



SOUTH GIPPSLAND SHIRE COUNCIL

Community Grant Program Evaluation

Independent External Evaluation

Main Report

July 2021



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DEFINITIONS & ACRONYMS

Acronyms:

CGP/Program	The Community Grant Program stream of South Gippsland Shire Council's Grants Program
CLG	Company Limited by Guarantee
ELT	Executive Leadership Team (South Gippsland Shire Council)
RBA	Results-Based Accountability™
SGSC	South Gippsland Shire Council
VAGO	Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Key Definitions:

Community	Within the context of this report, 'community' is primarily defined as the Program's target audience, that is community organisations and volunteer groups delivering activities, events, programs and services for the South Gippsland community.
Community Benefits	Derived from programs, projects and/or activities that provide a response to community needs
Grant	Represents the provision of financial support to an external organisation to provide a service (program, project, initiative) for community benefit, which supports the strategic intent of the funding body and meets the objectives of the Program under which the grant is provided.
Impact	The longer-term results that countries, states, nations and regions are collectively working to achieve for society (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals).
Outcomes	The difference a program makes to a target audience within a specific geographic area (e.g., South Gippsland Shire communities are resilient).
Outputs	The act of producing something; the process in which something is produced (e.g., number of grants approved).
Program Theory	Identifies how Program activities are understood to contribute to a series of outcomes and impacts.
Results-Based Accountability™	Is an outcomes-focused methodology that builds the capacity of government and social purpose organisations to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of their programs and services using qualitative evidence and credible data.

INTRODUCTION

This report includes the learnings and recommendations of an independent external evaluation of South Gippsland Shire Council's (SGSC) Community Grant Program (CGP/Program). The evaluation was undertaken in 2021 by Elaine Hendrick (Elaine Hendrick Consulting, project lead), Kate Buxton (Shift the Needle) and Emma Beaton (Communities Alive).

The CGP sits within SGSC's community strengthening remit. It represents one of the most immediate ways the Council seeks to strengthen community by 'supporting the community sector to thrive'¹ through 'making funds available for a broad range of community initiatives across the municipality'.²

Community strengthening is recognised as a key responsibility of Local Councils in Australia and is integral to many Council programs, services, and activities. Community Strengthening approaches to community development, which emphasise 'developing and growing wisdom, skills, knowledge, expertise and resources within the community'³, are widely accepted as being a key driver of community resilience and community's capacity to support itself. Effective community grant programs play a critical role in a Council's community strengthening activities. They leverage the contribution that local community organisations and volunteer groups make to building thriving, inclusive communities, and support the development of the skills and capacity of volunteers to better respond to community needs, leading to enhanced service delivery and more robust local networks.

This evaluation is intended to provide South Gippsland Shire Council with the data and knowledge required to develop a position for future Program delivery. Learnings have been synthesised in a series of recommendations that identify potential positive changes that could be made to the Program to ensure it fulfils its aims, meets community expectations, and drives positive community outcomes.

¹ South Gippsland Shire Council Community Strengthening Strategy, 2018-2022

² South Gippsland Shire Community Grants Policy (C47, adopted 26th June 2017)

³ Dimensions of Community Development, Boulet et al

While internal reviews of the CGP were done in 2008, 2016 and 2018, this evaluation was undertaken in response to a recommendation⁴ from South Gippsland Shire Council for an independent external review of the Program to:

- Evaluate the current Program's effectiveness and investigate community benefit, future demand, innovation, and options for delivery of Council's Community Grant Program in the South Gippsland Shire.
- Assist South Gippsland Shire Council to determine that the Community Grant Program achieves its aims as stated in the SGSC Community Grants Program Policy (C47).

And to consider:

- A strategic approach to the provision of Community Grants
- Resources required to meet Community Grant Program aims and objectives, both capital and non-capital

The evaluation has been conducted using a Results-Based Accountability™ (RBA) & Program Theory approach. RBA is an outcomes-focused methodology that builds the capacity of government and social purpose organisations to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of their programs and services using qualitative evidence and credible data. Program Theory identifies how Program activities are understood to contribute to a series of outcomes and impacts. This approach was used to determine whether the appropriateness, efficiency and processes of the Program ultimately lead to its effectiveness and sustainability within the Shire.

To inform learnings and recommendations, the evaluation examined the CGP as it operated between FY 2016/17 and FY 2020/21. While the evaluation team is confident in the veracity of the report findings, learnings and recommendations, it is important to highlight two constraining factors to the evaluation process.

- The evaluation was undertaken within a relatively short time frame (March 2021 – June 2021), which constrained the amount of time available for data collection and analysis and community consultation.
- Lack of available data, particularly concerning community outcomes catalysed by the CGP.

⁴ South Gippsland Shire Council Meeting No.446, 24th June 2020, section 4, page 68

A key finding at the outset of the evaluation process was the lack of available data to support a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the Community Grant Program stream with respect to its contribution to community outcomes. While the evaluation team has sought to fill this data gap through its methodology, especially through engagement and consultation with stakeholders, a strong recommendation going forward is that Council develops a Theory of Change for the Program, underpinned by an outcomes framework and a monitoring & evaluation framework. This recommendation is explored in more detail in Appendix 1.

How to use this report:

This report is divided into the following sections:

Opening Remarks presents a brief overview of key findings and recommendations.

Approach & Methodology outline the purpose and scope of the evaluation and the approach and methodology employed by the evaluation team.

Program Overview & Context provides an overview of the Program; its regulatory, strategic and Policy context, purpose and objectives, and operational and funding context.

The Evaluation presents a synthesis of findings and learnings through an outcomes-focused lens.

Summary Learnings and Recommendations presents a summary of learnings and recommendations to support continuous improvement of the Program and enhance its delivery.

The main evaluation report (this document) includes the following **Appendices**:

Appendix 1: Future Proofing & Sustainability of the Community Grant Program provides the Program with a different way of framing its success. The Appendix recommends Council embark on a robust outcomes and evaluation journey. The recommended approach will give the Program the ability to measure and collect useful and meaningful datasets with respect to its suitability to need and context; its efficient use of resources; and the fit for purpose and quality of its activities and service delivery. The Appendix highlights the importance of continuous improvement protocols to enable the Program to measure its achievements of community outcomes and community benefits. Sustainability is a journey and is only possible when robust structures are in place.

Appendix 2 summarises observations from Grants Management Framework Audit, Environmental Scan, collated Benchmarking data of like LGAs and Focus Group Discussions.

Appendix 3 presents collated responses from the online survey.

OPENING REMARKS

In common with most Council delivered community grants programs in Australia, South Gippsland Shire Council's Community Grant Program is funded by ratepayers. Therefore, value for money is an important consideration, with value, in this context, broadly defined as how well the Program is meeting its identified objectives and contributing to positive outcomes in South Gippsland.

The Program has provided a significant amount of funding to a broad range of community organisations and volunteer groups. It is deeply valued by community and unequivocally represents a critical source of funding for community organisations and volunteer groups.

Consultation with stakeholders during the evaluation process has yielded qualitative evidence to support a finding that the Program has contributed to positive outcomes in South Gippsland. However, a strong recommendation going forward is that Council develops a Theory of Change for the Program. This would establish clear program goals and embed outcomes-focused thinking within the Program.

The evaluation has also identified several improvements that could be made to the Program's practices and processes, including:

- That the Program be better aligned with, and informed by, Council's strategic priorities and planning.
- That Council does further work to understand and address factors contributing to lower engagement from some communities and eligible organisations.
- That the Program's objectives be updated to better align with community-identified needs and desired community outcomes.
- That consistency and transparency in some decision-making processes be improved.
- That data collection is improved to provide better insights into how the Program is meeting its objectives and used to inform future program delivery.

The above recommendations are explored in more detail in the Summary of Learnings and Recommendations section (page 64).

The evaluation team is mindful that the CGP utilises a responsive, competitive program model. This model of grant making has many positives, including that it:

- Enables a grant maker to offer broader-based support to a wide range of groups for a wide range of issues.
- Opens the door to critical support for smaller groups that may have limited access to other funding opportunities.

However, a responsive grant making model can make it challenging to target emerging or evolving community needs and understand (and measure) how a program is contributing to outcomes. Responsive grant makers often remark that their grants are 'an inch deep and a mile wide'.

For responsive grant making to be effective, it must have clearly defined goals and strategies. A key finding of this evaluation is that there is the opportunity for the Program to be more proactive and strategic by strengthening its alignment to Council Plans and Strategies to encourage and prioritise projects which address priorities and meet community needs.

One area of concern identified during the evaluation is that the Program has only distributed its full grant funding allocation in two rounds during the period under review. The Program's audience, which reflects a broad range of grant-seeking capabilities, has undoubtedly contributed to this. However, the evaluation team believes that this concern could be addressed through SGSC strengthening its outreach, capacity and capability building to grant seekers.

The evaluation team has also considered the establishment of a Community Grants Review Reference Group. While none of the LGAs benchmarked for the survey had a Reference Group, the evaluation team recommends that further consideration be given to this going forward. A Reference Group could:

- Support the process and the development of appropriate parameters for future internal reviews or independent evaluations of the Program.
- Provide a platform for testing ideas, exploring changes and collective decision-making.
- Provide an opportunity to engage external stakeholders in decisions that may affect them, in line with the principles of the Local Government Act (2020).

APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this evaluation has been to evaluate the current Program's effectiveness and investigate community benefit, future demand, innovation, and options for delivery of the Program.

Key objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Determine that the Community Grant Program has the capital and non-capital resources required to meet Program aims and objectives.
- Assist SGSC to determine that the Community Grant Program is achieving its purpose and objectives.
- Identify and recommend any potential positive changes to the CGP, including considering the establishment of Community Grants Review Reference Group.

In scoping the evaluation, the following key drivers and desired results were agreed upon with SGSC:

Driver	Short & Medium-Term Results	Longer-Term Results
Ensure the Community Grant Program meets the South Gippsland community's evolving needs and is achieving its intended outcomes.	An evidence base for alignment between the Community Grant Program and community needs.	Opportunities for further change or improvements to the Community Grant Program that will ensure it continues achieving its intended outcomes.
Ensure the Community Grant Program employs a good-practice approach for community grant making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Community Grant Program framework is accessible, available, and appropriate for grant seekers. • The Community Grant Program is sufficiently resourced to achieve its intended outcomes. 	
Ensure the Community Grant Program is strategically aligned with Council Strategy and Policy.	Enhanced understanding of how the Community Grant Program aligns with SGSC's Council Plan and relevant Policy.	

The scope of this evaluation is limited to South Gippsland Shire Council's Community Grant Program stream and does not extend to SGSC's other grant or funding programs, including, but not limited to, the Small Grant and Emergency Grant streams.

Limitations

The evaluation approach and methodology were designed to provide the best possible information.

However, the following limitations that could impact the findings have been identified:

- Available data - the limited extent of useful and meaningful data, particularly concerning the CGP's community outcomes.
- Time – the evaluation was initially intended to be undertaken over a longer time frame but was re-scoped to allow the report to be presented at the Council Meeting of July 2021. This reduced the amount of time available for data collection and stakeholder consultation.

Report Audience

The primary audience for this report is South Gippsland Shire Council and other relevant parties as SGSC determines.

Evaluation Team

Elaine Hendrick, Elaine Hendrick Consulting Pty Ltd

Specialist member of The Xfactor Collective with deep expertise in outcomes measurement and evaluation and more than 25 years experience working in the not-for-profit, government and non-government sectors in Australia and Singapore.

Kate Buxton, Shift the Needle

South Gippsland resident and specialist member of The Xfactor Collective with deep expertise in working with grant making organisations and more than 25 years experience in the not-for-profit sector in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Emma Beaton, Communities Alive

More than 20 years in the not-for-profit sector, and ten years in regional local government, with deep expertise in council processes, strategic policy frameworks and community engagement to deliver transparent and relevant services to communities.

Acknowledgements

The evaluation team thanks the Community Strengthening Coordinator for their time and assistance in providing documentation and access to data for this project. In particular, we acknowledge the internal stakeholders (Council officers) and external stakeholders (representatives from local community organisations and volunteer groups) for their time and willingness to participate in the process.

Grant Data Used in the Report

Grant data used throughout this report is derived from the following sources:

- SmartyGrants data (e.g. funds distributed)
- Data supplied directly by SGSC (e.g. Program budget)
- Data drawn from SGSC Annual Reports

The evaluation team found that datasets around total dollars requested, and total dollars allocated differed between SmartyGrants and other grant data sets made available for the evaluation process. Although only a relatively small difference, it is worth noting here.

RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY™ & PROGRAM THEORY APPROACH



The evaluation was conducted using a Results-Based Accountability™ (RBA) & Program Theory approach. RBA is an outcomes-based methodology that builds the capacity of government and social purpose organisations to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of their programs and services through qualitative evidence and credible data. RBA endeavours to determine how much and what changes are being achieved at a target population level. Program Theory identifies how program activities are understood to contribute to a series of outcomes and impacts. The approach will inform and improve future decision-making processes.

The Program was evaluated through five lenses (known as domains) to determine:

- Appropriateness
Suitability of the Program to its community's needs and context.
- Efficiency
That the Program's resources are sufficient and are being used well.
- Process
That the processes employed in the Program (quality of service activities, governance, and management systems) are robust and fit for purpose.
- Effectiveness
That the Program is delivering against its intended purpose and anticipated community outcomes.
- Sustainability
That the Program has the capacity for a continuation of community outcomes and community benefits.

Headline questions and indicators were developed for each lens (domain), which informed the identification of the relevant evidentiary base.

HEADLINE QUESTION The principal questions we asked	INDICATORS What we would expect to see	EVIDENTIARY BASE What we looked at through our Methods of Inquiry
Appropriateness		
1. To what extent is the Program suitable to its need and context?	1.1 Program delivery is aligned with the internal regulatory and strategic context. 1.2 The Program makes funds available for a broad range of community initiatives within identified thematic areas (heritage, recreation, and cultural opportunities) across the municipality. 1.3 The Program is flexible and responsive to the needs of its community. 1.4 The Program provides opportunities to volunteer groups and organisations which would otherwise have limited access to funds. 1.5 The Program supports groups to increase self-reliance without encouraging a relationship of dependence.	Policy and links to relevant Plans. Funds are provided to a range of organisations for a broad spectrum of initiatives throughout the Shire. Program employs a consistent approach (e.g., using data) and demonstrates a capacity to adapt to a change in its environment or operating context (e.g. changing community need). Repeat grant-seeking behaviour.

Efficiency		
2. To what extent are Program resources sufficient and used well?	2.1 Program resources are sufficient to meet internal (operational) and external (grant seeker) needs and are comparable to like programs.	Resource allocations (staffing, administration, grant funding). Benchmarking against like programs.
Process		
3. To what extent does the Program employ robust practices and processes?	3.1 The Program is aligned to the Grants Management Framework. 3.2 The Program's processes are in line with good practice principles in community grant making.	Program processes (Application, Assessment, Acquittal). Transparency, equity, and consistency in decision-making.
Effectiveness		
4. To what extent is the Program contributing to community outcomes?	4.1 The Program is guided by a set of community outcomes. 4.2 Program continuous improvement in response to community need.	Program effectiveness measured against community benefits and community outcomes. Use of community outcomes in decision-making.
Sustainability		
5. To what extent is the Program established to take a position to 'future proof' itself?	5.1 The Program is responsive to evolving and future community need.	Assessment through an outcomes lens and Program continuous improvement.

