region/#:~:text=The%20northern%20boundary%20is%20the,the%20region%20in%20diverse%20locatio   ns
[7] NSW has a total area of 80,160,000 hectares (801,600 square kilometres): https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/biodiversity/bioregions/bioregions-of-nsw#:~:text=NSW%20has%20a%20total%20area,the%20southern%20NSW%2DVictorian%20boundary.
[8] NSW has the highest population of any state in Australia, with 8,153,000 residents as of 30 June 2022: https://www.nsw.gov.au/about-nsw/key-facts-about-nsw#:~:text=coast%20of%20NSW.-,Population,population%20live%20in%20Greater%20Sydney
[9] These figures vary according to different Govt websites due to variations in LGA inclusions. The Western Region inclusive of North West (included in the New England region in this report) is approximately 40% of NSW: https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/regions/western
[10] http://www.bom.gov.au/water/nwa/2019/sydney/regiondescription/geographicinformation.shtml
[11] https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population/latest-release
[12] Excluding Lord Howe Island for which only one grant was awarded at $55,366

Figure 3: Total Program funds allocated per region, 2018 to 2021-22
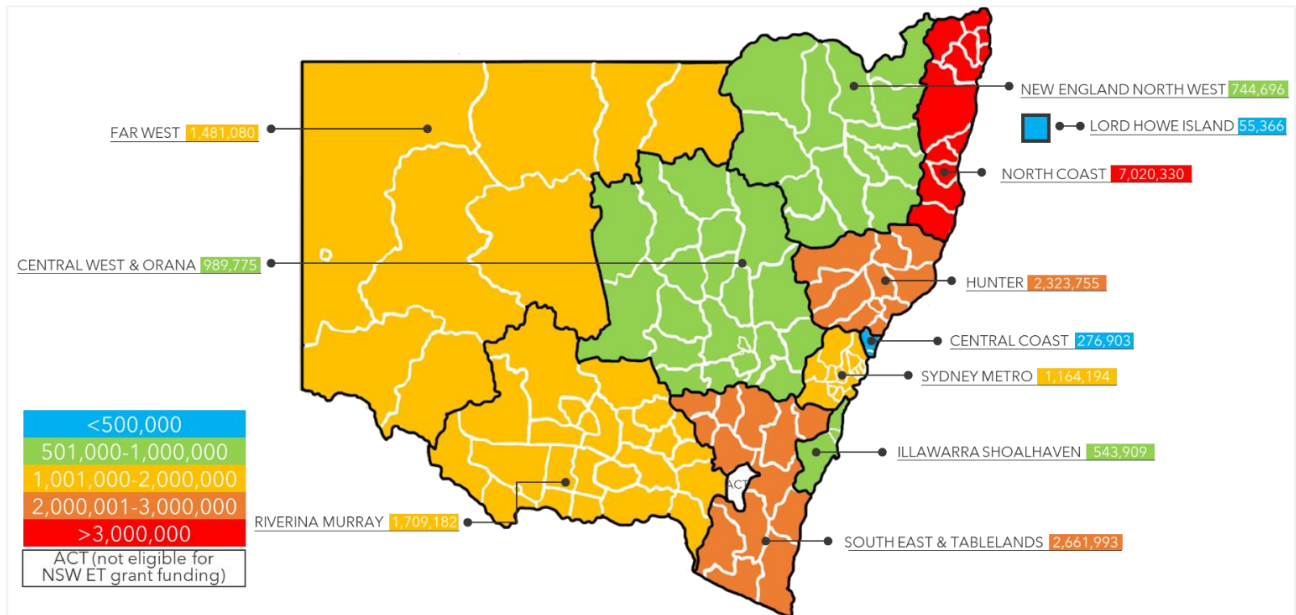
1.3 Program governance

The Program is administered by the Grants Branch within the Governance, Strategy and Coordination Division of the Environment and Heritage Group in the Department of Planning and Environment (see Figure 4). The Branch administers all Trust programs along with those funded by the waste levy and by the Department for coast, estuary and flood issues.

The Trust funding falls into three categories managed by separate teams shown in Figure 4:

1. Contestable Grants (Environmental Trust)
2. Contestable Grants (Waste and Environment)
3. Major Funded Projects[13].

The Restoration and Rehabilitation Program is one of seven programs that are currently administered by the Contestable Grants (Environmental Trust) team. Four of these are ongoing programs:

1. Environmental Education
2. Environmental Research
3. Restoration and Rehabilitation
4. Protecting our Places.

The other three are legacy programs that are closed to new entrants:

5. Saving our Species
6. Bush Connect
7. River Connections[14].

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[13] Whilst the Trust funds the staff in the Contestable Grants (Waste and Environment) team, grant projects are funded by external funds that include Commonwealth funding and the Waste Levy (external to the Trust).
[14] DPE team structure (Source: Grants Branch Overview, supplied by DPE October 2023)

The Contestable Grants (Environmental Trust) team is one of seven teams reporting to Director, Grants.

Figure 4: Organisation chart – DPE Grants Branch
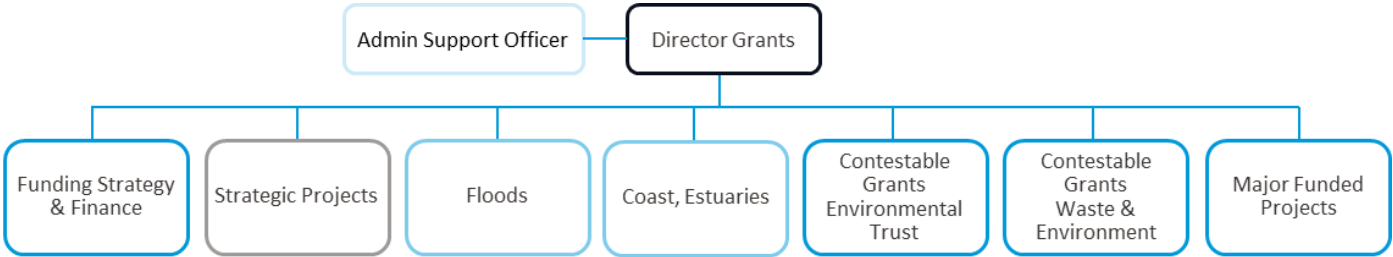
Figure 5 shows the staff in the Contestable Grants Environmental Trust team, which administers the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program (and others as noted above).

One staff member only (a Project Officer) from the Contestable Grants team is dedicated to the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program. The Program is also supported by a Senior Project Officer and the Program Support Officer[15].

Figure 5: Organisation chart – Contestable team
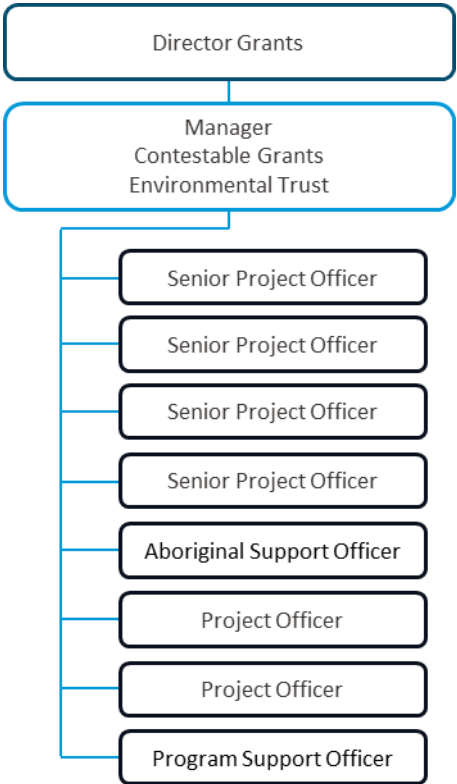
[15] Grants Branch organisation chart and update (Source: Environment and Heritage Group, Governance, Strategy and Coordination Division, supplied by DPE October 2023)

1.4   Program operations

Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Program Guidelines are produced for each funding round and the Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation page on the Trust's website[16] provides eligibility criteria and a general explanation of available funding and environmental priorities. In addition, it offers links to:

- guidelines and application forms
- planning and reporting processes
- project summaries of grants awarded since 2015
- the 2017 Restoration and Rehabilitation program evaluation, including the final report and the administrative responses to each of the recommendations.

The flowchart in Figure 6 presents an overview of the various stages in the administration of the Program from the application process to the completion of a grant.

1.5   2017 Program evaluation

An evaluation of the Program's operations between 2010 and 2015 was conducted by the Natural Resources Commission in 2017[17]. The evaluation made 45 recommendations across five broad areas:

- program design (nine recommendations)
- governance and administration (seven recommendations)
- application process and selection of projects (nine recommendations)
- communication (six recommendations)
- monitoring, evaluation and reporting (14 recommendations).

The Trust endorsed 32 of the recommendations, "partially accepted" 12 and rejected only one of the recommendations. Key reforms flowing from the evaluation that have been initiated by the Grants Branch include:

- a new draft program logic
- the establishment of two new tiers of funding, tier 1 for inexperienced applicants and tier 2 for experienced applicants (see Section 1)
- an increase in the ceiling of available funds to experienced (tier 2) grant recipients (for the 2022-2023 round - the two funding tiers have been adjusted for stream 1 (new organisations) to grants between $50K to $125K in total for 2-3 year projects and stream 2 (experienced organisations) to between $125K to $200K in total for 3-4 year projects)
- the introduction of a grants management system (GMS) to improve data quality and produce efficient and accurate Program-level data

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[16] https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/nsw-environmental-trust/grants-available/environmental-restoration-and-rehabilitation
[17] https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/nsw-environmental-trust/grants-available/environmental-restoration-and-rehabilitation

- the introduction of monitoring, evaluation and reporting data that incorporates outcome measures for both environmental and social (i.e. capacity building) aspects of the Program

- the introduction of mandated M&E funding.

A number of other key recommendations are in the process of being implemented or have not yet been addressed. These include:

- incorporating the new program logic and the suggested output and outcome measures in the workplan and reporting processes

- a reassessment of data measures to align measurement with the key outcomes for each project (e.g. capacity building and environmental outcomes)

- a review of the time-frame between a successful application and the provision of grant funds, including the timing of the workplan process

- a formal needs analysis to more specifically target Program funds

- additional support and more targeted promotion to "lower capacity" groups to encourage participation in the application process from potential grant recipients, especially from areas identified as important to address priority objectives

- the provision of more consistent and informative feedback to grant recipients and feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

Figure 6: Flowchart – The Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Program processes
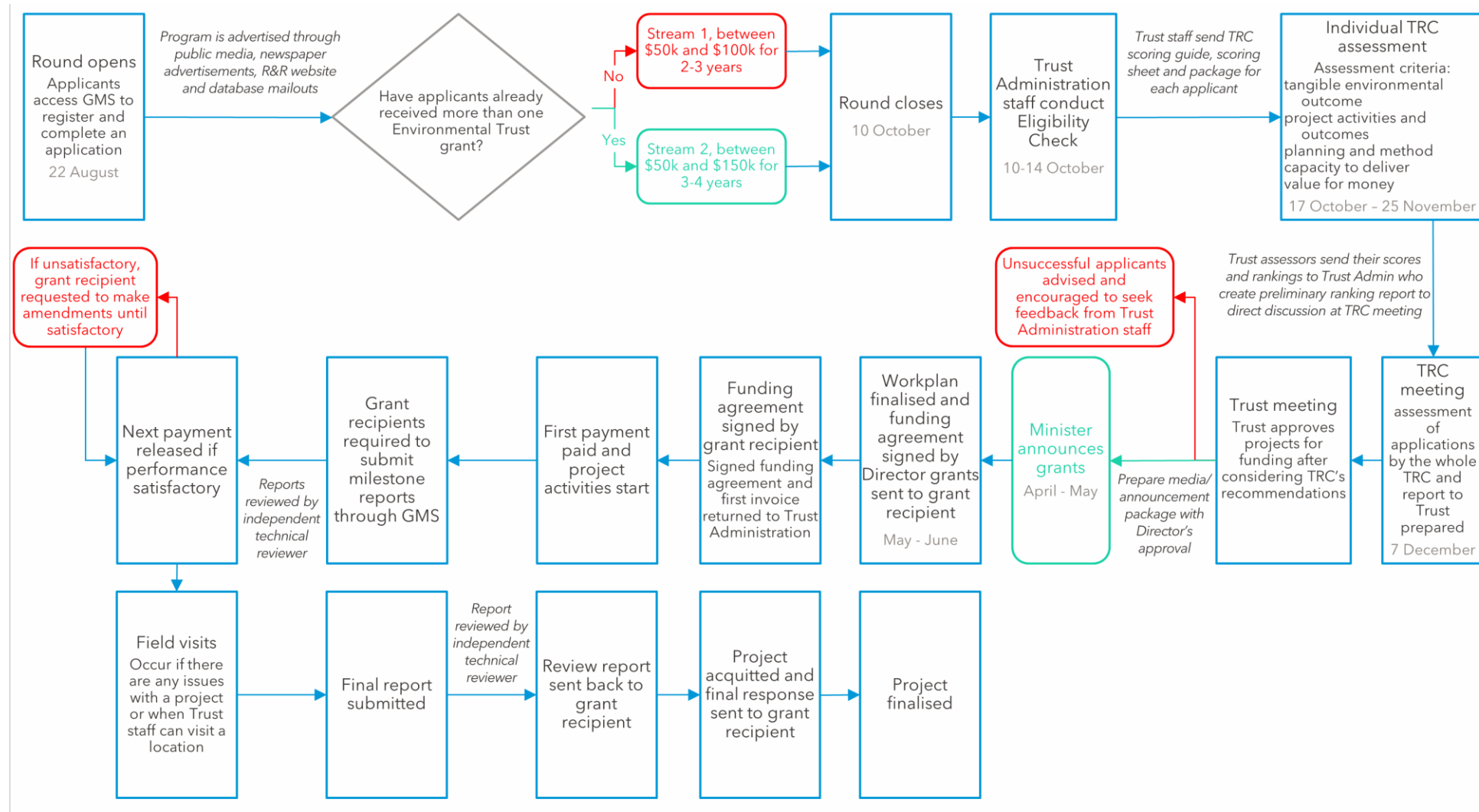
2. Evaluation methods

This evaluation was a multi-method evaluation comprising:

- collation and analysis of background information and data on the Program
- development of a "best practice" grants management checklist derived from the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide
- consultations with Trust staff
- interviews with representatives of funded organisations
- a survey of organisations funded between 2018 and 2021-22
- an in-depth analysis of various documents for five completed projects
- a series of consultations with key stakeholders, including TRC members, independent reviewers, representatives of funded organisations and unsuccessful applicants.

2.1 Collation and analysis of background information and data on the Program

The background information and data on the Program reviewed included:

- application guidelines from 2018 to 2022
- Program guidelines from 2018 to 2022
- advice packages sent to TRCs by Trust staff for assessing applications, including TRC assessment guidelines, Program guidelines and relevant Trust staff comments on each grant application
- TRC ranking reports of grant applications, including TRC members' individual scores of applications
- project measures and activity types
- sample workplans
- grant recipient GMS milestone reports
- the 2017 evaluation of the Program conducted by the Natural Resources Commission.

