MIDCOAST
council



DRAFT

MIDCOAST GREENING STRATEGY

APRIL 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live, the Gathang-speaking people and pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who now reside in the MidCoast Council area. We extend our respect to elders past and present, and to all future cultural-knowledge holders.



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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS PLAN

CSP Community Strategic Plan

DCP Development Control Plan

LEP Local Environmental Plan

MCC MidCoast Council

Note: The MidCoast area is covered by three LEPs and DCPs for the former three regions being Great Lakes, Greater Taree and Gloucester.



A MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

I'm delighted to present MidCoast Council's first Greening Strategy, an important body of work that will contribute to the health, wellbeing and amenity of our region into the future.

There's no doubt that we enjoy an enviable lifestyle surrounded by nature. The MidCoast is well-known as an outdoor playground offering residents and holiday-makers access to stunning natural landscapes that extend from the heights of Barrington Tops, through to a sparkling coastline stretching over 190km. Integral to our natural landscape, particularly in our towns and villages, is a strategic approach to managing our trees and vegetation.

Sitting alongside other strategic initiatives that include the development of a Biodiversity Framework and Climate Change Policy, the Greening Strategy acknowledges the importance of our natural environment to the local community. It provides a forward-thinking plan of action that will help us target priority locations, and a platform for gathering evidence to inform a longer term approach to greening.

Trees and vegetation not only improve the character and 'feel' of our urban centres, they provide recreational spaces and shade, improve air quality and local biodiversity, and play an important part in offsetting environmental pressures caused through climate change.

Our local communities are well-placed to provide valuable insight when it comes to greening in and around their neighbourhoods. I invite everyone to get involved as we move forward to a 'greener' future for the MidCoast.

Cr David West

Mayor - MidCoast Council

INTRODUCTION

About the Strategy

The MidCoast Greening Strategy sets out five principles to improve how we manage and enhance tree canopy cover and green spaces.

We are experiencing growth across the MidCoast, especially in our coastal centres. While planning for this future growth, we need to ensure that the high levels of liveability and environmental amenity our region is renowned for, are maintained. The aim of the MidCoast Greening Strategy (the Strategy) is to manage and enhance the quality and extent of vegetation across our diverse landscapes.

No single project or program can enable us to manage and enhance all of our landscape. Rather it is a complex web of legislation, programs, controls and strategies that interlink to enable this to happen, and this in itself is a challenge.

We are not starting from scratch. Our Council and our communities already recognise the value of our environment, which is reflected in ongoing action on the ground. Council through the management of it's extensive open space and bushland network and the community through their weed management and tree planting activities.

The reality is that the MidCoast is a large area and we have limited resources. We need to rethink our work to achieve measurable and quality outcomes. We need to focus our efforts, not spread them too thin. This Strategy looks at how we can improve our greening outcomes by focusing on five principles.



Why prepare a Greening Strategy?

The greening of the MidCoast adds to the liveability and environmental amenity of our towns, villages, and rural and natural landscapes.

A simple reason for preparing this Strategy is to retain and plant trees today, to create a positive legacy for future generations.

Forward-thinking Councils across NSW and Australia-wide are measuring the condition, diversity, and extent of greening (particularly in their urban areas), setting targets and aligning their operational programs to work towards improving vegetation coverage. This is driven by strong evidence that well managed trees and vegetation effectively improve the quality, liveability and performance of all landscapes.

Research has quantified the economic value of the benefits delivered by improving vegetation cover in urban areas. Some of the economic benefits from greening initiatives include reduced energy consumption, lower ongoing health costs, and potential boosts to business. The NSW Government's draft Greener Places Design Guide indicates that a 10% increase in tree canopy cover on adjacent streets, parks, and reserves or even just a street tree, can add to a property's value. Other benefits include:

- **improved amenity and recreation** - vegetation and trees can provide a positive sense of place, improve amenity and provide a local identity. Attractive open spaces and green spaces can also promote increased outdoor activity like walking and cycling
- **improved liveability and wellbeing** - greening initiatives can provide shade and shelter, improve air quality, and reduce daytime temperatures and sun exposure. The NSW Government's Healthy Built Environment Checklist identifies that well designed towns and villages can help reduce health risks and support positive health outcomes enhancement of biodiversity - greening initiatives can improve the connectivity of natural areas within and surrounding urban areas, providing important corridors and habitat for our wildlife
- **minimising the impact of climate change** - urban vegetation can assist stormwater infiltration, reduce the impact of the Urban Heat Island Effect by cooling urban areas, and absorb air pollution.



If you would like to know more about the challenges and opportunities associated with greening or the Urban Heat Island Effect, have a look at the Supporting Information attached to this Strategy



Advancing the principles in this Strategy also contributes to achieving the community's vision, set out in "*MidCoast 2030: Shared Vision, Shared Responsibility*" (the Community Strategic Plan). This Vision is:

We strive to be recognised as a place of unique environmental and cultural significance. Our strong community connection, coupled with our innovative development and growing economy, builds the quality of life we value.

The Community Strategic Plan includes objectives for the restoration and maintenance of our environment, managing resources wisely and balancing the needs of our natural and built environment. The 2020 Customer Satisfaction Survey reaffirmed that the natural environment is a priority for our community. Lifestyle, natural environment and location were the most valued aspects of living in the MidCoast.

Implementation of the Strategy will contribute to achieving the vision for the MidCoast and enhance the liveability and natural setting enjoyed by our community.

SCOPE

Where it applies?

The Strategy applies across the whole MidCoast, covering our urban areas and surrounding rural and natural landscapes.

The urban areas include the strategic, coastal and rural centres (shown in Figure 1), along with a large number of villages, each with their own unique character and qualities. These urban areas cover approximately 5% of the MidCoast and house around 95% of our population.

The remainder of the MidCoast is non-urban land, as a mixture of rural and natural landscapes (shown as light olive in Figure 1). Characterised by productive farmland, waterways, striking scenery and an abundance of natural treasures, these landscapes contribute significantly to our green spaces.



