



Adelaide Hills Council Draft Bushfire Mitigation Landscape Strategy: Engagement Outcomes Report

Results of public consultation conducted Oct-Nov 2023

1 Summary of the consultation

Thank you to everyone who took part in consultation on Adelaide Hills Council's (AHC's) draft Bushfire Mitigation Landscape Strategy, undertaken between 23 October and 17 November 2023.

We received 34 responses to our online survey, as well as multiple phone calls, emails and social media posts with specific suggestions to help improve our work. All feedback has been collated and is being used to update the strategy, as well as guiding the development of several key educational materials for our community relating to bushfire mitigation.

This report discusses the key themes that arose from consultation, as well as some interesting suggestions we received which we are now following up. This process has been insightful in helping us improve both the draft strategy and in identifying potential actions and ideas for Council to explore.

1.1 Background?

AHC has received funding until June 2024 to develop a Bushfire Mitigation Landscape Strategy, setting out the responsibilities of residents, Council and other agencies in managing vegetation to reduce bushfire risk. The other key aspect of this project will be to create a series of key educational resources to inform the community of actions they can take to achieve this.

Through developing this strategy, it is hoped that AHC will be able to increase community understanding around the risks of living in bushfire prone areas, and to enable a shift towards greater personal responsibility for managing fuel loads as well as preserving local biodiversity. Extensive consultation was undertaken with key community groups and stakeholders prior to October 2023, including through formation of an online community reference group. This stage of consultation, with the draft strategy and key accompanying documents being available for public comment, has been focussed on ensuring the strategy is relevant, easy to understand, and sets realistic expectations for our community.

1.2 How was the consultation promoted?

Anyone living or working in the AHC area could provide feedback. We promoted the consultation in the following ways:

- AHC website
- Article and advertisement in Courier Newspaper
- Targeted emails to community groups and networks with an interest in this space
- Targeted emails to members of our online consultation group (active June- July 2023)
- Targeted emails to partner organisations (including the SA Country Fire Service and Department for Environment and Water)
- AHC Facebook page

1.3 How could feedback be provided?

- Using the online engagement portal which featured a survey, quick poll and Q&A
- Emailing the project team (engage@ahc.sa.gov.au)
- Posting a letter (63 Mount Barker Road, Stirling SA 5152)
- Calling the project team 8408 0400

1.4 How did we hear from people?

54 people participated in the consultation, either via the online survey or by providing direct feedback to the project team.

Table 1: Response numbers

Feedback type	Number of responses
Email/Phone calls/Letter	19
Online survey	34
Online poll	1
Total	54

1.5 What did we hear?

We heard from various members of our community, with several different property types and experiences of living in the hills. Most respondents (n=26) were residents of the Adelaide Hills Council area. Most respondents indicated they feel they can manage vegetation on their own property (n=22), however there was a small number of people who did not feel they could manage (n=6).

The key themes that came through repeatedly were:

- Clearer information is required around vegetation management, in particular:
 - Who is responsible for maintaining what vegetation.
 - How to manage the conflict between native plants and biodiversity, and fire hazard reduction.
 - Why there is a permit and fee required for residents to maintain their own verges. There was strong sentiment around this issue reflecting that if verges are not on Council's schedule and we expect residents to maintain them, we should make this as easy as possible.

Our team is currently reviewing this process in line with Section 221 of the Local Government Act. **We aim to produce a simple guide capturing the answers to above questions which will be available on our website and in hard copy from libraries and service centers.**
- Weeds on road verges need to be better managed and there needs to be greater clarity around who's responsible for this. **Declared weeds on road verges are the responsibility of local Landscape Boards. Council works in collaboration with Landscapes Hills & Fleurieu to support their weed control efforts as required.**
- Expansion of kerbside green waste collection services is needed to assist with property preparation. **This has been fed back to our Waste Management team, and will also be flagged in the strategy as a future priority to explore.**
- Most people would be happy to pay for the service of someone qualified and properly equipped to help mow, slash and brush cut on steep and inaccessible terrain. Current barriers to this work included time, lack of appropriate equipment, and being physically unable to do this themselves. **These services are available through private landscaping businesses. Council is not resourced to deliver this on private property.**
- Several respondents to the survey reported that while they are doing their bit to maintain road verges, the same is not being done on verges adjacent to their property. A few respondents also mentioned specific properties near to theirs where they noticed fire mitigation works had not been

done. There is a need for clarity around who is responsible for those sites. **We are currently developing simplified maps showing ownership of roads in the AHC.**

