



HUME CITY COUNCIL **RURAL STRATEGY CONSULTATION REPORT**

March 2020

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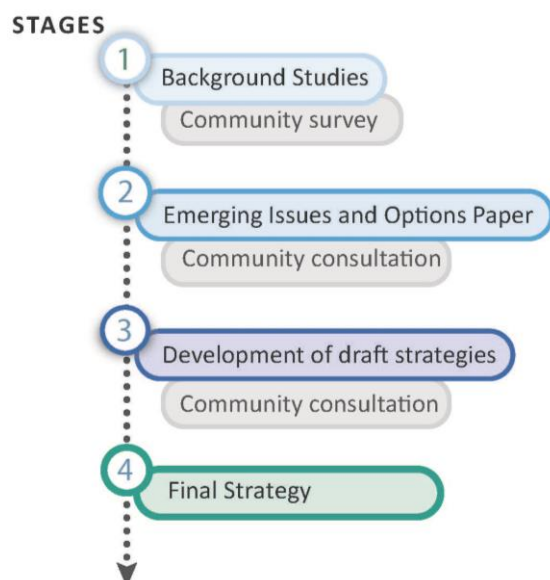
1. INTRODUCTION

In developing a Rural Strategy, Hume City Council has undertaken community consultation by distributing a survey to all landowners in late 2017 and inviting feedback on an Emerging Issues and Options Paper. This feedback has been critical to the preparation of the draft Rural Strategy and is summarised in this report.

2. BACKGROUND

Hume City Council is currently developing a strategy for its rural areas. The strategy provides a response to the challenges identified through background work and community feedback.

The Rural Strategy project commenced in March 2017. It is anticipated that the project will be delivered in four stages as illustrated below:



3. PHASE 1 – COMMUNITY SURVEY

The initial stage of the Rural Strategy project was to survey the views of Hume City's rural community members and its findings of this consultation are summarised below.

The community were invited to participate in the survey through:

- a mail out of postage paid hardcopy surveys to 2,127 landowners and occupiers within the Hume City rural areas located within the intended Rural HIGAP areal; and
- an online survey available via the *Hume City Council Your Say* consultation webpage, survey link or a scannable QR code.

A total of 360 survey responses (representing a response rate of 17%) were received from the beginning of July to mid-August 2017, many of these responses were detailed and considered.

3.1. Survey respondents

Survey respondents were located throughout Hume's rural areas. However, the responses were dominated by respondents from three main areas, these being Sunbury, Bulla and Oaklands Junction. Nearly 60 per cent (58%) of respondents were above 55 years of age. The majority stated they were planning to live in the area for more than 20 years.

The majority of respondents (88%) were owner occupiers and the median size of respondent's land was above four and up to ten hectares.

The top three land uses were non-commercial, including:

- 1) rural lifestyle living with no livestock (151 of 416 selections)
- 2) rural lifestyle living with horses for recreational purposes (59)
- 3) hobby farm (59).

3.2. Issues of importance

Respondents' agreement/disagreement with general statements about Hume's rural areas was strongly supportive of preserving and protecting the rural character, heritage and environment. Additionally, there was a desire for more support for communities to maintain liveability and assist businesses remain economically viable.

With regard to issues previously identified as important in Hume's rural community consultations, the following issues were still considered to be important:

- land management challenges.
- the impact of increasing rates on managing/maintaining land.
- restrictions on subdivision of land and urban development.

Other issues respondents highlighted were further development opportunities, with a split between those wanting development to cease and those advocating for it. In addition, there were concerns over farming viability, waste disposal (legal/illegal), and aspiration for local environments and rural lifestyle to be preserved.

3.3. For the next 25 years

Over 300 respondents left comments on what they would most like to happen in Hume's rural areas over the next 25 years. Many respondents wanted improved infrastructure, services and facilities that keep pace with the development occurring. There was also desire for the preservation of the current environmental and amenity values and the rural lifestyle. There were mixed views on the negatives and the positives that more urban encroachment and more housing could bring.

Over 270 respondents made statements about what they would least like to happen in Hume's rural areas over the next 25 years. Many of these comments concerned the detrimental impacts of unconstrained development (e.g. large/poorly planned housing estates, inappropriate land uses and commercial developments, development at the expense of the environment, farming and amenity value). There was a smaller group of respondents who feared rural areas stagnating through lack of development. They were concerned that everything would stay the same and/or development could be halted unnecessarily. Other comments were made about not wanting property rates to increase.

Over 250 respondents identified opportunities for Hume's rural areas over the next 25 years. These opportunities were a mix of increasing housing and development, and retaining the rural feel and lifestyle, while providing the infrastructure and employment to meet growth in a manner that protects the environmental, cultural and heritage values of the area. Emphasis was placed on the opportunities that small subdivisions (one to five acres) of freehold land for rural lifestyle properties and tourism could provide. Better planning and provision of infrastructure for rural areas was a role identified for government.

4. PHASE 2 - THE EMERGING ISSUES AND OPTIONS PAPER

The Rural Areas HIGAP Emerging Issues and Options Paper (paper) analysed key issues and suggests a number of options on how these issues could be addressed.

2018 Consultation

The community were invited to provide feedback on the paper between 30 July 2018 and 10 September 2018. The paper was available on Council's website and at Council Customer Service Centres.

A notification letter was distributed to all rural residents and landowners within the subject area, as well as government departments, agencies and other stakeholders inviting submissions to the paper. The letter was accompanied with a factsheet that summarised the issues and the proposed options discussed in the paper.

On 18 October 2018, 10 submitters were invited to a roundtable discussion with the Mayor, councillors and project officers to gain a deeper understanding of the issues highlighted in the submissions. These submitters were selected without prejudice, based on the diversity of views and geographic distribution across the study area. The results of this discussion are incorporated into discussion in each topic.

Additional Correspondence

Following the end of the 2018 consultation, additional correspondence was received from five submitters from late 2018 to early 2020. This correspondence reiterated the position of these submitters from the 2018 consultation.