Figure 1 – Map of the MidCoast area

The focus

While the Strategy applies to the whole of the MidCoast, many of the Strategy's principles focus on the urban areas.

Our towns and villages are home to the majority of our residents and are under pressure to grow, particularly along the coast. Urban land uses, structures and sealed roads/carparks all contribute to the Urban Heat Island Effect, increasing radiant heat and making neighbourhoods hotter. By focusing greening initiatives in these areas and building partnerships with businesses and residents, we can move towards reducing temperatures in our urban areas.

In our rural and natural landscapes, there is a different scale of activity - typically the properties are considerably larger, activities are not as intense and the landscapes are not subject to the same growth pressures of urban areas. Existing Council projects like the Biodiversity Framework, Rural Strategy and Catchment Management Programs apply to these areas, capturing a range of projects aimed at protecting the important environmental and rural values of these landscapes. A number of organisations and government agencies also contribute to the management and protection of these landscapes, like local Landcare groups, the NSW Rural Fire Service, Forestry Corporation of NSW, Hunter Local Land Services and National Parks and Wildlife Services.

Given the significant activity already occurring in our rural and natural landscapes, the Strategy recognises and supports this work and focuses on initiatives in our urban areas to increase vegetation and tree coverage.

There are strong linkages to a range of Council strategies and plans aimed at achieving biodiversity, climate change, catchment, coastal, economic or rural outcomes. Cross references to each body of work are included throughout this Strategy to show that the strategies and plans are working together to improve the liveability of the MidCoast.

The Strategy recognises that there is a complex web of legislation and controls that protect vegetation, which come into play through different triggers, including development and tree clearing. The Strategy examines both of these triggers, identifying ways to improve the retention of trees and vegetation across the MidCoast.

If you would like to know more about the legislation and controls that protect vegetation, have a look at the Supporting Information attached to this Strategy



Our first Greening Strategy

We examined the effectiveness of our current greening actions and reviewed 'best practice' from around NSW to develop the Strategy.

Being the first MidCoast Greening Strategy, the focus is on collecting data to better understand our priorities across the MidCoast and undertaking trial projects to determine the techniques and activities that work more effectively than others. Future versions of the Strategy will build upon on these findings, with a shift to more on the ground projects that are led by the data and knowledge collected. It is intended to review this Strategy within five years.

The Strategy needs to be flexible and adaptive. Recent unprecedented events that commenced with a drought in 2018/19, bushfires, the COVID pandemic and floods have adjusted our priorities and how we work. With continued technological advances, new ideas and adaptive solutions, we need to ensure that the Strategy is flexible and regularly reviewed in order to achieve the best greening outcomes for the MidCoast.





THE PRINCIPLES

Overview

The five principles aim to improve how we manage and enhance tree canopy cover and green spaces.

The five principles for the MidCoast are:

Principle 1 **Cooling our urban areas**

Principle 2 **Keeping what we have**

Principle 3 **Building partnerships**

Principle 4 **Right trees in the right place**

Principle 5: **Planning for the future**



In the following sections, each principle is explained by indicating why it is important, how we plan to do things differently, and how we plan to focus our efforts. Actions are identified under each principle with the majority of actions proposed for implementation in the short term (2021-2024), along with some medium term (2025 - 2028).

To show the inter-relationship with other Council activities, 'support projects' are listed under the principles, along with anticipated timeframes. The inclusion of support projects demonstrates how current strategies and plans are working together to improve the liveability of the MidCoast. Many of these projects are underway and contribute to the principles. For example, Council's ongoing catchment and weed biosecurity programs already compliment improved vegetation condition across the MidCoast.



Principle 1: Cooling our urban areas

It is common knowledge that trees provide shade and cool their surrounds, but to what extent? Tree Canopy Mapping and Heat Analysis is a common tool used in Greening Strategies to identify the extent of our tree canopy and provide data on how effective trees are at cooling urban areas. Over time this data can help with decision making to increase the canopy cover and minimise the effects of heat.

We aim to plant more trees and vegetation in our towns and villages to increase our tree canopy cover in priority locations to cool them down - minimising the effects of heat. By planting more trees and vegetation we are not only cooling our neighbourhoods but providing more shade and habitat, and improving the 'leafy' feel and character.

There are three steps involved in the Tree Canopy Mapping and Heat Analysis process.

Step 1 - Tree canopy cover

This project will map and analyse the tree cover in our towns and villages, to increase our understanding of the urban 'hot spots' across the MidCoast. Typical 'hot spots' can be town centres and industrial estates where roads, carparks, footpaths and buildings dominate; along with some residential neighbourhoods with large road reserves and limited street and garden trees. The heat analysis will be targeted to urban centres like Taree, Forster-Tuncurry and Gloucester, which are likely to house these 'hot spots'.

Aerial photography over time

While the MidCoast does not currently have this mapping and analysis, we have gathered evidence of vegetation change through the lens of a camera. The Supporting Information section of this document contains a series of aerial photographs that capture the changes in vegetation in some of the MidCoast's towns, villages and large lot residential areas. In some locations there are clear areas of regrowth and revegetation efforts, where other images show the reduction in vegetation coverage to facilitate development. One component of Tree Canopy Mapping is obtaining current aerial imagery. This imagery will allow us to continue to capture the changes in vegetation extent across the MidCoast.



1997: (© Department of Customer Service 2021) 2021: (© Nearmap 2021)

Step 2 - Make a plan

When complete, the Tree Canopy Mapping and Heat Analysis will help identify priority locations for targeting tree planting programs. A schedule will be developed outlining how and when priority locations will be targeted.

Each location will be different. Some may focus on planting street trees or trees in industrial estates or parks, while others may focus on planting more trees in backyards. The timeframe to undertake each project will also differ based on the size of the area and extent of planting required.

Benchmarks will be established so we can measure the success of our efforts over time. By undertaking the Tree Canopy Mapping and Heat Analysis on a recurring basis we can see if the amount of tree canopy cover and heat exposure in our target areas and across the MidCoast landscape has improved.