Methods of Inquiry

A detailed project plan, which identified the following methods of inquiry, was developed in consultation with the Community Strengthening Coordinator:

1. Grants Framework Audit – A determination that all framework components are accessible, available and appropriate, including an assessment of the resources that grant seekers access when making an application to the Program.
2. Environmental Scan – an analysis of relevant data to identify and understand the Program's role within the context of SGSC community needs, its strategic and Policy context.
3. Benchmarking – a comparison of identified aspects of the Program (guidelines, eligibility criteria, assessment practices, program resources) against like Council community grants programs and other Council grants programs.
4. Consultation – the extent to which the CGP meets its strategic purpose and its community's* need and expectations.

*Within the context of this report, 'community' is primarily defined as the Program's target audience, that is community organisations and volunteer groups delivering activities, events, programs, and services for the South Gippsland community. Community organisations and volunteer groups are the means to achieving community outcomes through the grant making mechanism.

Consultation Framework and Methodology

An essential requirement of the evaluation has been to ensure that consultation and engagement are meaningful, valuable, and aligned with relevant legislation and Policy. The Local Government Act (2020) does not prescribe deliberative engagement practices; however, a broad interpretation of the principles has been employed. Deliberative questioning was utilised throughout the focus group sessions to provide authentic, relevant, and informed responses and feedback about the Community Grant Program.

The evaluation team referred to internal Council policies C06 and C47 to ensure the consultation activities were aligned and consistent with Policy objectives when engaging with the community.

The benefits of this approach included:

- Conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders to provide a much-needed context and data for what the success of the Program would look like.
- Building rapport with project stakeholders, building long-term trust and credibility.
- Communicating regularly with relevant stakeholders to develop a platform for better understanding and strengthening long-term relations with key stakeholder groups.
- Ensuring that present and future grants recipients are consulted to ensure that their voices are heard and considered.
- Creating a platform for proactive problem solving and informed decision-making.

Principles of IAP2 were at the core of planning the engagement activities:

1. Online Survey (External Stakeholders)

Target Audience: Previous successful and unsuccessful grant seekers
Community organisations/volunteer groups who have engaged with the Program as a grant seeker or a potential grant seeker

Distribution Channels: SmartyGrants (SGSC's 222 registered SmartyGrants users)
SGSC Facebook page
Council Officer Networks

Target Response Rate: 35% of SGSC's 222 registered SmartyGrants users
Actual Response Rate: 49.5%

2. Focus Group Discussions x 2 (External Stakeholders)

Target Audience: Previous successful and unsuccessful grant seekers
Community organisations/volunteer groups who have engaged with the Program as a grant seeker or a potential grant seeker

Target Participation: 16 community organisations/volunteer groups

Actual Response Rate: 19 community organisations/volunteer groups

3. Face to Face Interviews (Internal Stakeholders)

Target Audience: Council Officers who have a departmental interface with the Program
Council Officers who have a responsibility for administering the Program or assessing grant applications

Interviews conducted: Community Strengthening Coordinator
Council Officers x 4 (Economy, Arts & Tourism, Environmental Health, Building and Recreation Assets, Recreation Services)
Internal Assessor x 1

4. Benchmarking Questionnaire

Target Audience: Like Councils (Super 11 LGAs)
Other non-Super 11 LGAs*

Target Response Rate: 9 Super 11 LGAs
2 other non-Super 11 LGAs

Actual Response Rate: 6 Super 11 LGAs
4 Other non-Super 11 LGAs

*The evaluation team felt it necessary to include both Super 11 and non-Super 11 LGAs within the Benchmarking group to ensure a more balanced sample, incorporating a greater diversity of like program practices and processes. The project's time constraints, which only allowed one week for Council's to respond to the questionnaire, contributed to the lower response rate for this method of inquiry.

Evaluation Standards Declaration

The methods for the evaluation were designed to meet accepted standards, ensuring the quality of the evaluation⁵.

- **Independence** – The credibility of the evaluation process has been maintained at all times. Evaluators were impartial and free from undue pressure by any party throughout the evaluation process. The evaluators had free access to information whilst conducting the evaluation.
- **Intentional** – The rationale for the evaluation and the decisions based on it were clear from the outset.
- **Credible** – Evaluators maintained independence, impartiality and a rigorous methodology during the process – including transparent evaluation processes, inclusive approaches and robust quality assurance systems. Evaluation learnings and recommendations were derived from &/or informed by the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the best available, objective, reliable and valid data and by accurate quantitative and qualitative analysis of evidence.
- **Transparent** – Meaningful consultation with stakeholders (internal and external) was credible and was used for the intended purpose. Evaluators established trust and built stakeholder confidence, enhanced stakeholder ownership and increased accountability.
- **Ethical** – The evaluation process did not reflect personal interests. Evaluators maintained the highest level of professionalism and ensured the integrity of the evaluation process. Evaluators respected the rights of stakeholders and provided a safe space for information to be shared in confidence and were sensitive to the beliefs and customs of local social and cultural environments.
- **Impartial** - The evaluation was conducted objectively, with professional integrity. Impartiality existed at all stages of the evaluation process, including planning, formulating the parameters and scope, accessing stakeholders, conducting the evaluation, and formulating learnings and recommendations.
- **Of high quality** – Evaluators met best-practice standards throughout the evaluation process
- **Timely** – The evaluation was designed and completed in a timely fashion to ensure the usefulness of the learnings and recommendations.
- **Use** – The evaluators provided information (resulting analysis, conclusions and recommendations) to inform decisions and actions. The intention was to make available relevant and timely contributions to Council's learning, informed decision-making processes and accountability for better program outcomes.

⁵ Adapted from Better Evaluation: https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/evaluation_standards

Adapted from United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), Norms and Standards for Evaluation (June 2016)
https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/UNEG%20Norms%20%20Standards%20for%20Evaluation_WEB.pdf

PROGRAM OVERVIEW & CONTEXT

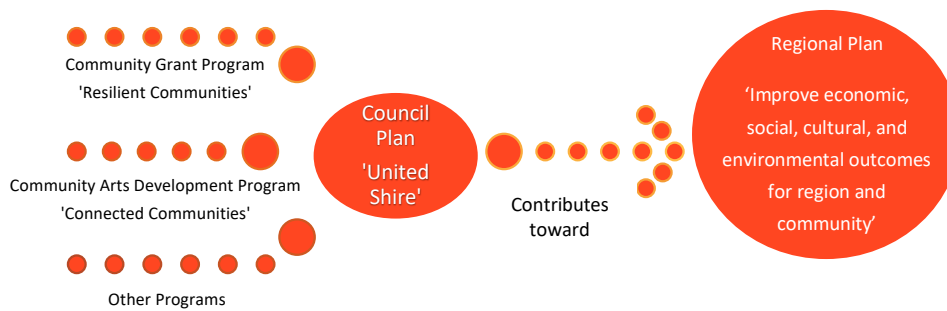
Regulatory, Policy & Strategic Context

Legislative Context

The principal legislation governing the establishment and operation of Councils in Victoria is the Local Government Act 2020. This principles-based Act defines the purposes and functions of local government and provides the legal framework for establishing and administering Councils.

Strategic Context

The Community Grants Program is one of many programs of SGSC which contribute to positive changes within South Gippsland Shire and the broader region.



The Gippsland Regional Plan 2020-2025 is a long-term strategic plan for improving the economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes for the Gippsland region and its community. The Plan is auspiced by the Gippsland Regional Plan Leadership Group (Committee for Gippsland, Gippsland Regional Partnership, One Gippsland (formerly Gippsland Local Government Network), and Regional Development Australia Gippsland).

The South Gippsland Shire Council Plan 2020-2024 identifies SGSC's strategic objectives and the strategies that will be used to achieve a 'United Shire', together with indicators for monitoring the achievement of its objectives.

SGSC Policy Context

South Gippsland Shire Council's Policy Framework provides a structure for developing and managing all Council policies to ensure consistency with good governance principles. All policies are reviewed on at least a four-year cycle.

The policies most relevant to the CGP include:

- Community Grants Program Policy - provides the basis for Council's financial support to eligible community groups to strengthen South Gippsland communities.
- Arts & Culture Policy - identifies Community Grants as one of the ways in which Council supports arts and cultural activity in the municipality.
- Audit and Risk Committee Charter - establishes the Audit & Risk Committee to support Council in overseeing financial and performance reporting, risk management, fraud prevention systems and control, maintenance of a sound internal control environment, assurance activities, and Policy and legislative compliance performance.
- Community Engagement Policy - outlines Council's approach to community engagement to assist with transparency, understanding and trust in Council's decision-making process.
- Community Infrastructure Project Management Policy - pertains to projects that are on Council owned or managed land and ensures that all community infrastructure projects seeking external funding are responsibly planned, managed.
- Human Rights Policy - confirms Council's commitment to considering and respecting human rights when making decisions and creating and setting policy directions.
- Public Transparency Policy - provides guidance in the management and release of community and Council information and formalises the level of transparency that will be applied to Council's decision-making processes according to legislation.
- Risk Management Policy - sets out Council's approach and commitment to establishing and maintaining an effective risk management culture across the organisation in accordance with the principles and guidelines set out in relevant standards.
- Youth Policy - supports the provision of opportunities for engagement, participation, and inclusion in the wider community by young people.

SGSC Strategy & Planning Context

SGSC's Strategies and Plans provide direction for Council's vision, goals, and various activities. The Strategies most relevant to the CGP include:

- Age-Friendly South Gippsland Plan 2017-2021 - aims to build effective partnerships between local agencies, levels of government, and the community to support older residents in South Gippsland.
- Community Engagement Strategy 2020-2024 - part of a suite of engagement documents that govern how Council interacts with the community and strives for engagement best practice.
- Community Strengthening Strategy 2018 – 2022 - has a primary objective of strengthening the capacity and resilience of the South Gippsland community by assisting the community sector to be effective and independent in their operations. This Strategy includes indicators for the Community Grant Program.
- Social Community Infrastructure Blueprint 2014-2029 - considers the utilisation of Council and other community managed and owned facilities in the Shire to provide support for socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable infrastructure into the future.
- South Gippsland Health and Wellbeing Plan 2017-2021 - identifies health and wellbeing priorities, and how SGSC will partner with the community and others to achieve health and wellbeing for people who live and work in the municipality.

Organisations receiving a grant are required to be compliant with the following legislation and Plans.

- Disability Action Plan 2018 – 2022 - aims to improve the way Council responds to the needs of people with disabilities, their families and carers, and service providers
- Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic)
- The Occupational Health and Safety Act (2004)
- Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006, which is a Victorian law that sets out the basic rights, freedoms and responsibilities of all people in Victoria.

Program Purpose & Objectives

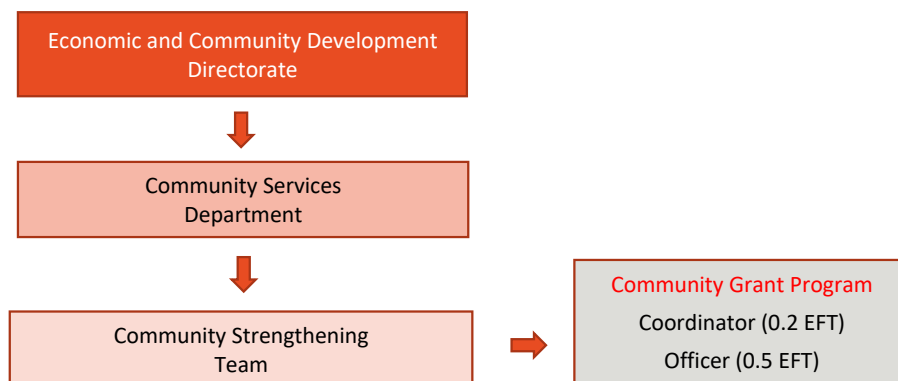
An overarching requirement for the Program is that funds allocated through the CGP should deliver beneficial projects, activities, and events for the South Gippsland Region⁶.

The Program's objectives⁷, are:

- a) Grants for a range of initiatives that support the achievement of the strategic goals and outcomes of the Council Plan and enhance the quality of life, heritage, recreation, and cultural opportunities of the South Gippsland community.
- b) A program that is flexible and responsive to the needs of the community.
- c) A program that minimises the burden on volunteers without undermining the principles of good governance and asset management.
- d) Provides opportunities to volunteer groups and organisations, which would otherwise have limited access to funds to expand or maintain community engagement within the community.
- e) Supports Community Groups to increase self-reliance without encouraging a relationship of dependence.

Operational Context

The Community Grant Program is administered from within SGSC's Community Strengthening Team and is delivered annually across two rounds. It is a competitive, responsive community-wide grant program – meaning grants are made in response to a broad spectrum of requests. The CGP sits alongside Council's other grant programs, including a Small Grant Program and an Emergency Grant Program. The scope of this evaluation is limited to the Community Grant Program stream.

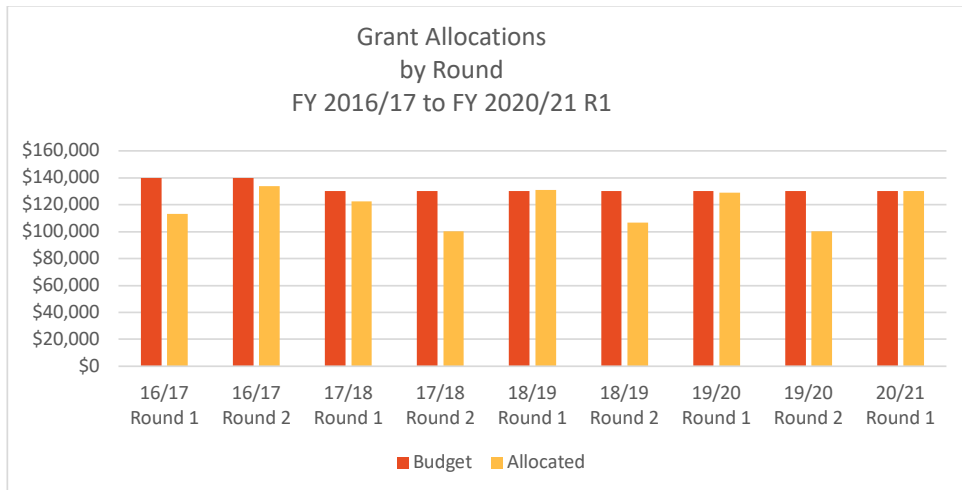


⁶ Community Grant Program Guidelines and Information 20/21

⁷ South Gippsland Shire Community Grants Policy (C47, adopted 26th June 2017)

Funding Context

Council sets the South Gippsland Shire Grants Program allocation (including the Community Grant Program, Small Grant Program, and the Emergency Grant Program) each financial year when formulating the annual budget. Funding for the CGP, and a small amount for administration, is taken from this allocation. During the period of this evaluation (FY 2016/17 to FY 2020/21), the funding allocated for grants has remained relatively static at \$280,000 for FY 2016/17 and then \$260,000 (\$130,000 per Grant Round, of which there are two per annum) for every year thereafter. Funds not distributed in a Grant Round (i.e., when the distribution in grants is less than the budgeted allocation), are carried over or reallocated to the other grant programs.



THE EVALUATION

Suitability of the Program to its Community's Needs & Context (Appropriateness).

1. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program suitable to its need and context?

- Indicator 1.1: Program delivery is aligned with the regulatory and strategic context.
- Indicator 1.2: The Program makes funds available for a broad range of community initiatives within identified thematic areas (heritage, recreation, cultural opportunities) across the municipality.
- Indicator 1.3: The Program is flexible and responsive to the needs of its community.
- Indicator 1.4: The Program provides opportunities to volunteer groups and organisations which would otherwise have limited access to funds.
- Indicator 1.5: The Program supports groups to increase self-reliance without encouraging a relationship of dependence.

