

Dear Department of Social Services

I would be most grateful if you could provide the following brief submission to the team responsible for compiling the above consultation, for their consideration.

Dear stronger, more diverse and independent community sector team

Please accept my apologies for the late submission. I read much of the excellent material provided on the consultation page, but was unable to complete a submission in time for the 7 November deadline. This is largely because I was grappling with the compliance requirements for a current grant - as explained below.

I am President of the Michelago Region Community Association Inc (MRCA), a small but active volunteer group based in the NSW village of Michelago, just south of Canberra.

Our objectives are to represent and advance the interests of Michelago and the region, and to that end we have been active in securing and administering a number of grants.

These include:

- a Snowy Monaro Boco Roc grant of about \$20,000 to paint the exterior of the Michelago Heritage Railway Station, which the MRCA licences from Transport for NSW / its agent UGL, and manages,
- a Bushfire Community Resilience and Recovery Fund grant of about \$78,000 to install barbecue facilities, hold community resilience events, and publish a local newsletter, inter alia,
- as well as many other Council and other smaller grants.

We have successfully executed and acquitted all these grants, however for some the compliance burden has nearly broken us. We are a small handful of volunteers of precisely the ilk that the National Strategy for Volunteering seeks to encourage, but we are increasingly discouraged.

We have recently been awarded a Heritage NSW grant of \$17,000 to perform necessary repairs to, and to paint, the interior of our historic railway station, and we have arranged the required matching funding from UGL. We were grappling with the intensely complex and onerous requirements to obtain approval for the works for which we have been awarded the funds, by the same department. Heritage NSW is now working well with us, and assisting us with the implementation of our Heritage grant.

The [REDACTED] was a compliance and administrative nightmare. The convoluted requirements for regular reporting lost us our valued Treasurer, a professional accountant who resigned on account of its unreasonable burden.

Another example of the burden on our volunteer group was in obtaining Development Approval from Council for the installation of a barbecue and prefabricated shelter and seating structures on our village oval. Council had supported the grant application, but was unable to assist with DA application - which had to be lodged via a new NSW online approvals system that was having multiple teething problems. After the application was finally lodged, Council took many months to approve the DA, while costs rose and builder availability evaporated. While the output of this grant produced, and continues to provide, significant benefits to the Michelago community, our numbers have diminished and our energy is depleted.

Compliance burdens of the kinds set out above are setting up a huge deterrent for volunteers. The systems seem to be designed for much larger organisations, with paid staff and access to experts. Volunteers feel overwhelmed, unsupported, and exploited. These are not conditions that will allow volunteering to thrive.

In our submission:

1. the compliance burden of executing, managing and acquitting grants needs to be adjusted so that it is appropriate to the size of the grant, and
2. administrative systems for volunteer grants need to be redesigned so that the volunteer experience is one of partnership with the granting body and any government approving bodies, rather than of an obstacle course.

Volunteering will thrive if volunteers feel supported and their efforts facilitated by government organisations. It will wither if they feel obstructed and thwarted at almost every turn.

Best wishes

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<http://www.michelagoregion.org.au/mrca/>