



Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture

# Rural Financial Counselling Service Program 2016 to 2019 Grant application assessment plan

SEPTEMBER 2015



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Rural Financial Counselling Service Program 2016 to 2019: grant application assessment plan is available at [agriculture.gov.au/rfcs](http://agriculture.gov.au/rfcs)

#### Contact

Telephone 1800 686 175

Email [rfcs@agriculture.gov.au](mailto:rfcs@agriculture.gov.au)

Website [agriculture.gov.au/rfcs](http://agriculture.gov.au/rfcs)

Postal address GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601

Street address 18 Marcus Clarke Street

Canberra ACT 2601

Inquiries about the licence and any use of this document should be sent to [rfcs@agriculture.gov.au](mailto:rfcs@agriculture.gov.au).

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# 1 Introduction

The Department of Agriculture is seeking grants applications for providers to deliver the Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS) program. The RFCS is to be delivered in 12 predefined regions covering all of Australia. The assessment process will consider applications on a region by region basis.

An overview of the program is set out in the [RFCS 2016 to 2019 grant program guidelines](#). The invitation to submit applications is expected to be posted on the internet on 10 September 2015 and advertisements published in national and major rural newspapers and online between 11 September 2015 and 4 October 2015. Applications close at midday (AEDT) on 16 October 2015.

Program staff will receive, store, open, register, handle and file applications in accordance with departmental policies.

## 2 Purpose of this assessment plan

This plan describes the application assessment process. It provides the assessment panel with the necessary process for selecting and ranking applicants, including scoring against eligibility and merit criteria. The assessment plan aims to facilitate fair and effective assessment and to ensure confidentiality and probity throughout the process.

### 3 Assessment process

The following process will be applied:

- All applications will be registered in accordance with the department's procedures.
- All applications registered will be treated securely with access only provided to the assessment panel and others duly authorised for assessment purposes.
- Acknowledgment of receipt will be sent to all applicants within three working days of receipt of the application.
- Any application received after the closing date will be registered and clearly identified as late. Late applications will only be considered under extenuating circumstances where an alternative time frame has been agreed prior to the closing date.
- Other than in circumstances outlined in the previous paragraph, late applications will not be assessed, as specified in the [grant program guidelines](#) (the guidelines).
- The RFCS secretariat (the secretariat) will check the eligibility of all applications submitted before forwarding them to the assessment panel to assess against merit criteria. The department will advise ineligible applicants of the reasons for ineligibility.
- All applications, including those with incomplete information, will be sent to the relevant regional assessment panel for assessment of merit.
- The assessment panel for each region will assess applications relevant to that region. The assessment panel will include a state government official from the state in which the region being assessed is located.
- The assessment panel for each region will meet to rank all eligible applications using the weighted scores against each merit criterion.
- The assessment panel may request that an applicant to attend an interview as part of the application assessment process or to provide additional supporting information. If an interview is conducted, standard questions will be asked and notes taken so that information can be used as part of the assessment of selection criteria. If the assessment panel deems that an interview is necessary, or that additional supporting information is required, all applicants for that region will be given the opportunity to provide the same level of information.
- The assessment panel will consider all relevant factors specified in this plan to rank the applications by merit and provide justifiable reasons for the resulting merit order.
- The assessment panel may draw on information provided by applicants to support their claims and/or clarification of submissions/presentations/verified information from other sources (e.g. technical experts).
- The assessment panel will provide their recommendations and comments to the secretariat. The secretariat will provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants on request.
- If the panel at any time considers that a change to the assessment process is required, the chair must immediately discuss this with the Department's Procurement, Grants and Delegations Section, and the probity adviser (see Membership of regional assessment panels), for advice before making any changes. The probity risks and impacts of the proposed change (including how the changes will be communicated to the public, whether entities which did not apply are given another opportunity to apply, whether applicants are given the opportunity to revise their applications, or whether the process needs to be

restarted) must be considered, documented and approved by the chair of the assessment panel before any changes are made.

