

Attachment F

Engagement Report October 2025

Engagement report – Grants program review



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Overview

Background

The City of Sydney is reviewing its Grants and Sponsorships Program to make it easier to use, fairer and more effective. The program supports community, environmental, cultural and business initiatives that make Sydney a more inclusive, creative and sustainable city.

As part of this review, a two-phase consultation will seek feedback from the community to create a streamlined, accessible program that provides stronger support for applicants.

The first phase focused on targeted consultation with past grant applicants and program users, with the aim of testing proposed changes and identifying support needs. Phase 2 will be a public exhibition of the revised guidelines for broad community feedback.

Engagement summary

In **September/October 2025** we ran 2 workshops with previous grant applicants to test proposed changes and understand what support organisations will need under a revised system.

A **face-to-face workshop** was held on **Tuesday 30 September 2025** at Town Hall House.

An **online workshop** was held on **Thursday 16 October 2025** via zoom.

In total, **21 organisations** took part.

Participants represented a broad cross-section of the community including arts, cultural and festival organisations, local businesses, community service providers, sustainability initiatives and culturally diverse groups. The groups included small and large organisations, experienced applicants and newer groups, and representatives from across our villages.

The workshops focused on four topics:

- The proposed single annual funding round and revised application model
- The introduction of external assessors
- The level and impact of grant funding caps
- How we can best communicate and support organisations through the changes

Feedback from these sessions has helped refine the draft guidelines before they are presented to Council in late 2025 for public exhibition in 2026.

About the workshops

Workshop structure

The workshops followed a structured and interactive format designed to gather detailed feedback on four key aspects of the proposed grants program review.

Facilitators shared short presentations outlining each proposed change before guided activities where participants discussed potential challenges, benefits and support needs.

Activity 1 – Application model

Participants discussed the shift to one main funding round per year and one main category per Council strategy ie Social, Economic, Environmental and Creative. They identified potential challenges, then suggested support measures that could make the model easier to navigate.

Activity 2 – External assessors

Facilitators presented a proposal to introduce industry local expert assessors. Participants explored the benefits, concerns and safeguards needed for trust and transparency in the process.

Activity 3 – Funding caps

Participants considered the potential impact of increasing grant funding limits. Using boards marked with +\$10K increments, they recorded what they would do with additional funds and what benefits this could create for their communities.

Activity 4 – Communicating the changes

Groups brainstormed how best to communicate the changes to the wider community and what resources or channels would help applicants understand and adapt to the new system.

Feedback summary

Across both sessions, participants supported the review and appreciated being involved early in the process. They valued the opportunity to shape the design of the revisions and offered clear, constructive suggestions.

Across both workshops, participants expressed strong support for simplifying the application program and improving accessibility. There was consistent enthusiasm for support materials such as clear templates, feedback, and one-to-one help.

In both sessions there was concern that a single annual funding round could disadvantage smaller and less experienced organisations, and general agreement that external assessors could strengthen transparency, provided they are diverse, well trained, and guided by clear criteria.

Participants had mixed views on funding cap increases. Some saw benefits for balancing increased costs and expanding project scale and impact, while others preferred to maintain the current cap so more, smaller grants can be given.

Both groups recommended clear communication and multi-channel outreach about any changes.

The face-to-face group focused more on operational challenges like application processes, timing, and support needs. They provided detailed ideas around their concerns and possible support.

The online group focused more on principles like transparency, diversity of assessors, and how to balance accessibility with fairness. They discussed community confidence and asked how success would be measured.

What we heard

This section of the report describes in detail the feedback we heard in about each topic in the workshops. It combines feedback and discussion points from both the face-to-face session and the online session.

1. Application model and process

Participants supported simplifying the application process but raised concerns about how the new timing model could affect smaller organisations and those with less administrative capacity. Most participants agreed that having one main funding round each year would make it easier for the City of Sydney to manage applications and appreciated the resulting increase in support that would enable. A key concern raised was that the length of time between applications would make it harder for a smaller and less experienced community organisations to utilise the learnings from their application feedback to re-apply after an unsuccessful application. There was concern about the challenge of aligning the timing of funding applications with creative opportunities.

