



MIDCOAST
council



COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION STRATEGY

Zoning in on our future of MidCoast rural lands and waterways



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live, that 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.



Contents

- Introduction4**
 - Background 4
 - The Rural Strategy 5
 - The approach 6
 - Timeframe 6
 - Flexibility..... 6
- Consultation to date7**
- Our program 11**
 - Environmental Planning & Assessment Act consultation elements 11
 - Level of engagement..... 12
 - Influence of engagement..... 13
 - Key issues to communicate..... 14
 - Communication goals..... 16
 - Key messages..... 16
 - Key stakeholders..... 17
 - Activities 18
- Reporting and evaluation.....20**
 - Reporting.....20
 - Evaluation.....20

Our vision:

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.

Our mission:

We deliver benefits for our community in a way that adds value and builds trust.



Introduction

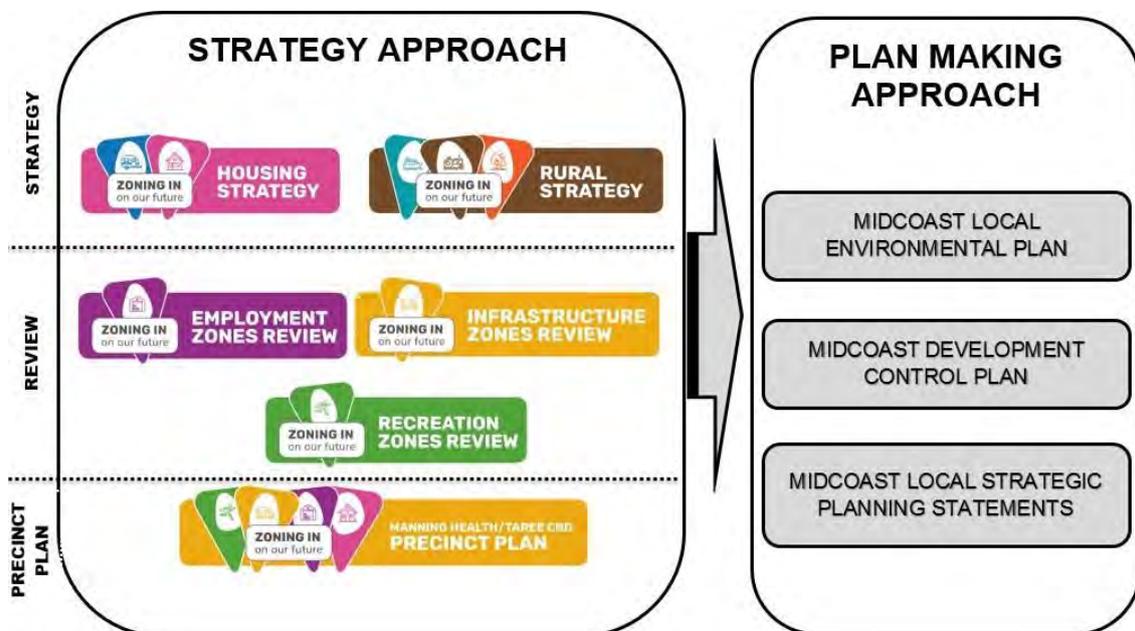
Background

A key task for MidCoast Council is the consolidation of planning controls across the three former Council areas to create one set of planning controls for the MidCoast.

The aim is to have planning controls that embrace new and innovative approaches and are consistently applied across our local government area.

The approach is outlined below and involves undertaking strategic studies and reviews, which will then guide our future planning documents - the Local Environmental Plan, Development Control Plan and Local Strategic Planning Statement.

It is important to note that further consultation will occur when we move into the next stages of the *Zoning in on our Future* project - the Local Environment Plan and Development Control Plan.



The projects outlined in the strategy approach section above have been developed in consultation with Council staff and relevant State Government departments.

During 2020 we engaged with the community extensively on the draft Housing Strategy, Employment Zones Review, Infrastructure Zones Review, Recreation Zones Review and Manning Health/Taree CBD Precinct Plan. We also developed, consulted on and adopted the Interim Local Strategic Planning Statement, which will be updated (where necessary) following the adoption of the Rural Strategy.