2.2 Development of a "best practice" grants management checklist

Nexus developed a checklist that was derived from the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide to assess the Program's administration. Appendix 5 presents the checklist and a summary of the assessment against the guidelines. The checklist was also used to inform the consultations with Trust staff and funded organisations.

2.3 Consultations with Trust staff

A series of consultations was held with Trust staff throughout the evaluation to:

- gather background information about the Program
- identify key issues to address during the evaluation
- discuss potential reforms to the Program's administration.

Appendix 6 lists the Trust staff consulted.

2.4   Consultations with funded organisations

Initial online consultations were held with representatives of three funded organisations to discuss their views on the Program's design, achievements and administration. Appendix 7 shows the briefing paper on which the discussions were based.

These initial consultations informed the development of the instrument for a focus group held with nine representatives of funded organisations to discuss:

- the strengths of the current Program

- areas for improvement in measuring and reporting on program outcomes and achievements

- areas for improvement in the administration of the program (e.g. application and reporting)

- whether the aims and structure of the program are appropriate or could be modified.

Appendix 8 contains the focus group instrument and the number of participants.

2.5   Survey of funded organisations

The consultations with the representatives of the three funded organisations guided the development of an online survey instrument which was sent to all grant recipients between 2018 and 2021-22. Of the 148 grant recipients, 65 (44%) responded to the survey. A version of the survey containing some open-ended questions was sent to a sample of 34 of the 148 grant recipients and, of these, 20 (59%) provided responses. Appendix 9 contains the survey instrument.

In summary:

- just under two-thirds (65%) of the respondents were from community organisations and just over one-third were from government organisations (35%)

- over three-quarters (77%) of the respondents had received two or more program grants and the grant was active for 70% of the respondents

- the size of the grant varied across respondents: from $50k-$100k (45% of respondents),

- $100-$150k (32%) and >$150k (23%).

Broadly, the survey sought grant recipients' views on:

- the strengths of the Program

- the Program design and administration

- the application process

- the grants management system

- monitoring and reporting requirements

- the Trust administration support.

Appendix 10 contains the survey results, including a summary of the themes from the responses to the open-ended questions.

2.6   In-depth analysis

The evaluation included an in-depth analysis of monitoring and reporting documents for a sample of five completed funded projects including:

- applications
- work plans
- milestone reports
- photo data points
- final reports.

The purpose of this in-depth analysis was to obtain an understanding of the projects funded and the Program's monitoring and reporting requirements with a view to seeing whether outcomes could be aggregated across multiple projects. This process involved the creation of a rubric where evidence from each project was assessed against four key criteria:

- monitoring and evaluation
- environmental outputs and outcomes
- community involvement and engagement
- sustainability of outcomes.

Appendix 11 contains the in-depth analysis instrument and a list of the five projects that were assessed.

2.7   Consultations with key stakeholders

A series of consultations was held with key stakeholders:

- a focus group with eight current and former members of the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program TRC that assesses program applications
- a focus group with six independent reviewers who assess grant recipients' milestone and progress reports
- interviews with two unsuccessful grant recipients.

See Appendix 7 for a copy of the briefing paper used to structure these consultations.

2.8   Reporting

Following the data collection and analysis stages, we prepared an issues paper setting out our preliminary findings and draft proposals for discussion with the Director, Grants and the Manager, Contestable Grants. We then prepared a draft report and this final report incorporates the feedback of the Grants Branch Director, the Manager Contestable Grants, Environmental Trust and selected Trust staff on the draft report.

2.9   Methodological challenges

Two fundamental methodological challenges preclude us from making a definitive assessment of the Program's achievements:

- the Program's intended environmental outcomes are often longer-term and beyond individual projects' funding terms – the evaluation did not have access to data on longer-term environmental restoration and rehabilitation outcomes

- even if it were possible to draw conclusions about the impact of individual projects on environmental outcomes, it is not possible to readily aggregate these achievements into standardised measures of outcomes because the Program funds a diversity of activities directed at different restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

These methodological challenges were also identified in the 2017 evaluation which recommended a number of reforms to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the program. Sections 4 and 5 of this report consider these issues in more detail.

In assessing program design and administration issues, the following methodological issues should be noted:

- while the response rate of the survey of grant recipients was relatively high (44%) for surveys of this type, there is the risk that the respondents were not representative of all grant recipients

- similarly, the 59% of grant recipients who responded to the open-ended survey questions may not be representative of all grant recipients

- only two unsuccessful applicants were interviewed and, in general, the evaluation mainly engaged with stakeholders and grant recipients who have contact with the Program.

3. Program strengths

This section outlines the Program strengths which were identified through our analysis against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration requirements and through stakeholder consultations including focus groups with grant recipients, TRC members and independent reviewers.
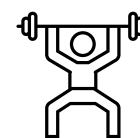
Our consultations with grant recipients, TRC members and independent reviewers revealed overwhelming support for the Program. Stakeholders consistently acknowledged the Program as being unusually longstanding and well-known in the sector and it was frequently noted that the Program occupies an increasingly important niche in environmental grants funding. The Program was also commended for providing multi-year funding and for its emphasis on building local capacity and the availability of funding for community groups.

The stakeholders also acknowledged the support of Trust staff for their in-depth knowledge of the Program, their willingness to work with grant recipients and for their flexibility in grants administration in the face of the dramatically changing operating environments in recent years, including Covid, fires, floods and drought.

Our consultations with TRC members and independent reviewers acknowledged the Program's transparent and robust administrative processes. Our review of the Program's administration indicates that it is largely consistent with Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration requirements and a particular strength is the involvement of independent technical experts in assessing applications and reviewing progress reports (although we have identified opportunities for improving how these experts are utilised, as discussed in Section 6).

The Program guidelines and administration are oriented to the achievement of environmental outcomes and the Trust has also devoted significant effort to the monitoring and evaluation of the program including:

- the evolution of requirements for funded organisations to report on and document their achievements
- the commissioning of independent evaluations of the Program, such as this evaluation
- the establishment of dedicated monitoring and evaluation budgets for grant recipients.

These strengths provide a sound foundation to address the key issues discussed in the next sections. These key issues concern:

- program design
- program achievements
- program administration.

4. Program design issues

> This section considers issues with the design, or "architecture" of the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program and addresses the following evaluation questions:
> → How effective is the Program delivery and design?
> → How equitable is the Program?

A recent independent review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016, conducted by Dr Ken Henry, concludes that the NSW environment is in a precarious state:

> *"Biodiversity is not being conserved at bioregional or State scale. The diversity and quality of ecosystems is not being maintained, nor is their capacity to adapt to change and provide for the needs of future generations being enhanced (piii)"*[18].

These conclusions are reinforced by the *NSW State of the Environment Report 2021* which emphasises that climate change continues to pose a significant threat to the environment and people of NSW. The report states that in NSW the condition of most native vegetation continues to deteriorate. Since the Black Summer fires of 2019, 62% of vegetation in the fire zone is under pressure from too much burning. Permanent clearing of native woody vegetation in NSW has increased about three-fold since 2015 and stands at an average of 35,000 ha cleared each year. Permanent clearing of non-woody vegetation, such as native shrubs and ground covers, occurs at an even higher rate[19].

Furthermore, the number of threated species also continues to rise in NSW; more than 1,000 native plant and animal species and 112 ecological communities are currently listed as threatened under State legislation. The main threats to these species are habitat loss due to permanent clearing and degradation of native vegetation and the spread of invasive pests and weeds[20].

Clearly, an environmental crisis of this scale is beyond the scope of the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program itself to remedy. Nevertheless, the Program has demonstrated an ability to secure small scale restoration and rehabilitation of degraded environmental resources, including rare and endangered ecosystems. There is strong support among all stakeholders we consulted for the retention of the Program and the need for the Program is also reflected in continuing high demand – over the evaluation period there were 428 applications, of which less than half (45%) were successful in obtaining funding, and the number of applications per year has remained relatively steady (see Table 2).

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[18] Source: https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/186428/Independent%20Review%20of%20the%20 Biodiversity%20Conservation%20Act%202016-Final.pdf
[19] Source: https://www.soe.epa.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/21p3448-nsw-state-of-the- environment-2021_0.pdf
[20] https://www.soe.epa.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/21p3448-nsw-state-of-the-environment- 2021_0.pdf

As noted in Section 3, the Program is seen to be uniquely positioned in the environmental funding landscape, although it is noted that the current funding priority area of threatened species coincides with the focus of another Trust funding program, Save our Species (SoS). However, Trust staff stated that the SoS program has a more specific focus and is due to expire over the next few years.

As also noted in Section 3, one of the strengths of the Program is its outcome orientation. The Program guidelines and application processes focus on securing environmental outcomes and the Trust has introduced a number of reforms to the Program's monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements since the 2017 evaluation to reinforce that outcomes orientation, including the development of a draft program logic with an accompanying monitoring directory.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the Program is confronted by three fundamental design issues concerning the achievement of longer-term, sustainable environmental outcomes:

- the relationship between project outputs and Program outcomes

- the sustainability of outcomes

- the equity of access to Program funding.

4.1   Project outputs and program outcomes

A fundamental challenge for the Program is that many of its intended environmental outcomes can only be achieved in the longer-term and often well beyond the funding period of individual projects. What can be achieved more readily are project outputs (e.g. area weeded; number of nest boxes installed; kms of fencing installed) as a precursor to the longer-term outcomes (such as area of habitat functionally connected, protected and sustained; change in behaviour of communities and institutions).

For this reason, the 2017 evaluation recommended that the Trust develop a program logic to articulate an explicit causal path between project outputs and longer-term outcomes. As noted in Section 1, the draft program logic shown in Figure 1 has been developed but was not adopted in the Program guidelines and application process between 2018 and 2021-22 (nor for the 2022-23 funding round which is outside the time frame of this evaluation). It is understood that the Branch is finalising the program logic as part of its review of its monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes.

The draft program logic provides a succinct, plain English summary of what the Program does and how projects contribute to intermediate and longer-term outcomes. In finalising the program logic, the following amendments are proposed:

- including an explicit statement that the intermediate outcomes relate to individual projects while the Program outcomes concern longer-term sustainable outcomes that extend beyond individual projects

- in line with this amendment, rewording the current intermediate outcome, "*NSW community has the knowledge and understanding of environmental issues and best management practices*" so that it focuses on local communities (i.e. project-specific) rather than the whole of NSW - indeed, change at the whole of NSW level is not even viable as a Program outcome

given that the Program comprises a relatively small number of discrete projects across a very large geographic area

- including a new row, "*what Restoration and Rehabilitation grants produce*", to encompass project outputs, as opposed to intermediate outcomes - the inclusion of this new row would strengthen alignment between the project reporting requirements and the conceptual distinction between outputs and outcomes drawn in the 2017 evaluation report

- revising the heading of the top row of the program logic so that it refers to the Environmental Trust strategic plan, rather than the Grants Branch.

> **Recommendation 1. It is recommended that the Trust amend the draft program logic to more clearly align with the wording of the Environmental Trust strategic plan, to draw an explicit distinction between project-specific intermediate outcomes and longer-term program outcomes and to incorporate project outputs.**

> **Recommendation 2. It is recommended that the Trust formally adopt the draft program logic and incorporate it in its Restoration and Rehabilitation Program guidelines and accompanying resources.**

The adoption of the program logic will enable the Trust to progress a key theme of the 2017 evaluation to more directly target projects that are likely to contribute to the desired outcomes. In the absence of a program logic and a systematic needs analysis, the Program has tended to operate under the broad objectives and aims discussed in the 2017 evaluation and set out in the Trust strategic plan. In addition to the three priorities highlighted in that strategic plan – strengthening NSW's natural environment, supporting native species and their habitats and reducing human-induced impacts on the environment - the Trust has nominated two additional priorities specific to the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program - climate change and threatened species. It is not clear how these two layers of priorities interact with each other and, in any case, while these objectives and priority areas are consistent with government policy and environmental objectives, they do not represent the proposed shift to a more targeted funding program aligned with more clearly articulated outcomes envisaged in the 2017 evaluation. Although it was not possible to extract information from the grants management system comparing the types of projects funded in the last five years compared with those considered in the 2017   evaluation, it appears that the allocation of funding since the 2017 evaluation has not shifted as proposed.

Consistent with the aim of having more targeted program funding, the 2017 evaluation recommended a systematic needs analysis to identify specific and local environmental restoration and rehabilitation priorities across NSW. It is understood that, in response, a needs analysis was commissioned but its results were not endorsed by the Trust. With changes to the composition of the Trust since the 2023 election, it may be opportune for the Trust to review the outcomes of the needs analysis and/or commission an update of the analysis.

> **Recommendation 3. It is recommended that the Trust review or update the needs analysis of local restoration and rehabilitation priorities that was undertaken following the 2017 evaluation of the program.**

4.2   The sustainability of outcomes

The adoption of the program logic and a more targeted approach to achieve environmental outcomes would not of itself address the sustainability of the outcomes beyond the funding period. That is, as noted in the 2017 evaluation and in consultations with grant recipients, TRC members and independent reviewers, there is an inherent risk that projects' rehabilitation and restoration *outputs*, such as weeding or fencing, will not be sustained once funding has concluded.

One option to enhance the likelihood of sustaining the environmental outcomes of projects considered during the evaluation was to fund a smaller number of larger projects from the Program budget. That is, under this option ("the bigger is better option"), the Program funding would be consolidated across a smaller number of projects that had been assessed as most likely to deliver sustained environmental outcomes. The option was explored in the survey of grant recipients in which there was a reasonably high level of support for funding to be directed to a smaller number of larger grants (53.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that fewer, higher value grants are more effective than more, smaller-value grants in achieving sustainable environmental goals)[21].

However, the consensus from our consultations with TRC members and independent reviewers revealed less support for the "bigger is better" concept. They saw the approach as reducing the likelihood of worthy smaller initiatives accessing funding, especially for organisations that have not previously received grants. That is, the approach would potentially erode a Trust priority to redirect funding to new grant recipients in new parts of the State.

An alternative to the "bigger is better" option that was considered during our consultations was a "longer is better" option. The majority of Program stakeholders was generally more supportive of the option of extending the length of funding for a sample of projects that were more likely to achieve sustainable environmental outcomes. This approach, which would build upon an existing strength of the Program, its multi-year funding cycle, would entail offering funding for a five-year period to <u>selected</u> projects that meet certain criteria:

- a track record of success in managing projects successfully, as documented by independent reviewers

- clear evidence that the project could yield demonstrable and measurable outcomes.

This model would formalise existing arrangements under tier/stream 2 funding in which grant recipients can access subsequent rounds to build upon earlier successes. The difference would be that the longer-term funding would be available from the outset thus negating the need for re-application. However, the shift to longer-term funding would need to be risk managed by being limited to selected applicants in priority areas and could incorporate more rigorous reviews at key milestones (e.g. at the project mid-point), as a precondition for continued funding until the end of the project. Ideally, these reviews would include site visits by the independent reviewers, possibly as part of the proposed annual cycle of project audits (see recommendation 14).