Clarity was provided to the participants that this change would only impact four categories that have been delivered twice a year. There were no changes proposed to the grants that are open all year round or as properties become available.

There was broad support for keeping quick-response grants open year-round, and for introducing clearer, more transparent processes for applicants. Participants said the structure should be designed around accessibility, equity and ongoing communication.

Key themes

- **Accessibility and equity:** The 'one round per year' model risks disadvantaging small or less experienced organisations that don't have dedicated staff to manage applications.
- **Risk and pressure:** Participants said missing the single application window could prevent them from delivering projects that respond to new needs or opportunities.
- **Clarity and feedback:** Applicants want simpler forms, templates and more feedback, especially for unsuccessful applications, to help improve over time.
- **Support for first-time applicants:** Participants emphasised the need for help navigating the system, especially for smaller, diverse organisations, and appreciated the extra support proposed as part of this change
- **Keep flexibility:** Participants supported retaining quick-response funding open all year.

"Longer lead time might help, clearer sense of project"

"Concentration into one application disadvantages smaller orgs with smaller staffing"

"Marginalisation – bigger orgs advantaged, smaller squeezed"

"Stifles creativity + innovation"

"What if orgs miss the deadline?"

"People miss out – system/economic driven not support innovation"

2. Assessment process (external panels)

Participants were broadly supportive of using external assessors to bring greater transparency, fairness and expertise to the grants process. Many saw this as a positive step toward shared decision-making and community involvement.

At the same time, participants highlighted risks around consistency, potential bias, and the need for appropriate training and representation. They stressed that assessors should reflect the diversity of Sydney's communities and creative sectors, not just established or well-connected organisations.

Key themes

- **Diversity and representation:** Participants expressed strong support for external panels that include assessors with lived experience, particularly people from First Nations, culturally diverse, disability and community-based organisations.
- **Training and guidelines:** There was strong agreement that all assessors should be trained on equity, conflict of interest and our assessment criteria.
- **Hybrid model:** There was strong support for a mixed panel of our staff and external assessors to balance community insight with program consistency.
- **Transparency and renewal:** Regular rotation of assessors and clear terms of reference were seen as essential to maintain confidence in the process.
- **Shared decision-making:** Participants valued the opportunity for the community to have a voice in allocation decisions, provided governance and oversight are strong.

"Diversity of expertise / lived experience"

"Assessors / representation (First Nations)"

"Global / broader perspective"

"Transparent / equitable"

"Manage COI, allocate more \$, define industry"

"Hybrid approach, terms for assessors to build knowledge"

"Facilitation of intercultural communication"

3. Funding caps

Participants had mixed views on increasing the maximum grant amount.

While many supported higher caps to match the rising cost of delivering programs, others were concerned that larger grants could mean fewer projects receive funding overall.

Participants were asked to describe what they could achieve with additional funding in \$10,000 increments. However, the following discussions focused less on the exact amount and more on how any increase would work in practice.

Participants who supported an increased funding cap said extra funds could be used for wages, artist fees, marketing, equipment and expanded community engagement. Some participants stressed that an increase in funding is necessary to balance the rising cost of living, and would

enable their organisation to continue delivering the same level of service. Many others said they would not seek a higher amount, noting that the current \$50,000 cap was appropriate for their project scale and that the priority should be supporting more organisations overall.

Key themes

- **Value of an increase:** A higher cap could help organisations balance higher costs, hire more staff, attract skilled staff and deliver longer-term outcomes.
- **Equity concerns:** Some participants expressed concern that increasing caps could reduce access for smaller or emerging organisations.
- **Different scales:** Some projects are already well served by the existing cap, while others could benefit from modest increases.