- “Shared responsibility” as a term is still creating confusion. It implies all verges are the responsibility of both Council and residents, rather than some verges being Council’s responsibility and others being responsibility of residents, which is the case. **We are looking at refining our messaging around this to clarify that shared responsibility is a landscape scale approach. Development of a verge policy could assist in clarifying Council’s position.**
- It was encouraging to see many respondents noting the ecological impacts of removing vegetation, and reflecting the need to balance these risks with management of fuel loads. **This is a key underpinning principle of the strategy, which has been written and researched with biodiversity outcomes in mind.**

Several respondents said they felt the document was too long and detailed. While the key audience of the document is intended to be both internal staff and the public, there were suggestions that perhaps two separate documents would be better- one for internal use and one public-facing. Another suggestion was to include a ‘quick reference guide’ or similar in the first 8-10 pages, with key information summarized and further detail later in the document.

We have chosen to adopt this suggestion and the strategy will be amended to include key ‘need to know’ information first up, followed by more detail under each priority which people can choose to read if they wish.

In their words:

- *“Whilst we have 2 green bins, these are full and we still have more vegetation to clear up. Collections once a week would help.”*
 - *“I think we need to hand some roadside clearance back to the residents like it used to be.”*
 - *“As I get older assistance with slashing steeper slopes that need brush cutting , then raking and burning piles would be very helpful.”*
 - *“It is confusing to landowners as to whether they are responsible for their particular verge.”*
 - *“More protection of already existing vegetation to help mitigate climate change and keep our area cooler in the first place, not cutting down 50 year old eucalypts to plant 3 year old non native species.”*
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- ***“Fire is unavoidable and if people can’t live with that risk, they should not live in the Hills.”***

Other suggestions included:

- Burning:
 - The regulatory process needs to be simpler for landholders to undertake ecological burning to prevent the dominance of golden wattle/kangaroo thorn and other fire responsive shrubs to

become so dominant after a bushfire. So much floral biodiversity has disappeared since the Cudlee Creek Bushfire.

- Make it easier for landholders to burn by providing assistance with pre burn weed control, administrative/regulatory processes, on-ground cool burns operations and post burn weed control.
- Information:
 - Primary producers need information specific to farming, not urban information.
 - Need for accurate and prompt weather and bushfire breakout announcements via SMS.
 - Post major fires it would be helpful to receive clear advice what you can do to help manage regeneration. For example: so that one species i.e. wattles don't become predominant at the expense of saplings etc.

"I believe there is not enough clarity around how far from buildings vegetation can be cleared. I think that some residents use fire risk as an excuse to clear far more than is legally allowed. Much more specific guidelines are needed to make this very clear. Information from the CFS makes it sound as though people should be removing fine fuels and vegetation in a much larger area than is permissible."

- Perhaps earlier in the year and on an annual basis, mail out information to residents about what is their responsibility vs council responsibility.
- There is a strong perception in the community that fuel/biomass reduction is needed everywhere to reduce bushfire risk. This perception is not good for preserving biodiversity. We need to better understand that higher fuel/biomass levels (eg a windbreak or vegetated watercourse) can slow down the speed of a bushfire. Allowing nature areas to be messy and have higher fuel loads is ok as long as built assets have adequate low fuel buffer area surrounding them.
- A new residents pack would be helpful which explains what it means to live in the Hills. There are many properties where people have illegally over cleared native vegetation with the excuse that they are worried about fire. There should be no room for confusion and if people are considering moving to the Hills it is important they understand what the rules are before they make this decision.
- Assistance:
 - If Council could provide a works crew to assist elderly people and/or people with a disability that could be a good option.
 - Property owners would benefit from AHC providing land maintenance personnel, equipment & removal of any description (natural vegetation debris which builds up after fires and bad weather) at a minimal fee, in order to make it beneficial for property owners who cannot afford to pay for private contractors. This would make clearing up in preparation for Bushfire Season much more accessible to those on acreage. If council contacted acreage owners via email or SMS annually to ask if assistance was needed landowners could be booked in allotted times prior to fire danger season, ensuring the process was completed in a timely manner.