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[21] It should be noted that given that the survey respondents, by definition, had received Program funding, including a large proportion that were managing active grants, it may not be surprising that they would support additional funding.

> **Recommendation 4. It is recommended that the Program be redesigned to provide for a stream of funding for five years that is available for organisations that have a successful track record in managing projects and can provide evidence that they will achieve measurable environmental outcomes with continued funding at key milestones dependent upon the outcomes of independent reviews, including site visits.**

It should be noted that implementing this recommendation would require substantial development work if approved by the Trust including:

• significant revision of the program guidelines

• development of robust criteria for determining the 'successful track record'

• revisions to the monitoring and reporting requirements.

Moreover, Trust staff expressed a concern that the transition to longer-term funding could add further administrative burden to a small and overstretched team (as noted in Section 3, the Program has only one dedicated full-time officer). The staff noted that longer-term grants often require resource-intensive, hands-on support in, for example, administering variations that flow from unanticipated changes in the operating environment, such as the droughts and floods of recent years. For this reason, any shift to longer-term funding may need to be accompanied by reforms to the funding cycle, such as moving away from annual funding or reducing the amount of funding available each year to accommodate additional spending on larger projects.

Longer-term grants would also accentuate a concern that was commonly raised in our consultations with Trust staff and funded organisations: the need for funding to take account of the increase in inflation that has occurred in recent years. It was noted that cost estimates provided in applications and work plans had become outdated thus jeopardising the ability of projects to achieve their targets.

> **Recommendation 5. It is recommended that the Trust include an annual adjustment to account for inflation in multi-year grants.**

An alternative, or additional, approach to increasing the likelihood of achieving sustainable environmental outcomes that was canvassed in our consultations was for the Trust to provide post-grant maintenance funding. That is, rather than a new round of full Program funding, organisations could apply for a smaller amount of funding to maintain the restoration and rehabilitation work completed during the initial funded period. The 2017 evaluation recommended that the Trust consider providing small longer-term maintenance grants[22] to reduce the risk that the restoration and rehabilitation efforts will not be sustained once funding ceases. While the Trust "partially accepted" the recommendation, it has not been actioned because the Trust noted that maintenance was already a responsibility of grant recipients[23] as part of their obligations in building local community capacity and resilience. The Trust also noted that diverting available budget funds to maintenance activities would reduce the Trust's ability to invest in its priorities as it could consume a growing proportion of the Program's budget.

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[22] The 2017 evaluation also recommended the Trust consider longer-term monitoring grants which is considered in Section 5
[23] restoration-rehabilitation-2017-evaluation-administrative-response-170712.pdf p11

![Nexus Management Consulting logo]

On the other hand, in the absence of post-project monitoring, it is not possible to determine whether local communities have fulfilled their responsibilities of maintenance of their restoration and rehabilitation work that will lead to more sustainable outcomes. Accordingly, there is merit in pursuing the proposed approach, at least on a pilot basis subject to evaluation which, ideally, would compare post-project environmental outcomes for those with maintenance grants versus similar projects that do not receive the maintenance funding. Careful consideration would need to be given to the eligibility for the maintenance funding to ensure that only projects that have successfully delivered their outputs would be eligible for any ongoing funding. That is, the funding should not provide a perverse incentive for "unsuccessful" projects to receive additional funding.

Moreover, to mitigate the risk of consuming too large a stake of the Program budget, the maintenance funding could be capped at a certain level each year.

> **Recommendation 6. It is recommended that the Trust pilot and evaluate maintenance grants for successfully completed projects to maintain restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.**

4.3   Funding equity

A defining characteristic and perceived strength of the Program is that it funds community-led and community-initiated local projects. This feature has significant implications for the distribution of Program allocations – the spread of funds can reflect the success of "bottom-up" bids rather than flowing from a "top-down" systematic analysis of environmental priorities across the State. For example, the 2017 evaluation noted that 47 percent of projects awarded in the previous five years were in the North Coast region even though that region represents only approximately 4% of total NSW land area and approximately 6.4% of NSW total population[24].

The 2017 evaluation therefore made a number of recommendations to improve the geographic spread of the Program funding, and, in response, the Trust introduced a number of reforms including the two-tiered system for "new" and "experienced" grant applicants noted in Section 1. Further, the 2019-2020 guidelines introduced an allowance for applicants in western NSW[25] to submit more than one application and to be awarded funding for two projects.

However, our analysis of the Program data over the last five years indicates that the allocation of Program funding is still skewed. For example:

- as reflected in the heat maps in Section 1, whilst reducing the over-representation of funding allocated to the North Coast from 47% in 2017 evaluation, the region still accounts for 37% of total funding in the five years since the 2017 evaluation, significantly larger than share of the State's population and landmass

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[24] https://hnc.org.au/our-region/#:~:text=The%20northern%20boundary%20is%20the,the%20region%20in%20diverse%20locatio   ns.
[25] This includes organisations located in the areas of operation of Western Local Land Services, North West Local Land Services, Central West Local Land Services, Riverina Local Land Services and Murray Local Land Services: 2019-2020: environmental-restoration-rehabilitation-grants-program-guidelines- 190555.pdf

- as a percentage of total funding, only 13% of funding was allocated to the state's west (combining the regions of Central West and Orana with Far West) which represents approximately 31% of the total NSW landmass[26].

Further, attempts to allocate more funding to organisations that have not previously been funded have only had limited success: only 21% of the available grant funds, representing 29% of the number of grants, were awarded to tier 1 (new) grant recipients in its first year of introduction (2020-2021) with similar figures in 2021-2022 (22% and 31% respectively).

These figures do not necessarily reflect problems with funding decisions, which are based on the merits of individual applications. What they may reflect are some underlying systemic factors:

- the relatively high population density in non-metropolitan areas such as the North Coast which have been more successful in attracting funding
- a higher concentration of scientific and technical expertise in those areas
- the traditional focus of the Program on natural bush regeneration which is more commonly practiced in coastal and hinterland range areas
- regional differences in land use such as the prominence of agricultural land use in Western NSW
- the fact that success breeds success – successful grants applicants develop superior grant writing skills
- less developed community capacity in conservation work in areas that have been proportionally less successful in accessing Program funds
- a possible lack of awareness of the Program in areas that have traditionally not received much funding[27].

To address these factors and attempt to broaden the geographic spread of funding and to attract new grant applicants, a more strategic, targeted approach may be required than the stream 1 funding component. This more strategic approach could encompass:

- the environmental needs assessment recommended in Section 4 to identify specific funding priorities (see draft recommendation 3), including a consultation of whether eligible activities could be broadened to encompass practices such as sustainable agriculture, more relevant in other parts of the State
- program promotion activities directed at these priorities
- local capacity building to encourage applications for these priorities, including mentoring and support to applicants and grant recipients.

The proposed needs assessment could be accompanied by a targeted campaign to promote the Program to attract applications, especially from areas that have been previously under-

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[26] NB: these figures vary according to different Govt websites due to variations in LGA inclusions. The Western Region inclusive of Northwest (included in the New England in this report) is approximately 40% of NSW: https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/regions/western

[27] This evaluation was unable to ascertain the level of awareness of the Program across the State. Most of the consultations were with Program stakeholders including grant recipients who, by definition, are aware of the Program. However, some of these stakeholders provided anecdotal evidence that the Program is not well known in non-traditional funding areas.

represented. The campaign could include:

- provision of resources to local organisations, including Local Land Services (LLS), councils and relevant community organisations
- public relations activities to attract local media interest, including local radio and TV and farming and environmental publication (e.g. The Land)
- targeted social media campaigns.

The campaign could also include pre-application capacity building to encourage the establishment of new partnerships and to develop potential proponents' understanding of the Program by showcasing previous successful projects and providing hands-on training in completing grant applications. These capacity building initiatives could be delivered online via webinars and resource links.

> **Recommendation 7. It is recommended that the Trust design and implement a strategy to target identified environmental restoration and rehabilitation priorities to promote the Program and attract new grant applicants.**

> **Recommendation 8. It is recommended that the Program promotion include targeted pre-application capacity building for potential applicants, including resources and training in grant writing.**

5. Program outcomes

The key evaluation questions addressed under program outcomes are:

→ **How enduring are the Program outcomes?**
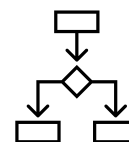
The Trust has continued to evolve its monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes following the 2017 evaluation of the Program. These reforms include:

- the draft Restoration and Rehabilitation program logic discussed in Section 4 that aligns with the overarching Grants Branch MERI framework

- categorising outcomes into project management, environmental and social outcomes, with standardised program measures enabling grant recipients to align their individual project outcomes with the program logic and MERI framework

- a monitoring directory to provide guidance to funded organisations on selecting the appropriate measures and data collection methods with the aim of collecting consistent data across projects that can be aggregated for reporting

- work planning revisions to enable grant recipients map the outcomes their project will deliver, and set out project measures to track their progress against each activity and desired outcome

- a requirement that the grant recipients allocate 10% of the final project funds towards monitoring - additional project support funding is also available if needed for monitoring and evaluation

- regular milestone reporting against the program measures, reviewed by independent experts, enables early identification of any aspects of the projects that are not on track to achieve the desired result

- encouraging grant recipients to adopt rigorous data collection methods and triangulation of evidence including pre–post assessments, surveys, photographic assessments and mapping.

The adoption of a revised program logic recommended in Section 4 is a pre-requisite for addressing other key monitoring and evaluation issues this evaluation has identified:

- clarification of responsibilities for monitoring and evaluation

- the measurement of program outcomes

- Trust staff capability development.

5.1 Monitoring and evaluation responsibilities

The monitoring and evaluation of the Program involves multiple players:

- Trust staff who are responsible for overall program administration including the monitoring and reporting systems

- grant recipients who are responsible for providing milestone and final reports, including progress against targets and measures set out in their work plans

- independent reviewers who conduct desktop assessments of project milestone and final reports.

In addition, some grant recipients engage third party contractors to carry out monitoring work for inclusion in their milestone and final reports. This work is funded through the dedicated monitoring and evaluation funds or the additional project support funding available for monitoring and evaluation.

While these respective roles are quite distinct, they have evolved over time and it would be helpful to prepare an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework for inclusion in the Program guidelines that set out:

- the respective roles and responsibilities of each of the above actors

- any monitoring, evaluation and reporting reforms flowing from this evaluation.

The development of an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework would also help address some confusion about the monitoring and evaluation budget provided to grant recipients. Our consultations with representatives of funded organisations and the survey results indicate that some grant recipients were unaware of the monitoring and evaluation component of their grant. Similarly, the independent reviewers' focus group revealed the need for clarification of how the monitoring and evaluation budgets were to be used by funded organisations and integrated with overall program monitoring and evaluation.

> **Recommendation 9. It is recommended that the Trust develop an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework, for inclusion in the Program guidelines, that sets out the respective roles and responsibilities of Trust staff, funded organisations and independent reviewers in project and program monitoring, evaluation and reporting, including the use of dedicated funds for monitoring and reporting in Program grants.**

This recommendation could be addressed in the context of ongoing reforms of the Grant Branch's overall MERI approach, including any changes that flow from the review of Trust programs against the NSW Government's guidelines.

5.2   Measuring program outcomes

Section 4.1 noted that environmental outcomes tended to be longer-term and beyond the funding envelope of most projects. As a result, the Program's monitoring and reporting efforts are primarily directed at assessing project outputs. Even if it were possible to obtain data on individual project outcomes, the challenge would be to aggregate this data to draw Program-wide conclusions about environmental outcomes. The establishment of standardised measures against which funded organisations map their projects is an attempt to facilitate this aggregation effort, at least at the output level. For example, the Trust annual report presents some selected aggregated measures:

- hectares regenerated and revegetated

- number of organisation adopting improved land management practices

- number of volunteers, contractors and students involved

- number of training sessions and other events, including number of attendees.

However, there are issues to be addressed in the aggregation:

- only a sample of all measures are aggregated and reported, and it is not clear whether information on the remaining measures is utilised
- the outcome measures identified in the revised program monitoring and evaluation framework have not been fully incorporated into the monitoring directory as yet (e.g. area of habitat functionally connected; area of habitat protected; number of individuals reporting enhanced capacities to address issues)
- the community involvement and engagement measures are output-focused and do not consistently address change in behaviour, awareness, knowledge and skills.

Moreover, the Branch's grants management system (GMS) is unable to readily generate aggregate data entered on a project level. Currently, it is time and resource-intensive for Trust staff to produce reports on aggregate outcomes which, ideally, should be automated (see Section 6.4 for further discussion of the GMS).

In some instances, there is inconsistency in how outputs and outcomes are differentiated in the Program documentation. For example, the application guidelines provide the following example under social outcomes (page 5):

> *Engage the community to attract 200 participants over 3 years in a citizen science project in monitoring tree hollows, through awareness raising and educational events on the importance of standing and fallen deadwood to the local animals.*

This example does not clarify that the number of participants and events are output measures and level of awareness is an outcome measure.

These issues also emerged in our desktop analysis of the final reports of completed projects:

- the projects reviewed in the in-depth analysis refer to baseline monitoring data but did not provide post-project evidence beyond self-reported narratives
- the community involvement and engagement measures tend to be output focused and do not consistently measure change in behaviour, awareness, knowledge and skills
- some outcome measures such as individuals/ participants adopting positive environmental action are not reported consistently.

The in-depth analysis and consultations with independent reviewers also identified the need to strengthen the reporting of the sustainability of outcomes. Currently the grant recipients are required to provide a narrative explanation on sustainability of outcomes ('What type of activities should you plan for to maintain your project outcomes after the end of the project?') and no other evidence is required for demonstrating the sustainability of outputs and outcomes, a fundamental aim of the Program. While issues of sustainability cannot be fully addressed in the self-reports of grant recipients and require independent verification and longer-term follow-up, the existing arrangements could be strengthened by:

- providing specific guidance to grant recipients on building sustainability
- developing sustainability outcome measures aligned to the program logic

- extending the independent reviewers' assessment criterial in the final report to address the sustainability of restoration and rehabilitation gains achieved.

Recommendation 10. It is recommended that the Trust incorporate the outcome measures recommended in the revised Restoration and Rehabilitation monitoring and evaluation framework in its monitoring directory.

Recommendation 11. It is recommended that the Trust continue work on the aggregation and reporting of project outputs and outcomes.

Recommendation 12. It is recommended that the Trust review and enhance its resource materials to differentiate between outputs and outcomes in the workplan when selecting project measures.

Recommendation 13. It is recommended that the Trust update the program guidelines, outcome measures and independent review process to gather the sustainability of outcomes more systematically.