Step 3 - Targeted greening

A targeted greening approach will be applied to each priority location. Public lands offer immediate opportunities to make improvements. If we think differently - road verges could transform to street gardens, canopy trees could shade playgrounds and carparks rather than shade structures and open drains (both concrete and grassed) could become vegetated drainage corridors.

Each priority location can be examined to see where we can make a difference, for example:

- **open spaces** - they have many functions from formal sporting fields to a playground or walking paths. A common feature is large grassed areas, which could be enhanced by trees and vegetated garden beds. Playground users, spectators at sports and residents using walking tracks are all seeking more shade. An increased shade tree planting program in these locations would positively contribute to the tree canopy cover and also increase habitat for wildlife

- **natural bushland and waterways** - they contribute to our biodiversity, often linking to the natural landscape around our towns and villages. Habitat and natural bushland increase in importance as the urban areas grow and expand. Links between these areas are important to allow for fauna movement, to increase flora diversity and to improve amenity that encourages walking and cycling. The greening initiatives for these natural areas are to remove weeds, increase natural vegetation and create or improve linkages between habitats

- **roads** - roads are multi-functional spaces; they allow the movement of vehicles, and people on roadside footpaths. They also assist in getting services to our front door through overhead power lines; and underground water, sewage, telecommunications and electricity. While constrained, they still offer greening opportunities when the right trees and vegetation are selected. In our towns and villages, most of the verges on our urban roads are just mown grass. Planting trees and establishing garden beds could dramatically change the look, feel and function of our streets.









In summary:

By targeting our greening in priority locations, we are putting our efforts into areas of the most need. By working with the community and thinking differently about our public spaces, we can work towards cooling our neighbourhoods. Being able to measure the success of these planting initiatives, we can see what works well and improve our processes over time. The challenge is that we have a large number of urban areas and working through the priority locations will take time and require funding.

ACTIONS	TIMEFRAME
1.1 Undertake Tree Canopy Mapping and Heat Analysis for urban areas	Short term
1.2 Develop a plan of the high priority locations for targeted greening activities and establish benchmarks	Short term
1.3 Undertake a targeted greening project in a priority location	Short term
1.4 Implement the plan for high priority locations for targeted greening activities	Ongoing

Supporting projects:

Plans of Management (ongoing) - assist Council to prioritise actions and manage parks and bushland reserves so that they are healthy, functional and resilient. Being regularly reviewed, these plans offer an opportunity to include some targeted greening initiatives.

Vibrant Spaces (ongoing) - through this program, businesses can use the footpath, free of charge, in return for some innovative thinking and a common-sense approach to adding colour, products, comfortable seating and lively entertainment onto our streets. The Vibrant Spaces program can explore ways for businesses to not only activate our centres, but also green them at the same time. Simple solutions like planter box build outs or potted plants can add to the footpath experience.

Increased nursery capacity (short term) - Council operates two nurseries, propagating local native plants for Council and community groups for landscaping and bushland regeneration projects on public land. Plants are also sold to landholders for environmental restoration projects on private land. With increased emphasis on greening our public spaces, the capacity of the nurseries needs to adapt and increase to meet future demand.

Urban bushland management (ongoing) - our remnant bushland reserves are valued by the community and form a key part of liveable urban areas. An asset management program is being developed for these reserves and a program of bushland regeneration is underway in all priority reserves. Community groups are also involved in maintaining areas that are special for local communities.

Shade Tree Program (short term) - a shade tree program is being developed to actively increase natural shade throughout the open space network, along walking and cycling trails.

Review and develop landscaping plans (ongoing) - street trees in our town centres, along our beaches, lakes and foreshores, and along our main entrances to towns, contribute to the character of a location, adding to the reason visitors choose to visit and spend time there. Many of these highly visited locations have landscape plans. Reviewing, updating and implementing the landscaping in these locations will ensure that both the resident and visitor experience is maintained to a high level.

Biodiversity corridor mapping (medium term) - corridors will be identified and mapped. Increased planting in these corridors will help reconnect fragmented areas and improve habitat corridors and promote urban cooling.

Open Space and Recreation Needs Analysis (short term) - shade and cooling open space will be a key theme of the analysis. Recommendations will be made to provide additional shade to reduce the heat stress.



Principle 2: Keeping what we have

We need to keep what we have, not only in our urban areas but across our natural and rural landscapes. The reality is that individual significant trees or tracts of mature vegetation can take over twenty years to regenerate, so we need to protect these trees where possible. We know that larger trees capture greater amounts of carbon. They also provide aesthetic values, more habitat for wildlife, more shade and are more difficult to replace if lost, than smaller trees.

There are two key projects aimed at keeping what we have.

Vegetation management controls

Councils can regulate the clearing of vegetation through vegetation management controls. Currently only part of the Great Lakes region is covered by a Tree Preservation Order. This Order covers urban areas east of the Pacific Highway and land that is generally included in the Large Lot Residential, Environmental Management and Environmental Living zones.

Around 120-130 applications per year have been made (over the past 3 years), with a 75% approval rate enabling applicants to remove the trees in question. In many cases trees are removed because they have outgrown their location, are considered hazardous or structurally unsound, are impacting buildings/ services or creating maintenance issues. But in some cases, there is no clear reason to remove trees, resulting in a refusal of the application.

Most of these applications (82%) came from our urban areas; with 43% from Forster-Tuncurry applicants, and a further 14% from the Hawks Nest area.

A review has been undertaken into the application of vegetation management controls across NSW and the MidCoast. A two-pronged approach is proposed:

- tailor the application process and controls to simplify the process, while ensuring that outcomes are achieved. A streamlined application process will be applied where set performance criteria can be met. More complex tree clearing will involve an application to be considered by Council's arborists. With the aim of no net loss of trees in these locations, offset arrangements will be considered to ensure new trees are planted to replace those removed
- target the locations where vegetation management controls are necessary to maintain important ecological habitats and the character of a town or village. Urban areas like Tinonee, Hawks Nest and Smiths Lake not only house residents, but also provide habitat for important species like koalas and squirrel gliders. Locations like Pacific Palms, North Arm Cove, Bundabah and Pindimar are nestled amongst bushland, and have an established well-treed 'leafy' character, adding to amenity and property values. Some Large Lot Residential estates also contain important ecological corridors. These are the locations where the vegetation management controls will apply. These controls will be aimed at maintaining the vegetation that we already have in place.