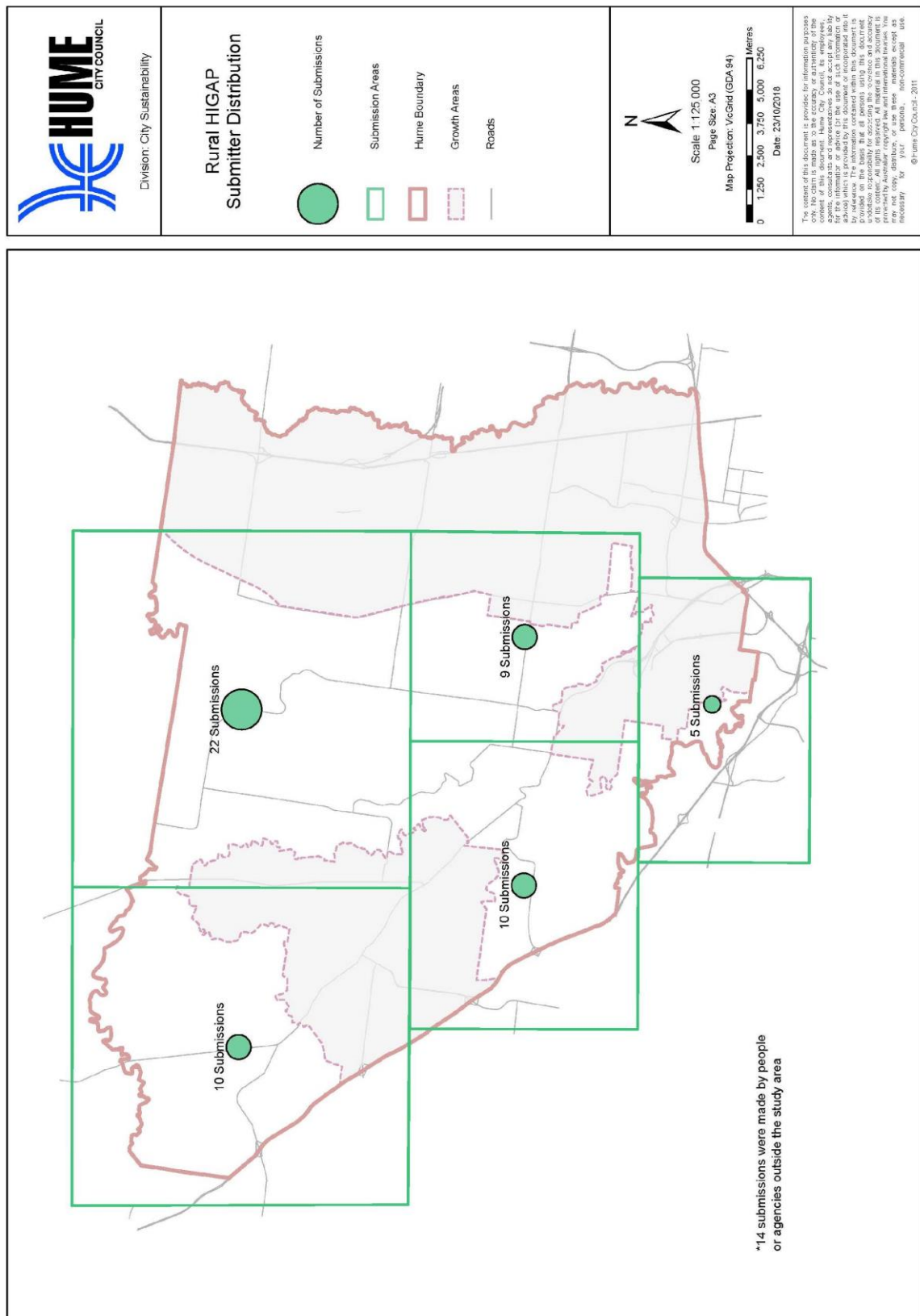
4.1. Findings

Seventy submissions were made during consultation on the Rural Areas HIGAP Emerging Issues and Options Paper (paper).

Sixty-three of these submissions were made by, or on behalf of, residents and landowners within or around the rural areas. The remaining submissions were from government departments and non-government groups or agencies.

The submissions received from residents and landowners within the rural areas, were relatively well distributed geographically across the rural areas (refer Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Location of Submitters to the Rural Areas Emerging Issues and Options Paper



Generally, the submissions indicated that the paper captured the issues confronting the rural areas fairly well.

Figure 1 details the number of submissions discussing each issue.

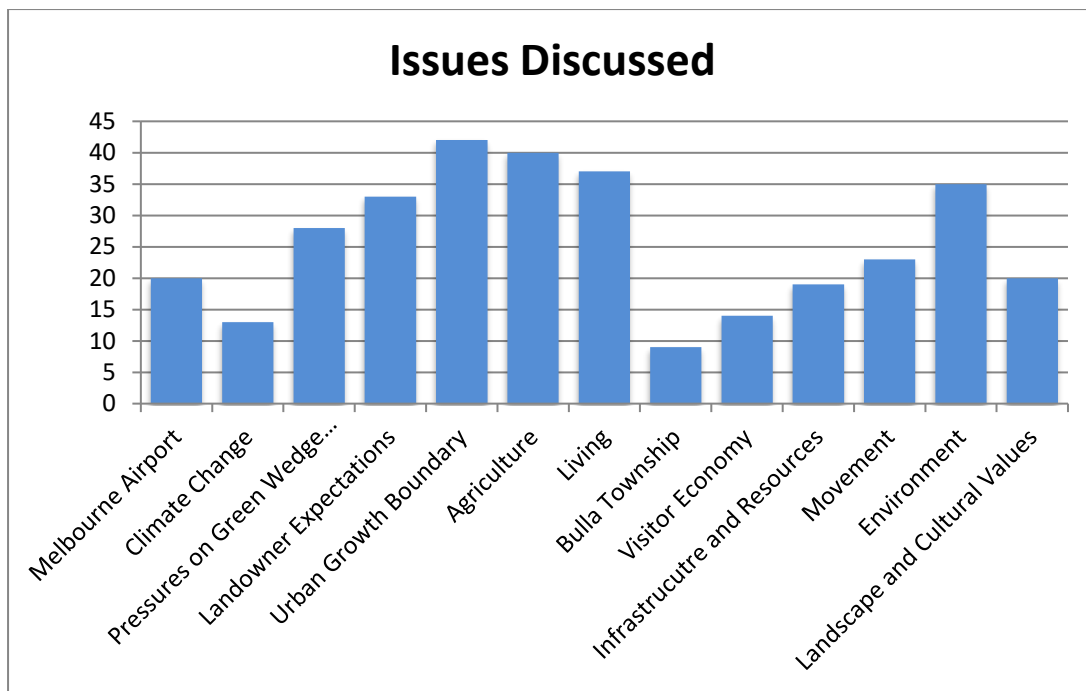


Figure 1 - Number of submissions discussing each issue

Broadly, the key issues that were highlighted in many submissions were:

- The urban growth boundary;
- Agricultural Viability;
- Minimum Subdivision Sizes; and
- Land management issues.