The desktop analysis also provided a more fundamental challenge: the difficulty of assessing program achievements through self-reported milestones reports – a point that was echoed in our focus group with the independent reviewers. While evidence such as photo points and videos is valuable, the reviewers indicated that in the absence of actual site visits this information was hard to interpret and was not placed in context to, for example, draw reliable and valid conclusions about pre-post project achievements.

The independent reviewers and the TRC members advocated for a more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluation that incorporates field visits, while acknowledging that it was too time and resource-intensive to visit all funded sites. A more feasible approach would be to introduce a risk-based program of annual project reviews and evaluations, involving two components:

- reviews of a sample of existing projects

- evaluations of a sample of completed projects.

Firstly, a sample of ongoing projects would be subject to annual reviews that involve site visits. The projects selected for the annual reviews would be chosen on risk criteria (e.g. site of the project; feedback from independent reviewers; geographic location) and the reviews would be conducted by contracted independent technical experts, such as the independent reviewers, using a standardised review approach. The introduction of the reviews would provide more rigorous information on project progress than the desktop analysis of progress reports and complement the existing role of the independent reviewers without adding a significant administrative burden on the Trust staff. The audits would also yield richer qualitative information for ongoing program improvement and refinement.

The introduction of the annual review cycle would send a signal to grant recipients that their project may be subject to more scrutiny, including potential site visits, and thus provide an incentive for improved project management and record keeping. The grant recipients we

consulted indicated a preference for more site visits as it would provide Trust staff, or independent reviewers, with an opportunity to physically view the restoration and rehabilitation work on the ground. The funded organisation representatives felt that milestone and final reports often failed to adequately capture their achievements and truly represent the work they have done.

Recommendation 14. It is recommended that the Trust introduce a risk-based program of a limited number of annual project reviews conducted by independent technical experts and involving site visits.

The second element of a strengthened monitoring and evaluation regime would be the introduction of commissioned evaluations of a sample of completed projects to assess the sustainability of the projects' restoration and rehabilitation outcomes. To assess the longevity of outcomes, these evaluations would take place some years after the grant is concluded. A set of criteria would need to be developed to guide selection of projects to be evaluated and these could include the size of the grant, the type of project and the opportunity for lessons learned to apply across the Program. Once again, these evaluations would be conducted by contracted technical experts, such as the independent reviewers.

The evaluations would be able to provide more conclusive evidence on the environmental impact of funded projects in the longer term than broadly based overall evaluations such as the one in 2017 and this current evaluation.

Recommendation 15. It is recommended that the Trust introduce a program of a limited number of annual post-project evaluations involving site visits conducted by independent technical experts to determine the longer-term sustainability of environmental restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

5.3   Trust staff capability development

Many of the issues discussed in this section concern complex methodological challenges in measuring environmental outcomes, drawing causal links, and distinguishing between project outputs and outcomes. While program monitoring and evaluation are core roles of the Trust staff and the Grants Branch overall, it is unrealistic to expect all staff to have fully developed technical skills in these areas. Accordingly, there is merit in considering a systematic approach to the ongoing professional development of Program staff and, indeed, to the broader Grants Branch.

Recommendation 16. It is recommended that the Trust undertake a needs analysis of Grants Branch staff to target professional development in monitoring and evaluation.

A Branch-wide approach to professional development could also build cross-program consistency in monitoring and evaluation. The needs analysis could, in addition, explore Branch-wide support for monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

6. Program administration issues

> The key evaluation questions addressed under program administration are:
> → **How efficiently is the Program being delivered?**
> → **How appropriately positioned and resourced is the Program?**

The terms of reference for this evaluation included an assessment of the program administration against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide which parallels a project examining compliance with the Guide across the whole of the Grants Branch. To assist our assessment of the Program, we developed the checklist shown in Appendix 6 which was derived from the Guide. To assist our assessment of the Program, we developed the checklist shown in Appendix 5 which was derived from the Guide. Appendix 5 also provides the results of our assessment against the checklist.

In summary, the analysis has identified that most aspects of the Program administration meet the requirements of the Guide:

• the Program guidelines are, in general, clear and articulate the Program aims and objectives

• the Program has a strong outcome orientation

• there is a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities in decision-making about funding with an independent expert panel, the Technical Review Committee, making recommendations to the decision-maker, the Trust

• grant recipients have clear accountability requirements, including milestone reports and the provision of documented evidence to monitor progress achievements

• these accountability requirements are facilitated by grant recipients having access to a dedicated monitoring and evaluation budget

• the milestone payments to grant recipients (but not the final payment) are conditional until independent reviewers state that project progress is satisfactory

• the reviewers also make recommendations to grant recipients on actions to address any issues identified in progress reports

• the Branch has a documented escalation system for addressing projects that are not progressing satisfactorily including the option of cancelling the grant

• the Program has been subject to independent evaluation in 2017 and again with this evaluation to examine overall achievements and to recommend improvements to the program design and administration.

In short, the analysis concludes that the program administration is robust and transparent. Nevertheless, we have identified a number of issues that warrant attention, mostly pertaining to the proportionality principle contained in the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide: Program administration requirements have to be proportional to the value and complexity of

the grant and the associated risks. The issues concern:

- the resourcing of the Program
- the application process
- grant recipients' reporting requirements
- grant recipients' work planning requirements
- the grants management system
- support to TRC members and independent reviewers.

6.1   The administrative resourcing of the Program

One of the evaluation questions is "how appropriately positioned and resourced is the Program"[28]. The resourcing of the Program needs to take into account two factors:

- workload
- resourcing benchmarks.

In relation to the first of these, figure 7 provides some key metrics about the Program. The figure demonstrates a large and consistent workload in managing applications, monitoring progress and providing ongoing support to funded organisations. These tasks are made more complex by the fact that the program has overlapping funding cycles. While multi-year funding is a strength of the program, Trust staff note that it does require more administration in, for example, variations and ongoing program management.

Figure 7: Some key Program administration metrics

| AVERAGE PER YEAR 2017-18 – 2021-22 | 86 applications received | 38 projects funded | $4 million allocated | 13 projects concluded |
| TOTAL 2017-18 – 2021-22 | 428 applications received | 192 projects funded | $20.4 million allocated | 64 projects concluded |

As noted in Section 1, the Program is managed by a team of eight who also manage seven other contestable programs with only one staff member dedicated to the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program. This level of resourcing has remained the same since the 2017 evaluation of the Program which stated:

> "Program administration could be further strengthened by addressing resource constraints within the Trust. Interviews highlight that Trust program staff are stretched for resources and struggle to keep up with the demands of so many projects. The large number of projects and applicants places a significant burden on the small number of staff. It was noted that this issue becomes more

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[28] The issue of program positioning is considered in Section 4 on program design.

acute when projects experience complex problems and require more time to address, which detracts time from other grant management tasks. Project proponents indicate that by and large the Trust are quite responsive during projects but provide limited feedback in formal reports. It is likely this discrepancy is due to resourcing restraints. Providing additional resources may be worth the Trust's investment as currently the limitations of staff time are reducing knowledge sharing. This in turn reduces the benefits from the Trust's funding (p30)."

While our consultations are consistent with this observation, it should be noted that judgements about the level of resourcing cannot be made in isolation. This evaluation did not examine the level of administrative support for other Grants Branch programs or, indeed, for grants programs more broadly. Such a benchmarking exercise is inherently complex and was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, our consultations with Trust staff did suggest that there were variations in the level of resourcing across the Branch programs and it would be informative to test these claims more systematically by conducting an internal benchmarking exercise.

> **Recommendation 17. It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct benchmarking to compare the level of administrative support across the Branch's programs.**

In the absence of benchmarking data, Trust staff state the current level of Restoration and Rehabilitation Program funding has constrained their program development work, such as implementation of many recommendations of the 2017 evaluation. Similarly, they are concerned that ongoing program management responsibilities will detract from their ability to implement the outcomes of this evaluation, an issue discussed in Section 7.

6.2   The application process

Our consultations with grant recipients and unsuccessful grant applicants, TRC members and independent reviewers revealed some concerns that the Program application process is unduly complex. The concern expressed was that organisations bear the cost of a time-intensive process that may in the end be fruitless. The unsuccessful grant recipients we consulted stated that the cost of resources and staff time (often over weeks) in completing all of the required details within the application was burdensome and discouraged future applications. However, the consensus was that the application process should be challenging; it was agreed that proponents need to demonstrate they have the skills, experience and capability to carry out projects that can involve specialist environmental management work in partnership with local organisations and community members over multiple years.

One suggestion canvassed in the consultations was to shift to a two-stage application approach as with other Trust grants programs, which involve an initial expression of interest followed by full applications for those whose EOIs deemed worthy of proceeding to the next stage. The potential advantage of this approach is that it would reduce the burden on those applicants who were unsuccessful in the existing one-stage process. On balance, however, the shift to a two-stage process was not supported by Trust staff and the focus groups comprising TRC members, independent reviewer and grant recipients:

- it would increase the burden on Trust staff and TRC members by requiring them to deal with two sets of documents

- it may further extend the time between application and project commencement which is already a concern, as discussed in Section 6.2

- to be a useful "screening" device, the EOIs would still need to include many of the details contained in full applications

- applicants who "pass" the EOI stage may have unrealistic expectations that they are likely to be successful at the second stage.

Therefore, we propose that the Program retain its existing approach, although there is merit for Trust staff to consider in more detail the strengths and weaknesses of the EOI model used in other Trust programs – such an investigation was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Within the current approach there are opportunities for the guidelines and application process to be simplified through, for example:

- the use of plain English terms

- clarifying that applicants are not required to address all intended Program outcomes (e.g. one focus group participants noted a "tick-a-box" tendency for specific activities, such as nest boxes)

- clear and consistent definitions of technical terms including the distinction between outputs and outcomes

- elimination of any parts of the application form that are not used in the assessment process by TRC members.

> **Recommendation 18. It is recommended that the Program application process be reviewed to adopt plain English terms, clear definitions of technical terms and to remove information that is not necessary for review by the TRC in making recommendations to the Trust on funding decisions.**

Unfortunately, we were only able to consult with two unsuccessful applicants as part of this evaluation. One of these informants indicated they had sought, but not received, feedback on their application. The invitation to provide feedback is included in the Program guidelines and failure to do so represents a missed opportunity to assist applicants address shortcomings for future applications and to build their capability for subsequent funding rounds. Along with being provided specific feedback on their application, unsuccessful applicants could also be referred to the proposed capability building resources discussed in Section 4.3.

> **Recommendation 19. It is recommended that a system be introduced for ensuring that those unsuccessful applicants who seek feedback are provided specific feedback on their application and referred to the Program's capability building initiatives.**

6.3   Reporting requirements

Our consultations with grant recipients, TRC members, independent reviewers and Trust staff all reinforced the need for the Program to have rigorous monitoring, evaluation and reporting

requirements in place to provide appropriate levels of accountability for the expenditure of the Program funds. However, in line with the Premier and Cabinet Grant Administration Guide, these requirements have to be proportional to the value and complexity of the grant and the associated risks.

It is instructive therefore to note that one of the least highly rated items on the survey of grant survey recipients was in relation to the Program's monitoring and reporting requirements: only 47% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the monitoring and reporting requirements. Furthermore, concerns about the monitoring and reporting requirements emerged as one of the key themes from the open-ended survey questions, as reflected in the following quotes:

> *Simplify what can only be described as highly complex, and sometimes irrelevant, reporting, in exchange for on-site evaluation of works by suitably qualified inspectors.*

> *The program appears to be developed for reporting purposes rather than best environmental outcomes.*

Our desktop analysis, including the in-depth analysis of documents on completed projects, indicates that projects provide a considerable amount of detailed information, quantitative and qualitative, in their progress and final reports. It is not clear how and whether much of this information is used and there would appear to be opportunities for streamlining the reporting requirements in line with the proportionality principle or the general principle that information should only be collected and reported if it is useful and is actually used by Trust staff and independent reviewers.

Consistent with contemporary co-design thinking, the review of reporting requirements would ideally include involvement of a range of stakeholders including grant recipients, TRC members and independent reviewers along with Trust staff. Specifically, the review could consider whether:

- the reporting requirements could be differentiated for stream 1 and stream 2 projects

- the proposed alignment of reporting to standardised measures could assist in focusing reporting efforts on selected measures

- reporting on Program activities could be aligned to three sets of work activities contained in the draft program logic: actual restoration and rehabilitation work; provision of infrastructure for restoration and rehabilitation; and community engagement and education for restoration and rehabilitation

- grant recipients could report some information at a project or milestone level rather than at an activity level – the current requirement to report at an activity level was raised as particularly onerous in the grant recipients' focus group

- the primary focus should be on quantitative measures with a reduction in the narrative organisations are required to report on in each milestone report – the independent reviewers indicated that this narrative is difficult to interpret for assessing project achievements, an observation echoed in our experience with the in-depth analyses.

> **Recommendation 20. It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the Program's reporting obligations to reduce the administrative burden on funded organisations, consistent with the proportionality principle in the NSW Government's grants funding guidelines.**

In conducting this review, the Trust would need to be mindful that:

- the reporting requirements need to achieve a balance between meeting grant recipients' accountability obligations while being commensurate with the size of the grant

- the proposed cycle of annual project reviews and longer-term evaluations recommended in Section 5.2 will strengthen the Program's overall monitoring and evaluation efforts

- any reforms that are introduced would need to be consistent with the reporting requirements of other Trust-funded programs and Grants Branch-wide work currently being undertaken to assess the Trust funding programs against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration requirements.

Another project reporting issue raised by the independent reviewers was the lack of differentiation between milestone reports and final reports. The focus group members stated that the final report should be more than another progress report but should provide a definitive account of the project's achievements against the work plan and targets. This lack of differentiation in the two types of reports was also evident in our work on the in-depth analysis.

> **Recommendation 21. It is recommended that the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program guidelines be modified so that final project reports are comprehensive end-of-project reports setting out the achievements of projects, rather than one of a series of milestone reports.**

By differentiating the final reports in this fashion, independent reviewers will be better placed to offer an informed review of the project and to advise Trust staff about projects' performance.

In this context, it is concerning to note that the final payment of the full grant allocation is currently paid in advance of the final report and acquittal of the Program funds. Grant recipients and Trust staff noted that the current arrangements are in place because funded organisations often rely solely on the grant funding to meet their salary and operating expense commitments. They argue that in the absence of these funds they may not be able to remain operational.

However, the current arrangement is inconsistent with the traditional grants management practice that final funding only be released upon successful completion of projects. The Trust has little recourse to deal with any organisation that has not managed its project successfully or managed its finances appropriately (although the risk is mitigated by the opportunity to review progress in milestone reports). It is understood that other Trust programs withhold a proportion of the project funds until acceptance of a final report and financial acquittal. It would be advisable for the Trust to explore whether this approach would be viable for the Program while noting that some community groups funded under the Program simply do not have the cash flow to meet their operating expenses in the absence of the full payment. However, larger organisations funded under the Program, such as councils and universities, may not have the

same cash flow issues and the Trust may therefore consider whether a two-tier system for payment of the final invoice is viable.