- If for a region the assessment panel finds there are no applicants that meet the required score to be recommended for a grant, the panel may invite all suitably ranked applicants from other regions to apply for that region. Those applying for the region, as part of a second round, will be given two weeks to submit their application.
- The assessment panel will generally work by consensus, but if a unanimous decision cannot be reached, a majority decision will be recorded.
- The assessment panel will prepare a report that includes a final ranking summary and recommendations on which applicants should receive funding and the level of funding to be offered. A report will be prepared for each region.
- The department will finalise the approval minute. The minute will be submitted to the Minister for Agriculture for approval of grant funding.
- The secretariat will write to applicants advising of decisions and offer feedback if requested. Feedback to applicants will be based on the assessment panel's report.
- The department will conduct funding deed negotiations with applicants approved for grants by the Minister for Agriculture.

## 4 Membership of regional assessment panels

Each regional assessment panel will be made up of representatives from the Commonwealth and state governments as follows:

**Chairperson:** Assistant Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Simon Murnane

**Member:** Director, Department of Agriculture, Lee Nelson

**Member:** State government representative.

Note: The state government representative will be from the state in which the region being assessed is located.

Where there are several RFCS regions in a state, the one panel will be used to assess each region but assessments for each region will be conducted separately. The Commonwealth representatives will sit on each panel.

State representatives are shown in this table.

**Table 1 State representation, regional assessment panels**

State	State government officer
New South Wales	Liane Corocher
Victoria	Tracey Harper
Queensland	Gerry Dixon
South Australia/Northern Territory	Greg Cock
Western Australia	Lewis Mavrantonis
Tasmania	Penny Sale

Panel members and independent advisors/experts are considered 'officials' of the department where they provide advice or recommendations to the approver. They are therefore subject to the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines (CGRGs), Australian Public Service (APS) Code of Conduct, the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cwlth) (Privacy Act), and other requirements under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (Cwlth) (PGPA Act).

The department has appointed a member of the Department of Agriculture's Office of General Counsel as a probity adviser for this process.

The probity adviser will provide advice to the assessment panel and department on probity matters to assist the assessment panel in ensuring that all applications are assessed fairly, uniformly and transparently. The probity adviser will report to the chair of the assessment panel and will, where requested, attend assessment panel meetings.

The assessment panel may be assisted by technical, financial, legal and other experts as required. The experts are not members of the panel, but if requested by the assessment panel, will analyse applications and prepare factual reports against one or more of the assessment criteria for the assessment panel's consideration.



## 5 Secretariat and departmental officers

The Department of Agriculture will provide secretariat support to the panel. A note taker will assist to record decisions of the panel.

## 6 Responsibilities of the regional assessment panels

All members and all other officers and advisers involved in the assessment process must be fully prepared for the assessment process. Panel members will be made aware that the requirements of the CGRGs apply to them.

In order to ensure a well prepared approach to the assessment, all members must at a minimum:

- read and understand the guidelines
- read and understand the Assessment Plan
- undertake required training
- read and understand the Probity Plan
- complete and sign Conflict of Interest forms
- understand the relationship between the assessment criteria and other requirements in the guidelines
- understand (as relevant to them) the assessment process outlined in this Plan and
- read and understand the applications assigned to them.

All members will assess applications for that region against the assessment criteria.

If during the assessment process assessors have any clarification questions they must be emailed through to the program secretariat at [rfcs@agriculture.gov.au](mailto:rfcs@agriculture.gov.au) who will assess the question and its relevance and any potential probity issues before sending the query to the relevant person to answer. Once the response has been reviewed to ensure it doesn't introduce 'additional material' outside their original application, checked by the probity adviser and cleared by the chair of the panel the question and answer will be forwarded to all assessors.

## 7 Assessment panel chair

The assessment panel chair will:

- chair meetings and manage meetings and conduct of the assessment in accordance with the CGRGs (including managing conflict of interest)
- ensure all panel members receive training in their responsibilities and discuss at the panel's first meeting, their understanding of training documents
- authorise and control any contact with applicants (including seeking clarification information or arranging interviews) or specialist advisers during the assessment
- arrange the outcomes of this assessment in order of merit in conjunction with the assessment panel
- finalise the assessment report and provide
  - justifiable reasons/basis for the selection of all preferred applications
  - the basis for all rejected applications
  - a recommendation to be put forward to the Commonwealth Minister for Agriculture's consideration.