Securing bushland

In recent years land has been secured by Council in private ownership for wetland restoration and biodiversity conservation at Cattai Wetlands, Big Swamp, Darawank, Wallis Lake, Kore Kore Creek and Smiths Lake. This has occurred through land dedication and purchases funded by grants and the Environmental Rate.

There are priority bushland parcels across the MidCoast in private ownership which contribute significantly to the natural landscape. Typically adjoining publicly owned land and containing important ecological assets, their contribution to the natural landscape can be significant.

Council has a role in identifying lands of high conservation value under threat that should be protected, seeking funding sources and facilitating this process. By adopting procedures and dedicating funds to secure identified high priority bushland parcels, Council will be able to facilitate purchases when opportunities arise and ensure that environmentally significant bushland is protected in perpetuity.

Case studies – recent bushland purchases

Purchase of 40ha of bushland at Brimbin occurred in 2019. Fronting the Dawson River, this site contains a large, connected area of native vegetation that provides good quality habitat for a range of threatened species. With 330m of riparian vegetation in excellent condition, the site contributes to the protection of the headwaters of the Dawson River and maintains a vital link from the river to Brimbin Nature Reserve.

A unique opportunity presented itself in 2019 to address multiple legacy issues impacting on the residents of Smiths Lake. A 50ha bushland site on Macwood Road came onto the market for sale. The site is steep land, contains multiple watercourses, provides habitat for a number of threatened species and presented a high bushfire risk for nearby residents. Now purchased, this site enables improved community outcomes by installing permanent asset protection zones (APZ), a reduced bushfire risk to neighbours, biodiversity offset sites for local developments and water quality protection of Smiths Lake.





Landowners doing their bit

Across the MidCoast there are some private lands permanently protected through mechanisms like Voluntary Conservation Agreements and Property Vegetation Plans. NSW Government's assistance (advice, education and funding) helps landowners manage the natural values on their land. Council's role is to inform landowners of the benefits of these agreements and encourage participation in private conservation through programs like the Land for Wildlife program which Council administers and supports.



In summary:

By keeping what we have, we are putting our efforts into retaining important vegetation and trees that contribute to our landscape, which if removed can take years to replace. The challenge will be in ensuring that vegetation management controls are in place where significant trees are located. We need to have the right balance of streamlining the assessment process without compromising our greening goals.

ACTIONS	TIMEFRAME
2.1 Develop and consult on vegetation management controls that adopt a targeted approach	Short term
2.2 Implement vegetation management controls	Ongoing
2.3 Investigate and develop a program that conserves significant bushland in perpetuity	Short term





Supporting projects:

Catchment Management Program (ongoing) - plans developed in this program outline how the health of a catchment's natural resources can be maintained and improved. They draw on scientific and local knowledge to identify the catchment's economic, social, environmental and cultural values, and identify outcomes and actions to improve a catchment's health. There are several plans already developed, including the Karuah River Catchment Management Plan and Wallis Lake Estuary and Catchment Management Plan. A high priority plan for the MidCoast is the development of the Manning River Estuary and Catchment Management Program, which is nearing completion.

Heritage trees (ongoing) - the Local Environmental Plans have listed heritage items which have heritage value. The landscaping on these sites can contribute to the item's heritage significance. Owners are required to seek advice when clearing trees on heritage sites. There are specific trees that are also listed such as the fig trees at historic punt crossings, and trees planted as memorials to soldiers who served in WWI. Items that have landscaping of heritage significance can be included in the Local Environmental Plans if they have merit.

State and Commonwealth Government liaison (ongoing) - continue to work with government agencies including the National Parks and Wildlife Service to secure and protect significant vegetation across the MidCoast through a range of mechanisms such as legislation, dedication, purchase, grant funding and conservation partnerships.

Principle 3: Building partnerships

Building community partnerships to green our neighbourhoods brings together our love for a relaxed lifestyle amongst beautiful natural settings, and our community's desire to volunteer to make a difference (20% of our population volunteer). The recent 2019 bushfire and 2021 flood events showcased our incredible community spirit as we came together to assist those affected.

Combined with guidance and support from Council, we can work towards greening our neighbourhoods using these partnerships. While these partnerships are not new, the initiative will make the process easier and target specific locations where we can make a difference together.

Neighbourhood habitats

Some neighbourhoods are home to significant fauna, like koalas and squirrel gliders. The trees we plant, the fences we use and controlling our pets can all enable fauna to move through our neighbourhood. We are very good at seeing the big picture, like 'save the koalas', but often we don't know what we can do to help. This is why community awareness is important.

In these locations, we will talk with school students, inform residents, produce accessible information and hand out free trees to get everyone thinking about what they can do. Residents can go to the next step, organising tree planting days in neighbourhoods, local parks, along the creeks or even planting street trees in front of their houses. Council staff will assist by supplying trees and equipment. The watering and ongoing care of the trees would be entrusted to the residents.

Often it is difficult for the community to work out who to talk to within Council, and how to get involved in greening initiatives. A new page will be created on Council's website to explain the process and how to organise or register for a tree planting event.

To ensure we have got it right, we are undertaking a pilot project in Tinonee, referred to as a Conservation Action Plan (CAP). Tinonee is renowned for its koalas, but with surrounding bushland devastated by the bushfires in 2019, the koala is in trouble. The Tinonee community and Koalas in Care Inc. are passionate about this koala cluster. So together with Council, we are all tackling the issue, with projects to retain and grow the koala habitat in and around the area. The work will be based on koala safe spaces and connecting habitats.



At Tinonee Public School, the students have long cared for the local koalas which are regularly seen in the playground. The school received a $5,000 Sustainable Schools Grant from the NSW Government and is working with Council to increase safety on Tinonee's roads – for both koalas and humans. The school has been involved in planting koala food trees and installing koala watering stations. The next step involves a local public signage scheme to help raise awareness of koalas.

