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Why should you establish an Accelerated Assessment Program?

An accelerated assessment program allows Council the opportunity to make a substantial contribution to the rebound of the local economy from the COVID-19 lockdown. Councils can use the acceleration program to target industries and activities most likely to assist in facilitating investment into their local areas.

Creating an accelerated assessment program allows Council to bring forward the assessment of projects that meet its own criteria for the delivery of public and economic benefit.

What benefit does a program provide?

During the COVID lockdown many small businesses, including those in the construction industry, were forced to shut down or reduce their activity. This has had an impact on local economies, many of which were already struggling from drought or bushfires. An accelerated assessment process, including greater certainty over the timeframe for a decision on development, will help to channel investment into the local area.

By managing its own accelerated assessment program, Council can use its own locally appropriate acceleration criteria, as well as providing a point of difference with other Councils as a means of attracting investment into its area.

How is community engagement and environmental assessment assured?

All projects will need to be considered in accordance with the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* and will be subject to the same level of rigorous assessment and opportunity for consultation as at any other time.

Typically projects identified will have completed the substantive planning work and are post the exhibition and community consultation phase.

How many more people will Council need to implement a program?

The accelerated assessment program does not involve additional fees or resources that Councils can draw on, so delivery of the accelerated assessments can only come by re-prioritising resources. The Department has re-prioritised its own work program, pushing some elements of work program into the longer term, to enable resources to be redirected into assessments.

The amount of resources a Council may need to re-prioritise towards its acceleration program will depend on the unique program and the approach taken to triaging projects. The Department has found the use of tranches to be effective in managing and utilising the resources needed for accelerated assessments.

What developments should be included in the program?

Councils are free to develop their own criteria on which projects should be considered for accelerated assessments. The Department's own criteria, which prioritise projects that generate jobs, are shovel-ready, and that provide a public benefit, are available for use and adaptation to local circumstances.

To be considered under the Department's accelerated assessment program, a project must already be in the system, it must be able to demonstrate public benefit through new public open spaces or affordable housing among other elements, it must demonstrate an ability to create jobs both during construction and once complete, and it must be able to commence construction within six months if it's a DA, or proceed to the DA phase within six months if it's a rezoning.

The Department has contacted proponents to confirm details where necessary, particularly the commitment to commence construction within six months, or to progress a development application.

Councils may choose to adopt a similar approach for their own program.

How do Councils manage any probity concerns about accelerating assessments?

Any decision to allocate resources to an accelerated assessment requires a strict adherence to probity principles. The Department undertook two crucial actions when developing and running its own acceleration program. Firstly, the Department consulted with the Independent Commission Against Corruption on the criteria to be used in the prioritisation process. Secondly, a probity advisor was appointed to advise on the development of the criteria and controls documents, as well as participating as an observer and reporter in the decisions to tranche projects.

Some of these resources and advice are available to support councils to design their own program

How should Councils prioritise projects for assessment?

The Department has made available its controls document for the accelerated assessment program that can be used and adapted by Councils. Important lessons include the necessity of clear upfront criteria and processes that are well-documented. The Department has also used a series of agreed oversight processes to ensure decisions made to tranche projects are documented and reviewed by State agencies external to the Department.

The controls document used by the Department is available online:

<https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Fast-tracked-assessments>

How can Councils assess criteria like jobs, shovel-ready status, and public benefit?

The Department's criteria for the prioritisation of projects into tranches for an accelerated assessment are available for Councils to use and adapt as appropriate. These criteria have been developed following broad engagement with industry groups, professional associations and State agencies. When developing the criteria the Department drew heavily from the agreed principles between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Planning Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association that should inform planning decisions that seek to support economic recovery.

The document containing the criteria used by the Department is available at:

<https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Fast-tracked-assessments>

What sort of information should Council be keeping and sharing for the program?

Announcing the projects that have been prioritised for an accelerated assessment is an important public accountability measure. Providing regular updates on the delivery of the projects is also important to both ensure accountability and provide certainty about the process.

Councils may want to use a call-out for projects as a way of creating a database of proposals for prioritisation. This will provide a useful registry of projects that could be considered for prioritisation, as well as a means of recording the consideration of the projects against the accelerated assessment criteria.

What assistance is available to help resolve State agency issues?

Where a proposal is identified for accelerated assessment and has an unresolved State agency referral, the Council can ask for assistance from the Government's One Stop Shop to resolve the issue. Details on the One Stop Shop are still being finalised, but the Department will leverage the rich data available from the online concurrences and referrals module on the NSW Planning Portal. The Department will also be working with agencies, in the same way that it has with Councils, to help re-engineer assessment processes.

What support will the Department offer to help manage the program?

Those Councils that are interested in taking up the program, will be offered the opportunity to receive regular updates and check-ins from the Department and other Councils and access to key resources. As adoption of a Council Accelerated Assessment program is purely on a voluntary basis, Councils are free to opt-in to the process and will be able to share experiences and lessons learnt in the operation of the program.

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