- Free or affordable assistance with tree pruning, weed removal, and grass cutting, at least on the road verges.
- Council or other agency should make available to property owners and residents free or cheap fire-resistant indigenous plants.
- Proper firefighting equipment should be mandatory for every property outside of townships.

“How does Council expect us to remove our woody weeds and other vegetation? Free green drop off days are not at all useful as weeds are not accepted. Green bins (which we are currently not eligible for) have very limited use as we produce large amounts of green waste every year. We are unable to burn on our property due to lack of suitable clear space. We have been in contact with NPWS fire management officers, regarding an environmental assessment; however this will not happen for possibly a year or more. Properties like ours need some assistance.”

- Reporting:

- Establishing an on-line method that vegetation/weed control can be reported with photos to DIT. The current phone in system doesn't allow for photographs to be provided.
- Self-audit list for homeowners yards to assess potential risks if/when fire arrives.

“Vegetation management is only one aspect of bushfire mitigation. We have real concerns regarding water for fire fighting purposes. We have rain water tanks that hold 150,000 litres which are connected to the house and the fire fighting sprinkler system on the house. We also have mains water connected. Due to alterations to our house, 12 months ago we were required to install a 20,000 litre tank specifically for CFS use. This tank is not visible from the road and despite contacting the CFS and AHC we have been unable to resolve the issue of signage on the verge to indicate to the CFS that fire water is available. As far as we know the CFS may be unaware of its existence. “

- I believe there should be a plan in place, as we speak, to combat ARSONISTS. Having lived in the hills for over 30 years it is obvious to us that most fires that occur have been deliberately lit. Sometime appearing almost in a straight line! Arsonists could be combatted in many ways. **This is being done through SAPOL's Operation Nomad project.**

- Verge management:

- Reading through the FAQ, it appears residents have to seek approval to slash the vegetation but past experience has been that the AHC just expects residents to do it themselves. If residents have to do it, reduction in council rates should be applied if the council won't do the work themselves.

A number of these suggestions will be used in refining our educational materials and informing development of a verge policy to clarify Council's position on verge management.

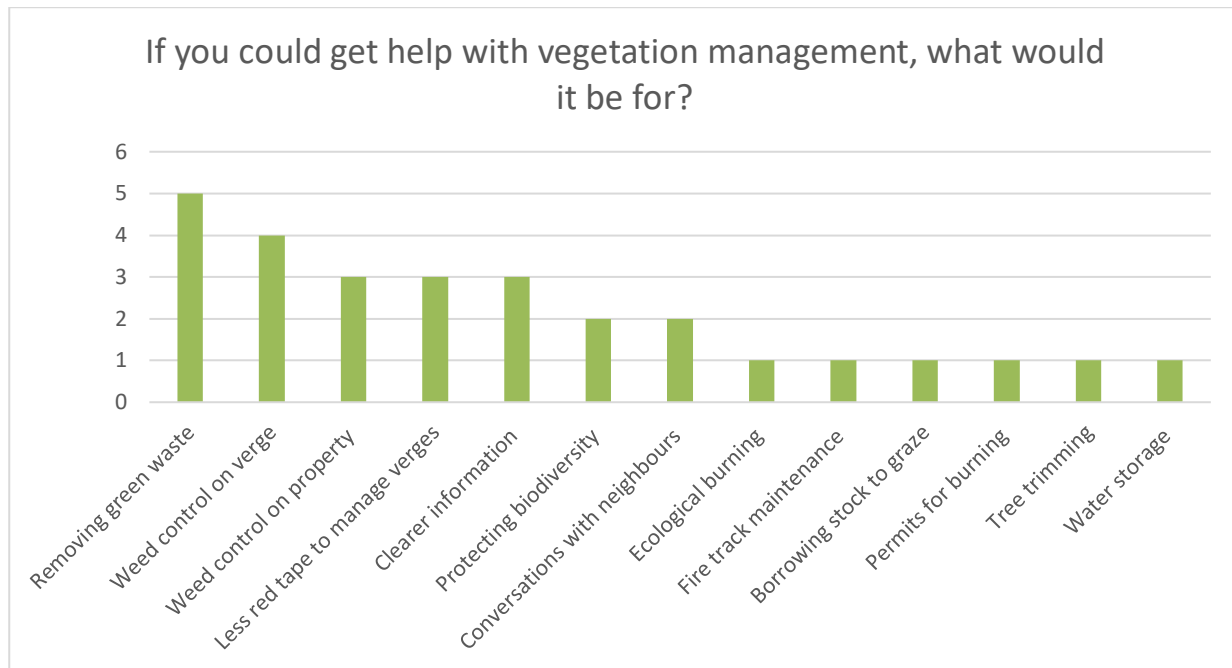
More general feedback regarding the consultation process itself has also been noted for future reference:

- This consultation would have been better if it had also been mailed out to residents - not everyone is on Facebook which is the only way I have found out about it.

- Provide the draft would be good. Providing links to documents is not sufficient. It takes you away from the survey which drops you out.
- The AHC website could have a more obvious link on the front page to information on bushfire mitigation.

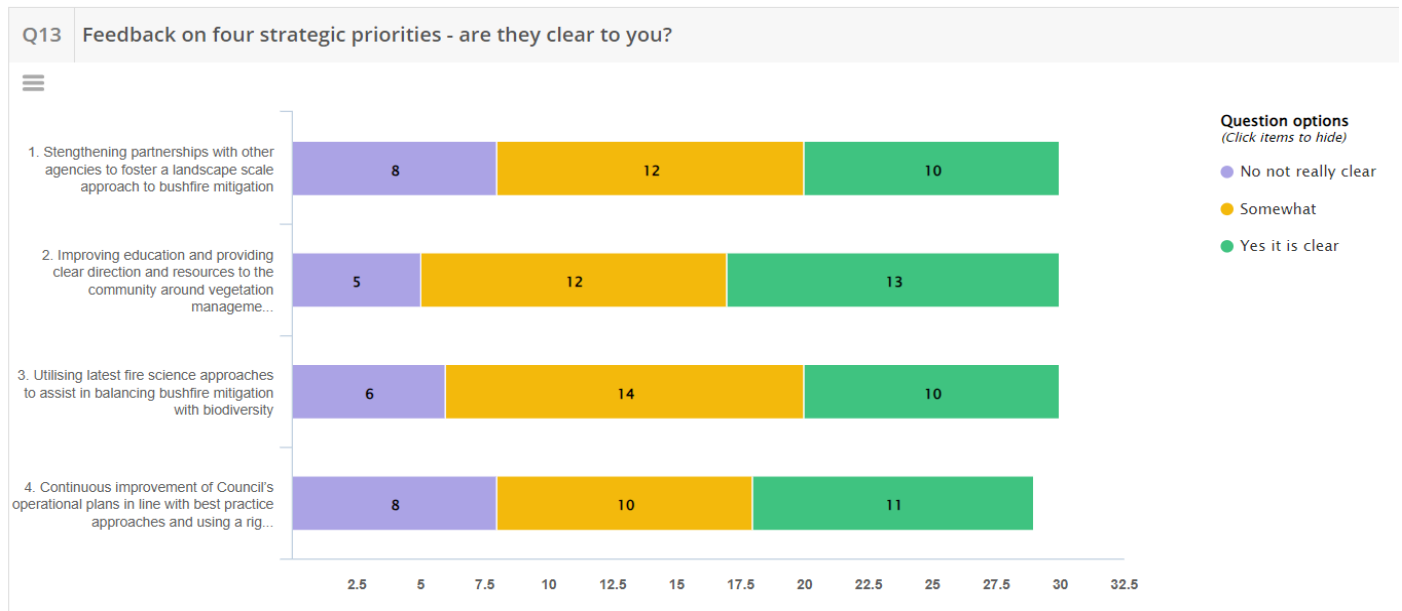
Figure 1 shows responses to the question “if you could get more help with vegetation management, what would it be for?” The highest response rates were “removing green waste” and “weed control on verge”.