This document outlines how we will inform the community of the implications and recommendations in the draft Rural Strategy.



The Rural Strategy

The Rural Strategy aims to provide clear and consistent land use planning and management principles to sustainably manage the use of lands and resources outside of our towns and villages.

The strategy will be used to inform preparation of not only the new MidCoast Local Environmental Plan and Development Control Plan, but to guide well-balanced development and conservation outcomes across our rural landscape into the future.

It looks at how we can protect rural areas by managing how land is used and developed to deliver balanced outcomes for our community.

It does this through an examination of how we apply rural, environmental and waterway zones across the MidCoast.

The rural landscape covers over 90 per cent of our local government area and is a defining feature of the MidCoast.

The landscapes and natural resources found between our coastal waterways and forested ridges, provide a range of agricultural and tourism opportunities; connect our towns and villages; enhance our lifestyles; and offer a diverse range of visitor experiences.

The purpose of the communication and consultation activities to support the Rural Strategy is to ensure the community and landholders are aware of the proposed changes for land to which the following zones do, or should, apply:

- RU1 – Primary Production
- RU2 – Rural Landscape
- RU3 – Forestry
- RU4 – Primary Production Small Lots
- RU5 – Village
- E1 – National Parks and Nature Reserves
- E2 – Environmental Conservation
- E3 – Environmental Management
- E4 – Environmental Living
- W1 – Natural Waterways
- W2 – Recreational Waterways
- W3 – Working Waterways

While the changes foreshadowed in the draft strategy and reviews do not come into place until the eventual adoption of the new Local Environment Plan and Development Control Plan, this is an important opportunity for the community to understand the process and the impacts.



The approach

To ensure landholders and the wider community are aware of the elements that may impact them contained in the Draft Rural Strategy our approach will include:

- Direct communication with the landholders of the MidCoast to provide them with information on what the Rural Strategy means for them, their property and its future,
- Mapping solutions for property owners to access via the MidCoast Council website to enable property owners to see the potential impacts on their property and changes to properties around them,
- Opportunities for property owners to engage directly with land use planners on what the strategy means to them, through a variety of strategies including individual phone consultations, zoom sessions, small group talks, or individual in-person sessions,
- Information provided through a range of communication channels to ensure all members of the community, whether impacted landowners or not, have the opportunity to learn about the implications of the Draft Rural Strategy.

Timeframe

The communication and consultation program will take place over an eight-week period to allow property owners the opportunity to understand and question the strategy before being required to make a submission if they wish to do so.

When the consultation is completed, the feedback received will be reported back to Council, along with any revision to the draft documents.

Flexibility

This communication and consultation plan outlines how Council intends to listen to our community. As new information is gained, or concerns are raised by the community, the engagement plan may be revised. We need to remain agile enough to take advantage of the opportunities and changing circumstances that may arise.



Consultation to date

There has been extensive engagement and communication with the community during the development of the draft Rural Strategy. Much of this engagement has been targeted towards key stakeholders, who would have an interest in the outcomes of the Rural Strategy. The following section provides an overview of the various engagement activities that have occurred since April 2018 for the development of the Rural Strategy.

Tourism workshop

In June 2018 a workshop was held in Gloucester to understand how planning controls could be best used to enable tourism operators to meet their needs and future aspirations in rural locations. Invitations were emailed to 385 tourism operators and rural land holders, plus the event was promoted MidCoast wide via traditional and social media outlets, as well as internal promotion to Council staff. A total of 40 people registered their attendance on the day.

Internal and State government workshops

Four topic specific workshops were held with local and state government representatives, in July 2018. The workshop aimed to get a better understanding of the current policy framework, operational considerations, current information and mapping available, as well as identify gaps in current data. The workshop topics were:

- Emergency management and response
- Environment
- Economy
- Infrastructure

Forty people attended the four workshops across the day. Additionally, a second internal workshop was held in September of the same year to further discuss spatial planning, zone selection and minimum lot sizes. This workshop was attended by 16 Council staff.