It is clear from the consultation that the community would prefer that Council adopt a proactive approach to managing the challenges confronting the rural areas. Only a minority of submissions sort a wind-down approach and that even those who sought the preservation of the rural areas, stated that Council should proactively maintain and enhance these areas.

The analysis below outlines the feedback from the community based around the each issue discussed in the paper.

4.2. Melbourne Airport

Melbourne Airport was discussed in 20 of the 70 submissions.

Most of these submissions spoke to the importance of the Airport to Melbourne and Victoria.

Figure 2 indicates consistent support for both options. Importantly, several submissions stated their preference for both options. To protect the operation and curfew free status of the Airport, while at the same time exploring the opportunities for the rural areas can capitalise due to the proximity of the Airport.

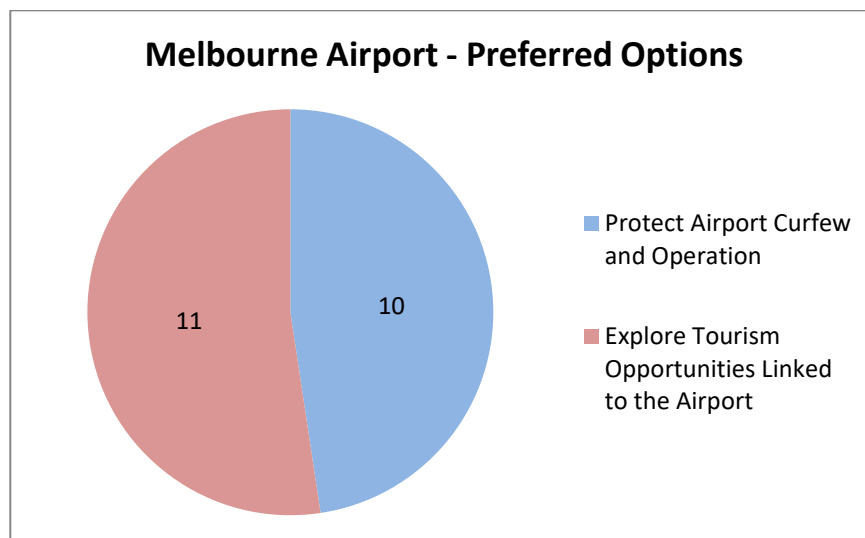


Figure 2 - Melbourne Airport total preferred options

Submissions highlighted that the potential tourism and business opportunities that are explored must be cognisant of the noise impacts of the Airport and ones that are compatible with the Airport's operation.

Four of the 20 submissions did not support the continued curfew free status of Melbourne Airport. Two of these submissions stated that the light and noise impacts of the Airport's operation should warrant a curfew on night time operations.

Finally, a submitter who operates a farm in Keilor, south of the Airport, indicated the impact that Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination has had on the viability of their farm. The submitter stated that PFAS contamination from the Airport had been identified in the waterways and that agriculture and stock were vulnerable due to this.

4.3. Climate Change

Climate change was directly discussed in 16 submissions.

As climate change is such a multi-faceted issue, the impact and importance of climate change can be seen to be indirectly discussed in a larger number of submissions that discuss agricultural viability, water access and land management. Of the submissions that directly discuss climate change, it was referred to as one of the greatest challenges confronting the rural areas.

As indicated by Figure 3, there is consistent support for both options. Similarly to options regarding Melbourne Airport, support for either option was not seen as mutually exclusive, with many submitters supporting both options to continue to support rural land owners and explore alternative agriculture and land uses.

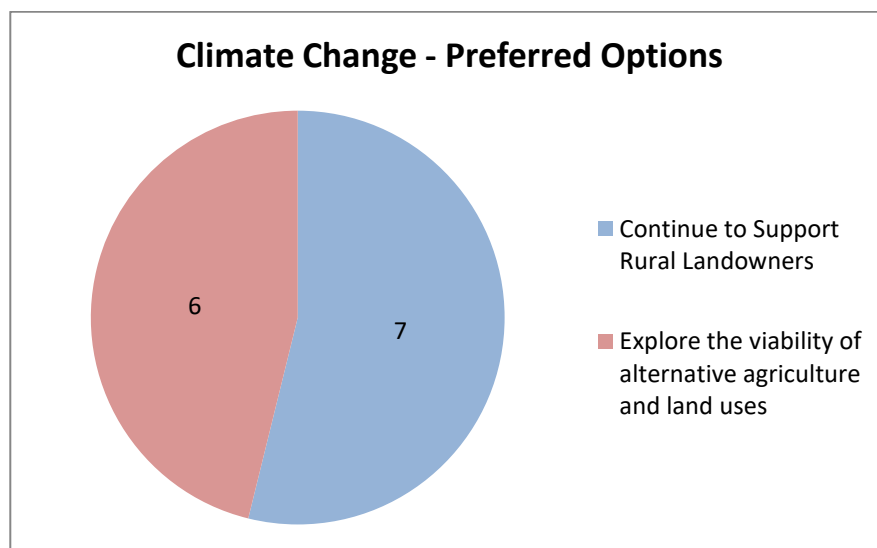


Figure 3 - Climate Change total preferred options

Submissions also propose that innovative agricultural practices such as using recycled water, drought tolerant crops and alternative planning schedules should be explored to address this issue.

4.4. Pressures on Green Wedge Area

Pressures on Green Wedge Areas were directly discussed in 28 submissions.

Due to the comparably small group of submitters who responded to this section directly, these results can be seen as reasonably split between all three the options, as seen in Figure 4.