> **Recommendation 22. It is recommended that the Trust review its practice of paying the final instalment of grant allocations to grant recipients prior to reviewing a final report and financial acquittals.**

6.4 Work planning

As shown in the flowchart in Figure 1, once the Trust approves funding for a specific project, the funded organisation works with Trust staff in developing a detailed work plan containing:

- project management, environmental and social outcomes with in-depth descriptions of each
- a project schedule with all planned activities and their intended start and finish dates
- project measures and expected output for every activity
- detailed budget descriptions for each planned activity including where the budget will come from grant payments, cash, and in-kind contributions.

The work plan sets the basis for the project's ongoing implementation and reporting and is therefore a fundamental vehicle for project accountability. However, our consultations reveal concerns about the complexity and time involved in developing work plans and whether the effort is proportional to the funding allocated:

- grant recipients state that it is very difficult to set realistic and specific activities and targets in advance for the full funding period
- grant recipients also stated that the requirement to provide detailed information at an activity level, rather than at the project level, is onerous and very hard to predict accurately prior to project commencement
- Trust staff report that working with successful applications in refining their work plan can be very time-consuming and resource-intensive and involve multiple iterations.

As a result, the development and finalisation of the work plan can be a protracted process and there can be long delays between the application process in October each year to project commencement.

It is understood that other Trust programs have different approaches to finalise funding agreements following successful applications and it would be instructive for Trust staff to explore the viability of these for the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program. One option would be to remove the requirement to develop the work plan before the funding agreement is signed, as has occurred in previous program funding rounds. If this were to be done, significant information would need to be provided in the application for the TRC to be able to adequately assess the components of the proposed project and what is to be achieved.

Other options for reducing the cycle time between application and project commencement include:

- introducing a more streamlined work plan that only contains key information for accountability purposes

- requiring grant recipients to review and prepare updated work plans as part of their milestone reporting requirements for review by the independent reviewers
- relaxing the requirement for grant recipients to provide detailed information on an activity level (e.g. number of hours, number of volunteers).

> **Recommendation 23. It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the work plans process to reduce the administrative burden on Trust staff and grant recipients.**

In conducting this review, the Trust will need to be mindful of:

- achieving a balance between the administrative burden on grant recipients and accountability requirements
- Grants Branch-wide work being done to review Trust programs against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide
- opportunities for strengthening the consistency of grants management practices across all Branch programs.

6.5   The grants management system

The Grants Branch introduced the grant management system (GMS) in 2019-20 with program enhancements introduced over time. Those grant recipients whose involvement with the program predate the GMS, view it as a welcome improvement to the previous arrangement that required managing manual systems and complex spreadsheets.

However, a key finding of this evaluation is that the system needs to evolve. Only 36% of the respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with GMS and a number of the survey respondents to the open-ended survey questions had negative comments about the GMS:

> *The reporting requirement within GMS is too complicated and time consuming relative to the benefit of the outcome. We have had many other grants over the years and generally deliver similar style projects. I have designed similar project plans and budgets for these grants, but the ET grants exceeds the others in administration time three-fold. I do not agree that it produces better outcomes from the project or ensures that the project stays on track. I feel that this has been achieved with the other grant programs, but with less time spent fiddling in GMS - which is not an efficient platform to report in…..*

> *Continued tweaking of the GMS to make it more user friendly.*

> *The GMS system didn't appear to accept my reporting (at my end of the portal).*

Similarly, the individual consultations with grant recipient and the grant recipients' focus group all stated that the system was cumbersome, difficult to use and not user-friendly.

Moreover, the GMS is unable to generate standardised reports on straightforward matters such as the number of grant recipients by location or by type of organisations funded. As occurred during this evaluation, responding to basic data requests can require inefficient and time-consuming manual interrogation of the database.

The Grants Branch is currently reviewing GMS resourcing and upgrades, including whether the

Branch transition to the SmartyGrants platform, which is being rolled out across NSW government agencies from January 2024. According to the SmartyGrants website, the platform is used by over 550 funders at commonwealth, state and local government levels, accounting for more than $7 billion of grants covering almost 12,000 users. It is therefore timely for the Program, and for the Grants Branch as a whole, to systematically consider the cost and benefits of moving to the SmartyGrants platform versus the necessary upgrade of the in-house GMS. The cost-benefit analysis should also take account of the ongoing maintenance and upgrades of the two platforms. To ensure the system meets the need of the variety of users, the analysis should adopt co-design and user experience principles with the active participation of grant recipients, independent reviewers, TRC members and Trust staff.

> **Recommendation 24. It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the transition to the SmartyGrants platform versus the upgrade and ongoing maintenance of the in-house Grants Management System.**

6.6 Support to TRC members & independent reviewers

An inherent strength of the Program is the involvement of the TRC and independent reviewers as core components of the Program "architecture" in contributing to robust and transparent program management. Our consultations with the TRC members and independent reviewers revealed their commitment to the Program and they appreciated that their skills and expertise were being used to inform funding decisions and project implementation.

The TRC members, however, feel that they could be better "integrated" into the Program; they see their work as involving sporadic bursts of activity during the application process separated by long gaps between funding rounds and they would like to receive communications about the achievements and progress of individual projects that the TRC had recommended for funding. One option is for TRC members to be appointed as independent reviewers, at least for projects where they were not involved in the original assessment of applications.

Similarly, the independent reviewers participating in the focus group expressed a desire to have more opportunities to place their contribution in a larger context through, for example, getting information on the larger funding landscape and the interaction of the Program with other funding programs.

It is therefore proposed that the Trust explore options for monitoring ongoing engagement with the independent reviewers and for seeking their suggestions for improvements to the program's design and administration.

> **Recommendation 25. It is recommended that the Trust explore options for more regular interaction through the funding cycle with the independent reviewers.**

These options need not be time or resource-intensive. One option would be to expand the annual TRC conference to include the reviewers, although it is noted for conflict of interest reasons that the current guidelines for TRC meetings preclude the attendance of other parties. However, there may be an opportunity to hold parts of the meeting as joint meetings with the two groups to split off into separate forums were necessary.

7. Conclusion & implementation of the evaluation recommendations

It is one thing to make a series of recommendations; it is another to act on and implement them. Our consultations with Trust staff indicate that the current level of resourcing hampered their efforts to fully address the recommendations of the 2017 evaluation of the Program. They are similarly concerned that the implementation of reforms flowing from this evaluation will flounder in the face of ongoing, day-to-day program management responsibilities. Moreover, some of our recommendations, if approved, would require significant developmental work, such as the transition to a five-year funding cycle.

Broadly, there are two options available to the Trust in progressing the reform agenda while simultaneously attending to business as usual:

- assigning additional resources, at least on a short-term basis, to project manage implementation of the approved reforms

- putting business as usual on hold by, for example, "postponing" the next funding cycle for 12 months.

Our preference is for the former option so that the program can continue to be round out while reforms are being introduced. Accordingly, we propose that a short-term dedicated resource be allocated to project manage the implementation of approved recommendations from this evaluation. This resource could possibly be drawn from the Grants Branch.

> **Recommendation 26. It is recommended that the Trust allocate resources for the engagement of a short-term project manager to implement approved recommendations of this evaluation.**

The project manager, or implementation coordinator, would be responsible for developing an implementation plan for approved recommendations containing:

- key actions with milestones and target dates

- structured communication of the evaluation findings and agreed outcomes to internal and external stakeholders

- regular monitoring of implementation against key milestones by the Branch leadership group

- regular, structured communication to the Trust and staff on implementation progress.

The implementation plan will need to take account of several factors:

- what work can be done in preparation for the next program funding round

- the inter-dependencies between actions

- activity occurring at a whole-of-Grants Branch level

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- whether additional resources are required for implementation, above and beyond the proposed project manager recommended above.

To assist in this planning effort, Table 5 groups the recommendations in this report, listed in Section 9, into four categories or "action areas":

- implementation and governance

- monitoring, evaluation and reporting

- funding reforms

- program operations and guidelines.

The related recommendations are shown under each action area along with:

- an <u>indicative</u> time-frame for implementation, and specifically, whether the action could be completed in the short, intermediate or longer-term

- whether implementation may require additional resources or is a relatively "low cost" action (which may still require coordination by the proposed project manager)

- whether the action has implications for work across the Grants Branch.

The schedule set out in Table 5 is indicative only and has been provided in response to feedback on our draft report from Trust staff who wanted a clear depiction of the scheduling and resource implications of the recommendations. In particular, the proposed timing set out in the table is an initial estimate and would require more rigorous assessment in detailed implementation planning that aligns with the funding cycle. As an initial guide, the timing estimates in table 5 are based on the following assumptions:

- *short-term*: actions that can be completed for the 2024 funding round

- *intermediate*: actions that can be completed for the 2025 funding round

- *longer-term*: actions that can be completed over the next three years.

> **Recommendation 27. It is recommended that the proposed project manager to coordinate implementation of the approved recommendations of this evaluation develop an implementation plan informed by the information in Table 5.**

Table 5: <u>Provisional</u> plan for implementing evaluation recommendations

**(1) Action Area 1
IMPLEMENTATION & GOVERNANCE**

Actions	Relevant Recs	short-term	Timing intermediate	longer-term	Additional resources?	Cross-Branch implications
Benchmarking of administrative support	17			✓	Y	Y
Possible adoption of SmartyGrants	24			✓	Y	Y
Dedicated resource to coordinate implementation	26	✓			Y	Y
Implementation planning	27	✓			N	Y
Implementation governance group	28	✓			N	Y

**(2) Action Area 2
MONITORING, EVALUATION & REPORTING**

Actions	Relevant Recs	short-term	Timing intermediate	longer-term	Additional resources?	Cross-Branch implications
Finalise program logic	1, 2		✓		N	Y
Updated MER framework	9, 10, 11, 12, 13		✓		N	Y
Streamline reporting requirements & work planning	20, 21, 23			✓	N	Y
Annual project reviews & post-project evaluations	14, 15			✓	Y	N
Staff needs analysis	16			✓	N	Y

**(3) Action Area 3
FUNDING REFORMS**

Actions	Relevant Recs	short-term	Timing intermediate	longer-term	Additional resources?	Cross-Branch implications
Needs analysis, promotion & capability building	3, 7, 8			✓	Y	Y
5 year funding cycles	4			✓	N	N
Adjustment for inflation	5		✓		N	N
Maintenance funding	6			✓	N	N
Final payment instalment	22		✓		N	Y

**(4) Action Area 4
PROGRAM OPERATIONS & GUIDELINES**

Actions	Relevant Recs	short-term	Timing intermediate	longer-term	Additional resources?	Cross-Branch implications
Plain English review	18		✓		N	N
Feedback to unsuccessful applicants	19		✓		N	N
Engagement of PIC members & independent reviewers	25	✓			N	N

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It is imperative that the implementation take on a whole-of-Grants Branch focus to draw on the experience and practices of other programs administered by the Branch. In our consultations (and in previous assignments for the Branch), we have noted a somewhat siloed approach to grants administration across the various program teams (e.g. there are reported differences across programs in their application, funding administration and monitoring and evaluation processes). While some of these differences may be a function of the unique nature of individual programs, there do appear to be opportunities for shared learnings across teams. Accordingly, central to the implementation strategy is the need for engagement of all teams across the Grants Branch to, firstly, consider the implications of the recommendations for their own programs and, secondly, to identify potential processes within other programs that are consistent with the evaluation recommendations and could be adopted by the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program. To this end, we propose that a cross-Branch governance group be established for implementation of the approved recommendations from this evaluation.

> **Recommendation 28. It is recommended that a governance group comprising representatives from across the Grants Branch be established to oversee the implementation of approved recommendations of this evaluation.**

This cross-Branch engagement could consider this evaluation's review of the Program against the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guidelines in concert with the Branch's overarching review of the Trust's grants administration against those guidelines.

> **Recommendation 29. It is recommended that DPE Restoration and Rehabilitation grants program team develops a strategy, including a structured communications plan, for implementing the approved recommendations of this review.**

8. Conclusion

The Restoration and Rehabilitation Program has a long history of securing local environmental improvements and strengthening the capacity of communities to sustainably manage local ecosystems. This evaluation has revealed strong support for the continuation of the Program among all stakeholder groups we consulted. Moreover, we conclude that the Program administration largely meets the requirements of the NSW government's grants management guide.

Rather than fundamental reform, we propose continuing evolution of the Program's administration, including:

- some changes to the funding arrangements

- further development of the monitoring and evaluation systems

- streamlining the administrative responsibilities borne by funded organisations, work planning and reporting.

The recommendations, listed in Section 9, will continue to strengthen the Program and assist in addressing a key challenge of the Program: translating individual project outputs into sustainable program outcomes.

Implementation of the recommendations, however, is unlikely to be achieved in the absence of a systematic effort accompanied by dedicated, short-term resources which will need to take account of reforms across the whole of the Grants Branch.

9. List of recommendations

Recommendation 1. It is recommended that the Trust amend the draft program logic to more clearly align with the wording of the Environmental Trust strategic plan, to draw an explicit distinction between project-specific intermediate outcomes and longer-term program outcomes and to incorporate project outputs.

Recommendation 2. It is recommended that the Trust formally adopt the draft program logic and incorporate it in its Restoration and Rehabilitation Program guidelines and accompanying resources.

Recommendation 3. It is recommended that the Trust review or update the needs analysis of local restoration and rehabilitation priorities that was undertaken following the 2017 evaluation of the program.

Recommendation 4. It is recommended that the Program be redesigned to provide for a stream of funding for five years that is available for organisations that have a successful track record in managing projects and can provide evidence that they will achieve measurable environmental outcomes with continued funding at key milestones dependent upon the outcomes of independent reviews, including site visits

Recommendation 5. It is recommended that the Trust include an annual adjustment to account for inflation in multi-year grants.

Recommendation 6. It is recommended that the Trust pilot and evaluate maintenance grants for successfully completed projects to maintain restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

Recommendation 7. It is recommended that the Trust design and implement a strategy to target identified environmental restoration and rehabilitation priorities to promote the Program and attract new grant applicants.

Recommendation 8. It is recommended that the Program promotion include targeted pre-application capacity building for potential applicants, including resources and training in grant writing.

Recommendation 9. It is recommended that the Trust develop an updated monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework, for inclusion in the Program guidelines, that sets out the respective roles and responsibilities of Trust staff, funded organisations and independent reviewers in project and program monitoring, evaluation and reporting, including the use of dedicated funds for monitoring and reporting in Program grants.

Recommendation 10. It is recommended that the Trust incorporate the outcome measures recommended in the revised Restoration and Rehabilitation monitoring and evaluation framework in its monitoring directory.

Recommendation 11. It is recommended that that the Trust continue work on the aggregation and reporting of project outputs and outcomes.

Recommendation 12. It is recommended that the Trust review and enhance its resource materials to differentiate between outputs and outcomes in the workplan when selecting project measures.

Recommendation 13. It is recommended that the Trust update the program guidelines, outcome measures and independent review process to gather the sustainability of outcomes more systematically.