## 8 Assessment against assessment criteria and scoring

The assessment panel will assess eligible applications against the following **eligibility** and **merit criteria based** on the guidelines:

The following organisations can apply for funding:

- organisations that are incorporated Australian legal entities capable of entering into a legally binding and enforceable deed with the Commonwealth. For example
  - a company incorporated under the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cwlth)
  - an incorporated association incorporated under the various state and territory association incorporation legislation
  - an Indigenous corporation incorporated under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (Cwlth)
  - a body corporate created under state or territory legislation
- Organisations that are solvent entities with an Australian Business Number.

If successful, organisations that are not incorporated will be required to incorporate within 30 days of receiving a letter of offer.

Organisations must be able to comply with requirements in the grant funding deed relating to boards, including having a separate board to govern the operations of a Rural Financial Counselling Service. Where the constitution or draft constitution of a successful applicant does not allow it to meet requirements of the funding deed, it must amend its constitution or draft constitution and provide evidence of the amendment before a funding deed can be executed.

A copy of the organisation's constitution or draft constitution is required to be included with its application.

Commonwealth, state and territory government departments and agencies are not eligible to apply.

In considering the merit criterion of overall value for money, the assessment panel for the relevant region applied for will assess all applications against the program's objectives and expected outcomes (see [Program objectives in program guidelines](#)) and the government's decision on recommendations in the National Rural Advisory Council (NRAC) report.

Each merit criterion is weighted as described in the merit criteria. An applicant will be scored against each merit criterion. In order to be considered for a grant, an applicant must receive a score of at least 5 out of 10 against each merit criterion.

Applications will be assessed on their own merit and then assessed against other applicants for a region to determine a ranking. The ranking will be on the basis of the total score that an applicant receives.

### Merit Criteria

#### Criterion 1 Provision of services

The objective of the Rural Financial Counselling Service is to help clients, through the provision of rural financial counselling services, understand their financial position and the viability of their enterprise, and to develop and implement plans to become financially self-sufficient.

Describe how your organisation will achieve this objective for stakeholders in the region you nominated, demonstrating innovation, flexibility, and value for money. Please indicate where you would place counsellors to achieve best coverage for the region and explain your rationale for how counsellors will be located in this region. Please also ensure you use the budget template in the application form. This indicative budget should only factor in Commonwealth funding. [weighting: 30%]

## Criterion 2 Organisation capability

The board of a Rural Financial Counselling Service is responsible for corporate governance, strategic and risk planning, effective delivery of services and meeting Commonwealth grant requirements.

Demonstrate your organisation's capacity (including experience and qualifications of the chair and board members) and your staff's capability (including experience and qualifications) to deliver RFCS in the region.

If a board has not been recruited for the service or if you have not yet recruited staff, describe your board establishment and personnel recruitment plan, including the merit criteria you will use to assess applicants' claims.

Note: See Who is eligible to apply for funding (in the [program guidelines](#)) for details of the qualifications and/or experience that board members must hold. Key features of the program (in the [program guidelines](#)) describes the minimum qualifications that rural financial counsellors must hold, and the appropriate training to meet ASIC requirements if they are providing advice on generic financial products.

Identify what you see as key risks in delivery of the service and how you will mitigate these risks. Please include a list of board members using the template in the application form. Also include a transitional plan for merit selection of board members during the course of the funding term. [weighting: 30%]

## Criterion 3 Case management

A key performance indicator for the program (see [Program evaluations in the program guidelines](#)) is that the majority of clients are exited from the service having come to understand their position and achieved their client plan or objectives within one to three years.

Describe and demonstrate a case management model for clients in financial hardship that you would adopt. It should be timely, outcome focused and include effective linkages and referrals to professional advisers and the Department of Human Services (for Farm Household Allowance clients), where warranted. [weighting: 20%]

## Criterion 4 Regional knowledge and connections

In relation to the region for which you have nominated to run a rural financial counselling service, describe the issues clients and potential clients may face in addressing financial hardship. Your description may address the nature of primary production businesses and the issues faced by key regional industries.