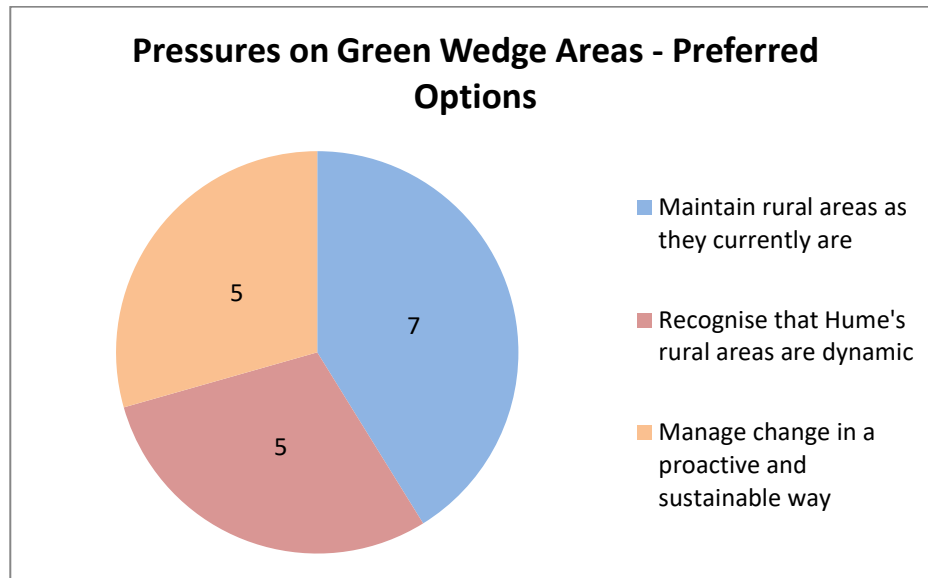


Figure 4 - Pressures on Green Wedge Areas

Another key challenge that emerged from the consultation under the theme of Pressure on the Green Wedge is the lack of understanding and motivation for residents in and around the rural areas to practice proper land management. This often presents in the instances where a landowner does not manage the weeds and other invasive species on their property, which spreads to adjacent properties. Additionally, there is a concern regarding the lack of understanding or respect for landowners for responsibilities to minimise the risk of bushfires. This was highlighted in the submission by the Country Fire Authority as a major risk for the rural areas.

To address this issue, seven submitters stated that there should be education programs for land management offered by Council, particularly around weed control and fire risks.

Additionally, eight submitters explicitly stated that Council needs to provide more effective support and incentives to facilitate good land management, such as by exploring additional rebate or agricultural loan programs. At the same time, seven submitters also argued that there should be disincentives for those practicing poor land management, such as higher rates and fines. Primarily, it is believed that consistent enforcement action is needed to address these issues.

4.5. Landowner Expectations

Landowner Expectations were discussed in 33 submissions.

As indicated by Figure 5, there is a relatively even split between all three options, with the largest portion of submitters supporting changes to the statutory controls and policy to allow new opportunities and activities in the rural areas.

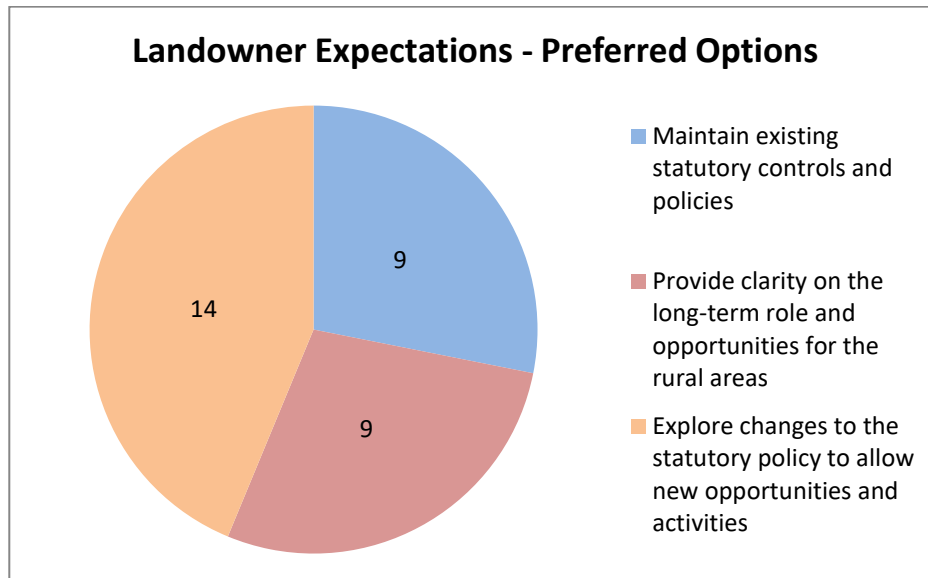


Figure 5 - Landowner Expectations total preferred options

The assertion by many submitters who support new opportunities and activities to be allowed in the rural areas was that the existing agricultural uses of the land are not financially viable (see Agriculture section below). The submissions to this theme also highlighted that there was not a full and accurate understanding amongst some submitters as to which land uses are and are not permitted under the current planning controls. There was a perception amongst a number of submitters that in the Green Wedge Zones only agricultural uses were permitted.

A number of submitters that supported clarity of the long term opportunities felt that this was needed to manage the increasing number of land bankers. It was considered that certainty on potential urban growth boundary changes and potential subdivision was a key cause of increased land banking. The submissions also reveal that uncertainty on long term opportunities has resulted in several submitters who currently manage agricultural land not investing time and money in required agricultural machinery and intensive land care. These submitters feel that their time, money and effort will be wasted as the planning controls might change at any moment.

The challenges of land management associated with land bankers, who submitters state have little motivation to practice proper land management, was also repeatedly mentioned in submissions. To manage these impacts a number of submissions identified the need for support and incentives to facilitate good land management and stronger disincentives for those practicing poor land management (see above).

4.6. The Urban Growth Boundary

The urban growth boundary was discussed in 42 submissions. As indicated in Figure 6, many of the submissions discussing the urban growth boundary seek changes to the urban growth boundary and rezoning to allow new, mostly residential, uses. This position was typically the culmination or suggested solution to managing the challenges of agricultural viability, economic opportunities and land management. For those immediately on the edge of the urban growth boundary, the proximity of residential development and the challenges and opportunities this presented was seen as a reason why their land should be included in the urban growth boundary.