State government meetings

A number of individual meetings have been held with State agencies with a direct interest in the Rural Strategy outcomes. This has included:

- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, including several meetings to discuss progress and any relevant changes to State or regional level matters that would affect the Rural Strategy project.
- NSW Department of Primary Industry – Agriculture, including several meetings to discuss progress of the Important Agricultural Land mapping project, and preferred methods for considering planning controls as relevant to productive agricultural areas.
- NSW Office of Environment and Heritage / Hunter Councils joint meeting to discuss regional vegetation mapping.

Development industry workshop

As key users of the final Rural Strategy, representatives of the development sector were invited to discuss issues relevant to planning in rural areas and possible solutions, at a workshop held in September 2018.

Email invitations were sent to a stakeholder list of 242 people and included planning consultants, surveyors, developers, builders and real estate agents, with 11 people attending the workshop.



Public survey

To enable further detailed feedback from the community on the range of issues relevant to rural areas, a survey was developed in September 2018. This was an opportunity for those who couldn't participate in a workshop or had further feedback to contribute. The survey was made available in hard copy and download as a PDF on our website.

As well as promotion via media release, advertising in local papers and social media, a direct link was also sent, via email, to 825 registered businesses in the MidCoast area, in the sectors of:

- Aquaculture and environmental groups (15)
- Agricultural businesses (483)
- Agriculture and mining suppliers (45)
- Tourism operators (37)
- Development industry (Construction, planning and real estate agents) (242)

The survey was completed by 63 people.

Direct phone calls and mini-interviews

It was evident further into the engagement that gaining feedback from particular sectors was difficult, particularly with relevance to face to face engagement of the agriculture and aquaculture industries.

To address this, the Rural Strategy team changed some strategies to target these groups. Using a comprehensive contact list, targeted phone calls and emails were undertaken, targeting tourism, waterways and agriculture businesses sectors and their peak bodies. The list included the following representation:

- Tourism – 77 businesses
- Water ways/Aquaculture – 31 businesses
- Agriculture – 57 businesses

Of those on the list, mini-interviews were undertaken in order to get more detail feedback on the issues and opportunities.

The questions included:

- What are the biggest opportunities / challenges facing their industry?
- What is their experience with 'planning' to date?
- Is there anything specific they would like to see the Rural Strategy address?

A total of 59 interviews were undertaken which included 39 (tourism), 10 (waterways / aquaculture) and 10 (agriculture) mini-interviews have been undertaken, 12 of which have been with representatives of peak bodies.

Rural issues papers

Following the comprehensive engagement process between April 2018 and November 2018, in order to check in with previous participants and interested community members on the issues being raised and potential solutions, Rural Issues Summary Papers were developed.

These were sent directly via email to those who have registered an expression of interest (232 at that point in time), attended a previous workshop, or submitted a survey on the Rural Strategy, as well as made available on our website and in hard copy at Council Office locations.



Councillor workshops 2020-21

Workshops were held with Councillors between November 2020 and May 2021 and focussed on key rural, environmental and waterway recommendations and the issues in villages and paper subdivisions that required review in response to the Urban Zoning In exhibition and submissions.

Internal workshops 2021

A series of workshops were held in February, March and April 2021, revisiting the following issues with key internal stakeholders from across Council:

- Agriculture and rural industries, in response to the DPIE proposed amendments to agriculture
- Transport and infrastructure, including water, sewage servicing and on-site sewage disposal
- Marine areas and rural waterways, including the identification and protection of priority drinking water catchments, in response to the drought and water scarcity in the MidCoast. This matter was also discussed within the water resilience team with DPIE in attendance.
- Housing and accommodation, including the review of RU4 Primary Production Small Lot zone, E4 Environmental Living zone; land within paper subdivisions; and the outcome of the planning proposal to amend the R1 General Residential Zone in Greater Taree LEP 2010 in relation to manufactured home estates.
- Rural tourism and conservation, in response to the concurrent Biodiversity Framework, Manning Valley Estuary & Catchment Management Plan programs and the DPIE proposed amendments to agriculture.
- Agriculture, rural industries, extractive industries and energy production in response to the concurrent Climate Change policy and the DPIE proposed amendments to agriculture.
- Zones and land use in rural, environmental and waterways zone in response to the DPIE Planning Reform Program, including draft amendments to agriculture, housing, design & place, flood planning and the planning proposal review programs.