INDICATOR 1.1: **PROGRAM DELIVERY IS ALIGNED WITH THE REGULATORY AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

There is some indication that council strategies, priorities and planning are referred to in Program delivery and are utilised as a means of surfacing and prioritising or deprioritising projects within the context of broad community need. For example, an application for a feasibility study was unsuccessful as it did not align with Council's community infrastructure priorities.

However, some grant seekers expressed confusion about how Council Strategies related to their projects. Some noted they had difficulty finding or interpreting Council Strategies or seeking assistance from Council Officers to support them to better understand how their project aligned with Council's strategic and planning context.

"Council is often compliance and strategy driven and if your project does not align you get sent a link to a particular document on the website, it is very impersonal" (focus group Participant)

"To access key people, especially in operational areas is challenging, it is difficult to get in touch with them" (focus group Participant)

Key Learning

Evaluation findings suggest that Council Strategies and Plans are not consistently and systematically referred to within the application review and assessment processes as a means of prioritising or deprioritising projects within a context of community need.

Measures contained in the 2020-2024 Council Plan (all community grants require an 8/10 ranking) and Community Strengthening Strategy 2018-2022 (grants received by groups in at least 20 separate communities annually), do not support Council to measure progress against Council Plan priorities, or the Grant Policy objective for a 'Program that is flexible and responsive to the needs of the community'.

Council Officers identified social and community infrastructure as a particular area of need, resulting in the CGP experiencing an increased demand for asset-based grants.

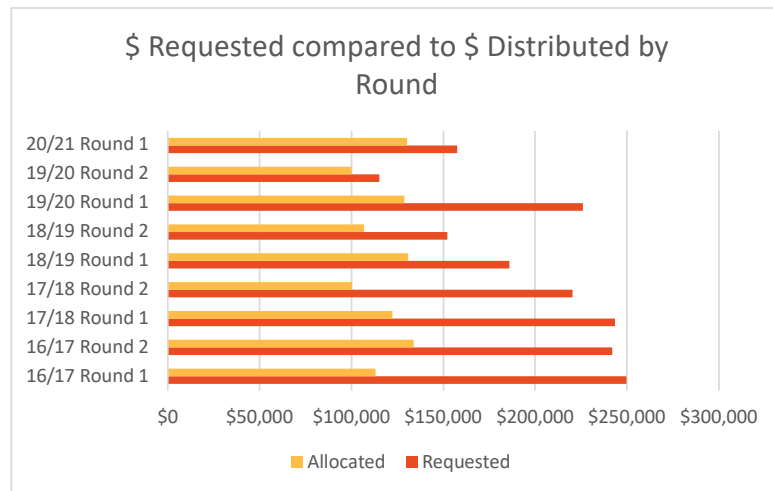
Key Learning

Given the CGP utilises a responsive rather than a proactive grant model (responds to a broad spectrum of requests through an open competitive process), without intervention, there is a risk that a growing demand for asset-based grants may come at the cost of other types of community projects and activities.

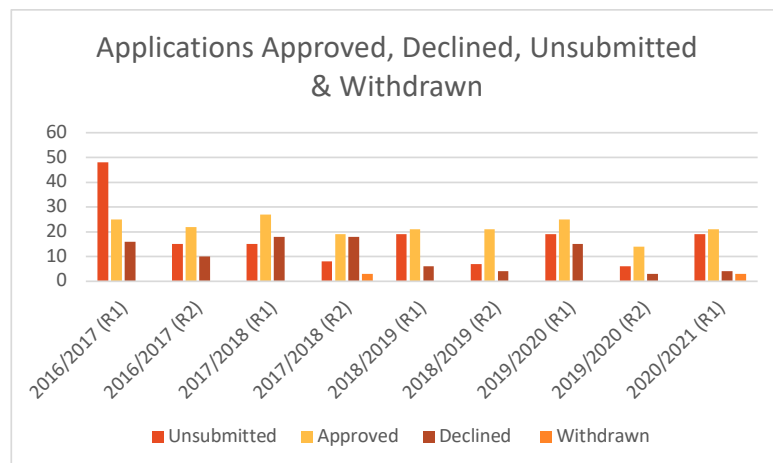
The Social and Community Infrastructure Blueprint, which is in an early stage of establishment, will address expectations around community assets and will create a new funding stream for council owned assets.

INDICATOR 1.2: **THE PROGRAM MAKES FUNDS AVAILABLE FOR A BROAD RANGE OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES WITHIN IDENTIFIED THEMATIC AREAS (HERITAGE, RECREATION, AND CULTURE OPPORTUNITIES) ACROSS THE MUNICIPALITY**

From FY 2016/17 to FY 2020/21 (excluding Round 2 of FY 2020/21, which has not yet been decided), the CGP received a total of 292⁸ applications, totalling \$1,792,356 funds requested. Of this, 195 applications were approved, totalling \$1,066,492 funds distributed. This is represented in the graph below.



The graph below shows applications approved, declined, and withdrawn by grant round. Between FY 2016/17 & FY 2020/21 (round 1) - 43.5% (195) applications were successful; 20.9% (94) were declined; 34.9% (156) were unsubmitted and 0.7% (3) were withdrawn.



⁸ This figure is comprised of 195 applications approved, 94 not approved and 3 withdrawn

The relatively high rate of unsubmitted applications requires further exploration, although survey respondents did identify several reasons that may be contributing to this.

“It is difficult for those who don't have the literacy or organisational experience” (survey respondent)

“Wrote a couple of applications before realising help available but didn't see anywhere that it was there. Perhaps more promotion of availability” (focus group participant)

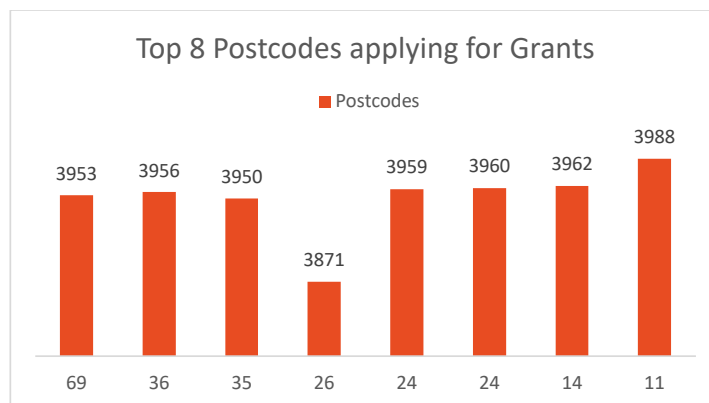
“Roadblock can be specific and having someone to help is helpful” (focus group participant)

Key Learning

The relatively high number of 'unsubmitted' grants (34.9%) warrants further investigation. It may indicate that Council needs to provide additional support to communities that do not have the appropriate skills or face barriers to engaging with the Program.

Program Reach

Between FY 2016/17 and FY 2020/21, the Program received applications from 25 postcodes, 15 of which were from within the Shire and ten outside the municipality for projects delivered within it. Postcode 3964, located within the Shire, was not represented. Of the 15 postcodes within the Shire, 81.8% of applications were received from 8 postcodes - 3953 (23.6%), 3956 (12.3%), 3950 (12%), 3871 (8.9%), 3959 (8.2%), 3960 (8.2%), 3962 (4.8%) and 3958 (3.8%), accounting for 239 of the total 292 applications received.

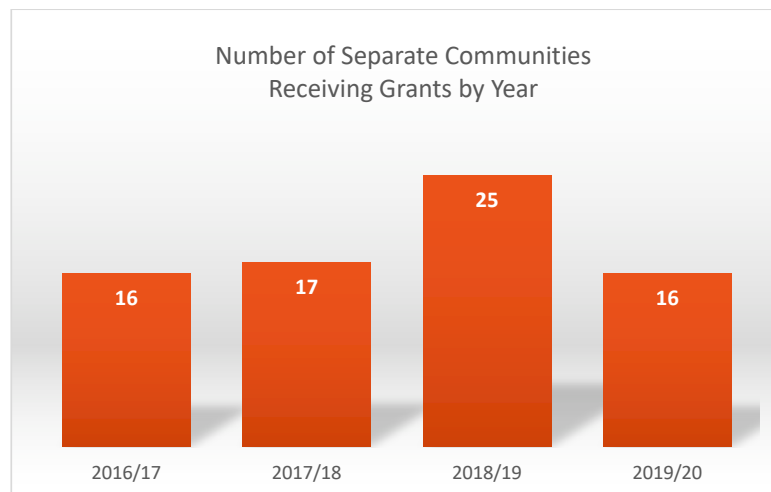


Key Learning

There is a reasonable correlation between postcode population size and the number of applications received.

While smaller communities have fewer community organisations and groups (leading to fewer applications), the Program may not be as effective in reaching and meeting the needs of these communities.

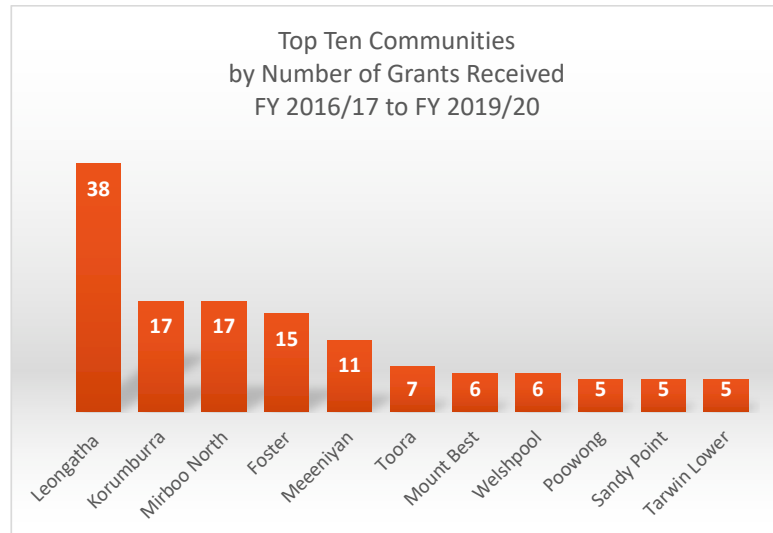
SGSC's Community Strengthening Strategy includes an indicator specifying 'community grants are received by groups in at least 20 separate South Gippsland communities every year (Indicator – Theme 3)⁹. Although this target was achieved in FY 2018/19, it has not been achieved in any other year between FY 2016/17 and 2019/20¹⁰.



⁹ Community Strengthening Strategy 2018-2022

¹⁰ Data Source – South Gippsland Annual Reports 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/10, 2019.20

There was a relatively high degree of variability for the distribution of grants to separate communities between FY 2016/17 and FY 2019/20. Leongatha received the highest number of grants (38), followed by Korumburra (17) and Mirboo North (17), Foster (15) and Meeniyan (11)¹⁰.



Eleven communities in the Shire received only one grant in the period (table below):

Allambee South
Bena, Berry's Creek, Buffalo
Coal Creek
Jeetho, Jumbunna
Leongatha North, Leongatha South
Mirboo
Nerrena

Widespread community awareness of the Program is critical to ensuring it reaches a broad range of communities and that community organisations and volunteer groups are aware of funding opportunities. Promotion of Grant Rounds was primarily undertaken via an email to previous applicants (SmartyGrants distribution list) and through Information Sessions promoted through Council's networks and the 'In the Know' newsletter.

As well as providing guidance, Information Sessions, which are generally attended by 15-30 people are a valuable mechanism for raising awareness of the Program. Focus group participants identified several barriers to attending these:

- Distance (participants indicated sessions are too far for them to travel to)
- Time of day (People were reluctant to drive to a session at night)
- Lack of value in the information provided (information provided at sessions was too general)

Many focus group participants noted that having access to a Grants Officer to answer specific questions about the Program was a particularly valuable aspect of the Information Sessions.

Like LGAs surveyed, as part of the Benchmarking, held information sessions and workshops either per Grant Round or at least once a year. Many Councils are moving from in-person to online sessions and workshops.

Key Learning

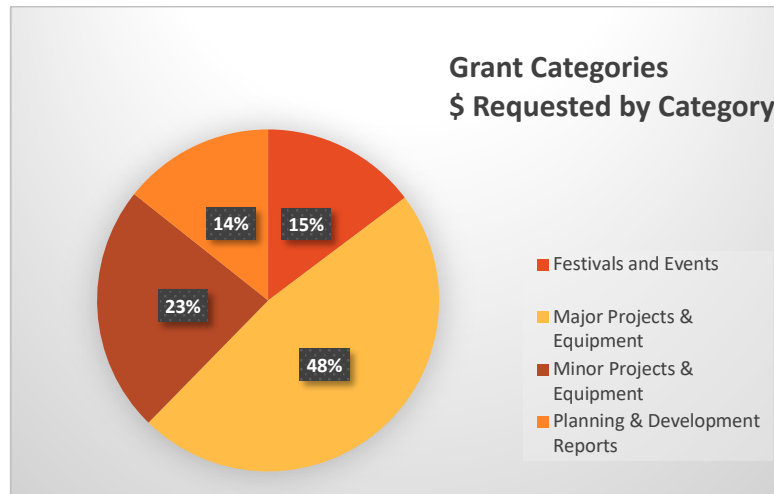
There is an opportunity for the CGP to do more to raise awareness of the Program, particularly in smaller communities, for example, by leveraging Information Sessions to better meet grant seeker needs.

Types of Community Initiatives Funds are Made Available to

Between FY 2016/17 and FY 2020/21, more funds were requested from the Major Projects & Equipment category than for any other category, followed by Minor Projects & Equipment, Festivals and Events and Planning and Development Reports.

The Major Projects & Equipment category requested the largest share of grant funds (\$852,979 of funds requested), followed by Minor Projects & Equipment (\$418,429 of funds requested), Festivals and Events (\$264,244 of funds requested) and Planning & Development Reports (\$256,707 of funds requested).

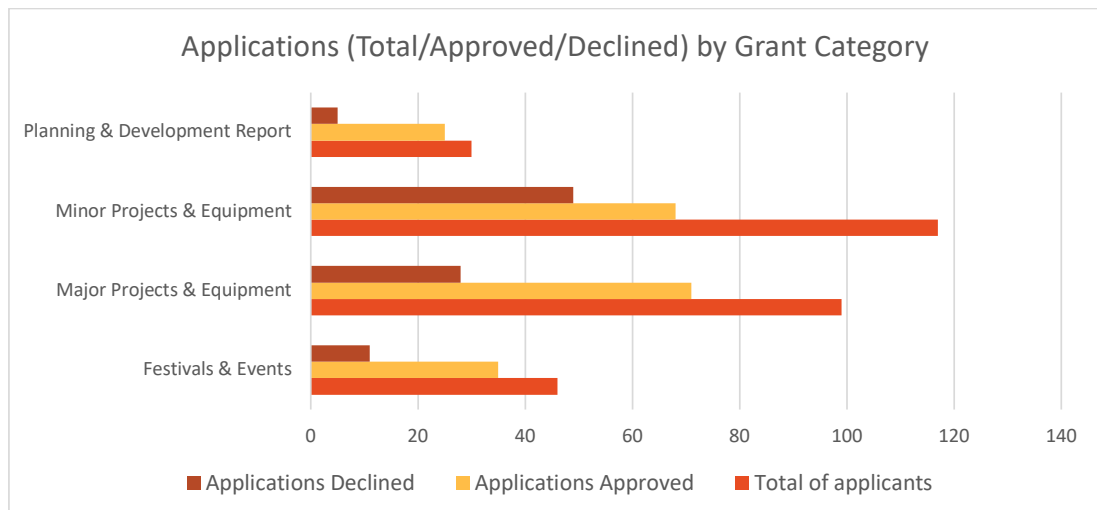
Allocations to grant categories were in direct proportion to funding requested.