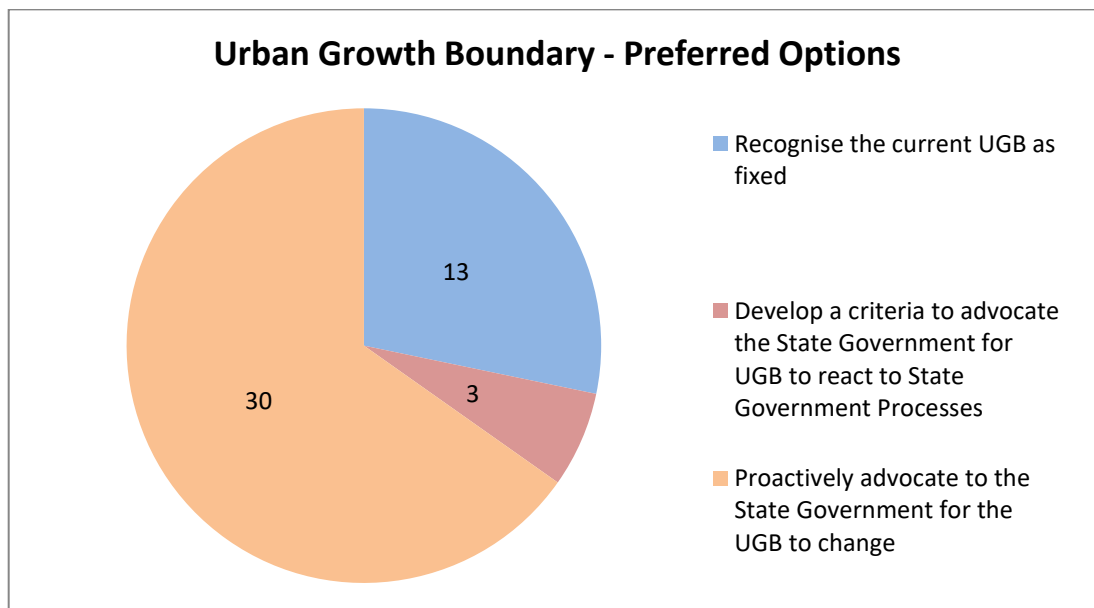


Figure 6 - Urban Growth Boundary total preferred options

Importantly, approximately a third of submissions discussing the urban growth boundary did not want the urban growth boundary altered. These submissions commonly identified the need to maintain the important ecological role of green wedge land. State Government agencies and neighbouring local councils support the recognition of the current urban growth boundary as a fixed boundary as this is consistent with current State Government policy in *Plan Melbourne 2017-50*.

4.7. Agriculture

Agriculture was discussed in 40 submissions.

As indicated by Figure 7, most submitters support Council maintaining the current level of support to existing operations and the exploration of opportunities to foster emerging agricultural uses. Many submitters stated that both pro-active options should be pursued.

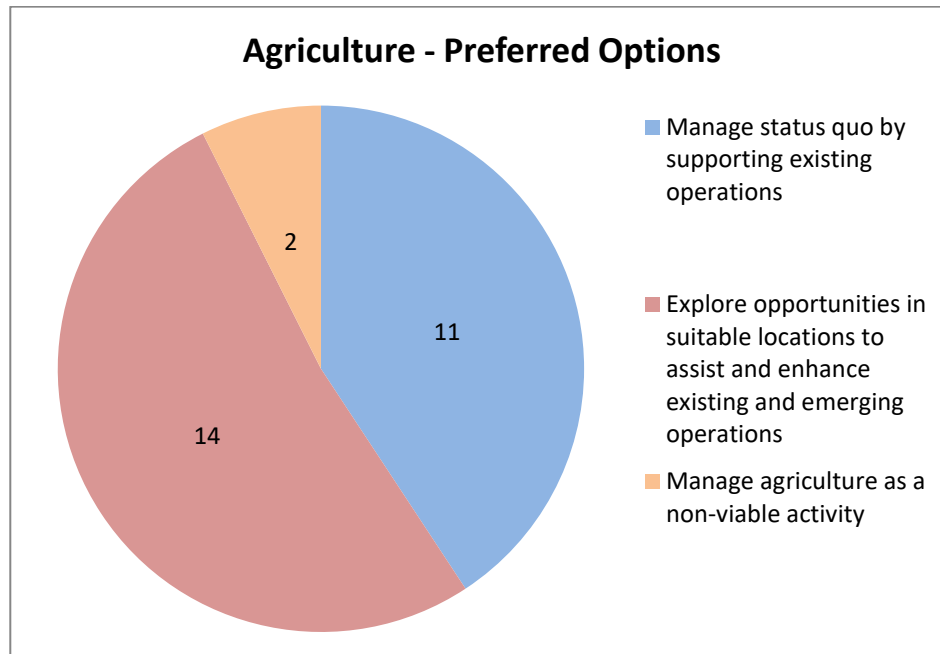


Figure 7 - Agriculture total preferred options

Of the 40 submissions that discuss agriculture, 25 of these state that agriculture is not viable in Hume's rural areas due to a lack of rainfall and water access, weed management issues, the rising costs of land management and agricultural machinery and current subdivision sizes.

The assertion that the land is not agriculturally viable was often used as a justification to change the urban growth boundary or a reduction in minimum subdivision sizes. It is important to note that of those submissions that stated agriculture was not viable, many still supported Council supporting existing operations or the exploration of alternative agriculture in suitable locations. Additionally, many submitters indicated that despite their belief that agriculture was not viable, it would be their preference to keep farming with support from Council.

Several submissions express their frustration with Council and the State Government, given that it is these government agencies preference for maintaining the prohibitive controls on the green wedge, that they should be responsible for ensuring they are viable. Suggestions proposed include new grant programs for pesticides and machinery and rate rebate programs, as well as the employment of an agribusiness officer to assist landowners in managing their businesses and linking them to other economic opportunities.

Another issue raised in submissions was the challenge faced in moving agricultural machinery or livestock on roads due to increased residential development and traffic. Submissions identified that increased traffic was making this necessary activity difficult and dangerous. This issue was also raised in additional correspondence sent by one submitter after the end of the 2018 consultation.

4.8. Living

Living was discussed in 37 submissions.

As indicated in Figure 8, many submitters support a reduction of the current minimum subdivision sizes or sought the investigation into rural living cluster subdivisions.

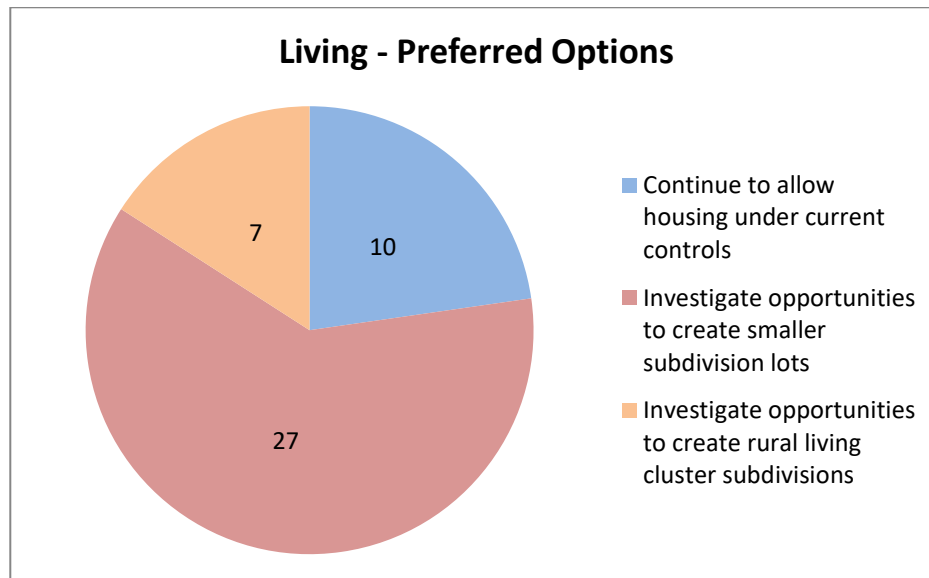


Figure 8 - Living total preferred options

Similar to requests to alter the urban growth boundary, this position was based on the assertion that agriculture is not viable and managing the land had become too challenging. However, unlike the submissions seeking a change to the urban growth boundary, many of the submitters supporting the creation of smaller subdivision of lots considered that this would enable better land management, particularly for those who wished to remain living in the rural area and for those who were ageing.