Tinonee has both wide road reserves and unformed Crown roads (not constructed) that offer potential as wildlife corridors. We are investigating opportunities to close and transfer the control of the unformed roads from the NSW Government to Council. When transferred the call will go out to the school and the broader community to plant koala feed trees to enable safe movement through the township, reducing the need for koalas to enter backyards, where fencing and pets can be problematic. We will also explore other ventures with the Tinonee community aimed at protecting the local koala population.

Once the Tinonee Conservation Action Plan is complete and learnings have been established, future plans will be identified in locations where significant habitat and greening objectives can be achieved like Hawks Nest, Smiths Lake, Forster and Hallidays Point.

Improving Forster squirrel glider habitat

In October 2019, the Forster squirrel glider population received a helping hand with the local community participating in a tree planting day. It was a great success attended by 20 volunteers who were enthusiastic helpers and happy to get their hands dirty. Around 70 native trees, shrubs and grasses were planted, providing future feeding and nesting habitats for a wide range of native animals, particularly the loved and vulnerable squirrel glider.





In summary:

By targeting greening in priority locations where there is a specific environmental 'win' we are putting our efforts into areas of most need. The challenge is that there are a number of urban areas where growth is putting pressure on local biodiversity and working through these locations will take time.

ACTIONS	TIMEFRAME
3.1 Establish a process for community groups to organise a community tree planting event	Short term
3.2 Provide information on Council's website outlining the process and resources available to assist with community tree planting events	Short term
3.3 Develop and implement the Tinonee Conservation Action Plan	Short term
3.4 Review the Tinonee Conservation Action Plan to document the learnings and then establish a schedule for new Conservation Action Plans	Medium term

Supporting projects:

Backyard Bushcare (short term) - implemented in Seal Rocks, Hawks Nest and Pacific Palms, this project has been underway for several years targeting priority weeds. Local communities were encouraged to work together to remove weeds from their own backyards to help protect the natural bushland that surrounds their neighbourhood. Typically, 65% of the weeds currently invading bushland areas have escaped from urban gardens. Together, Pacific Palms residents helped support the recovery of local ecosystems and protect the biodiversity of their neighbourhood. As funding ends on this project, we will pursue grants to undertake similar projects to green other neighbourhoods.

Volunteers (short term) - a large portion of our 1,600 volunteers work on greening projects, including revegetation, landscaping and maintenance of parks, bushland and riparian areas. The aim is to continue to grow our volunteer programs, especially those involving greening initiatives by establishing a Volunteer Framework. Council wants to facilitate volunteering; and developing guidelines for self-managed groups, and assisting with equipment will make it easier for community members to become MidCoast volunteers.

Council support (ongoing) - Council will attend community events to coincide with targeted programs in an area. Staff are on hand to offer advice and discuss local projects, hand out information and free trees on some occasions. Community initiatives to enhance local biodiversity including National Tree Day, Coastcare and Landcare will continue to be supported.

Creek to Coast (ongoing) - this quarterly newsletter reports on positive actions and opportunities to care for our natural resources including waterways, agricultural land, urban areas and biodiversity (visit Council's website to register). With the new emphasis on greening our urban areas, this publication will incorporate information on greening initiatives.

Principle 4: Right trees in the right place

Trees can offer many benefits - shade for pedestrians, nectar for birds and bees, homes and food for local wildlife, climbing opportunities for kids and enhancement of the 'leafy' feel of a street. The wrong tree in the wrong location can also provide many challenges - falling limbs, encroaching on overhead power lines, lifting concrete driveways and paths and entering underground services.

Tree selection should reflect the scale of the street or space for which it is chosen. A mixture of habitats such as low grass, tall grass, shrubs and trees can add diversity to the street. Encouraging the planting of specific tree species in streets can also enhance the character of an area. The Cabbage Tree Palms at Pacific Palms, Figtrees near the Old Dairy Cooperative in Chatham and the Jacarandas on the approach to the Martin Bridge in Taree, enrich these locations by the dominance of a single tree species and theme planting.

This principle is about renewing our lists of tree species for urban areas, providing guidelines on where and how to plant, and making the information available for landowners and developers to ensure we are all working towards the same greening outcome. It is also about targeting biodiversity offset planting where it will make a difference.

Trees species schedule and guidelines

Across the MidCoast we have historic lists of preferred street tree species for some of our towns and villages. Council's arborists are reviewing and updating these lists to assist in identifying what species should be planted in each location. It is not the case that 'one size fits all' - the species selection will reflect the character of each town or village. A list of trees with cultural value and 'bush tucker' trees will be explored in partnership with our local indigenous communities.



Accompanying guidelines will include details on site selection, ground preparation, tree planting, maintenance, pruning, tree removal, tree replacement and how to minimise the conflict between trees and services (both above ground and underground).

Residents and businesses will be able to check what species are appropriate for their street or property by making the guide readily accessible via Council's website.

Biodiversity offsets

Offsets are used to compensate for biodiversity impacts associated with development, often resulting in an overall biodiversity gain. Offsets are used when the impacts of a development are unavoidable and they are unable to achieve no net loss of biodiversity.

Quantitative measures determine the amount, type and quality of habitat that is likely to be affected by a proposed project, which is used to determine the type and quantity of habitat to be protected or established at a new location.

While protection in a biodiversity sense is always better and more cost-effective than restoration or re-creation, there are instances where Council needs to remove vegetation for the provision of public infrastructure, like roads, walkways and water/sewage pipes. A procedure has been developed to use biodiversity offsets where funds are being collected to plant trees to replace the lost vegetation.

The issue is where the plantings should occur? Securing biodiversity offset sites can enable Council to select where the offsets can achieve the best environmental outcomes. For example, purchasing sites that can benefit from revegetation, especially where they contribute to environmental corridors like creeks or adjoin significant bushland reserves.

Investigations into biodiversity offset sites should be undertaken to determine whether the outcomes are beneficial.