Recommendation 14. It is recommended that the Trust introduce a risk-based program of a limited number of annual project reviews conducted by independent technical experts and involving site visits.

Recommendation 15. It is recommended that the Trust introduce a program of a limited number of annual post-project evaluations involving site visits conducted by independent technical experts to determine the longer-term sustainability of environmental restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

Recommendation 16. It is recommended that the Trust undertake a needs analysis of Grants Branch staff to target professional development in monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendation 17. It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct benchmarking to compare the level of administrative support across the Branch's programs.

Recommendation 18. It is recommended that the Program application process be reviewed to adopt plain English terms, clear definitions of technical terms and to remove information that is not necessary for review by the TRC in making recommendations to the Trust on funding decisions.

Recommendation 19. It is recommended that a system be introduced for ensuring that those unsuccessful applicants who seek feedback are provided specific feedback on their application and referred to the Program's capability building initiatives.

Recommendation 20. It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the Program's reporting obligations to reduce the administrative burden on funded organisations, consistent with the proportionality principle in the NSW Government's grants funding guidelines.

Recommendation 21. It is recommended that the Program guidelines be modified so that final project reports are comprehensive end-of-project reports setting out the achievements of projects, rather than one of a series of milestone reports.

Recommendation 22. It is recommended that the Trust review its practice of paying the final instalment of grant allocations to grant recipients prior to reviewing a final report and financial acquittals.

Recommendation 23. It is recommended that the Trust review and streamline the work plans process to reduce the administrative burden on Trust staff and grant recipients.

Recommendation 24. It is recommended that the Grants Branch conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the transition to the SmartyGrants platform versus the upgrade and ongoing maintenance of the in-house Grants Management System.

Recommendation 25. It is recommended that the Trust explore options for more regular interaction through the funding cycle with the independent reviewers.

Recommendation 26. It is recommended that the Trust allocate resources for the engagement of a short-term project manager to implement approved recommendations of this evaluation.

Recommendation 27. It is recommended that the proposed project manager to coordinate implementation of the approved recommendations of this evaluation develop an implementation plan informed by the information in Table 6.

Recommendation 28. It is recommended that a governance group comprising representatives from across the Grants Branch be established to oversee the implementation of approved recommendations of this evaluation.

Recommendation 29. It is recommended that DPE Restoration and Rehabilitation grants program the Program team develops a strategy, including a structured communications plan, for implementing the approved recommendations of this review.

Appendix 1: Key evaluation questions and sub questions

This section defines the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and their related sub-questions to be addressed in the evaluation.

Objective 1.   **Key evaluation questions and sub-questions for assessing the appropriateness of the Program**

Appropriateness	
Key Evaluation Question	**Sub-questions**
How appropriately positioned and resourced is the Program?	- How well does the Program align with the <u>NSW Premier's priorities</u> and the DPE's priorities and policies? - How well do the Program objectives and assessment criteria align with the Trust Strategic Plan and relevant Trust Act objects? - To what extent does the Program address an identified need? - To what extent is the Program meeting market demand? - How appropriate are the Trust's systems, resource materials, and procedures to facilitate best practice customer service? - How appropriate is the internal program resourcing in facilitating effective customer service for the Program? - How appropriate are the guidance and resources provided to the Technical Review Committee to assist them in performing their duties?

Objective 2.   **Key evaluation questions and sub-questions for assessing the effectiveness of the Program**

Effectiveness	
Key Evaluation Question	**Sub-questions**
How effective is the Program delivery and design?	- To what extent is the Program improving the quality of ecosystems and environmental assets? - To what extent is the Program facilitating the development of environmental expertise and stronger partnerships between individuals, community groups, governments and industry? - To what extent is the program logic clear and well-evidenced (e.g., linkages between assumptions / actions / outcomes) and does the new draft address any identified shortcomings? - What are the success factors and barriers to achieving program objectives? - What unintended outcomes (positive and negative) were produced, and have any unexpected benefits been generated by the selected projects (e.g., cultural, economic, social)? - Is the application assessment process sufficiently robust and transparent to result in the selection of projects that align with the objectives of the Program?

Objective 3. Key evaluation questions and sub-questions for assessing the efficiency of the Program

Efficiency	
Key Evaluation Question	**Sub-questions**
How efficiently is the Program being delivered?	• Is the amount of funding available appropriate for the environmental need, level of demand and capacity of recipients (per project and whole of program)? • To what extent is the current two-stream funding structure appropriate (for current needs, demands and capability of recipients)? • What proportion of grant funding is used for administration of projects? • How well do Trust Administration resources and support systems (e.g., Grant Management System) support grantees and stakeholders to efficiently deliver projects? • How does the Program's cost-effectiveness (including administrative costs) compare with similar programs nationally and internationally?

Objective 4. Key evaluation questions and sub-questions for assessing the equity of the Program

Equity	
Key Evaluation Question	**Sub-questions**
How equitable is the Program?	• To what extent is the Program addressing a range of priority environmental issues across NSW? (e.g., riparian, aquatic, coastal, arid zone) • To what extent does the Program design facilitate equitable access to applicants across NSW (e.g., eligibility requirements, eligible activities, program promotion, etc.)? • Do barriers exist in attracting a broader range of applicants to the Program? • Is the application process accessible, appropriate and well-supported by Trust staff?

Objective 5. Key evaluation questions and sub-questions for assessing the legacy of the Program

Legacy	
Key Evaluation Question	**Sub-questions**
How enduring are the Program outcomes?	• To what extent did projects deliver sustainable impacts beyond the project lifetime? • To what extent did grantees continue to utilise resources developed during the project? • To what extent are future considerations (e.g., climate change scenarios) being appropriately factored into program design by the Trust, and project design by grantees? • To what extent did innovative methods trialled through the Program lead to best practice uptake in the broader industry?

Appendix 2: Case studies

This section contains some case studies, provided by the Trust, of projects completed under the Restoration and Rehabilitation Program.

CASE STUDY

Sydney Institute of Marine Science, Greener pastures: Co-restoration of Posidonia seagrass and White's seahorse in NSW estuaries

Sydney Institute of Marine Science (SIMS) Greener pastures project builds on innovations in seahorse and seagrass restoration to provide a 'two-for-one' method to restore and conserve two threatened species: White's seahorse (Hippocampus whitei) and its seagrass habitat, Posidonia australis meadows.

Approximately 350 fragments of Posidonia have been collected and planted in seagrass restoration areas in conjunction with 15 seahorse hotels, in Gamay Botany Bay. Seahorse hotels have been installed to provide biodegradable, artificial habitat for juvenile seahorses. The seahorse hotels act as a temporary habitat for juvenile seahorses to be released into, while natural habitat becomes re-established through planting Posidonia fragments to restore seagrass meadows. Project collaborators at University of NSW designed and built 15 seahorse hotels. SIMS have already observed two wild White's Seahorses using the artificial habitats and the seahorse hotels will continue to be monitored to inform the optimal design and material use in the future.

SIMS have worked with project partners, NSW Department of Primary Industries and SEALIFE Sydney Aquarium to conduct workshops, a school field trip, seminars and produce a website outlining the project methodology and outcomes, and the importance of seagrass meadows in seahorse conservation. Volunteers contributed an impressive 850 hours throughout the first stage of the project to ensure its successful delivery.

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Protecting and improving critical habitat for reptiles in the Central Tablelands

CASE STUDY

Central Tablelands Landcare has worked with 12 landholders to protect and revegetate rocky outcrops to connect connecting regional wildlife corridors via steppingstones of paddock trees, remnant vegetation and reserves. Through the commitment of private landholders, many native species have benefitted from the protection and improvement of 16 hectares of rocky outcrop habitat on private land.

Volunteers have contributed over 600 hours to protect and enhance the conservation value of sites. Monitoring has shown that local reptiles such as the pink-tailed legless lizard and Cunningham's skink, birds and pollinating insects are making use of the rocky outcrop habitat refuges. Participating landholders have commented that after the planting of trees under the project, they have noticed an increase in both bird and insect diversity taking advantage of the enhanced shelter and breeding habitat.

Real Life Restoration: Rivers of Carbon Grabben Gullen

CASE STUDY

Through the Rivers of Carbon (RoC) Grabben Gullen project, the Australian River Restoration Centre engaged 5 landholders. Spanning from Gunning to Crookwell, there were sites of all sizes that experienced a range of challenges including drought, fire, floods, hail and COVID-19 impacts.

RoC Grabben Gullen had a particular focus on biodiversity connectivity for native wildlife and improving water quality for downstream communities and farm productivity. To achieve these outcomes, the project provided incentives for fencing, native revegetation, alternative stock water sources, small scale erosion works and minor woody weed removal. With the addition of community 'get-togethers' and local workshops on waterway management, landholders were equipped with the tools and knowledge to engage in riparian restoration long after the completion of the project.

This project resulted in 4,800 m of fencing installed and over 3600 plants planted, helping to regenerate and connect 242 ha of local wildlife habitat and connect 9 km of aquatic habitat in riparian areas. Understorey and ground cover vegetation was increased by fencing restoration areas to protect them from domestic stock and revegetating with trees, shrubs and grasses. Direct water sources lost through this project were returned in the form of alternative stock water, using gravity or solar pumps to fill paddock troughs. This ensured that landholders have improved off-stream water quality sources assisting to improve water security on their farm.

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Appendix 3: Details on codes for program logic

Program logic codes

Measure code	Area of work	
NE1	Natural Environment	Improvement of condition
NE2	Natural Environment	Management
A1	Culture	Access to country
A2	Culture	Respect, value and partnerships – understanding Aboriginal culture
A3	Culture	Respect, value and partnerships – Aboriginal engagement
P1	People	Behaviour and practice change
P2	People	Education- shift in awareness
P3	People	Education – Change in values
P4	People	Capacity development
E1	Economy	Employment

Appendix 4: Data table for LGA heat maps

LGA	#	$
Albury	1	169,995.00
Ballina	5	574,367.00
Balranald	1	100,000.00
Bathurst	3	277,470.00
Bega Valley	3	282,072.00
Bellingen	3	369,950.00
Bowral	1	27,700.00
Byron	13	1,358,669.00
Cabonne	1	149,614.00
Camden	1	114,000.00
Campbelltown	1	51,200.00
Carrathool	1	154,100.00
Central Coast	3	276,903.00
Central Darling	2	217,250.00
Cessnock	1	169,261.00
Clarence Valley	1	93,680.00
Cobar	1	99,750.00
Coffs Harbour	2	192,970.00
Dungog	1	100,000.00
Eurobodalla	2	235,237.00
Georges River Council	1	100,000.00
Glen Innes Severn	4	447,100.00
Greater Hume	5	692,137.00
Hay	2	275,904.00
Hilltops	3	369,833.00
Hornsby	1	141,958.00
Inverell	1	97,600.00
Kempsey	4	412,503.00
Ku-ring-gai	1	14,456.00
Kyogle	3	298,732.00
Lake Macquarie	1	29,144.00
Leeton	1	100,000.00
Lismore	10	1,028,957.00
Lord Howe Island	1	55,366.00

LGA	#	$
Maitland	1	100,000.00
Mid Coast	4	581,560.00
Multiple in Central West	1	100,000.00
Muswellbrook	1	73,766.00
Nambucca	1	98,117.00
North Sydney	1	59,940.00
Northern Beaches Council	2	177,505.00
Orange	3	290,918.00
Parkes	1	100,000.00
Penrith	1	95,600.00
Port Macquarie-Hastings	2	298,623.00
Port Stephens	7	800,197.00
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional	4	536,600.00
Randwick	3	326,445.00
Richmond Valley	5	642,348.00
Shoalhaven	3	209,831.00
Singleton	3	319,827.00
Snowy Monaro	6	573,410.00
Snowy Valleys	1	95,987.00
Sutherland	2	83,090.00
Tamworth	1	100,000.00
Tweed	14	1,651,414.00
Unincorporated NSW	3	437,920.00
Upper Hunter	1	150,000.00
Upper Lachlan	3	345,840.00
Uralla	1	99,996.00
Wagga Wagga	2	221,059.00
Wentworth	5	626,160.00
Western Plains Regional	1	71,773.00
Wollondilly	1	126,106.00
Wollongong	3	306,378.00
Yass Valley	3	192,895.00
Total	**175**	**18,971,183.00**

Region	#	Additional LGAs[29]	Total #	$
South East & Tablelands	25		1	2,661,993.00
Central West & Orana	10		3	989,775.00
Far West	12		7	1,481,080.00
Hunter	20	1	8	2,323,755.00
Illawarra Shoalhaven	7	1	11	543,909.00
New England North West	7		12	744,696.00
North Coast	63	5	18	7,020,330.00
Riverina Murray	13	3	17	1,709,182.00
Sydney Metro	14	1	21	1,164,194.00
Central Coast	3		25	276,903.00
Lord Howe Island	1	8	71	55,366.00
Total	**175**	**19**	**194**	**18,971,183.00**

The regions were drawn from the following map (source: https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/regional-delivery/nsw-government-regional-boundaries)

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[29] Additional LGAs include those applications where multiple locations were listed and were manually added to the map graphics.

Appendix 5: Guiding principles checklist

The Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide was published in the Gazette on 19 September 2022 and issued under Premier's Memorandum M2022-07 Grants Administration Guide. Compliance with the guide is a legislative requirement under clause 31 of Schedule 1 to the Government Sector Finance Act 2018. All grants undertaken on and from 19 September 2022 are required to implement practices and procedures consistent with the principles and mandatory requirements in the Guide.

The evaluation was required to assess the Program's administration against these requirements and we developed a checklist for the assessment task. The following table sets out guiding principles contained in the Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide and provides our assessment against each principle.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
Robust planning and design	
• Project planning and design stage includes – Clarifying rationale for the funded project and how it will meet government objectives – Appropriate risk assessment and management (timely identification of risks and appropriate mitigation/management strategies in place) – Active risk management plan for the grant life cycle – Co-design with prospective grantees and stakeholders – Assessment of costs, benefits and value for money – Performance measures, appropriate monitoring and evaluation approach	The Program has a long history and is a statutory requirement of the Environmental Trust. The Program aligns with the Trust's strategic plan and with the government's environmental objectives and priorities. The Program has developed a draft program logic that aligns with an overarching program logic for the Trust's funding program and provides the basis for program monitoring and evaluation of projects. The Program has been independently reviewed regularly, including the 2017 evaluation and this evaluation leading to refinements to funding priorities and program design. **This evaluation recommends the Trust conduct a needs analysis to inform future funding decisions, target identified restoration and rehabilitation priorities and to attract new grant recipients in new areas of the State (recommendations 3, 7, 8).** **The evaluation recommends the Program be modified to include a five-year funding stream for recipients with a successful track record and a pilot and evaluation of maintenance grants (recommendations 4, 6).** **The evaluation recommends ongoing improvements to the program's monitoring and evaluation to address the difficult methodological challenge of delivering the Program and funded projects' longer-term environment outcomes (recommendations 1, 2, 10-15, 16, 21, 24).**

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
• Appropriate application and selection criteria	The Program guidelines set out clear and appropriate selection criteria and applications are assessed by an independent technical panel
• Clear and easy to understand application guidelines	The application process is quite onerous but appropriate to establish whether proponents have the capability and capacity to deliver complex environmental restoration and rehabilitation projects in partnership with community organisations and community members over multi-year funding periods. **This evaluation recommends the information in applications be reviewed to ensure that information is only collected if it is central to the application assessment process by the TRC (recommendation 14).**

Collaboration and partnerships

• Effective collaboration and partnership with grantees throughout the grants administration process	The staff work closely with proponents on the development of a work plan that provides a basic accountability tool for individual projects. **This evaluation recommends that the work planning process be simplified to reduce the time between approval of applications and project commencement (recommendation).**

• Grant agreement
  – Establishes the basis for effective working relationship with grantees
  – Ensures a shared understanding of objectives and expectations
	The project work plans are developed in consultation with Trust staff and, along with the funding agreement, provide a sound basis for ensuring a shared understanding of project objectives and expectations.
	