Looking at the number of applications, rather than dollars allocated, the largest number of applications were received in the Minor Projects & Equipment category (40%). This was followed Major Projects & Equipment (33%), Festivals & Events (16%), and Planning & Development Reports (11%).

Success rates varied across categories: Festivals & Events (76% of grant applications received approved); Major Projects & Equipment (71% of grant applications received approved); Minor Projects & Equipment (57% of grant applications received approved); and Planning & Development Reports (83% of grant applications received approved).

Aggregated data is not available at a thematic level (i.e., heritage, recreation, cultural opportunities). Consultation with Council Officers suggested that while some community sectors are very engaged with the Program, for example, Sports and Recreation, others such as Arts & Culture are not.



87.5% of survey respondents strongly agreed/agreed that their organisation's needs were reflected in the CGP's categories, indicating that the CGP's current grant categories are appropriate to grant seeker needs.

Key Learning

CGP grant categories, while meeting grant-seeker needs, do not reflect the Program objective to 'enhance the quality of life, heritage, recreation, and cultural opportunities of the South Gippsland community'.

Quality of life is not defined within the Program's Policy or Guidelines and data on funding distributed to thematic areas, although available at an individual application level, it is not captured or aggregated, and is therefore not readily available for the purposes of developing an understanding of how the Program is contributing to these thematic areas over time.

INDICATOR 1.3: **THE PROGRAM IS FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF ITS COMMUNITY**

While previous internal reviews undertaken in 2008, 2016 and 2018 resulted in minor adjustments to the CGP, the internal review conducted in FY 2019/20 resulted in a more significant change through the inclusion of eligible Companies Limited by Guarantee (CLG) and Social Enterprises in response to a request from a locally based CLG.

Some Council Officers expressed concern that community members may perceive CLGs or Social Enterprises as being less entitled to grant funds because of their potential to compete with local businesses through their activities. However, all nine Councils surveyed as part of the Benchmarking include these structures in their eligibility requirements.

In May 2019, a Special Meeting of Council proposed the addition of a new category for Community Sustainability projects in response to a presentation from a local organisation. This resolution was overturned in November 2019 when it was agreed that the category was already catered for within the existing grant categories.

Key Learning

The introduction of CLGs and Social Enterprises and the proposed addition of a new Community Sustainability Grant category demonstrate that the Program has the capacity for flexibility.

However, it also raises concerns as these decisions, which impact Program design and delivery and community perception of the Program, appeared not to have been supported by clear evidence of need or through wider stakeholder consultation.

Consultation with Council Officers – either responsible for administering the Program or engaged with the CGP through their departments - observed that the Program was not informed or influenced by emerging or evolving community need.

Key Learning

The CGP utilises a responsive grant-making model where grantees largely drive the agenda and grants are made to a wide range of project types and initiatives. This makes it challenging to ensure the Program is responding to community needs or contributing to desired community outcomes.

Leveraging data to identify emerging and evolving community needs, engaging prospective grantees to better understand how their projects or initiatives will address these needs, and prioritising projects that align with evidence-based community needs, are all strategies that can be employed to strengthen responsive grant making.

INDICATOR 1.4: ***THE PROGRAM PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES TO VOLUNTEER GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS, WHICH WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE LIMITED ACCESS TO FUNDS***

Grants are currently accessible to not-for-profit community groups or organisations managed by a volunteer committee of management. 75.6% of survey respondents agree that the Program is a vital source of funding for their organisation and 92.3% agree that it is a vital source of funding for their community.

The Program supports a diversity of organisations through its eligibility criteria which include several legal structures:

- Incorporated Body (Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012)
- Community Asset Committee of Council (formerly a Section 86 Committee)
- Company Limited by Guarantee (Corporations Act 2005) and Social Enterprises which exist to benefit community, not owners or shareholders

Groups that do not have a prescribed legal structure can still participate in the Program through an auspice.

"As a not-for-profit volunteer group, it is vital to get support from our local council to achieve positive outcomes for our organization. This ultimately benefits our local community" (survey respondent)

"The Community Grant Program supports volunteerism which is a vital capacity building and social interface in our community. A little can go a long way" (survey respondent)

Key Learning

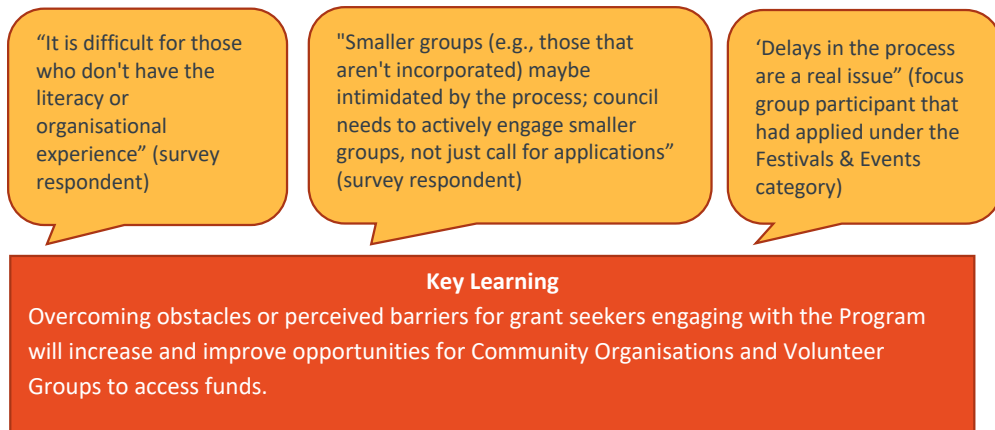
The CGP is deeply valued by the community and represents a vital source of funding for Community Organisations and Volunteer Groups from a broad range of governance and legal structures.

40.7% of survey respondents were not at all confident/not so confident/somewhat confident that the GGP was available to appropriate groups, with some suggesting that smaller or less grant-literate groups may be missing out.

Grant seekers also identified barriers to applying for grants or engaging with the Program, including a perception that the effort and investment in time required to apply for a grant was outweighed by the likelihood of success.

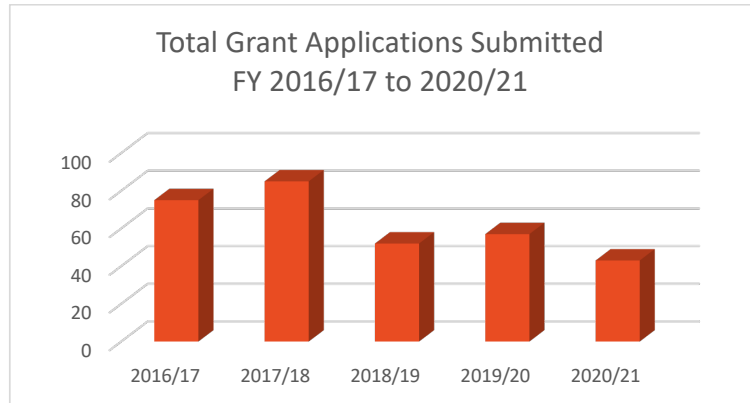
The time between applying for a grant and knowing the outcome of an application was also noted as a barrier by some grant seekers, particularly those applying for Festivals and Events.

Some stakeholders also felt that grants were more likely to be awarded to 'good grant writers,' suggesting that lack of self-perceived capability impeded potential grant seekers from engaging with the Program.

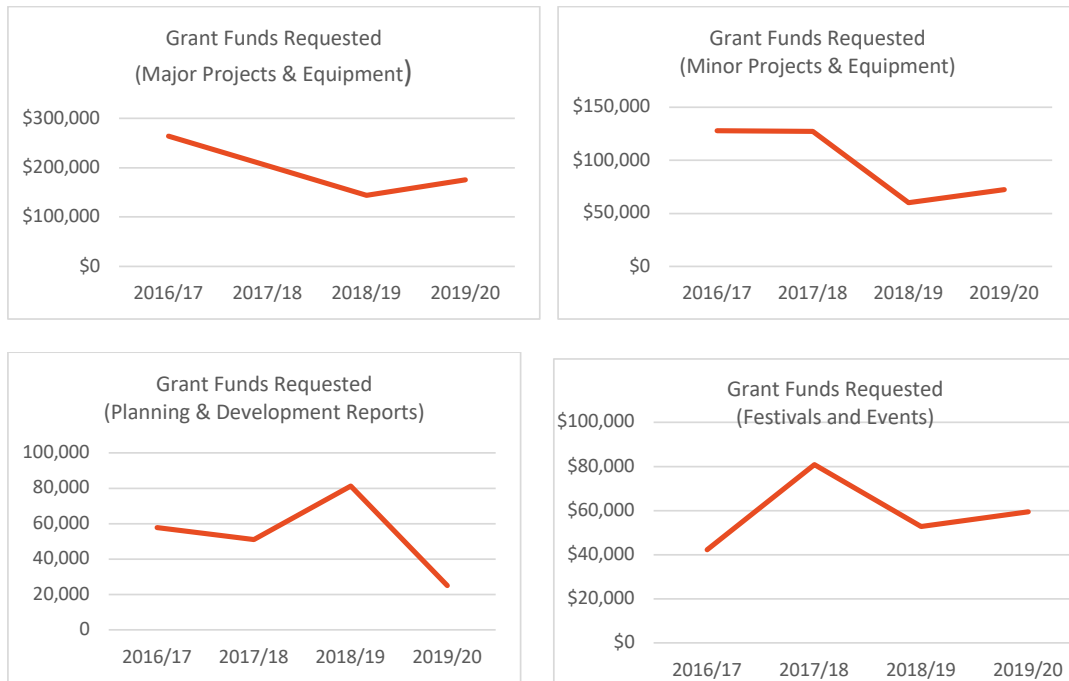


INDICATOR 1.5: **THE PROGRAM SUPPORTS GROUPS TO INCREASE SELF-RELIANCE WITHOUT ENCOURAGING A RELATIONSHIP OF DEPENDENCE**

Between FY 2016/17 and FY 2020/21, the number of applications made to the CGP has generally been trending downward.



This downward trend is reflected in grant funds requested in all categories other than Festivals & Events.



Key Learning

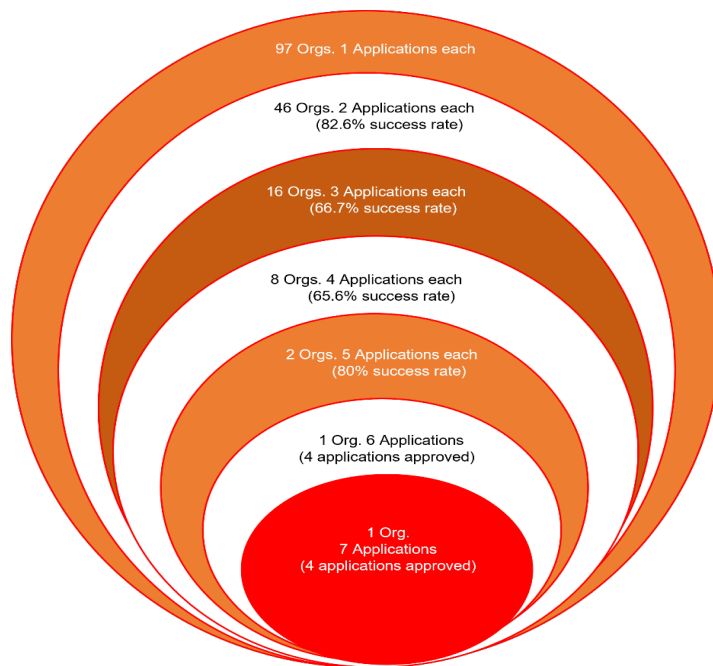
The downward trend in applications indicates that the Program is not building community dependency, but this should not be interpreted as reflecting a lack of need.

The barriers (below) identified by grant seekers through the consultation process may be contributing to the downward trend:

- a perception from grant seekers that the effort and investment in time required to apply for a grant was outweighed by the likelihood of success was relatively low.
- The time between applying for a grant and knowing the outcome of an application, particularly for Festivals and Events.
- A perception that grants were more likely to be awarded to ‘good grant-writers’
- A perception that smaller organisations may not have the capacity or capabilities to engage with the Program

Repeat Grant Seeking Behaviour

Of the 171 organisations that applied for a grant between FY 2016/17 and FY 2019/20, 97 (57%) applied only once to the Program, and 74 (43%) organisations made two or more applications:



The diagram shows some extent of repeat grant-seeking behaviour by organisations. Of the 171 organisations that made applications in the period FY 2016/17 and FY 2020/21 - one organisation applied seven times, of which four applications were approved; one organisation made six applications of which four were approved; two organisations made five applications, each with a success rate of 80%; eight organisations applied for four grants each with a success rate of 65.6%; 16 organisations made three applications each with a success rate of 66.7%; 46 organisations made two applications each with a success rate of 82.6%.

66% of the organisations that applied only once were successful. 66.7% of organisations applying for two or more grants were successful.

Key Learning

Were the Program building a relationship of dependency one would expect to see a higher rate of repeat grant seeking. Most organisations do not make more than one application to the Program.

Project constraints did not allow time to determine whether organisations receiving multiple grants were doing so for the same activity or for different activities. Regardless, the CGP is, for many organisations, the only source of grant funding available and multiple grant-seeking may thus indicate a certain level of dependency born of necessity.

PROGRAM RESOURCES (EFFICIENCY)

2. Headline Question: To what extent are Program resources sufficient and used well?

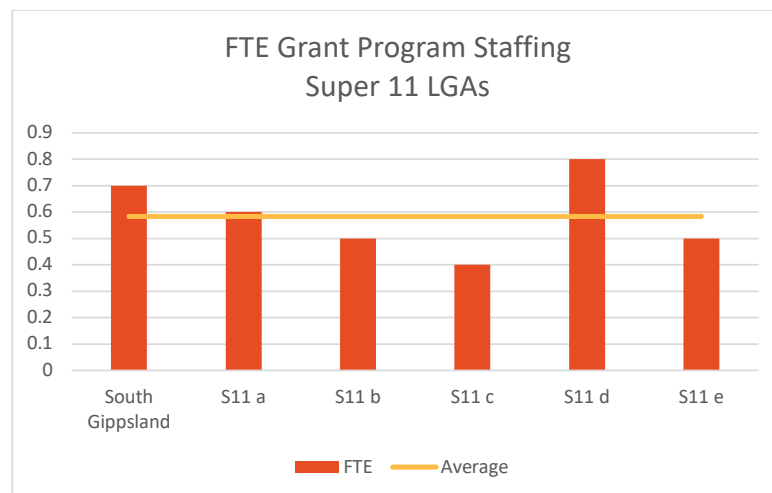
Indicator 2.1: Program resources are sufficient to meet internal (operational) and external (grant seeker) needs and are comparable to like programs.