In summary:

Encouraging the right trees to be planted in the right place reduces the long term impacts of pruning or eventually tree removal. Having species that add to the leafy character of a neighbourhood and support native wildlife provides dual benefits. A challenge might be ensuring we have adequate tree stock of the selected species to cater for our planting programs.

ACTIONS	TIMEFRAME
4.1 Review and update tree species schedules across MidCoast	Short term
4.2 Develop guidelines for planting trees; including guidance on site preparation, and reducing impacts on services and maintenance	Short term
4.3 Provide information on Council's website outlining the tree species schedules and guidelines available to assist the community	Short term
4.4 Investigate the establishment of biodiversity offset sites to offer locations for restoring habitats in priority locations	Medium term



Supporting projects:

A project that supports this principle is:

Increased nursery capacity (short term) - Council operates two nurseries, propagating local native plants for Council and community groups for landscaping and bushland regeneration projects on public land. Plants are also sold to landholders for environmental restoration projects on private land. With increased emphasis on greening our public spaces, the capacity of the nurseries will need to be increased to meet future demand.

Principle 5: Planning for the future

Community concerns regarding vegetation clearing are often associated with development. Seeing large areas of land cleared for a housing or industrial development can be confronting. But typically, extensive technical studies, the provision of biodiversity offsets and years of planning have enabled the development to proceed. These processes have evolved over time to improve the retention of vegetation on these development sites and to ensure appropriate vegetation is planted through planning controls. We have an opportunity to update these planning controls to ensure new and more effective controls are in place.

There are two key actions aimed at putting in place plans to improve greening outcomes from development.

Strategic plans



Working with local communities, we will prepare planning strategies to cater for the growth of our urban areas, while retaining and enhancing important natural assets.

The MidCoast Housing Strategy identifies potential urban land that will cater for the growth of our towns and villages over the next 20+ years. These locations are drawn from strategies developed over the last 30 years and are supported by the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036*.

While identified as potential growth areas or development sites, they still need to go through a rigorous rezoning process (known as a Planning Proposal). Relevant studies are required (assessments include ecological, contamination, traffic, Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and bushfire) and community consultation undertaken to determine the suitability of the site to be developed and the appropriate zones.

Larger rezonings often include a master planning process where Council and the community can influence the development outcome to ensure a high standard of development is achieved and to address public spaces and landscaping that will contribute to the retention of existing trees and the planting of additional trees and vegetation. We need to examine how more trees can be retained, to provide an improved tree canopy cover for new housing estates. The earlier in the development process this is considered the better. In this regard, strategic plans provide an opportunity to influence this prior to land being identified for rezoning.

Location-specific strategies provide an early opportunity to retain important vegetation by clearly identifying areas for protection. For example, the Hallidays Point Settlement Strategy is proposed to be undertaken to identify areas of vegetation that should be retained or enhanced and land that can be considered for future rezoning for urban purposes. This strategy will determine the desired environmental outcome and development opportunities, providing certainty to the community and developers alike. Strategies such as this will provide a long term plan for the retention of important vegetation for conservation and the identification of areas that will have minimal environmental impact for future development.

Planning controls

Consistency is an important element of any planning system. We currently have three sets of planning controls - one for each of the three former regions which make planning inconsistent across our region. Through the 'Zoning In' project we are developing one set of controls being the MidCoast Local Environmental Plan (LEP) and the MidCoast Development Control Plan (DCP) that will be applied to future development. This is a unique opportunity to not only consolidate but incorporate best and emerging practices into our planning controls.

In terms of influencing greening outcomes, the MidCoast LEP will focus on:

- the application of environmental and recreation zones and the uses permitted to ensure that environmental objectives can be achieved
- mapping layers and local provisions to identify and protect significant environmental lands
- heritage controls which protect important vegetation in heritage locations.

The DCP can improve greening outcomes through development, with regard to:

- landscaping controls for new development. Ideally all new developments will have adequate street trees, sites will be landscaped incorporating advanced established trees and mature trees will be retained on-site. New developments could include passive irrigation for street trees
- consolidating services (water, sewer, power, telecommunications) in one underground location in new estates to enable the establishment of street trees
- enabling new controls to reduce the effect of heat islands through green roofs, green walls and water-sensitive urban design solutions including bio-retention systems and rain gardens
- environmental provisions to protect and maintain important ecological habitats and corridors. It is important that solutions are incorporated at the design stage to cater for the specific ecology of the area. Solutions can include installing wildlife crossings under or over major roads, traffic-calming devices, signage, ensuring canopy trees can create canopy bridges over roads, or restoring and rehabilitating piped creek lines
- strategies which identify the character and environmental outcomes for towns and villages.

With the Rural Strategy due for completion in 2021, the writing of the MidCoast LEP and DCP will commence in 2022. We will continue to check-in with the community to ensure the strategies and zone reviews are in-line with community expectations throughout the planning process.





In summary:

This is a unique opportunity to not only consolidate but incorporate both the best and emerging practices into our planning controls to achieve good greening outcomes. These planning controls are complex; the challenge is to ensure that the new controls provide greening opportunities, rather than limiting them.

ACTIONS	TIMEFRAME
5.1 Develop a location specific strategy for Hallidays Point	Short term
5.2 Prepare the MidCoast Local Environmental Plan (LEP) and the MidCoast Development Control Plan (DCP)	Short term

Supporting projects:

The following projects support this principle.

Biodiversity Framework (ongoing) - this framework will establish the strategic context for a range of activities that work in concert to appreciate, conserve and manage our region's natural assets. It will provide a blueprint for a suite of plans, principles, policies, actions, datasets and management tools in a format that promotes adaptive management.

Rural Strategy (short term) - extending to all lands outside our towns and villages, this strategy covers our rural and natural landscapes. It takes the opportunity to examine the complexities of these landscapes and rethink the planning approach based on evidence, best practice and emerging ideas. The Rural Strategy will provide clear and consistent land use planning and management principles to inform the preparation of the MidCoast LEP and DCP. It will also ensure that significant vegetation is appropriately zoned to ensure it is protected, and it also helps recognise the land that makes up our unique landscape.