Please describe how your service will connect with relevant services in the region and how you will promote the RFCS in your region to reach potential clients. [weighting: 20%]

Your application will be assessed and scored by each member of the regional assessment panel individually prior to the assessment panel convening to finalise scores and rankings. Your application will be ranked against all other eligible applications received for the region for which you have applied.

Applicants must have a score of 5 or more out of 10 against each criterion to be considered suitable to run a regional RFCS. Applications will be assessed on a merit basis by a panel. Assessment panels will use all assessment criteria to consider overall value for money.

The assessment panel may take into account historical information on service costs.

In the quantitative assessment of each application, selection criteria will be scored as follows:

**Table 2**

Rating	Description	Level of risk	Score
Excellent	Exceeds requirements in all ways	Very little or no risk	9–10
Good	Meets requirements in all ways, exceeds them in some	Little risk involved	7–8
Satisfactory	Meets requirements and is workable	Acceptable risk	5–6
Marginal	Nearly meets requirements, workable but may be deficient or limited in some areas	Higher than acceptable element of risk	3–4
Poor	Applicant has either stated or demonstrated non-compliance, poorly addressed criteria or there is insufficient information to assess.	Unacceptable risk	0–2

In the qualitative assessment of each application the assessment panel must comment in respect of all merit criteria. Criteria may be grouped for this purpose (i.e. a comment may be made in relation to more than one criterion).

The assessment of applications by the assessment panel will also involve identification of any other risks associated with each application and any mitigation measures to alleviate those risks.

Weightings will be applied to each criterion as outlined in the guidelines:

Criterion 1 Provision of services 30%

Criterion 2 Organisation capability 30%

Criterion 3 Case management 20%

Criterion 4 Regional knowledge and connections 20%

An applicant may be requested to attend an interview as part of the application assessment process or provide additional supporting information. If an interview is conducted, standard questions will be asked and careful notes taken so that information can be used as part of the assessment of selection criteria. If the assessment panel deems that an interview is necessary, or that additional information is required, all applicants for that region will be given the same opportunity.

### **Process for regions where applicants not recommended for a grant**

If the regional assessment panel finds there are no applicants for a region that meet the required score to be recommended for a grant, the panel may approach applicants from the round in other regions that achieved the required score.

These suitably ranked applicants would be requested to submit an additional application for the region that will be assessed on the same basis and in accordance with the guidelines. In this process, invited applicants would have two weeks to submit an application for the region.

To avoid delaying the decision on grants for regions where applicants have met the required score, that process will continue. The decision on a grant for a region under this process will be made once applications have been assessed and recommendations made to the Minister for Agriculture.

### **If a funding deed is terminated**

If a deed is terminated during the course of the funding deed negotiations or during the funding deed term, the department may use the results of this assessment process to offer the service to another suitably ranked applicant in the region. Where there are no other suitably ranked applicants in the region or a suitably ranked applicant declines to provide the service, suitably ranked applicants from other regions may be invited to submit an application for the region, using a similar process to the one set out paragraph for a region where no applicants meet the required score.

## 9 Ranking of applications

The assessment panel chair will prepare a preliminary ranking of applications after collating the assessment result provided by members. The ranking will be prepared for each region. The preliminary ranking will incorporate:

- a preliminary list of applications which are ranked in order of relative merit, based on the weighted scores awarded against the assessment criteria
- justifications for the scores awarded against the assessment criteria
- an outline of any risks identified against particular applications and any mitigation measures to alleviate those risks
- assessment of value for money
- identification of any significant issues which arose during the assessment process (e.g. significant variances in panel members' scores or comments or need for further clarification/expert advice)
- identification of areas where recommended applications could be improved by negotiation or by joining into coordinated, collaborative projects.

The preliminary ranked applications will then be finally scored and ranked by the assessment panel based on the overall assessment against the merit and eligibility criteria after taking into consideration the risk assessment and other checks carried out by the assessment panel.



## 10 Assessment report

The chair produces an assessment report that will, for each state:

- summarise the assessment process (including any risks, probity or contentious issues which arose during the process and recording the numbers of eligible and ineligible applications and reasons for ineligibility)
- include a weighted score and ranking summary (including assessment against any minimum scores for criteria set by the guidelines and an assessment of merit)
- include detailed assessment comments against each application which will be suitable for providing feedback to the applicant (including reasons for applications which were found to be ineligible and performance of their application against the published criteria)
- provide a recommendation and basis for the recommendation for each application
- identify areas where the preferred applications could be improved by negotiation.