	As noted above, however, this evaluation recommends that the work plan be simplified (recommendation 19).

Proportionality

• Grant administration process is customised to the value and complexity of the grant (including reporting requirements, acquittal process)	Overall, the Program's administration is robust and transparent in view of the grant allocations and funding periods. However, consistent with the proportionality principle, there are opportunities for reducing the administrative burden on grant applicants and recipients. **This evaluation has recommended changes to a number of elements of grants administration to reduce the administrative burden on grant recipients and Trust staff, including a the possible transition to a new grants management system (recommendations 17, 18, 20, 23, 24).**

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
Outcomes orientation	
• Effective monitoring process to assess funds are utilised for intended purpose and to track progress	Funded organisations are required to prepare milestone reports which are subject to independent review by technical experts. **The evaluation recommends ongoing improvements to the Program's monitoring and evaluation systems (recommendations 1, 2, 10-15, 16, 21, 24).**
• Identified objectives are outcomes and benefits focused	The Program and individual projects are focussed on securing environmental restoration and rehabilitation outcomes.

• Identified outcomes are
   – Aligned with government objectives
   – Measurable and clear
	The Program's outcomes are aligned to the Environmental Trust strategic plan and government environmental outcomes and policies. There is a significant methodological challenge in measuring the effect of projects and the overall program on these outcomes given that many are longer-term and beyond funding cycles.

• Program logic is documented – how inputs and activities are expected to lead to the desired outcomes and benefits	The Program has developed a draft program logic that articulates the relationship between activities, outputs and outcomes. **This evaluation recommends amendments to the draft logic and for the Trust to formally adopt the revised program logic (recommendations 1-2).**
• Appropriate selection of and reporting on performance measures	The methodological issue noted above presents challenges for selecting and reporting on performance measures. The 2017 evaluation recommended the development of a program logic to underpin a new monitoring and reporting framework. **The evaluation recommends ongoing improvements to the Program's monitoring and evaluation systems (recommendations 1, 2, 10-15, 16, 21, 24).**
• Grant administration process enables grantees to focus on achieving outcomes	**This evaluation has recommended improvements to elements of the Program's administration processes to reduce administrative and reporting burden on grant recipients to allow them to focus on project implementation (recommendations 16, 19 & 20).**
Achieving value for money	
• Grantees are required to appropriately assess project benefits and costs to demonstrate value for money • Value for money assessment is proportionate to the value and risk of the grant	The program has an outcomes monitoring and reporting process and all applications are assessed by an independent expert panel to determine whether projects are likely to achieve the intended benefits and represent value for money. However, assessments of value for money are difficult to quantify.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
• Value for money is a key consideration across the grant life cycle, from design to implementation and evaluation	
• CBA is required where appropriate (check value)	N/A
• Effective collaboration with stakeholders to develop and modify grant opportunities to achieve better value for money • Flexibility to responding to changing circumstances	Grants recipients acknowledged the flexibility of Trust staff to collaborate with them to adapt project plans in light of major changes in the funding context (Covid-19, fires, drought).
• Support grantees on how to capture data and identify benefits and costs where needed	Grant recipients enter data to a grants management system (GMS) with defined requirements. The Program sets out requirements for grant recipients to report on benefits and costs, including in-kind costs, which are elements in a grants management system (GMS) that has been introduced in recent years. **This evaluation recommends streamlining of the reporting requirements and a cost-benefit analysis of transitioning from the GMS to the SmartyGrants platform (recommendations 20, 23 & 24).**

Governance and accountability

• Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all stages of grant administration process	The Program has clearly defined responsibilities for assessing applications: an independent technical panel makes recommendations to the Environmental Trust which formally approves applications.
• Officials involved in managing grants have the necessary experience including grants management, stakeholder liaison and financial management skills	The Trust staff are part of a Grants Branch whose responsibility is the administration of Environmental Trust grants. The staff are supported by independent technical experts in assessing applications and reviewing progress reports.
• Officials involved in assessing application are appropriately skilled	The members of the independent technical review committee (TRC) are chosen on the basis of their scientific and technical expertise in environmental restoration and rehabilitation.
• Officials involved in assessing applications have access to relevant instructions and training for processing grant applications	The TRC members are provided guidelines on assessing applications, including explicit selection criteria.
• Grant agreements are easy to understand and fit for purpose	**This evaluation makes recommendations to streamline work planning and reporting processes (recommendations 20 & 23).**

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GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
• Effective ongoing communication and active grant management proportionate to the risks involved	Grant recipients in general reported on positive relationships with Trust staff and good communication. The two unsuccessful applicants we consulted stated that they did not receive the feedback they sought on their application. **This evaluation recommends an improved system for reporting feedback to unsuccessful applicants and for referring them to Trust capacity building initiatives (recommendation 19).**
• Appropriate performance monitoring requirements proportionate to the risks involved	**This evaluation recommends changes to the Program's monitoring and reporting processes including the introduction of an annual cycle of project audits and longer-term project evaluations including site visits to strengthen performance monitoring (recommendations 11 & 13).**
Probity and transparency	
• The grants administration process is transparent • There is a transparent and systematic application and selection process • The application and selection process is competitive and merit based, based on clearly defined criteria	There are clear Program guidelines, explicit selection criteria against which applicants are assessed by an independent panel who makes recommendations to the Environmental Trust which approves funding.
• All decisions are appropriately documented and published	All funding decisions are published on the Environmental Trust website following announcement by the Minister. **This evaluation recommends an improved system for reporting feedback to unsuccessful applicants (recommendation 15).**
• Public interest remains paramount in the administration of Restoration and Rehabilitation Grant Program	The involvement of an independent expert panel in reviewing applications and making recommendations to the Environmental Trust which comprises a range of stakeholders, ensures funding decisions are based on environmental restoration and rehabilitation grounds.
• There are appropriate checks and balances at each stage of the grants administration process	There is a clear delegation of responsibilities for reviewing applications by an independent expert panel (the TRC); for funding decisions (the Environmental Trust); for assessing milestones and final reports (independent reviewers); for promoting the Program and administering the Program (Trust staff). **This evaluation recommends clarification of the role of the various players in Program monitoring and evaluation (recommendation 9).**
• Appropriate process to identify and manage actual or perceived conflict of interest	There is a clear separation of decision-making responsibilities in allocating funds.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	ASSESSMENT
• Appropriate fraud control processes in place proportionate to the value and risk of the grant	**This evaluation recommends that the Trust review its practice of paying final payments to grant recipients prior to reviewing the final report (recommendation 22).**

Appendix 6: Trust staff consulted

Independent consultations:

- Michael Dine (Acting Manager, Contestable Grants)
- Sara Ormond (Project officer, Contestable Grants)
- Irene Soo (Program Support Officer, Contestable Grants)
- Marianne Boros (Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Officer, Grants)
- Katie Robinson (Director, Grants)

Focus Group:

- Shannon Whyte (Aboriginal Programs Officer, Environmental Trust)
- Karen Wakely (Project Officer, Environmental Trust)
- Irene Soo (Program support officer, Contestable Grants)
- Marianne Boros (Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Officer, Grants)

Further Trust staff consultations:

- Laura Purcell (Manager, Contestable Grants)
- Erin Rowe (Senior Project Officer, Contestable Grants)
- Steve Hardy, Project Manager, Office of Energy and Climate Change

Appendix 7: Background paper for stakeholder consultations

Nexus has been engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Environmental Trust's (ET) Restoration and Rehabilitation (R&R) Program, which is administered by DPE. Broadly, the purpose of the evaluation is to consider the Program's achievements and to recommend improvements that might guide the Program into the future.

The evaluation involves:

- analysis of Program data

- a survey of all funded organisations in the last five years

- a review of the program administration against the NSW Government's guidelines

- consultations with funded organisations and other stakeholders, including Technical Review Committee members and Trust administration staff Focus Groups,

Firstly, as a key stakeholder, we thank you for taking the time to speak with us, and secondly, please be assured that any comments you make will remain anonymous unless you wish to be identified, so please be as candid as possible. Following our conversation, should you have any additional thoughts or comments please feel free to reach out by phone or email so we can include those too.

There are three key themes we would like to discuss for your feedback and insights:

PROGRAM DESIGN

- How well is the intent of the Program aligned with real environmental needs?

- Is there more benefit to giving fewer, higher-value grants? Or more, smaller-value grants?

- How sustainable, or enduring, should be the environmental benefits because of the funded projects?

- What should be the balance between the Program's goal of educating the broader community about the environment versus achieving the environmental outcomes directly?

PROGRAM OUTCOMES & ACHIEVEMENTS

- How effective is the monitoring and reporting of program outcomes?

- How could the Program achieve greater sustainability of outcomes (i.e., beyond the funding period)?

- How easy or difficult is it to demonstrate project outcomes?

- How much time and resources are spent on reporting?

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

- How did you hear about the Program? *(Not for TRC)*

- How easy or difficult is the application process?

- How easy or difficult is it to work with the Grants Management System? *(If relevant)*

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the work plan process?

- How would you rate the support you get from the Trust administration team?

Please also consider:

- What do you see as the key strengths of the Program?

- Are there opportunities for improvement?

- Are there any other issues you would like to raise?

Many thanks, again, for your time and input.

Appendix 8: Focus group instrument

Nexus has been engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Environmental Trust's (ET) Restoration and Rehabilitation (R&R) Program, which is administered by DPE. Broadly, the purpose of the evaluation is to consider the Program's achievements and to recommend improvements that might guide the Program into the future.

The evaluation involves:

- analysis of Program data

- a survey of all funded organisations in the last five years

- a review of the program administration against the NSW Government's guidelines

- consultations with funded organisations and other stakeholders, including Technical Review Committee members and Trust administration staff Focus Groups.

Firstly, as a key stakeholder, we thank you for taking the time to speak with us, and secondly, please be assured that any comments you make will remain anonymous unless you wish to be identified, so please be as candid as possible. Following our conversation, should you have any additional thoughts or comments please feel free to reach out by phone or email so we can include those too.

There are four key themes we would like to discuss in the focus group:

1. **PROGRAM DESIGN**
2. **PROGRAM OUTCOMES &ACHIEVEMENTS**
3. **PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION**
4. **STRENGTHS.**

Many thanks, again, for your time and input.

Appendix 9: Funded organisations' survey instrument

Introduction

Nexus Management Consulting (Nexus) has been engaged to evaluate the Environmental Trust's (the Trust) Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Grants Program (the Program). This evaluation will assess the Program's achievements and help inform future iterations.

As part of the evaluation, we would like to invite you to complete a short feedback survey. Your insights are valuable, and we are most appreciative of your time. The survey should take 10-20 minutes to complete. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

Please click on the following link to complete the short survey online:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RR_Grants_Prog_Eval_stakeholder1

If you would like to discuss the survey or your involvement, please feel free to contact Talya from Nexus Management Consulting on tgundogan@nexusmc.com.

1. Which of the following best describes your organisation?
   - ☐ Government
     - ☐ State government agency and/or statutory committee
     - ☐ Council
     - ☐ Regional organisations of councils
     - ☐ Other local government-controlled organisation
     - ☐ University
   - ☐ Community
     - ☐ Community group
     - ☐ Incorporated association
     - ☐ Incorporated non-profit organisation
     - ☐ Non-commercial cooperatives
     - ☐ Companies limited by guarantee
     - ☐ Non-government organisation
     - ☐ Trust

2. How many grants has your organisation ever received from the Program?
   - ☐ 1
   - ☐ 2
   - ☐ 3 or more

3. Have you received funding from other *regular* or *annual* environmental (non-Environmental Trust) grants programs in the last five years?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Unsure

4. If yes, please list the names of the grants programs: *(open text)*

   ....

   ....

5. Briefly describe the most recent project funded by the Program: *(open text)*

   ....

   ....

6. Please select all the options below that are relevant to the most recent project funded by the Program:
   ☐ Protection of habitat

   ☐ Vegetation corridors/ vegetation management

   ☐ Weed management

   ☐ Water quality

   ☐ Wetlands management

   ☐ Aquatic / marine management

   ☐ Threatened species and communities conservation

   ☐ Rivers / riparian management

   ☐ Other...

7. Is the grant currently active?
   ☐ Yes

   ☐ No

8. What is / was the $ value of the grant?
   ☐ $50k - <$100k

   ☐ $100k - $150k

   ☐ >$150k

9. What year was the grant awarded?
   ☐ 2018

   ☐ 2019

   ☐ 2019-2020

   ☐ 2020-2021

   ☐ 2021-2022

Feedback

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N/A
The intent of the Program is aligned with real environmental needs						
The Program is clearly distinguished from other environmental funding programs						
The amount of funding available is appropriate for your organisation to meet the identified environmental need						
Fewer, higher value grants are more effective than more, smaller-value grants in achieving sustainable environmental goals						
Grants administration requirements are appropriate for the amount of funding provided to your organisation						
The monitoring and reporting requirements enable funded organisations to effectively measure outcomes and understand their impact						
The Program design and administration ensure each project continues to deliver sustainable impact beyond the funding cycle						
The Trust's staff have the necessary skills and expertise to provide the support needed throughout the lifecycle of the project						

11. To what extent are you satisfied with the following aspects of the Program:

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	NA
Overall clarity of instruction in the Program Guidelines						
Appropriateness of the Program's eligibility criteria						
Appropriateness of the Program's selection criteria						
Appropriateness of the Program's selection process						
Overall transparency of the Program's grants administration process						
Using the Grants Management System (GMS) (If applicable)						
The work plan process for your project						
Support provided by the Trust staff prior to submitting your application						
Support provided by the Trust staff to finalise your workplan once the grant was awarded						
Support provided by the Trust for monitoring and reporting						
The Program's monitoring and reporting requirements						
The Trust's flexibility in adapting projects to changing circumstances						

12. Recent grant funding now includes an amount of $5000 for supporting monitoring and reporting. Please would you indicate how have you used it? (Please <u>tick all applicable</u>)

☐ Video evidence

☐ Photographic evidence

☐ Scientific data

☐ N/A (Project completed prior to inclusion of this amount)

☐ Other (please state) ....