Importantly, over a quarter of submitters who discussed this topic supported only allowing housing under the existing controls.

During the Mayor's forum, issues relating to subdivision controls were discussed extensively. Some attendees considered that a reduction in minimum subdivision sizes would result in better land management, which would encourage existing landowners to stay in the area rather than selling their properties to land bankers.

Others raised concerns that changes to the minimum subdivision sizes could exacerbate land management issues by increasing the number of landowners who lack understanding of appropriate weed and bushfire management. There was consensus that should minimum subdivision sizes be reduced, this should be accompanied by Council led land management education programs.

Additional correspondence was received after the end of the 2018 consultation from four submitters restating their preference for a reduction to the minimum subdivision controls for the land north of Sunbury township.

4.9. Bulla township

Bulla township was discussed in 11 submissions.

Figure 9 indicates that most submitters prefer to maintain the existing uses in Bulla township.

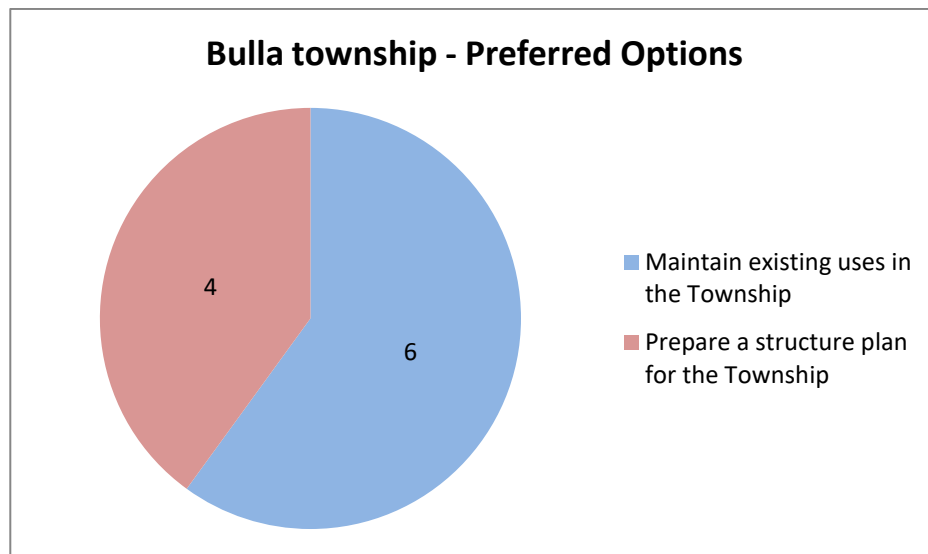


Figure 9 - Bulla Township total preferred options

Only one submission was received from a resident of Bulla Township, which indicated support for the preparation of a structure plan for the Township.

State government agencies supported the creation of a structure plan for Bulla Township. They note that the plan should include an analysis of options to increase pedestrian and cyclist movements through the Township. The potential for active transport opportunities in the Bulla precinct plan can be incorporated into a broader cycling network throughout the rural areas. This will also be explored as an opportunity to promote the tourism of the rural areas, discussed in the next section.

Another submission proposes that the heritage and history of Bulla Township could be promoted by Council as a tourism opportunity.

The majority of submissions did not discuss Bulla Township in detail, as most submissions simply highlighted their preferred option.

4.10. Visitor Economy

Visitor Economy and potential tourism was discussed in 14 submissions.

As indicated in Figure 10, the majority of submitters support the exploration of new tourism opportunities in the rural areas.

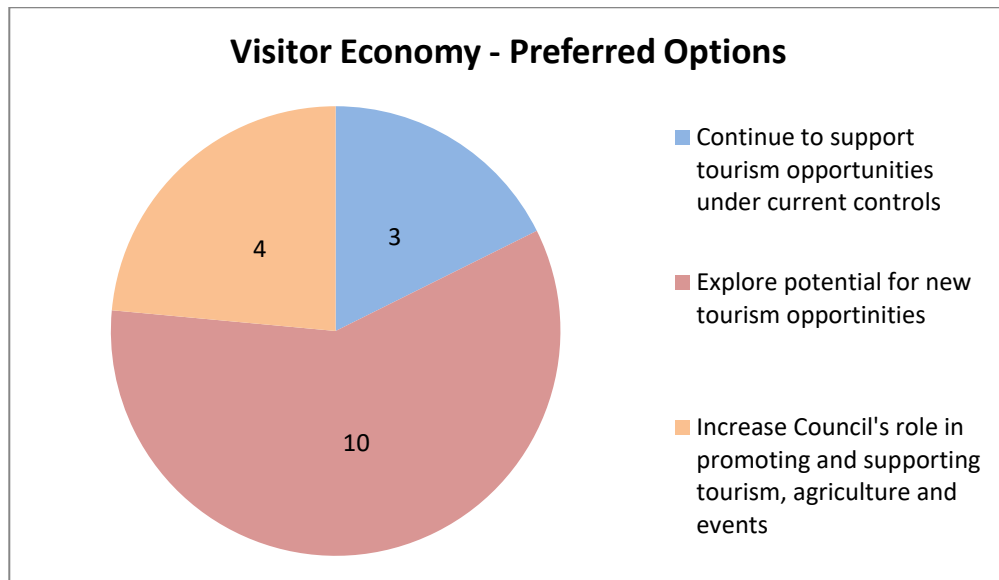


Figure 10 - Visitor Economy total preferred options

Many submitters mentioned the possibility of tourism activities linked to the unique landscape and the natural and cultural heritage features of the rural areas. Submitters also suggested that walking and cycling trails, particularly along watercourses forming a linear park, should be explored. Some of these submissions asserted that Council is not appropriately utilising its public land and that access to this land should be promoted.

The key feature of many of the submissions that discussed tourism opportunities was the desire to make the rural areas viable to minimise the speculation of land banking and urban expansion.

4.11. Infrastructure and Resources

The Infrastructure and Resources theme included Energy, Water, Extractive Resources and Waste Management and was discussed in 19 submissions.