If applicable, the assessment panel chair will seek signoff from the Probity Adviser on the draft Assessment Report, prior to submission of a report recommending funding to the decision-maker. Once signed off by the panel members, the assessment panel chair will submit the Assessment Report to the Minister for Agriculture for decision.

The assessment panel will generally work in a consensus manner. However, if a unanimous decision cannot be reached a majority decision will be recorded.

# 11 Assessment time frame

The following indicative time frames will apply:

- Copies of eligible applications distributed to assessment panel by 23 October 2015
- Assessment panel meeting(s) and report provided to Department of Agriculture by 27 November 2015
- Assessment report submitted by Department of Agriculture to Minister by 7 December 2015
- Announcement of successful grant recipients made/notifications of unsuccessful applicants and feedback by 21 December 2015
- Any negotiations with preferred applicant to be commenced by 21 December 2015
- Funding deed signed by 15 January 2016

## 12 Special instructions

All documents and proceedings of the assessment panel are confidential and are to be secured when not in use by members of the assessment panel. The disclosure of information contained in applications may prejudice the interests of the applicant and the bargaining position of the Commonwealth during subsequent contract negotiations.

Record keeping is to occur to APS standards including professional comments (noting that they could be potentially disclosed under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cwlth), and ensuring the return of all documents to the Department of Agriculture.

Privacy and confidentiality—before, during and after the assessment process. At all stages throughout the assessment process the assessment panel will ensure that personal information is handled in accordance with the Privacy Act. This means the assessment panel should ensure that information is only used and disclosed for the purposes it was provided to the department (for the purposes of assessing applications). If any members of the assessment panel are unsure whether the use or disclosure of personal information is consistent with the Privacy Act, the department's Privacy Team should be contacted on [privacy@agriculture.gov.au](mailto:privacy@agriculture.gov.au)

Panel members and independent advisers/experts are considered 'officials' of the department where they provide advice or recommendations to the decision maker. They are therefore subject to the CGRGs, APS Code of Conduct, the Privacy Act and other requirements under the PGPA Act.

Panel members will be required to undertake mandatory training for the assessment process.

Individual panel members must refrain from communicating with applicants about the assessment process before, during or after the process.

Members of the assessment panel are personally invited to join the assessment panel and every effort should be made not to withdraw during the assessment process. In the event of withdrawal by a member of the panel, two members will be sufficient for the panel to continue the assessment process.

All members of the assessment panel must demonstrate impartiality and equitable treatment of all applicants. Panel members will declare any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest regarding their roles on the panel.

Panel members must not depart from the published [program guidelines](#) and this assessment plan. Panel members must contact the Department of Agriculture and the probity adviser for advice if considering changes to the process. Any changes jeopardise the probity and transparency of the process and must follow government's mandatory approval process.

## 13 Approval by Department of Agriculture

This assessment plan was approved by Simon Murnane; Assistant Secretary, Farm Business Branch; Chair of Assessment Panel on 31 August 2015.

## 14 Agreement by assessment panel members

*Note: Assessment panel members will sign ahead of the assessment process.*

The assessment panel, in agreeing to this plan, have signed (where relevant) a form to declare any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest and acknowledge their confidentiality and other obligations under the CGRGs.

I agree to abide by the assessment plan.

I have made a conflict of interest declaration and will inform the assessment panel if a conflict of interest arises during the assessment process.

**Simon Murnane**, Chair, Assessment Panel (Australian Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Lee Nelson**, Member, Assessment Panel (Australian Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Liane Corocher**, Member, Assessment Panel (New South Wales Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Tracey Harper**, Member, Assessment Panel (Victorian Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Gerry Dixon**, Member, Assessment Panel (Queensland Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Greg Cock**, Member, Assessment Panel (South Australian Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Lewis Mavrantonis**, Member, Assessment Panel (Western Australian Government)

Date                      /                      /

**Penny Sale**, Member, Assessment Panel (Tasmanian Government)

Date                      /                      /