13. What do you see as the strengths of the Program?

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14. What changes or improvements to the Program would you recommend?
   a) Overall

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   b) The design of the Program in meeting environmental needs

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c) Program administration

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d) Monitoring and reporting

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e) Achieving environmental outcomes and sustainability of impact

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....

15. Are there any other issues you would like to raise?

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....
....

16. We would like to obtain further information from funded organisations about the issues covered in this survey. Please provide your contact details if you would be willing to participate in an anonymous 90-minute focus group in late August with other grant recipients:

Name: ....

Email address: ....

Contact number: ....

Appendix 10: Funded organisations' survey results

Survey respondent details

Table 6: Which of the following best describes your organisation?

Answer Choices	#	%
Community	42	64.62%
Government	23	35.38%
Total	**65**	**100.00%**

Table 7: What type of Government organisation?

Answer Choices	#	%
State government agency and/or statutory committee	10	43.48%
Council	10	43.48%
Other local government-controlled organisation	2	8.70%
University	1	4.35%
Regional organisations of councils	0	0.00%
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

Table 8: How many grants has your organisation ever received from the Program?

Answer Choices	#	%
1	14	22.58%
2	11	17.74%
3 or more	37	59.68%
Total	**62**	**100.00%**

Table 9: Have you received funding from other regular or annual environmental (non-Environmental Trust) grants programs in the last five years?

Answer Choices	#	%
Yes	45	72.58%
No	9	14.52%
Unsure	8	12.90%
Total	**62**	**100.00%**

Table 10: Please select all the options below that are relevant to the most recent project funded by the Program:

Answer Choices	#	%
Protection of habitat	53	86.89%
Threatened species and communities conservation	50	81.97%
Vegetation corridors/ vegetation management	44	72.13%
Weed management	43	70.49%
Rivers / riparian management	24	39.34%
Water quality	14	22.95%
Wetlands management	11	18.03%
Aquatic / marine management	3	4.92%
Other (please specify)	9	14.75%
Answered	**61**	

Table 11: Is the grant currently active?

Answer Choices	#	%
Yes	42	70.00%
No	18	30.00%
Total	**60**	**100.00%**

Table 12: What is/ was the size of the grant?

Answer Choices	#	%
$50k-<$100k	25	44.64%
$100k-$150k	18	32.14%
>$150k	13	23.21%
Total	**56**	**100.00%**

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Table 13: What year was the grant awarded?

Answer Choices	#	%
2018	6	10.34%
2019	10	17.24%
2019-2020	9	15.52%
2020-2021	10	17.24%
2021-2022	23	39.66%
Total	**58**	**100.00%**

Respondents feedback on Restoration and Rehabilitation program design, administration and outcomes

Figure 1: To what extent do you agree with the following statements:
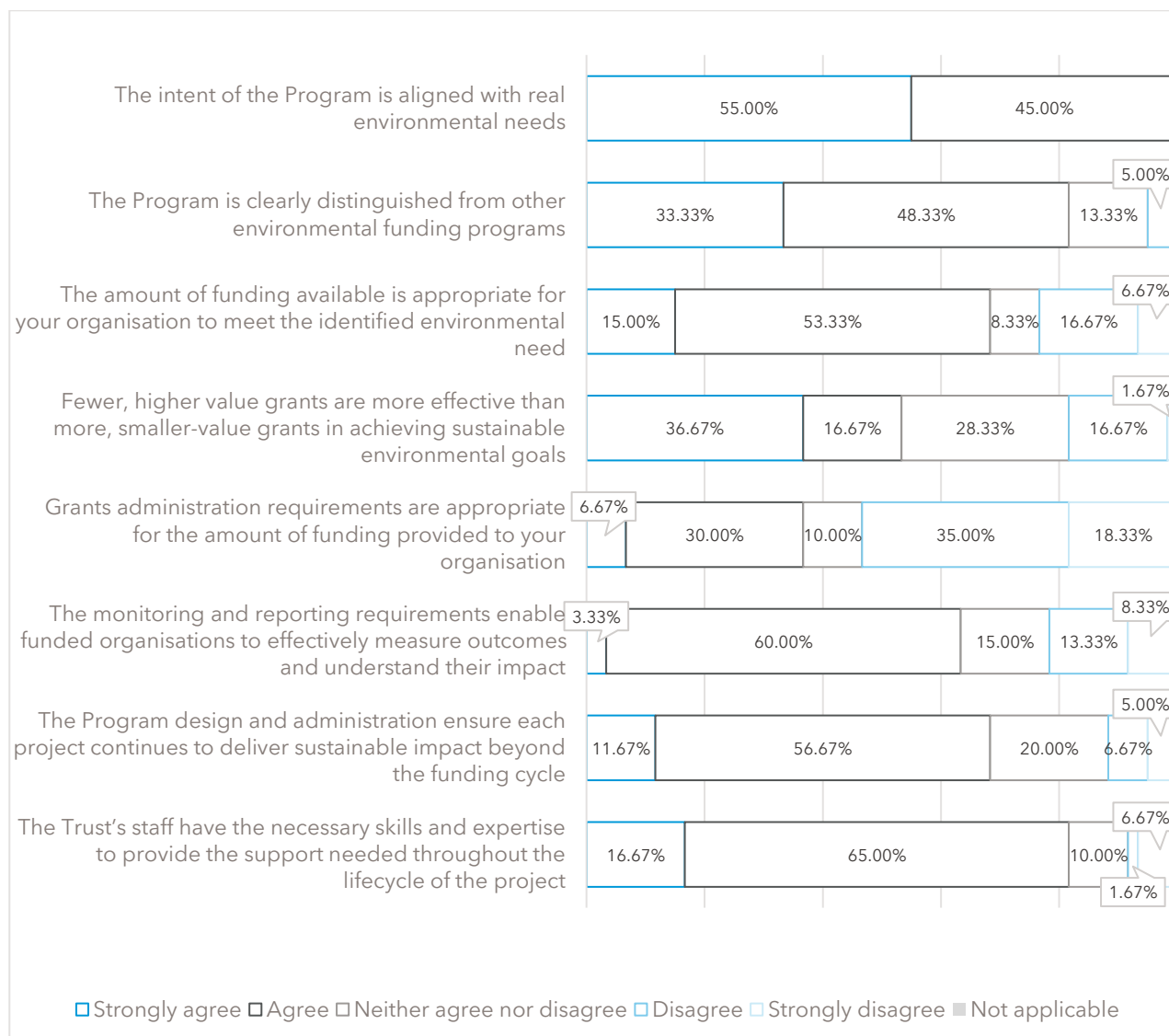
Figure 2: To what extent are you satisfied with the following aspects of the Program:

Aspect	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
Overall clarity of instruction in the Program Guidelines	16.67%	68.33%	8.33%			6.67%
Appropriateness of the Program's eligibility criteria	18.33%	65.00%	11.67%	3.33%		1.67%
Appropriateness of the Program's selection criteria	11.86%	67.80%	16.95%	1.69%		1.69%
Appropriateness of the Program's selection process	10.00%	53.33%	31.67%	3.33%		1.67%
Overall transparency of the Program's grants administration process	10.17%	57.63%	25.42%			6.78%
Using the Grants Management System (GMS) (If applicable)	3.64%	32.73%	29.09%	10.91%	10.91%	12.73%
The work plan process for your project	8.62%	55.17%	15.52%	10.34%		10.34%
Support provided by the Trust staff prior to submitting your application	19.30%	49.12%	15.79%	3.51%	1.75%	10.53%
Support provided by the Trust staff to finalise your workplan once the grant was awarded	30.51%	52.54%	6.78%	3.39%	3.39%	3.39%
Support provided by the Trust for monitoring and reporting	11.67%	61.67%	18.33%	5.00%	1.67%	1.67%
The Program's monitoring and reporting requirements	3.33%	43.33%	21.67%	21.67%		10.00%
The Trust's flexibility in adapting projects to changing circumstances	43.33%	36.67%	15.00%			5.00%

☐ Very satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very dissatisfied ☐ Not applicable
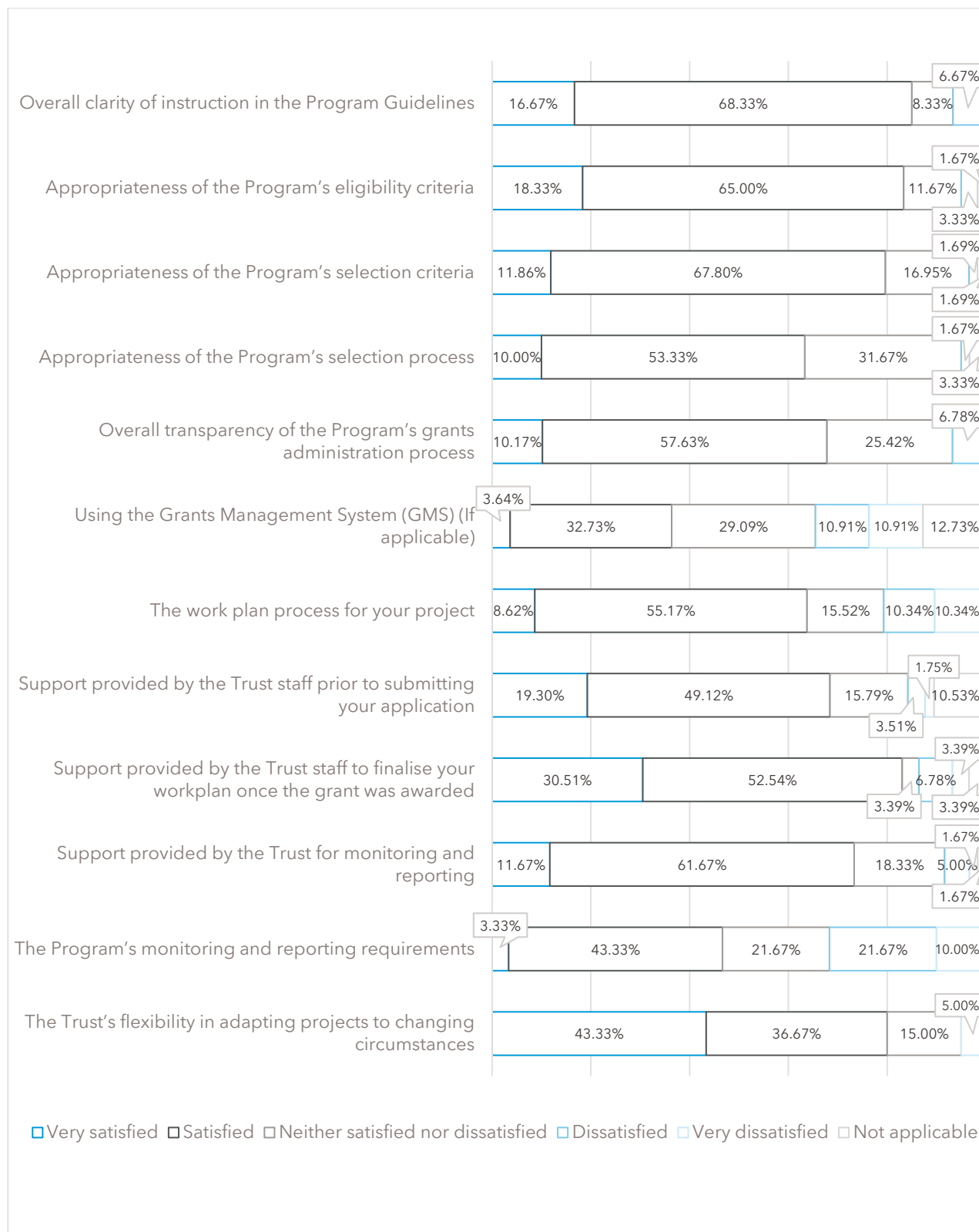
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Table 14: Recent grant funding now includes an amount of $5,000 for supporting monitoring and reporting. Please would you indicate how have you used it? (Please select all applicable)

Answer Choices	#	%
Photographic evidence	27	44.26%
N/A (Project completed prior to inclusion of this amount)	25	40.98%
Scientific data	16	26.23%
Video evidence	10	16.39%
Other (please specify)	10	16.39%
Answered	**61**	

Key themes (open ended questions)

Strengths

- Multi-year funding enables sustainable impact
- Program is aligned with real environmental needs
- Flexibility allows organisations to work with the Trust staff to adapt to changing circumstances
- Supportive Trust staff

Recommendations

Program design

- Increase amount of funding available
- Provide more longer term funding
- Better timing
- Better alignment with other grant opportunities

Program administration

- Simplified application and planning process
- Simplified reporting requirements

Program outcomes and sustainability

- Separate funding to measure and ensure sustainability.

Appendix 11: In-depth analysis instrument and list of projects assessed

Criterion	No evidence	Little evidence	Some evidence	Strong evidence
Monitoring and Evaluation	M&E system does not include any of the following: • Clear, measurable environmental outputs & outcomes • Appropriate data collection methods • Pre-post data including photographic evidence • Independent reviewers conclude selected monitoring techniques were effective	M&E system includes some of the following: • Clear, measurable environmental outputs & outcomes • Appropriate data collection methods • Pre-post data including photographic evidence • Independent reviewers conclude selected monitoring techniques were effective	M&E system includes most of the following: • Clear, measurable environmental outputs & outcomes • Appropriate data collection methods • Pre-post data including photographic evidence • Independent reviewers conclude selected monitoring techniques were effective	M&E system includes all of the following: • Clear, measurable environmental outputs & outcomes • Appropriate data collection methods • Pre-post data including photographic evidence • Independent reviewers conclude selected monitoring techniques were effective
Environmental outputs and outcomes	• No targets were achieved • No supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude no evidence	• Some targets achieved • Little supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude little evidence	• Most targets achieved • Some supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude some evidence	• All targets achieved • Strong supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude strong evidence

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Criterion	No evidence	Little evidence	Some evidence	Strong evidence
Community involvement and engagement	• Work plan includes no activities under community involvement & engagement • No community involvement and engagement targets achieved • No supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude no evidence	• Work plan includes limited activities under community involvement & engagement • Some community involvement and engagement targets achieved • Little supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude little evidence	• Work plan includes some activities under outcome category community involvement & engagement • Most community involvement and engagement targets achieved • Some supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude some evidence	• Work plan includes a comprehensive list of activities • All community involvement and engagement targets achieved • Strong supporting evidence provided • Independent reviewers conclude strong evidence
Sustainability of outcomes	No details provided on continuity and sustainability	Some aspects incorporated in the project to ensure continuity	Aspects incorporated in the project to ensure sustainability but no comprehensive planning, monitoring and evaluation plan	A comprehensive plan identified to ensure sustainability of impact including a long-term monitoring and evaluation plan

Projects assessed:

- Nangarin Landcare
- Wilsons Creek
- Tuntable Creek
- Illawarra local Aboriginal Land Council
- Bellinger Landcare Group

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