INDICATOR 2.1: **PROGRAM RESOURCES ARE SUFFICIENT TO MEET INTERNAL (OPERATIONAL) AND EXTERNAL (GRANT SEEKER) NEEDS AND ARE COMPARABLE TO LIKE PROGRAMS**

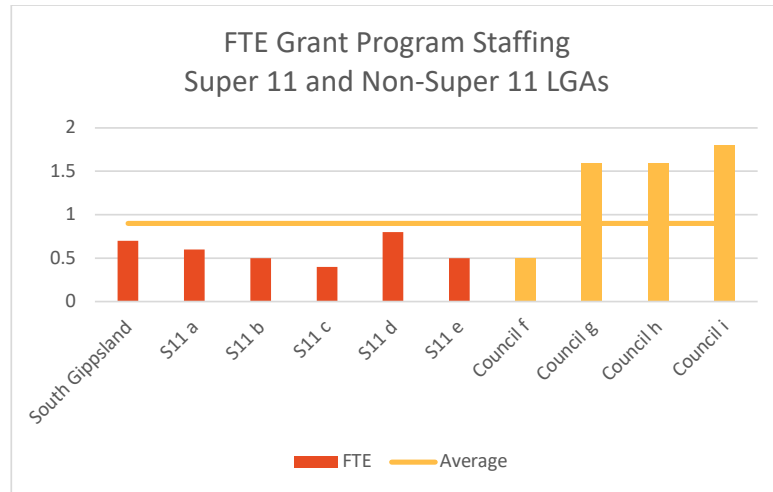
Human Resources

The CGP is administered from within SGSC's Community Strengthening Team. A Community Strengthening Officer (0.5 FTE) administers the day-to-day operations of the Program. 0.2 FTE of the Community Strengthening Coordinator's role is also allocated to the Program.

In comparison to most of the Super 11 LGAs surveyed for the Benchmarking, SGSC is above average with respect to staffing resources dedicated to the CGP:



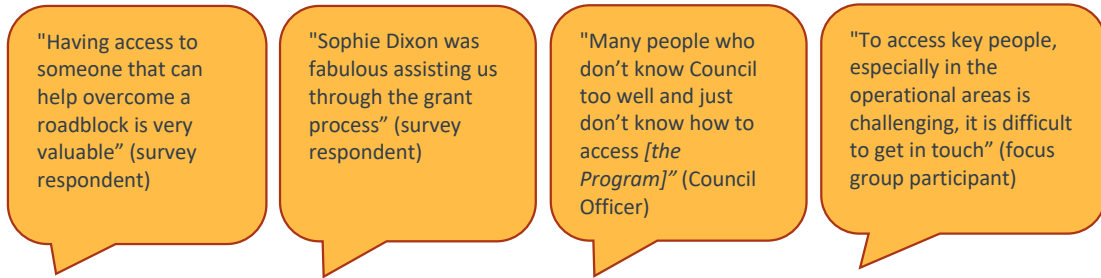
When benchmarked against non-Super 11 LGAs, SGSC is below average in terms of staffing resources. However, all but one of these Councils deliver significantly larger grant programs:



Most of the Super 11 LGAs surveyed do not employ a dedicated officer to administer the Program but allocate staff from other teams to support delivery. All but one of the non-Super 11 LGAs employ a dedicated grants officer or administrator.

The survey and the focus groups received very positive feedback regarding the Grants Team. However, feedback from the focus group did suggest that it was more challenging to reach other SGSC Officers in connection with their applications.

82.9% of survey respondents strongly agreed/agreed that Grants Officers were accessible for assistance when they had questions about the application process, and 84% strongly agreed/agreed that Grant Officers were able to respond to any requests they may have about the application process.



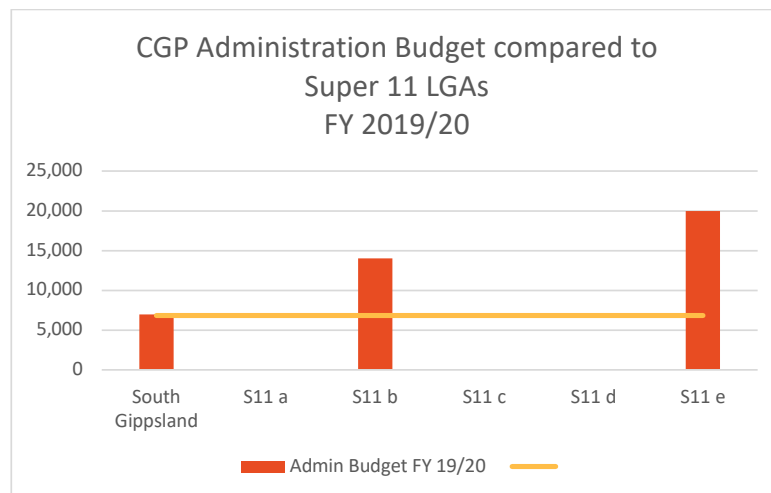
Key Learning

SGSC's staffing resources are well in-line with similar programs and the Program staff are valued by the community.

The broad range of grant-seeking capabilities in the Program's audience result in unpredictable demand for support from grant seekers which may be challenging to meet given Program staff have limited additional capacity.

Administration Budget (excluding staffing & grant allocations)

The Program's administration budget is applied to SmartyGrants fees (cost shared equally between the CGP, Emergency and Small Grant Programs) and grantee presentation events (two per annum). Of the Super 11 LGAs surveyed, SGSC had the lowest administration budget.



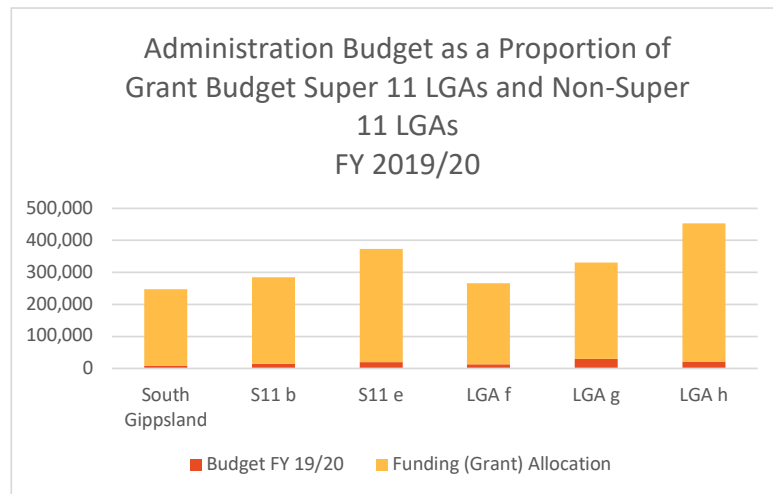
(Note: Three of the Super 11 LGAs surveyed did not allocate a budget for administration of their grants program, but met costs from other budget centres (e.g., Economic and Community Development. None of these Councils were using SmartyGrants software at the time of the survey).

Key Learning

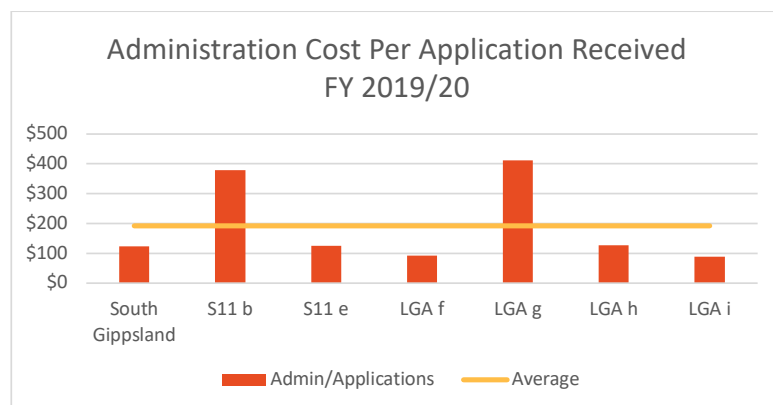
SmartyGrants is a valuable resource that SGSC could be making better use of. CLASSIE is integrated into the SmartyGrants platform and enables grantmakers to manage, classify and derive insights about their grant making activities and the impact it is enabling.

The platform also includes a series of gender lens standard fields. When added to application forms and progress/final reports, they allow grantmakers to apply a gender lens to their work.

CGP administration costs as a proportion of the Program's grant budget (allocation) was low compared to the Super 11 and non-Super 11 LGAs surveyed (the table below excludes Super 11 LGAs who did not allocate an administration budget to their grant program).



The average cost to administer a grant (the administration budget divided by the number of applications received) was \$192 (Super 11 and non-Super 11 LGAs).



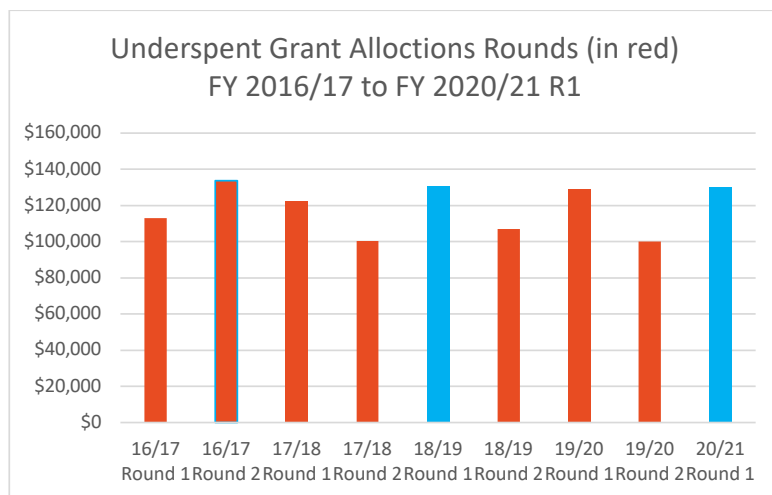
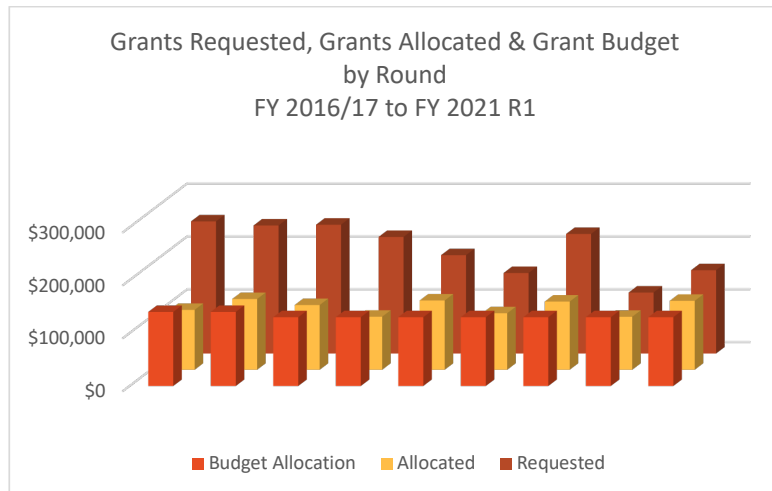
Funding Allocations

During the period of this evaluation (FY 2016/17 to FY 2020/21), the funding allocated for grants has remained relatively static at \$280,000 (\$140,000 per Grant Round) in FY 2016/17 and then \$260,000 (\$130,000 per Grant Round)¹¹ for each year thereafter. Funds that are not distributed in a Grant Round (i.e. when the distribution is less than the maximum total allocation) are, if necessary, reallocated to the Small or Emergency Grant Programs. Any underspend at the end of the financial year is rolled into the following year. A similar approach was taken by most of the LGA's surveyed as part of the Benchmarking.

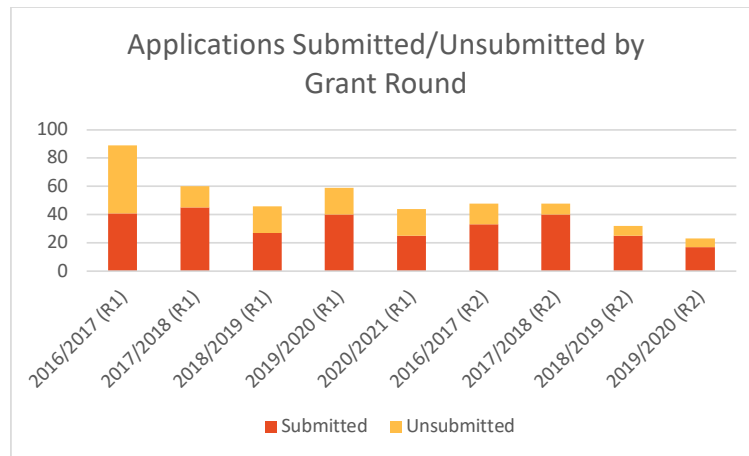
LGA Approaches to Underspends	
South Gippsland	Reallocated to other grant programs (if required) or carried over to the next financial year
S11 a	Reallocated to another grant program
S11 b	Reallocated to next Round
S11 c	If underspend is sufficient, it will be offered in a separate round or carried over to the next financial year
S11 d	All funds are generally allocated
S11 e	Underspend in Round 1 carried over to Round 2. Any underspend at the conclusion of Round 2 is returned to surplus
non-S11 LGA f	Have only ever underspent one round. Underspend in the first half of the financial year is carried over to the next Round.
non- S11 LGA g	Not answered
non-S11 LGA h	Underspend in Round 1 carried over to Round 2. Any underspend at the conclusion of Round 2 is returned to surplus
non-S11 LGA i	Reallocated to other grant programs

While the Program has consistently been oversubscribed (i.e. funds requested have exceeded the grant allocation budget), the Program has only expended its maximum allocation in two Rounds during FY 2016/17 to FY 2020/21. Reasons given for not distributing the grant allocation budget were that grant applications were not eligible or were not assessed at a high enough standard.

¹¹ Source: Budget data supplied by SGSC



The Program has a relatively high rate of unsubmitted applications (i.e. applications that are started in SmartyGrants but have not been submitted by the closing date of the Round).



Survey respondents and focus groups participants stated they had experienced difficulties with the Program's grant application process. This may be contributing to the relatively high rate of unsubmitted applications.

"An enormous amount of work/documentation required" (focus group participant)

"It seemed quite long for a small amount of money - we couldn't apply for a small grant because it wasn't enough, and the big grant wanted a lot more information than we felt necessary." (survey respondent)

Key Learning

Consistent underspends and a high unsubmission rate may be an indication of:

- Lack of clarity in the resources provided to grant seekers (e.g., Grant Guidelines) or in the application process itself
- Lack of adequate support for grant seekers, particularly those who are inexperienced or lack capability in grant writing
- Lack of capabilities in the Program's target audience

Key Learning

Managing the Program budget well, ensures that the Program delivery goes smoothly.

It is important that stakeholders have a realistic idea about how much the Program will make available to grant seekers. This involves a high level of planning. If the grants are used well, then the Program is progressing and being successfully implemented.

PROGRAM PROCESSES (PROCESS)

3. Headline Question: To what extent does the Program employ robust practices and processes?

Indicator 3.1: The Program is aligned to the Grants Management Framework.

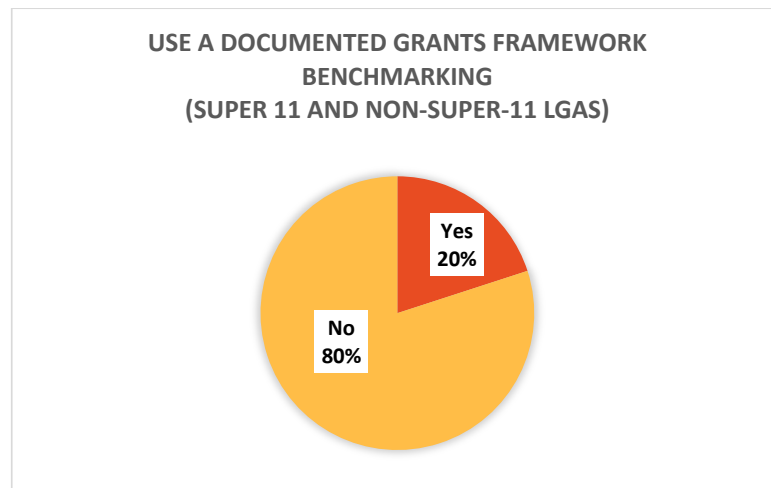
Indicator 3.2: The Program's processes are in line with good practice principles in community grant making.