As indicated in Figure 11, there was a relatively even split in submitters who supported the consolidation and expansion of extractive resource and waste management facilities on established sites only and the exploration of additional such facilities.

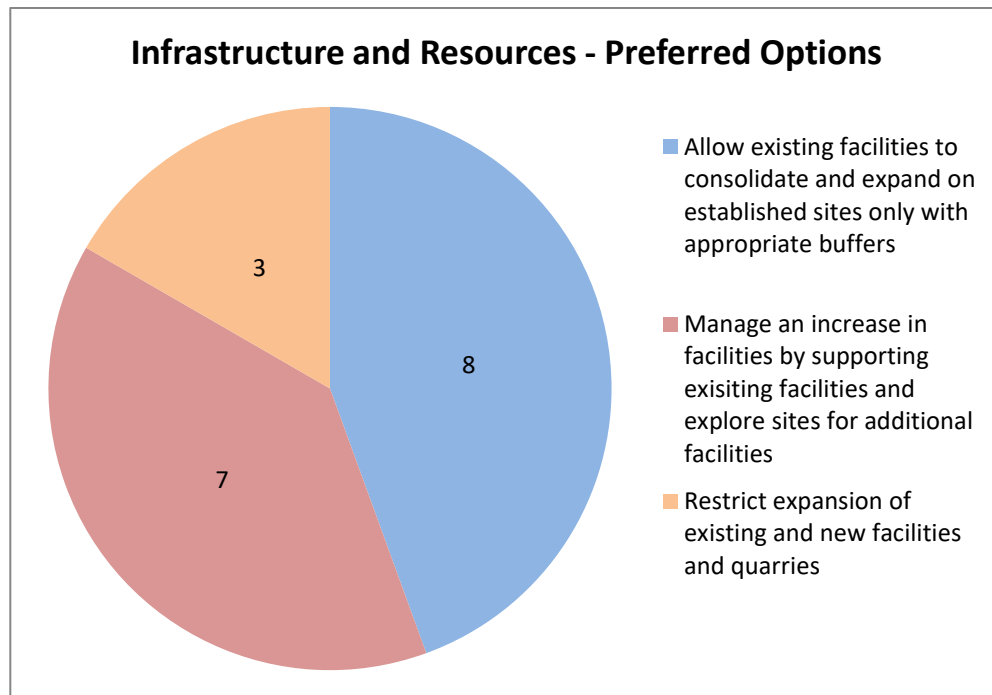


Figure 11 - Infrastructure and Resources total preferred options

Many submitters recognise the need for facilities and believed that, due to the marginal productivity of the land for agriculture, these resource and industrial uses are more appropriate in the rural areas. Suggestions for possible uses included the development of wind turbines or solar farm facilities.

Several submissions mentioned that the former Cleanaway Tip located on Western Avenue near the Airport should be revegetated and turned into a public park, which could serve as buffer land for the Airport. It is noted that this land sits outside the study area for this project.

Water access and its impact on agricultural viability was a key challenge that was mentioned in 14 submissions. These submitters highlighted that one of the key reasons that agriculture is not viable is due to the lack of rainfall and the prohibitive costs associated with buying recycled water. Climate change is exacerbating this issue. The extent of which recycled water might be able to be reasonably delivered in the rural areas was also raised in additional correspondence received after the end of the 2018 consultation.

Another important issue that was highlighted during the consultation was that of illegal dumping. Submitters highlighted that the pervasiveness of this issue, particularly for its lack of respect for the rural areas and the potential danger of dumping abandoned vehicles.

4.12. Movement

Movement, roads and traffic were discussed in 23 submissions.

As shown in Figure 12, the vast majority of submissions supported either producing a rural road strategy or exploring the need for additional new road connections or upgrades. Again, many submissions highlighted the need for both options to be pursued.

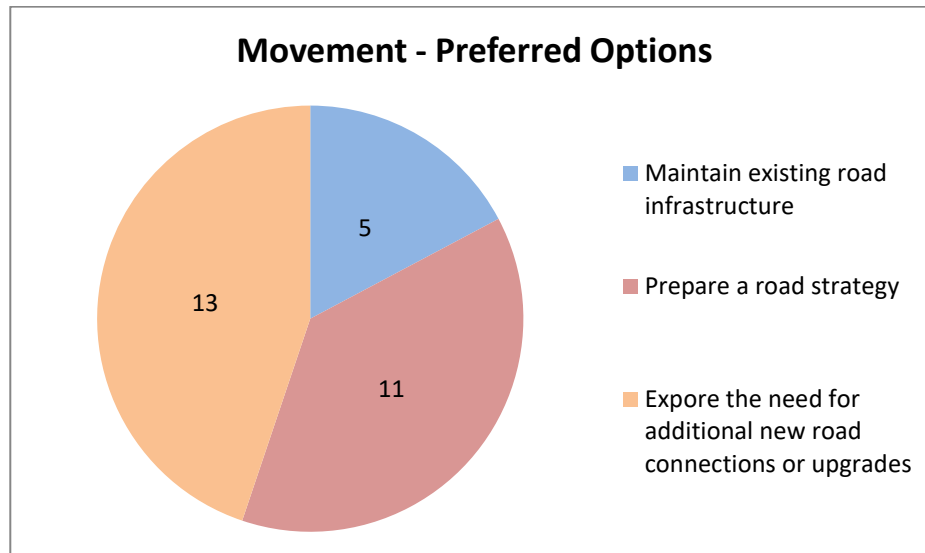


Figure 12 - Movement total preferred options

Submitters also highlighted the need for additional connector roads to link to Sunbury and Lancefield Road due to the residential development that will soon be occurring through Sunbury South and Lancefield Road Precinct Structure Plans.

Additionally, several submitters argued for the need to duplicate Somerton and Mickleham Roads. Duplication of both of these roads has been identified and form part of Council's advocacy to State Government,

A key theme in many of these submissions was concern about the impacts of increased traffic and congestion that will arise as Sunbury and the Hume Growth Corridor continue to develop. As discussed above, of particular concern was the impact of this on the moving of agricultural machinery and livestock.

Tourism opportunities linked to hiking and biking trails were also prevalent in these submissions, these opportunities are discussed above in the Visitor Economy section.

4.13. Environment

The Environment was discussed to varying degrees in 35 submissions.

As indicated by Figure 13, there is significant support for the development of additional programs and controls, as well as new mechanisms to protect landscape, water and biodiversity. Submitters who responded directly to the proposed options consistently supported the maintenance of the current programs in conjunction with these approaches. Many submitters stated their opposition to a wind-down approach of reducing Council's role.