+\$10K:

“Wages (1E person)”

“More money to artists / more community engagement”

“Will cover costs”

“No – 50k is enough, it is always a portion of our external funding”

“Not enough arts funded now”

+\$30K:

“More marketing / shop fronts”

“Wages for more detailed data collection”

“Spend less time chasing money from other sources”

“More money to artists / more community engagement”

“No need”

“Not enough apps are funded now”

+\$50K:

“Staff wage to focus on making the project financially sustainable”

“Permanent infrastructure such as vehicle”

“Buy equipment for lasting impact”

“More ambitious and transformative projects”

“More leverage on external/matched funding”

“No need”

4. Communication and support

Participants emphasised that how the changes are communicated will be critical to the success of the revised program.

They said it is important to provide clear and transparent communication of what is changing and why those changes are being made.

Participants highlighted the importance of practical support including training, one-on-one help and case studies, especially for smaller organisations and less experienced applicants. They encouraged us to use trusted community networks and multiple formats to make information accessible to everyone.

Key themes

- **Plain English communication:** Explain the changes clearly, including what is new, what is staying the same, and why the review is happening.
- **Multiple channels:** Use our libraries, social media, newsletters and community networks to share information widely.

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- **Practical support:** Offer webinars, drop-in sessions and short videos to guide people through the new process.
- **Community advocates:** Partner with local and sector leaders to help reach diverse audiences.
- **Transparency:** Emphasise that changes are designed to improve fairness and access, not to reduce funding.

“Social media”

“Text messages?”

“Comms via library”

“Face-to-face sessions”

“Be clear about why”

“Plain English”

“Be aware of impact of changes at other levels”

“What is the why / opportunity / benefits”

“Don’t oversell opportunity”

“Webinars (recorded) – accessible”

“Workshops”

“1:1s”

“Be clear not a cut to \$ but process change”

“Community advocates involved”

Engagement approach

We invited a targeted group of past grant applicants to take part in this early consultation. These organisations were selected to reflect a mix of program experience, focus areas and community perspectives.

Participants were chosen to include:

- community service organisations
- arts and cultural organisations
- sustainability initiatives
- festival and events organisers
- First Nations and culturally diverse organisations
- small, medium and large organisations working across different villages.

Two workshops were held:

- **Face-to-face workshop** – 30 September 2025, 10am to 12 noon, Marconi Room, Town Hall House, 456 Kent Street Sydney
- **Online workshop** – 16 October 2025, 12 noon to 1pm via Zoom

A total of **21 organisations** participated (16 in person and 5 online).

Both sessions were facilitated by staff from the City Engagement and Grants teams.

Activities were designed to explore participant views on the four key areas of proposed change:

1. the new application model and process
2. use of external assessors
3. changes to funding caps
4. how to communicate and support applicants during implementation.

Participants worked in small groups using worksheets, discussion boards and post-it notes to record feedback. For the online session, participants contributed through facilitated discussion and chat.

All feedback was recorded and analysed to identify consistent themes and practical suggestions for improving the draft guidelines.

Response

Feedback received has been taken into account during the review of the Policy and Guidelines.

In addition, as a result of the feedback received, the new Grants programs outlined in the draft Grants Guidelines have been restructured around offering one round a year.

One round will achieve greater clarity, ease of navigation and simplicity of design for City of Sydney applicants due to the following reasons:

- the new program is more streamlined, simpler and clearer in its purpose.
- the new categories in the program are easier for applicants to navigate.
- the new categories create more opportunities for new projects while continuing to support current project proposals.
- one round provides clarity for planning of projects - applicants will have earlier notification of funding outcomes for the coming year.
- one round allows for comprehensive assessment of all applications and alignment with funding purpose
- one round allows the assessments to be reviewed for equity of distribution of support across the whole city (this includes addressing whether we are supporting larger or smaller organisations).

Currently only the Food Support, Green Building Grants, Festivals and Events and Innovation and Ideas programs are offered twice a year. In the proposed new program Festivals and Events and Innovation and Ideas will no longer be stand alone programs but are eligible activities under the four core categories.

Green Building Grants is a program within the broader category of Environmental grants. Food Support remains a flexible program that could be offered either twice a year or a year long program, but for efficiency purposes would be best run during the one main round.

Quick Response grants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fund continues to be offered all year around as does our Value in kind (VIK) support through venue hire and street banner.