INDICATOR 3.1: **THE PROGRAM IS ALIGNED TO THE GRANTS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK**

A Grants Management Framework is a set of management and operational processes which collectively determine how a grant program is delivered.

The critical elements of a Grants Management Framework identified by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) were used as the basis to evaluate SGSC's Grants Management Framework. The evaluation team also compared elements of SGSC's Framework to those used by other LGA's to gain a better understanding of good practice in this area.

Eight of the ten LGAs surveyed for the Benchmarking, including SGSC, did not have a fully documented Grants Management Framework.



SGSC Grants Management Framework

POLICY

Critical Element (VAGO)	SGSC	Key Observations
Objective	Yes	
Scope	Yes	
Prescribed assessment process and selection criteria	Partial	Assessment processes and selection criteria are not comprehensively articulated within the Policy. Example: https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-01/Policy-Boroondara-Community-Strengthening-Grants.pdf
Specifies key principles, requirements, roles and responsibilities associated with evaluating applicants	Partial	Roles and responsibilities are included but are not well articulated, particularly item 3, which states that Council will 'endeavour' to arrange for education of Councillors and relevant staff, rather than ensure education is provided. Key principles are not articulated in the Policy Example: https://www.casey.vic.gov.au/policies-strategies/grants-policy

Although not included as a critical element under the VAGO criteria, SGSC's Policy did include Risk Assessment.

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Critical Element (VAGO)	SGSC	Key Observations
Conflict of Interest declared by assessors and are managed	Yes	
Transparent processes around the Assessment of applications.	Partial	Some aspects of the CGP's Assessment Process lack transparency (see Assessment Processes below for detailed learnings).
Acquittals, to ensure that grants are used for the purpose that Council has granted the funds	Yes	

GOVERNANCE & OVERSIGHT

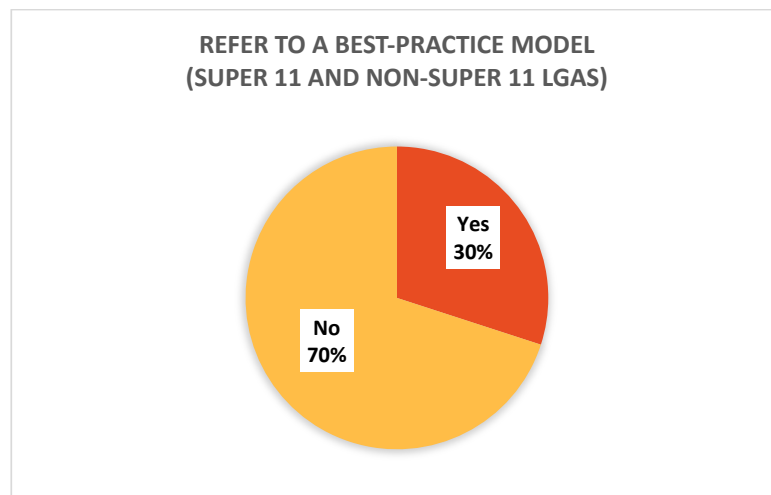
Critical Element (VAGO)	SGSC	Key Observations
Reporting to senior management and the Council on grant progress and outcomes of grant programs	Partial	Briefings and reports are provided to Senior Management and Council but are primarily output-focused and do not address program outcomes.
Internal audit to review Policy, processes, and practice periodically	Partial	Limited internal reviews are undertaken periodically. Reviews do not significantly engage with the Program's target audience (grant seekers) to identify potential improvements to Program processes (application, Assessment, acquittal). The Evaluation Team was unable to determine if Program outputs were being used to track and measure progress against CGP indicators identified in the Community Strengthening Strategy.

Key Learning

SGSC's Grants Management Framework is largely complete but critical elements should be strengthened to better align with VAGO's recommended approach.

INDICATOR 3.2: **THE PROGRAM'S PROCESSES ARE IN LINE WITH GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES IN COMMUNITY GRANT MAKING**

Of the ten LGAs surveyed, seven did not refer to a best-practice model to inform their grant making. Of the three that did, two used the Our Community (SmartyGrants) Guide.



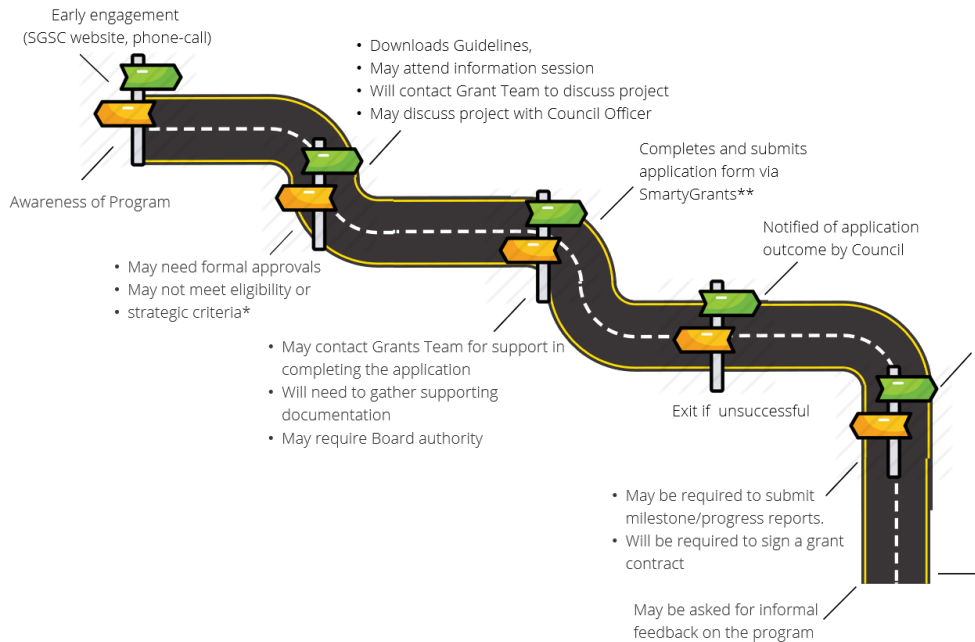
Key Learning

While grant making lacks a universally accepted set of standards, utilising an established best or good practice model would support Council to enhance and improve the CGP's processes and practices, and ensure the Program reflects the widely accepted key principles of good grant making (transparency, accessibility and equity).

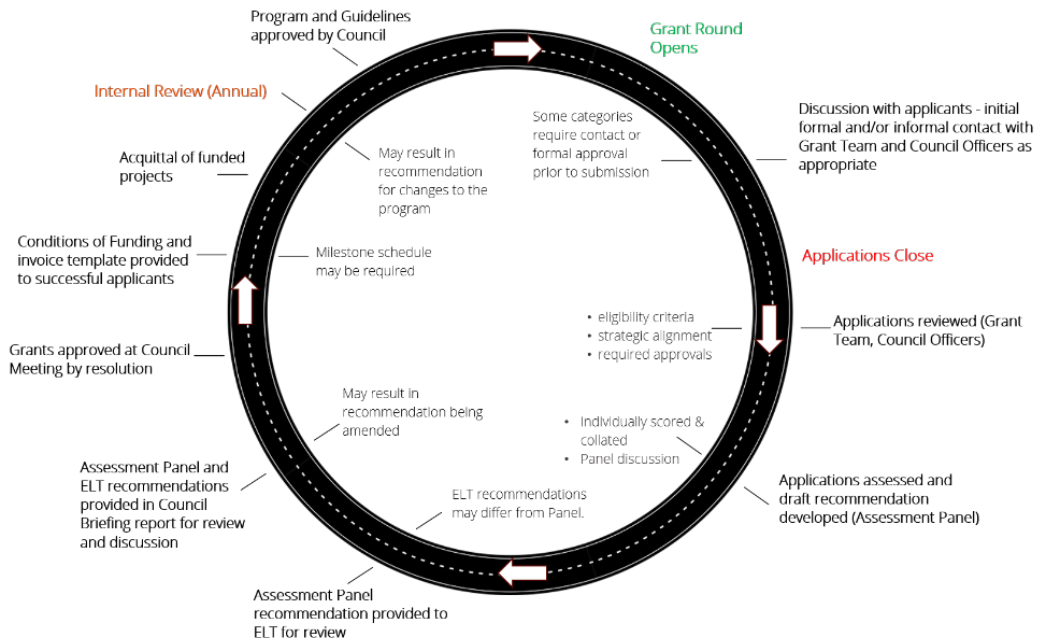
As SCSC does not have an end-to-end process manual for the CGP, the evaluation team developed a:

- Grant Seeker Journey Map (to clarify the processes that grant seekers experience when engaging with the Program).
- A Council Flow (to identify the administrative and decision-making processes that Council employ in the delivery and management of the Program).

Grant Seeker Journey Map



Council Flow



The Application Process

For the purposes of this evaluation, the Application Process incorporates the following elements:

- Grant seeker engagement with Grant Officers and SGSC Officers in connection with their project or application
- The Grant Guidelines and Information resource
- The Application Form

86.3% survey respondents (strongly agreed/agreed) found the *Community Grant Guidelines & Information* was helpful when completing their application. Although, some survey respondents and focus group participants noted that they found the guidelines overly long.

65.9% of survey respondents strongly agreed/agreed, and 27.2% neither agreed nor disagreed that Council provided useful and appropriate resources to guide the grant application process.

The SGSC Disability Action Plan (2018-2022) aims to prioritise access and inclusion and reduce barriers for people with a disability, including by ensuring communication collateral is accessible. However, CGP's Guidelines are only available for download from the Council's website in PDF format or as a physical copy from Council's head office or at events such as Grant Information Sessions.

Key Learning

The Community Grant Program Guidelines are a comprehensive and useful resource for grant seekers, but accessibility could be improved.

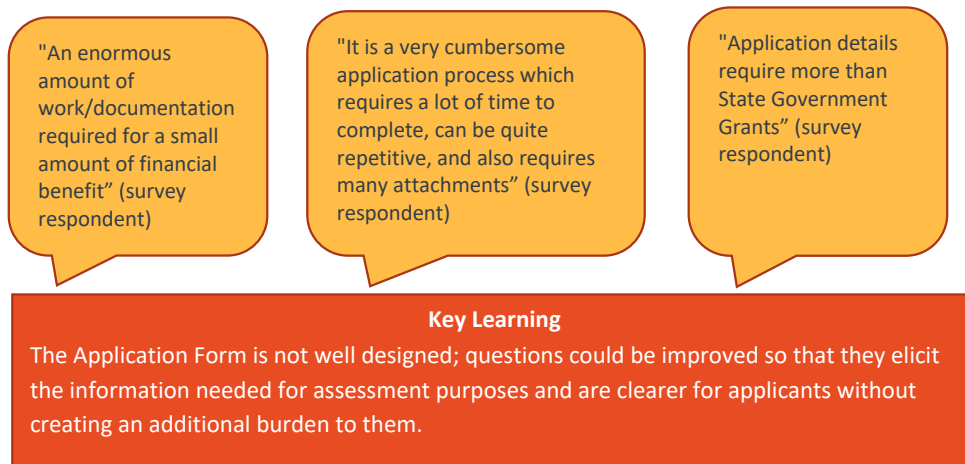
Grants and SGSC Officers indicated that many grant seekers approach them very late in the application process for advice or information to support applicants in developing their application. SGSC Officer's felt that earlier contact would be beneficial to applicants, particularly with respect to assisting them to better align their applications to Council Strategies or Plans.

Key Learning

Ensuring applicants engage with Council early in the application process would benefit applicants, strengthen alignment between projects and Council Strategies and Plans, and enhance the quality of applications.

Applications to the CGP are submitted online via the SmartyGrants platforms. Grant seekers also have the option, if they experience difficulties or cannot access the SmartyGrants portal, to attend the Council's offices in Leongatha and receive Officer support to complete their applications.

78.6% of survey respondents were very satisfied/satisfied with the application process, and 71.6% strongly agreed/agreed that the application process was straightforward to complete. However, several survey respondents and focus group participants indicated that they found the process challenging and that questions in the Application Form were unclear and/or repetitive:



It can be challenging to gather the information required to make an informed assessment without creating a burden for applicants, particularly for community grant programs which are often accessed by a broad range of people with varying degrees of experience. Many grantmakers are exploring other ways to improve accessibility for grant seekers, including engaging with them earlier on in the process, building the capability of grant seekers through workshops and information sessions and ensuring they have simple, supportive grant application processes.

The Assessment Process

For the purposes of this evaluation, the Assessment Process incorporates the following elements:

- Due diligence of applications to ensure they comply with the CGP eligibility and supporting documentation requirements
- Internal review of applications by relevant SGSC Officers (service owners) before assessment
- Assessment and recommendations (Assessment Panel)
- Review of the Assessment Panel's recommendations by the ELT
- Council Briefing and discussion on the recommendations
- Council Approval

Prior to being assessed, applications are checked for due diligence by the Grants Team.

All LGA's surveyed as part of the Benchmarking undertake some level of due diligence to ensure, at minimum, applications meet their program's eligibility requirements. Any applications that fail to demonstrate eligibility do not move forward, and grant seekers are advised that this is the case.

Depending on the funding amount or project category, some LGAs apply additional probity to applications, for example, event management plans, risk assessment plans, event permits, (or evidence of application for) building and/or planning permits.

SGSC reviews all applications for due diligence but does not currently have documented procedures for doing so. Consultation with the assessor indicates a lack of confidence in the due diligence process.

Key Learning

The Program's lack of a documented due diligence procedure is contributing to grant assessors having a lack of confidence in this aspect of the Assessment Process.

Before being formally assessed, relevant SGSC Officers (service owners) review applications with any comments noted in the SmartyGrants platform for the attention of the Assessment Panel. Of the 292 applications received, 28% had comments noted by Council Officers.

Key Learning

The review of applications by SGSC Officers is an important mechanism for obtaining contextual information, particularly within a complex planning environment.

However, there is a lack of transparency, as well as the potential for lack of equity, in this process given it does not utilise a systematic approach including standardised criteria for SGSC Officers (i.e. they may provide general comments, relevant planning information, or offer their support/lack of support for an application).

There is no way to measure the influence of the internal review within the overall assessment process (i.e. to what extent the comments influence the assessors' scores and recommendations).

The assessment panel comprises three internal assessors (currently the Coordinator Community Strengthening, Coordinator Building & Recreation Assets, Coordinator Major Projects) and two external assessors from local grant making organisations. All assessors are required to declare a conflict of interest and must not provide an assessment for the application for which they are indicating a conflict.

The two external assessors (including the Chair) were added to the panel following the 2019 internal review, which identified a risk that the assessment process could be too internally focused. While only one of the LGAs surveyed for the Benchmarking used external assessors, having independent parties on the panel can add to community confidence in decisions.

Key Learning

Consultation indicated that support and guidance for assessors could be strengthened to ensure they understand their responsibilities and are confident in the assessment scoring methodology.

Assessors score applications independently from one another. Scores are then aggregated, and the panel meet to jointly determine which applications will be recommended for approval.

Scoring is against application form questions, with each question contributing a certain percentage to the overall score for that application.