Figure 1: Survey question about getting help with vegetation management



We also asked for feedback around our four strategic priorities. Results are shown in Figure 2, noting that due to a relatively low response rate this is not necessarily indicative of the views of our wider community.

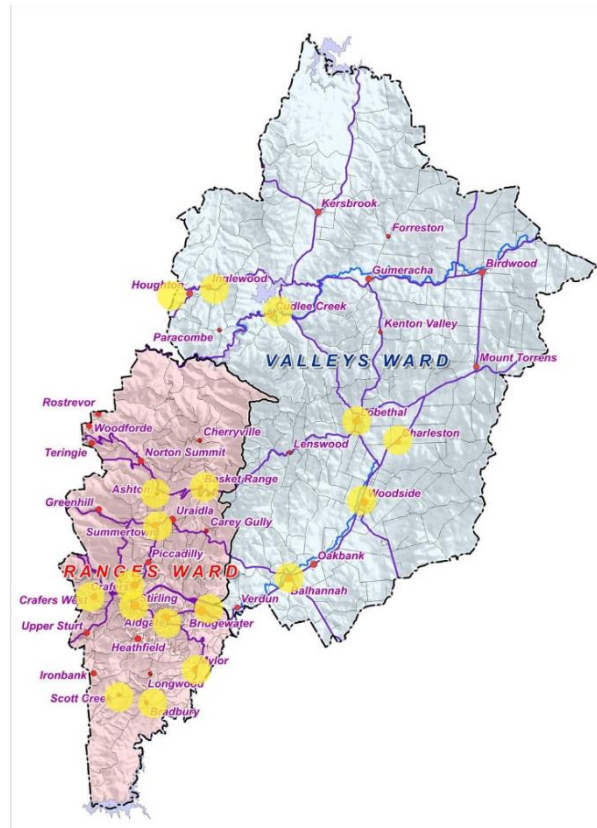
Figure 2: Strategic Priorities feedback



Snapshot of response data:

- Responses to our online survey were received from residents across a range of townships:

- Woodside
- Cuddlee Creek
- Aldgate
- Scott Creek
- Basket Range
- Mylor
- Inglewood
- Stirling
- Crafers
- Lower Hermitage
- Charleston
- Crafers West
- Ashton
- Bridgewater
- Bradbury
- Lobethal
- Summertown
- Balhannah



- Most respondents were residents, with some also owning businesses within the Adelaide Hills.
- Most respondents felt they were adequately prepared to manage their own properties for fire mitigation. Only 6 disagreed that they felt prepared.

1.6 Emails received

We received 19 emails from residents, Department for Environment and Water staff and representatives of other agencies including BlazeAid, and feedback can be summarised as follows:

- More clarity is needed around the S221 process, i.e. what is required of residents in terms of managing their own road verges. (This was mentioned several times.)
- Strategic fire breaks across the landscape are a useful management tool and need to be discussed further, especially with regard to the roadmap for future priorities.
- More clarity is needed around how Council manages fire tracks.
- The role of native vegetation, which if carefully selected can contribute to decreasing fuel loads- especially when planted in places where invasive weeds would otherwise create issues.
- Recommendations from previous events and inquiries need to be incorporated into the strategy and used to drive action.
- Residents pay their rates, and there is a perception that therefore they should not have to manage their own verges.

In relation to this last point, we acknowledge the frustration around this. However, estimates suggest that managing every verge in our district on an annual basis would exceed \$2m every year. The only feasible way to continuously fund this work would be to raise rates significantly.

2 Summary and next steps

A big thanks to all who participated in this consultation. Your feedback has been very useful.

In broad terms the next steps will be:

- Council to email feedback report to all stakeholders and have available on our website and social media channels.
- Key council staff to incorporate changes to the Bushfire Mitigation Landscape Strategy according to feedback received.
- Final draft of strategy to be presented to Elected Members for formal endorsement.
- Strategy published on our website along with associated educational materials by June 2024.