Climate Change Policy and Strategy (short term) - the Policy provides a framework and a set of guiding principles for climate action, setting ambitious targets for climate mitigation, committing to reducing the risks of climate change to Council's assets and operations and supporting the community's efforts to do the same. The Strategy outlines an approach to renewable energy, energy efficiency and climate adaptation and sets out the case for a range of cost-effective actions that that can be implemented progressively over several years to mitigate and adapt to climate change in Council's operations. The Strategy is the first phase of a two-part program of work and is focused on Council's assets and operations. The second phase of the project will focus on working with the MidCoast community to help them to reduce their emissions and increase their resilience to climate change.

Bushfire risk (short term) - approximately 885,000ha of the MidCoast is currently classified as bushfire prone land. In late 2019, the MidCoast suffered a catastrophic bushfire event with the loss of life, and 617 properties damaged or destroyed. With learnings from this event and others across NSW, we will continue to work with the NSW Government to establish a more strategic approach to planning and managing bushfire risk in accordance with the NSW Government's Planning for Bush Fire Protection. It is important that the implementation of the Greening Strategy does not significantly increase bush fire risk.

Open Space Strategy (short term) - a review of our open space network is important to understand the supply, connectivity and quality of the parks and recreational facilities across the MidCoast. It can also identify opportunities for an open space network. This will be achieved by first undertaking an Open Space and Recreation Needs Analysis and then using the information gathered to develop an Open Space Strategy for the MidCoast.

Policy for dedication of land (short term) - Councils often secure land which can benefit the local community, including natural spaces and land with significant landscape value. The land can be either be acquired or dedicated typically through a development process. It is important the land is fit for purpose, required and provides a benefit to our community. Management of the land needs to be either fully funded by the donor (or another party), managed within Council's current resources or the land can generate its own funding (eg through a Biodiversity Stewardship Agreement). A policy for the dedication of land to Council should be developed to ensure the process is clear and transparent.

MidCoast Development Contributions Plan (short term) - Adequate open spaces are needed to cater for our future population. This requirement can be met in a consistent and equitable way through our Development Contributions Plan.



IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

It is important that this Strategy aligns with the Community Strategic Plan which provides a mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the Strategy. The actions and supporting projects provided under each principle will inform Council's Delivery Program and Operational Plan, in keeping with the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) framework.

Being the first version of the Strategy, a review will be undertaken within five years, to update the principles based on the data collected. With increased data and learnings from trial projects and investigations, we will have evidence to plan greening activities for future years. With good planning and community buy-in, the trees that we plant today in the MidCoast can leave a long term legacy for future generations and enhance the MidCoast landscape.

The successful implementation and delivery of the Strategy will require investment and resourcing over the next decade and beyond. With no foreseen net increase of funding for this Strategy and greening initiatives, we need to accommodate these initiatives within current budgets. We need to rethink our work to achieve measurable and quality outcomes, and particularly focus our efforts on the identified priority actions. Funding through the Environmental Rate, biodiversity offsets and grants could support these initiatives.

It is important to have quick wins in this Strategy which can be delivered based on what we know now, as well as continuing to build a strong foundation to inform long term change.

Effective community engagement and partnerships are essential for the success of every aspect of the Strategy. Council will need to continue its engagement efforts across all parts of the community. It is important that Council champions the Strategy, leading by example and working with the community to achieve the key actions.





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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Challenges and opportunities

We have many challenges that we face across the MidCoast. The reality is that by increasing our green spaces and tree canopy cover, we can provide opportunities to improve the liveability of our urban areas and the amenity of our rural and natural landscapes.

Population growth

The MidCoast has a population of approximately 93,800 people living in almost 40,000 households. The population of the MidCoast is forecast to grow to 100,100 people by 2041, generating the need for approximately 8,000 more dwellings. This is an estimated growth rate of 0.3% over a 25-year period. Much of this growth is expected to occur in or near our coastal towns and villages.

As the population of the MidCoast grows, we need to increase the quality and extent of vegetation and open space in our towns and villages. In an urban context, all trees on public and private land make up the 'tree canopy'. This includes trees found within public parks, in street verges, private gardens, along creeks and drainage lines.

Climate change

In October 2019, MidCoast Council recognised that a state of climate emergency currently exists. Council affirmed that urgent action is required by all levels of government to take clear steps to avert a climate crisis.

It is projected that the North Coast Region will continue to warm, and the number of high temperature days is projected to increase as outlined below. Anticipated impacts from climate change include:

- an increase in the number of extreme hot weather days and bushfire risk
- sea level rise resulting in inundation of low-lying areas, wave over-topping and accelerated coastal erosion
- an increase in the frequency of storm events, intense rain periods and flooding
- changes in annual rainfall which impacts stream flow and water supply.

Projected temperature changes	
Maximum temperatures are projected to increase in the near future by 0.4 – 1.0°C	Maximum temperatures are projected to increase in the far future by 1.5 – 2.4°C
Minimum temperatures are projected to increase in the near future by 0.5 – 1.0°C	Minimum temperatures are projected to increase in the far future by 1.6 – 2.5°C
The number of hot days will increase	The number of cold nights will decrease
Projected rainfall changes	
Rainfall is projected to decrease in winter	Rainfall is projected to increase in autumn and spring
Projected Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) changes	
Average fire weather is projected to increase in summer and spring	Severe fire weather days are projected to increase in summer and spring

North Coast Climate Change Snapshot Source: NSW Office of Environment and Heritage

Maintaining and enhancing our green spaces can help mitigate the impacts of these projected changes. Well maintained trees can live for many decades as part of our infrastructure and open space network. Trees we plant in the coming years may need to thrive in a very different climate by the end of this century. When correctly managed, trees will then not only thrive, but also protect the community from the wind, flooding and heat events that may occur due to the changing climate. There is no better time to plant a tree than now.