Scoring Matrix

Application Form Question	Response Criteria	
1. Why does your organisation want to do this project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent to which project responds to needs of organisation and/or community and why it is necessary Project supported by any Plans (Community Plans, Business Plans) Increases in participation, membership, or community involvement 	30%
2. Why do you need Council Funds?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why organisation cannot fund the project Why organisation needs ratepayer funds Future commitments of organisation (if they are setting funds aside which are evident, e.g. in a bank statement or balance sheet) 	20%
3. How will your organisation carry out the project/event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the project will be delivered 	10%
4. Who will be involved in the project/event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who will manage the project? What experience they have Have they provided letters of support 	10%
5. What will the project achieve for the community? Tell us about your organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate how the project will meet the need of your organisation and the community Background on the organisation and its purpose 	20%

The current scoring matrix does not:

- Clearly differentiate between how the project will meet the grant seeker's organisational needs or the community's needs.
- Clearly differentiate between needs (the issue the project will address) and outcomes (the impact or benefits a project will create for the community).

Question 5 requires both information on the applicant organisation as well as the project benefits or outcomes. The response criteria for this question duplicates the response criteria for question 1 (which do not directly go to outcomes or benefits).

In addition to the above scoring matrix, the additional assessment criteria (below) may be applied to applications. However, it is unclear when these criteria may be employed or the level of weighting they may be given:

- Level of financial and other support already provided by Council for the project seeking support.
- Level of financial support previously provided by Council to the applicant.
- Level of demonstrated financial and/or in-kind contribution by the applicant.

Key Learning

The current scoring matrix does not clearly differentiate between what need/s the project is addressing and what outcome/s (community benefit) the project will achieve. This risk undermines the quality and consistency of the Assessment Process.

The Assessment Panel's recommendation is reviewed by the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and then provided, together with any suggestions for changes to the recommendation that the ELT may have, as a Briefing for discussion and review by Council before being developed into a final recommendation. The latter is formally put to a general Council meeting for approval at a later date.

Community confidence in whether decisions were being made on the merit of a project was lower than for other grant processes.

- 40.7 % of survey respondents were extremely confident/very confident that grants were awarded on the project's merit.
- 59.3% of survey respondents were not at all confident/somewhat confident/not so confident.

While consideration and approval of funding allocations is the Council's responsibility, most LGAs surveyed as part of the Benchmarking reported that Council never or only rarely made changes to Assessment Panel recommendations.

"I am concerned over decision being made only by Council Officer" (focus group participant)

" I feel the grant process seems a bit ad hoc and there seems to be no real explanation with unsuccessful projects or consistency with what gets funded" (survey respondent)

"This process could be more transparent" (survey respondent)

Key Learning

The community lacks full confidence in the decision-making process with respect to the awarding of grants.

There is no formalised process for providing unsuccessful applicants with feedback on their applications. Several survey respondents and focus group participants suggested that receiving feedback would be valuable and would support them in building their grant-seeking capabilities.

"All applicants should receive feedback on why their application was not successful, including areas to focus on should they wish to reapply". (survey respondent) " (focus group participant)

"(I) Would like more targeted and constructive, more detailed feedback following unsuccessful Applications' (survey respondent)

Key Learning

Providing feedback to grant seekers on their application will help them to build their capabilities and increase their confidence in the Assessment Process.

The Grant Agreement and Acquittal Process

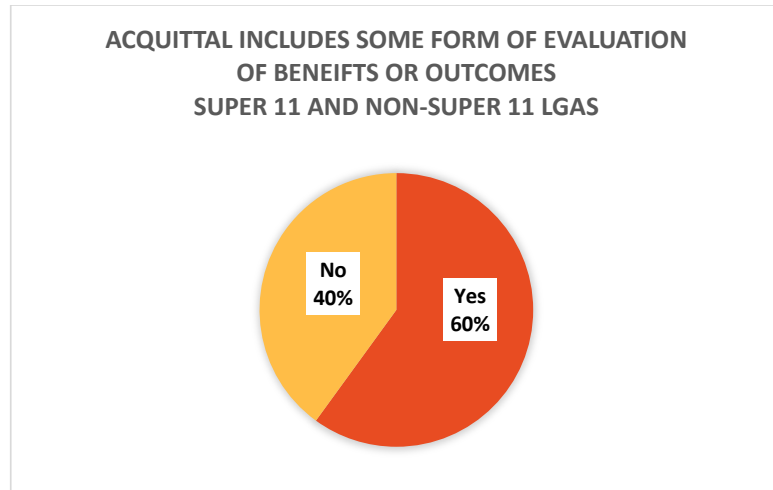
Successful grant seekers are provided with step-by-step instructions on how to claim the grant monies from Council, which include:

- Agreement to acknowledge Conditions of Funding (T&Cs)
- An invoice template and an acquittal template

No process is identified for the termination, withdrawal or repayment of funding in the Information Pack for Successful Applicants. Other like LGAs contain this information in various ways (e.g., Fact Sheet, Guidelines, Application Help Guide).

Applicants are clear on the requirements of acquitting funds for their project, and 74.1% of survey respondents said they were very satisfied/satisfied with the Acquittal process. However, focus group participants suggested that the Acquittal Form could be better leveraged to identify project outcomes.

The majority of LGAs surveyed as part of the Benchmarking included at least some form of evaluation, including an assessment of the project's benefits and outcomes, as part of their acquittal process:



" What is not evident in the acquittal process is a place to identify unforeseen benefits or something that wasn't evident at the start of the process – something that we could all learn from. I feel that there should be more emphasis on this"
(focus group participant)

Key Learning
Collecting only financial data misses an important opportunity to capture project learnings and achievement of community outcomes.

ACHIEVEMENT OF COMMUNITY OUTCOMES (EFFECTIVENESS)

4. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program contributing to community outcomes?

Indicator 4.1: The Program is guided by a set of community outcomes.

Indicator 4.2: Program continuous improvement is responsive to community need.

INDICATOR 4.1: *THE PROGRAM IS GUIDED BY A SET OF COMMUNITY OUTCOMES*

Guided by a set of community outcomes

While the Program lacked a documented set of community outcomes to guide its processes and practices, the evaluation found qualitative evidence indicating that the CGP is contributing to community benefits and outcomes.

Community organisations and volunteer groups articulated with great clarity what the Program's benefits were to their organisations and their communities and shared personal stories of what the grant dollars had achieved for their communities.



While Council's Strategies and Plans are not a substitute for a well-developed program outcomes framework, they do provide a structure for identifying the shared outcomes to which the Program is contributing. However, there was little evidence to show that Council's Plans and Strategies were informing the Program. Or conversely, that Program outcomes were being understood in the context of supporting the priorities identified in these Plans and Strategies.

For example, although the Program sits within the community strengthening remit and is acknowledged in Council's Community Strengthening Strategy as key mechanism for supporting the community sector to thrive, there is only one indicator identified within the Strategy (20 grants to be received by 20 separate communities each year). The primary objective of the Community Strengthening Strategy is to 'strengthen the capacity and resilience of the South Gippsland community'. The CGP is well-positioned to contribute to these objectives and use them as goalposts to give the Program a clearer sense of direction.

Similarly, consultation with Council Officers suggests that there is the opportunity for the CGP to align and support the Arts Culture and Creative Industry Strategy 2017-2021 and support the broader principles of the arts strategy – 'supporting community growth'.

Guided by strategic objectives

The Program has a role in Council's work toward a 'Thriving South Gippsland'.¹² Council has acknowledged that the Program is a way for it to connect and engage with its community. By its very design, the Program builds and strengthens community partnerships across the Shire between communities of interest and of place. It is a vehicle for 'community volunteerism'¹³ and a platform to achieve common community goals or outcomes. The Program has the capacity to 'activate local community who might not otherwise be engaged'¹⁴. The evaluation found little evidence that showed that the Program was using identified Council's Strategic Objectives to guide its processes, practices and decision-making.

Key Learning

Council's Plans and Strategies do not inform the Program and, conversely, the Program's outcomes are not understood in the context of supporting the priorities in Council Plans and Strategies.

¹² South Gippsland shire Council, Invitation for community consultation by SGSC Communications Team (PR2637 29/3/21)

¹³ South Gippsland Shire Council, Community Strengthening Strategy 2018-2020 – Supporting the Community and Volunteer Sector

¹⁴ South Gippsland Shire Council, Community Strengthening Strategy 2018-2020 – Supporting the Community and Volunteer Sector

INDICATOR 4.2: **PROGRAM CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IS RESPONSIVE TO COMMUNITY NEED**

Program continuous improvement is responsive to community need

Although consultation activation activities yielded valuable qualitative data, it is only one piece of the puzzle. In the future, qualitative data should also be gathered. When looking at the Program's continuous improvement capacity to be responsive to community need, the evaluation team looked at the degree to which the Program can make incremental and breakthrough improvements as part of its proactive efforts to improve processes and practices. It also examined the protocols that were in place to support periodic robust reviews and ensure informed decision-making. The evaluation found that the Program was primarily collecting data through SmartyGrants, the cloud-based grants management system. The system is currently used to record and track details around grant transactions. It also found that the full capability of SmartyGrants has yet to be fully explored. The Program's data could be expanded to include datasets on 'how well the program is grant making' and whether 'it is making a difference'. Having the suitable datasets will help the Program:

- Gauge the impact of its grant making activities.
- Enable the Program and grant seekers/grantees to have a set of shared outcomes to work toward.
- Evaluate programmatic outcomes and measure progress.
- Enable grantees to understand how their projects are contributing to community outcomes through a fit-for-purpose grant evaluation process.
- Ensure the Program is strategically placed to make better and informed decisions around its grant making activities.

Grant making data intelligence

Having robust continuous improvement protocols only works when the Program is collecting, tracking and evaluating meaningful datasets. The evaluation found that the Program is collecting transactional data and systematically collecting the 'who', 'what' and 'where' of funding. There was little evidence to show that the Program was collecting contextual and impact data which can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the impact the Program is enabling. No evidence was found to show that the Program was able to look across the Council's grant making streams over the years to paint a picture of the success of its grant making activities. The datasets from the three grant streams are walled off from each other, making it challenging to connect grant-by-grant data with cluster-level evaluation.

Benchmarking data on outcomes measurement and monitoring and evaluation frameworks

Do you have a documented Outcomes Measurement Framework?	
S11 c	Has a documented outcomes measurement framework for its grants program
S11 a, S11 b, S11 d, S11 e, non-S11 LGA f, non-S11 LGA g, non-S11 LGA i	No documented outcomes measurement framework
non-S11 LGA h	No documented outcome measurement framework. Have documents in place but are not referred to a framework
Do you have a documented Monitoring & Evaluation Framework?	
non-S11 LGA h	No documented monitoring and evaluation framework but have documents in place that are not referred to as a framework
S11 a, S11 b, S11 e, non-S11 LGA f, non-S11 LGA g, non-S11 LGA i	No documented monitoring and evaluation framework
S11 c & S11 d	Has a documented monitoring and evaluation framework for their community grants programs
How often do you evaluate or review their community grants program?	
S11 a	Review or evaluate program annually
S11 b	Reviews get done once every 3 years. Last review was in 2017
S11 c	Conduct review annually
S11 d	Policy and procedure are periodically reviewed - program recently had a full review
S11 e	No major review but minor changes to program
non-S11 LGA f	2016 was a Benchmarking review. 2018 discussed with Council for any potential changes. Currently undertaking a more thorough review of categories, frequency, assessment
non-S11 LGA g	Do not evaluate or review their community grants program
non-S11 LGA h	Last review was completed in 2020. Another review when the Council Plan & Health and Wellbeing Plan is endorsed
non-S11 LGA i	A review gets done once every 4 years, and the last one was done in 2018
In the evaluation process, does your Council determine whether the community grants program has improved social outcomes for community?	
S11 a, S11 c, S11 e, non-S11 LGA f, non-S11 LGA g, non-S11 LGA i	No
S11 b	Not broadly and formally
S11 d	Yes

Key Learning

Evaluating the Program's achievement of community outcomes has been challenging. The evaluation team found that the Program does not have the proper structures to enable it to measure its success through an outcomes-focused lens. Although the Program sits with the broader Council strategic policy space, very little thought is given to how it is linked to higher level strategic objectives.

Without a set of well-articulated outcomes, the Program does not have a 'compass' to guide its implementation and decision-making processes. Without robust datasets the Program is not set up for continuous improvement conversations.

CONTINUATION OF COMMUNITY BENEFITS & OUTCOMES (SUSTAINABILITY)

5. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program established to take a position to 'future-proof' itself?

Indicator 5.1: The Program is responsive to evolving and future community need.

INDICATOR 5.1: **THE PROGRAM IS RESPONSIVE TO EVOLVING AND FUTURE COMMUNITY NEED**

Program is responsive to evolving and future community need

For the Program to be sustainable, it must be set up to be sustainable. The evaluation found very little evidence that supported this. Although there is qualitative evidence to support a finding that the Program is contributing to community outcomes and benefits, it did not have documented community outcomes and therefore is not well-positioned to collect the evidence to support this. The Program does not have a program logic model or a theory of change statement to guide its activities and its measurement of achievement of community outcomes. Although the Program is collecting data through SmartyGrants, it is collecting only transactional data. There is a gap in data sets. For the Program to have continuous improvement conversations internally, it must improve its capacity to collect and use data to assist with informed decision-making. Data collected systematically and consistently would allow the Program to make better-informed decisions on the best use of ratepayers' grant making dollars and ensure that the dollars are used to support community projects that make the biggest difference.

Key Learning

The evaluation found that the Program was not guided by a program logic model and/or a theory of change statement. Without the 'compass' it was inevitable that the Program would be collecting transactional data only. A program logic model or theory of change statement would provide the structure to develop robust datasets to help with informed decision-making around the Program's grant making activities.