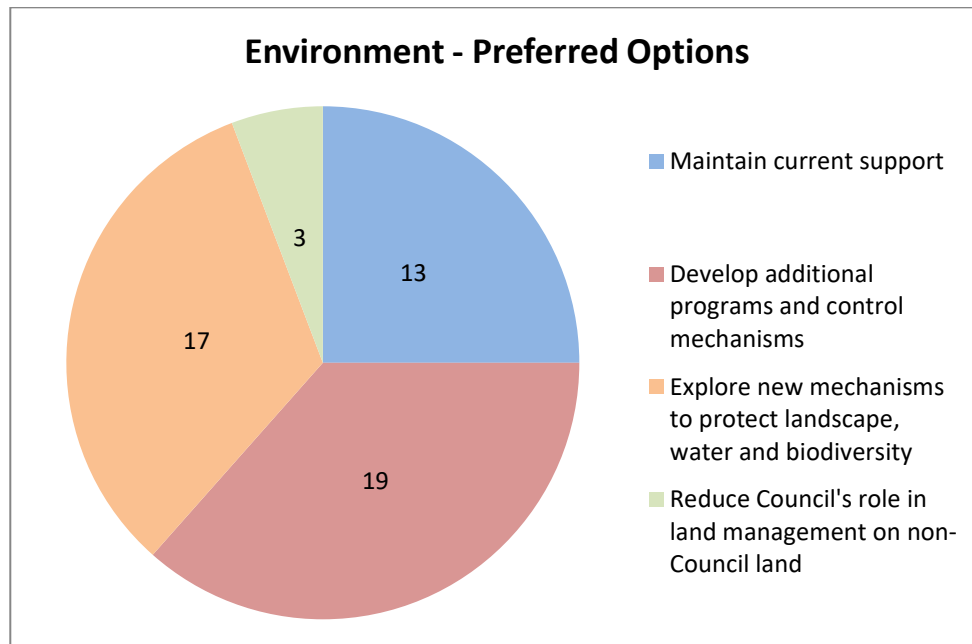


Figure 13 - Environment total preferred options

As 'environment' is such a broad topic that intersects many of the challenges and opportunities already discussed in the Climate Change, Pressures on Green Wedge Areas and Agriculture sections above, they will not be discussed in greater detail here. In keeping with the recommendations in the submissions it is important to note consistent support for:

- New grant and rebate schemes;
- New incentives for good land management and compliance action for negligent land management;
- Environmental and land maintenance education programs; and
- Consistent enforcement action.

Many submissions highlight that environmental issues are exacerbated by land banking and that the only way to allow for better management was to allow for a reduction in minimum lot sizes.

Many submissions called for a need for revegetation programs and for Council to support the reconnecting of fragmented habitats.

4.14. Cultural and Landscape Values

Cultural and Landscape Values were discussed in 20 submissions.

As indicated by Figure 14, there is relatively even support between all three options. Importantly, many submitters selected all three options as their preferred options, or stated that the current conservation areas should be maintained while new cultural and heritage landscape areas are explored.

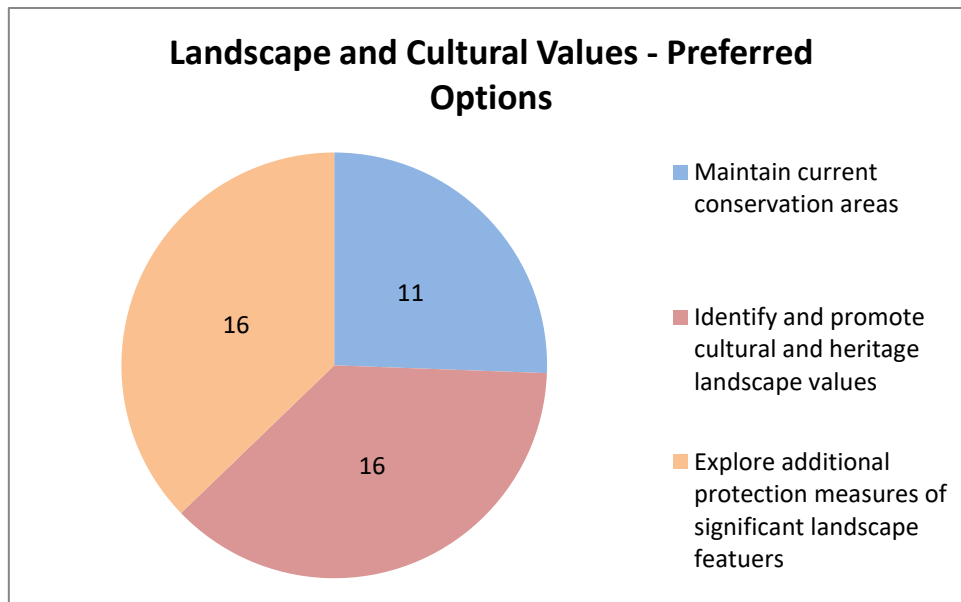


Figure 14 - Landscape and Cultural Values total preferred options

As discussed in the Visitor Economy section above, many submitters asserted that Council should promote the natural and cultural heritage assets of the rural areas and uses as an opportunity for increase walking and biking trails.

From the consultation it is clear that there is an appreciation and desire to preserve Hume's unique landscapes and heritage felt by many submitters, although there is not unity on how this might be done. For instance, several submitters stated the only way to preserve the significant landscape is to close off all public access, while others proposed increased access and the tourism opportunities they present.

4.15. Unaddressed Issues

Several submissions highlighted topics that either were not discussed in the paper or were not specifically mentioned in the options developed. The topics that have not already been discussed above include:

- Horticulture and viticulture opportunities;
- Shooting and hunting issues;
- Pesticide and herbicide regulations; and
- The equity issue regarding urban residents benefitting from and utilising rural land without contributing to its preservation and viability.

5. CONCLUSION

One of the key findings from the second round of community consultation on the Rural HIGAP Emerging Issues and Options Paper revealed a strong desire on behalf of the community for Council to proactively manage the issues that are confronting the rural areas.

The key issues that emerged were consistent with the initial community survey conducted in late 2017:

- The Urban Growth Boundary;
- Agricultural Viability;
- Minimum Subdivision Sizes; and
- Land management issues.

The issues relating to the urban growth boundary and subdivision controls were the most discussed topics during the consultation and while there was support for altering the urban growth boundary and subdivision controls, support for both options was not unanimous.

To address the land management issues that reinforce many of the other issues impacting the rural areas, there was consistent support for education programs, rate and grant incentives and enforcement action from Council.

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