Urban Heat Island Effect

The Urban Heat Island Effect (UHIE) can contribute to higher temperatures in our urban areas, which can be significantly warmer than the surrounding rural and natural landscapes. Heat islands develop where we have large areas of hard surfaces such as concrete, asphalt, tiled roofs and gravel that absorb rather than reflect heat. Thermal currents generated by heat islands can impact rain clouds, which means that a vital cooling mechanism is impacted or interrupted. This means our urban areas could become hotter and drier.

There is undisputable evidence that increasing the tree canopy coverage can reduce temperatures and improve air quality. Trees can influence climate by transpiring water, changing wind speeds, shading surfaces, and modifying the heat absorbed by urban surfaces. This is a very important role, and they need to be nurtured to achieve this.

Bushfire

In late 2019, the MidCoast suffered a catastrophic bushfire event with the loss of life, and 617 properties damaged or destroyed. Many of the losses occurred in our rural and natural landscapes and threatened a significant number of our towns and villages. The fire burnt through 2,371km2, representing 23.5% of the Council area.

With learnings from this event and others across NSW, we are working with the NSW Government to establish a more strategic approach to planning and managing bushfire risk in accordance with the NSW Government's Planning for Bush Fire Protection. Council will continue to work with the NSW Government and landowners to ensure that they are prepared for the threat of bushfire, and that there is adequate infrastructure to support them in the event of fire. It is important that the implementation of the Strategy does not significantly increase bushfire risk.





Tree retention

Large trees are important, they can provide shade, wind protection, character and a sense of place in both public and private spaces. Illegal tree clearing and vegetation vandalism are issues throughout the MidCoast. Conflict can arise around vegetation growth and impacts on views, along with issues arising from solar access, and leaf and seed drop.

The communities' views on tree preservation controls vary. Some communities are very passionate about retaining trees in their towns or villages and accept controls, while others are concerned about the need to apply to remove trees on private property.

Trees can outgrow their location or create safety issues and their removal becomes necessary. Maintaining and building new infrastructure (eg roads, water and sewage) can require tree removals by Council. In these circumstances, an offset arrangement results in trees being planted to replace those removed.

Complex environment

No single project or program can enable us to manage and enhance all of our landscape. Rather it is a complex web of legislation, programs, controls and strategies that interlink to enable this to happen, and this in itself is a challenge. Knowing who to contact and what controls apply over private property can be confusing.

Other organisations and government bodies contribute to the management/protection of the MidCoast landscape for example the local Landcare groups, NSW Rural Fire Service, Forestry Corporation of NSW, Hunter Local Land Services and National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Greening controls

There is a complex web of legislation and controls that protect trees and native vegetation, which come into play under different scenarios.

Land rezoning

Planning strategies are required to plan for the growth of our urban areas including the retention and protection of important environmental lands. Through these strategies, parcels of rural land (typically adjoining urban areas) can be identified as potential urban lands. The first stage of development for these sites is to change the zone of the land through a planning proposal. The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* and the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* play an important role in ensuring that the environmental values of sites are managed or retained. The development must also be in accordance with the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* which is a 20-year blueprint for the growth of the Hunter region.

Development

Development applications can be for the subdivision of land, establishing a use on land or creating the opportunity for the construction of a building. When a development application is received it can trigger a number of legislative requirements, the primary legislation being the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979. This Act regulates the planning controls applied by Councils through their Local Environmental Plans and Development Control Plans. In terms of this Strategy, the Act requires Council to consider the potential impacts of the development on the environment any threatened species or ecological communities known or likely to be present and apply mitigation measures through conditions of consent.

The *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, together with the *Biodiversity Conservation Regulation 2017*, outlines the framework for addressing impacts on biodiversity from development and clearing. It establishes a framework to avoid, minimise and offset impacts on biodiversity from development through the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme (BOS).

The *Biodiversity Conservation Regulation 2017* sets out threshold levels for when the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme is triggered. The threshold has three triggers:

- whether the amount of native vegetation being cleared exceeds an area threshold;
- whether the impacts occur on an area mapped on the Biodiversity Values Map; and
- whether the 'test of significance' determines the development is likely to significantly affect threatened species, ecological communities or their habitats.



If the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme does apply, the proponent must engage an accredited assessor to apply the Biodiversity Assessment Method (BAM) to the proposal. After applying the Biodiversity Assessment Method, the accredited person will prepare a Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) that sets out how the proponent has applied steps to avoid and minimise impacts on biodiversity, and the number and type of ecosystem and species credits required to offset residual impacts of the activity on biodiversity.

Vegetation present within areas mapped as *Coastal Wetland* or *Littoral Rainforest* in *State Environmental Planning Policy (Coastal Management) 2018* cannot be cleared without development consent and are mapped on the Biodiversity Values Map triggering entry into the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme.

Vegetation clearing

The Local Land Services Act 2013 provides the regulatory framework for the management and clearing of native vegetation on rural zoned land in NSW and is administered in the MidCoast region by Hunter Local Land Services.

Clearing of native vegetation in urban areas, large-lot residential and environmental zones that does not require development consent and does not exceed any of the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme thresholds is regulated by councils under a Tree Preservation Order through their Development Control Plan pursuant to the provisions in *State Environmental Planning Policy (Vegetation in Non-Rural Areas) 2017*.

At present, some parts of the region are covered by a Tree Preservation Order, but this only applies in the former Great Lakes LGA. The Greening Strategy recommends new vegetation management controls across the entire MidCoast local government area targeting specific locations.

Clearing of native vegetation above the Biodiversity Offset Scheme threshold is not regulated by councils and requires an approval from the NSW Native Vegetation Panel established under the *Local Land Services Amendment Act 2016*.

Clearing of threatened species, ecological communities or protected plants that are not regulated by councils under a Tree Preservation Order need to seek a biodiversity conservation licence from the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment.



If you still need more information about these greening controls, contact Hunter Local Land Services or MidCoast Council

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MIDCOAST
council

Yalawanyi Ganya
2 Biripi Way
PO Box 482
Taree 2430
Mon-Fri 8.30am - 4.30pm
Tel: (02) 7955 7777