SUMMARY OF LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant'
Suitability of the Program to its community's needs and context (Appropriateness) 1. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program suitable to its needs and context?		
Indicator 1.1: Program delivery is aligned with the regulatory and strategic context	<p>Evaluation findings suggest that Council Strategies and Plans are not consistently and systematically referred to within the application review and assessment processes as a means of prioritising or deprioritising projects within a context of community need.</p> <p>Measures contained in the 2020-2024 Council Plan (all community grants require an 8/10 ranking) and Community Strengthening Strategy 2018-2022 (grants received by groups in at least 20 separate communities annually) do not support Council to measure progress against Council Plan priorities, or the Grant Policy objective for a 'Program that is flexible and responsive to the needs of the community'.</p>	<p>Better understand how the Program aligns and supports Council's strategic priorities and planning within the context of community needs.</p> <p>Short-term Support grant seekers to understand and communicate how their projects align with Council Strategies and Plans and engage Council officers in this process more effectively.</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Ensure the Program is informed by strategic priorities (e.g., Council Plan and Community Strengthening Strategy) and appropriate outcomes-focused indicators are used.</p> <p>Use Council Plan priorities, Grant Policy objectives as a guide when making grant making decisions.</p> <p>Shift decision-making from outputs to contribution to community outcomes and meeting community-identified needs.</p>
	<p>Given the CGP utilises a responsive than proactive grant model (responds to a broad spectrum of requests through an open competitive process), without intervention, there is a risk that growing demand for asset-based grants may come at the cost of other types of community projects and activities.</p> <p>The Social and Community Infrastructure Blueprint, which is in an early stage of establishment, will address expectations around community assets and will create a new funding stream for Council owned assets.</p>	<p>Ensure the impact of Social Community Infrastructure Blueprint on CGP grant making is well understood and communicated to grant seekers.</p> <p>Explore options for meeting the funding needs of non-Council community assets and infrastructure.</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Suitability of the Program to its community's needs and context (Appropriateness)		
1. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program suitable to its needs and context?		
<p>Indicator 1.2: The Program makes funds available for a broad range of community initiatives within identified thematic areas (heritage, recreation, and culture opportunities) across the municipality</p>	<p>The relatively high number of 'unsubmitted' grants (34.9%) warrants further investigation. It may indicate that Council needs to provide additional support to communities that do not have the appropriate skills or face barriers to engaging with the Program.</p> <p>Program Reach There is a reasonable correlation between postcode population size and the number of applications received.</p> <p>While smaller communities have fewer community organisations and groups (leading to fewer applications), the Program may not be as effective in reaching and meeting the needs of these communities.</p> <p>There is an opportunity for the CGP to do more to raise awareness of the Program, particularly in smaller communities, by, for example, leveraging Information Sessions to better meet grant seeker needs.</p>	<p>Understand and address the factors that may be contributing to lower engagement with the Program by some communities /organisations.</p> <p>Increase awareness of the opportunities provided by the Program.</p> <p>Improve outreach and engagement within the Shire to community organisations and volunteer groups.</p> <p>Short-term Develop a 'short & simple' survey for applicants that fail to submit their applications. The data gathered will inform the Program on how it could reduce unsubmitted grants.</p> <p>Organise focus groups with smaller communities to understand how the Program can better support them and encourage previous applicants to share their knowledge and experiences.</p> <p>Enhance Information Sessions to provide meaningful and relevant information to grant seekers (e.g., how Council strategies and priorities align with the CGP) and ensure relevant Council Officers attend sessions to respond to grant seekers specific enquiries.</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Develop and conduct ongoing capability and capacity building initiatives with the Program's audiences - particularly those communities facing perceived barriers to engaging and applying for grants</p> <p>Leverage the Community Engagement Strategy to improve outreach and engagement of community organisations.</p>
	<p>Types of community initiatives funds are made available for CGP grant categories, while meeting grant-seeker needs, do not reflect the Program objective to 'enhance the quality of life, heritage, recreation, and cultural opportunities of the South Gippsland community'.</p> <p>Quality of life is not defined within the Program's Policy or Guidelines and data on funding distributed to thematic areas, although available at an individual application level, it is not captured or aggregated, and is therefore not readily available for</p>	<p>Revisit Program objectives to ensure they better align with community-identified needs and desired community outcomes.</p> <p>Short-term Ensure each Program objective is well-defined and measurable so that progress can be tracked and to support continuous improvement.</p> <p>Track applications against thematic areas (heritage, recreation, cultural opportunities).</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Develop a Theory of Change Statement for the Program to provide guidance on meeting community expectations and benefits and that desired community outcomes are being contributed toward.</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Suitability of the Program to its community's needs and context (Appropriateness) 1. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program suitable to its needs and context?		
	the purposes of developing an understanding of how the Program is contributing to these thematic areas over time.	
Indicator 1.3: The Program is flexible and responsive to the needs of its community	<p>The introduction of CLGs and Social Enterprises and the proposed addition of a new Community Sustainability Grant category demonstrate that the Program has the capacity for flexibility.</p> <p>However, it also raises concerns as these decisions, which impact Program design and delivery and community perception of the Program, appeared not to have been supported by clear evidence of need or through wider stakeholder consultation.</p> <p>The CGP utilises a responsive grant making model where grantees largely drive the agenda and grants are made to a wide range of project types and initiatives. This makes it challenging to ensure the Program is responding to community needs or contributing to desired community outcomes.</p> <p>Leveraging data to identify emerging and evolving community needs, engaging prospective grantees to better understand how their projects or initiatives will address these needs, and prioritising projects that align with evidence-based community needs, are all strategies that can be employed to strengthen responsive grant making.</p>	<p>Ensure decision-making is evidenced by community needs and supported through community consultation.</p> <p>Communicate rationale for changes to the Program within the context of meeting community needs supported by the Program's Theory of Change Statement.</p> <p>Short-term Improve communication to and engagement with community on any improvements/changes to the Program.</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Ensure all Program decision-making are guided by the Program's Theory of Change Statement.</p> <p>Strengthen the responsive model currently used so that it better targets evolving or emerging community needs.</p> <p>Develop Program strategies using community outcomes as the guide for Program continuous improvement.</p>
Indicator 1.4: The Program provides opportunities to volunteer groups and organisations, which would otherwise have	<p>The CGP is deeply valued by the community and represents a vital source of funding for Community Organisations and Volunteer Groups from a broad range of governance and legal structures.</p> <p>Overcoming obstacles or perceived barriers for grant seekers engaging</p>	<p>Understand the barriers that are contributing to lower engagement in the Program by some communities /organisations</p> <p>Short-term Develop a simple monitoring tool to regularly check with community organisations and volunteer groups (6-monthly; annually) to capture data on any perceived barriers and obstacles.</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Suitability of the Program to its community's needs and context (Appropriateness) 1. Headline Question: To what extent is the Program suitable to its needs and context?		
limited access to funds	with the Program will increase and improve opportunities for Community Organisations and Volunteer Groups to access funds	<p>Use data to start continuous improvement conversations for the Program.</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Develop and conduct ongoing capability and capacity building initiatives with the Program's audiences - particularly those communities facing perceived barriers to engaging and applying for grants.</p>
<p>Indicator 1.5: The Program supports groups to increase self-reliance without encouraging a relationship of dependence</p>	<p>The downward trend in applications indicates that the Program is not building community dependency, but this should not be interpreted as reflecting a lack of need.</p> <p>The barriers identified by grant seekers through the consultation process may be contributing to the downward trend.</p> <p>Were the Program building a relationship of dependency, one would expect to see a higher rate of repeat grant seeking. Most organisations do not make more than one application to the Program.</p> <p>Project constraints did not allow time to determine whether organisations receiving multiple grants were doing so for the same activity or for different activities. Regardless, the CGP is, for many organisations, the only source of grant funding available and multiple grant seeking may thus indicate a certain level of dependency born of necessity.</p>	<p>Investigate reasons for multiple grant seeking behaviour and identify ways to support organisations becoming more sustainable.</p> <p>Short-term Consult with multiple grant seekers to better understand their grant seeking behaviour</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Build capacity and capability of community organisations and volunteer groups to diversify their income and/or access other funding opportunities</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Program Resources (Efficiency) 2. Headline Question: To what extent are Program resources sufficient and used well?		
Indicator 2.1: Program resources are sufficient to meet internal (operational) and external (grant seeker) needs and are comparable to like programs	Human Resources SGSC's staffing resources are well in line with similar programs, and the Program staff are valued by the community. The broad range of grant-seeking capabilities in the Program's audience result in unpredictable demand for support from grant seekers which may be challenging to meet given the Program staff have limited additional capacity.	Continue to ensure that appropriate resources are available to deliver the Program and respond to the needs of grant seekers.
	Administration Budget (excluding staffing & grant allocations) SmartyGrants is a valuable resource that SGSC could be making better use of. CLASSIE is integrated into the SmartyGrants platform and enables grant makers to manage, classify and derive insights about their grant making activities and the impact it is enabling. The platform also includes a series of gender lens standard fields. When added to application forms and progress/final reports, they allow grant makers to apply a gender lens to their work.	Ensure effective use of the SmartyGrants platform to inform the Program's processes and practices. Short-term Ensure Program Officers attend SmartyGrants training and download Smarty Grants Tool Kit to help with re-designing the tools currently being used to capture data. The Program should incorporate the collection of contextual & impact data outside of the 'business as usual' transactional data. Having all three types of datasets will make for better-informed decisions
	Funding Allocations Consistent underspends and a high unsubmission rate may be an indication of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity in the resources provided to grant seekers (e.g., Grant Guidelines) or in the application process itself • Lack of adequate support for Grant seekers, particularly those who are inexperienced or lack capability in grant writing • Lack of capabilities in the Program's target audience Managing the Program budget well ensures that the program delivery goes smoothly.	Investigate reasons for consistent underspending in grant allocations by rounds to identify appropriate strategies to address identified issues/concerns

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Program Resources (Efficiency) 2. Headline Question: To what extent are Program resources sufficient and used well?		
	It is important that stakeholders have a realistic idea about how much the Program will make available to grant seekers. This involves a high level of planning. If the grants are used well, then the Program is progressing and being successfully implemented.	

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Program Processes (Process) 3. Headline Question: To what extent does the Program employ robust practices and processes?		
Indicator 3.1: The Program is aligned to the Grants Management Framework	SGSC's Grants Management Framework is largely complete but critical elements should be strengthened to better align with VAGO's recommended approach.	Review all elements of the Grant Framework in accordance with VAGO's recommended approach. Long-term Ongoing review of the Grants Management Framework in accordance with Council's Policy review cycle and during internal reviews of the Program.
Indicator 3.2: The Program's processes are in line with good practice principles in community grant making	While grant making lacks a universally accepted set of standards, utilising an established best or good practice model would support Council to enhance and improve the CGP's processes and practices, and ensure the Program reflects the widely accepted key principles of good grant making (transparency, accessibility and equity).	Explore adopting an established best-practice model to guide SGSC's grant making activities. Short term Use the resources provided by SmartyGrants (e.g., Grants Tool Kit) to guide grant making activities.
	Application Process The Community Grant Program Guidelines are a comprehensive and useful resource for grant seekers, but accessibility could be improved. Ensuring applicants engage with Council early in the application process would benefit applicants, strengthen alignment between projects and Council Strategies and Plan, and enhance the quality of applications.	Ensure Program collateral meets accessibility requirements. Short Term Ensure the Guidelines are available for download in an accessible format (e.g., RTF) and consider putting the Guidelines in their entirety on the Council website. Council should encourage applicants to engage with Council earlier on in the application process. Medium Term Explore making grant seeker contact with a Grants Officer a mandatory part of the process.
	Application Form The Application Form is not well designed; questions could be improved to elicit the information needed for assessment purposes and are clearer for applicants without creating an additional burden to them.	Improve the application form, ensuring that it aligns with assessment criteria and data collecting/reporting needs.

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Program Processes (Process) 3. Headline Question: To what extent does the Program employ robust practices and processes?		
	<p>Assessment Process The Program's lack of a documented due diligence procedure is contributing to grant assessors having a lack of confidence in this aspect of the Assessment Process.</p> <p>The review of applications by SGSC Officers is an important mechanism for obtaining contextual information, particularly within a complex planning environment. However, there is a lack of transparency, as well as the potential for lack of equity, in this process given it does not utilise a systematic approach including standardised criteria for SGSC Officers (i.e., they may provide general comments, relevant planning information, or offer their support/lack of support for an application).</p> <p>There is no way to measure the influence of the internal review within the overall assessment process (i.e., To what extent the comments influence the assessors' scores and recommendations).</p> <p>Consultation indicated that support and guidance for assessors could be strengthened to ensure they understand their responsibilities and are confident in the assessment scoring methodology.</p>	<p>Develop and implement a documented Due Diligence procedure with clearly articulated responsibilities.</p> <p>Improve the transparency of the internal review process through standardise criteria (e.g., alignment with Council Plans or Planning implications) for Council Officers to review against.</p> <p>Provide enhanced support and guidance for assessors:</p> <p>Short-term Develop a procedure/process manual for assessors. Ensure Assessors are appropriately trained and supported during the assessment process.</p>
	<p>Scoring Matrix: The current scoring matrix does not clearly differentiate between what need/s the project is addressing and what outcome/s (community benefit) the project will achieve. This risks undermining the quality and consistency of the Assessment Process.</p>	<p>Ensure that the Assessment criteria enables assessment of applications against program objectives and contribution to community needs and benefits.</p> <p>Short-term Improve the scoring matrix (in line with the Application Form) to ensure consistency in scoring.</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Program Processes (Process) 3. Headline Question: To what extent does the Program employ robust practices and processes?		
	The community lacks full confidence in the decision-making process with respect to the awarding of grants.	Ensure there is consistency and transparency in the awarding of grants. Changes to the assessment panel recommendation should be supported by a documented rationale, which is available for review by relevant senior staff while not made public.
	Providing feedback to grant seekers on their application will help them to build their capabilities and increase their confidence in the Assessment Process.	Develop a mechanism to provide feedback to unsuccessful grant seekers to build their capability and strengthen their confidence in the assessment process.
	The Grant Agreement and Acquittal Process Collecting only financial data misses an important opportunity to capture project learnings and achievement of community outcomes.	Develop a process to enable grant recipients to capture the positive outcomes of their projects at the acquittal stage. Explore opportunities to share these outcome stories with the community.

Indicators	Key Learnings	Suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Achievement of Community Outcomes (Effectiveness) 4.Headline Question: To what extent is the Program contributing to community outcomes?		
Indicator 4.1: The Program is guided by a set of community outcomes	<p>Guided by a set of community outcomes The Program is contributing to positive community benefits and outcomes within South Gippsland Shire, although the Program does not have a documented outcomes framework</p> <p>Guided by strategic objectives Council's Plans and Strategies do not inform the Program and, conversely, the Program's outcomes are not understood in the context of supporting the priorities in Council Plans and Strategies.</p>	<p>Develop an Outcomes Framework for the Program to ensure it has a set of community outcomes that will guide the Program's processes, practices and decision-making. The Framework will also align the work of the CGP to that of Council and other Council departments involved in the Program.</p> <p>Short-term Develop a Theory of Change Statement.</p>
Indicator 4.2: Program continuous improvement is responsive to community needs	<p>Program continuous improvement is responsive to community needs Evaluating the Program's achievement of community outcomes has been challenging. The evaluation team found that the Program does not have the proper structures to enable it to measure its success through an outcomes-focused lens. Although the Program sits with the broader Council strategic policy space, very little thought is given to how it is linked to higher level strategic objectives.</p>	<p>Develop a Monitoring & Evaluation Framework for the Program.</p> <p>Review and develop a robust data development agenda that includes community outcomes indicators.</p>
	<p>Grant making data intelligence Without a set of well-articulated outcomes, the Program does not have a 'compass' to guide its implementation and decision-making processes. Without robust datasets, the Program is not set up for continuous improvement conversations.</p>	<p>Improve the data quality and the documentation for decision-making.</p> <p>Short-term Improve categorisation and collation of datasets in SmartyGrants to support outcomes-based reporting.</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Use data consistently to report upwards (Council Plan and other plans and strategies) on Program's progress and contribution to community outcomes.</p>

Indicators	Key Learnings	Recommendations and suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Achievement of Community Outcomes (Effectiveness)		
5.Headline Question: To what extent is the Program established to take a position to 'future-proof' itself?		
Indicator 5.1: The Program is responsive to evolving and future community need	The evaluation found that the Program was not guided by a program logic model and/or a theory of change statement. Without this 'compass', it was inevitable that the Program would be collecting transactional data only. A program logic model or theory of change statement would provide the structure to develop robust datasets to help with informed decision-making around the Program's grant making activities.	<p>Council should consider developing a Theory of Change for the Program to future proof and ensure its sustainability.</p> <p>Short-term Develop a Theory of Change Statement</p> <p>Develop an Outcomes Framework</p> <p>Medium- to Long-term Develop a Monitoring & Evaluation Framework</p>

	Area of Focus	Recommendations and Suggestions for 'how to' accomplish recommendations, where relevant
Community Grants Review Reference Group		
	Establishment of Community Grants Review Reference Group	<p>Further consideration should be given to the establishment of a Review Reference Group for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the process and the development of appropriate parameters for future internal reviews or independent evaluations of the Program. • Provide a platform for testing ideas, exploring changes and collective decision-making. • Provide an opportunity to engage external stakeholders in decisions that may affect them, in line with the principles of the Local Government Act.