Stakeholder register

A stakeholder register for the Rural Strategy project was initially established in March 2018 and has been continuously updated as the project progresses. To date, the register includes:

- DPI's Important Agricultural Land mapping project contact list (30)
- DPC's Rural Economic Development Strategy project contact list (205)
- Existing Council lists:
 - Estuary Management Committees (45)
 - Council's 'Tourism Partner List' (325)
 - Meeting records from GLC's Poultry Excellence meetings in 2015 (15)
 - Rural Strategy project's telephone mini-interviews (people suggested 25 additional contacts)
- Rural Strategy consultants' research and Federal / State Agency identification



- Australian Business Register database of target industries:
 - Aquaculture and environmental groups (15)
 - Agricultural businesses (483)
 - Agriculture and mining suppliers (45)
 - Tourism operators (37)
 - Development industry (Construction, planning and real estate agents) (242)
- North Arm Cove Local Community Plan submissions from non-urban land holders (63)

Rural Strategy database

Community were also given the opportunity to register their interest in the range of strategic planning projects currently underway, via the Council website.

As of June 2021 a total of 1,043 people are on the rural strategy email database and have been contacted at regular intervals with progress updates and upcoming engagement activities. It is noted that of this list, a number are non-urban landowners.

Direct emails to State agency representatives and Council staff

State agencies were a key stakeholder in the engagement process. In March 2018, 366 letters were sent to agency stakeholders – including Federal, State, regional and local Government agencies, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and peak industry groups - outlining the Rural Strategy project, its purpose and an invitation to participate.

A total of 82 staff within state agencies were also emailed directly to be informed of the project, as well as invited to attend a workshop. A total of 16 representatives expressed an interest in participating and attending future workshops.

Internal staff were also included as key stakeholders in the engagement, with many staff targeted due to the roles they represent. Additionally, regular communication was provided to all staff both in direct emails and promotion via the intranet, as representatives of the broader community. For the purpose of this summary, Council staff have only been counted once as part of the reach of communication, being 800 people.

Council website

Specific information on the draft rural and urban strategies has been available, and regularly updated, on Council's website since 2018. The Zoning in on our Future hub has focused on projects relevant to the LEP planning strategies, including the rural strategy, and has been well utilised by the community as a source of information and link to key engagement activities. Most recently information on the draft Rural Strategy has been placed on the 'have your say' section of the website to allow those who have an interest to follow the issue and receive updates.



Our program

When communicating and engaging with our community our guiding principles are designed to deliver on our mission to build trust with our community and to show we value community participation.

Timely	Early in the project timeline prior to key decisions being made
Accessible	Open and available with strategies in place to reach across the community
Broad	Strategies for ensuring representation from across the entire community
Accurate	Feedback collected, interpreted correctly and reported clearly
Meaningful	It is clear how input has contributed to decision making
Transparent	Community understands the process and sees how their input is used
Genuine	The input sought has a purpose and is used to inform decisions
Responsive	Community dialogue continues throughout the process, to outcome

Environmental Planning & Assessment Act consultation elements

Key consultation elements from the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) relating to planning controls are:

- the community should be given opportunities to participate in strategic planning as early as possible to enable community views to be genuinely considered
- community participation should be inclusive and planning authorities should actively seek views that are representative of the community
- planning decisions should be made in an open and transparent way and the community should be provided with reasons for those decisions (including how community views have been taken into account).



Level of engagement

As outlined in MidCoast Council's Community Engagement Policy, our engagement approach utilises the five-point framework developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

Given this work will lead into future legislative provisions, being the Local Environmental Plan and Development Control Plan, there are legal requirements that need to be met.

There are the things that we cannot change through the consultation process. Examples include:

- we must use the suite of zones provided by the State Government; we cannot create new zones
- there are some uses and controls for zones that are required in legislation
- there is a set process for developing the planning controls
- there are State environmental planning policies and Ministerial guidelines that provide the rules for our planning controls or over-ride our planning controls.

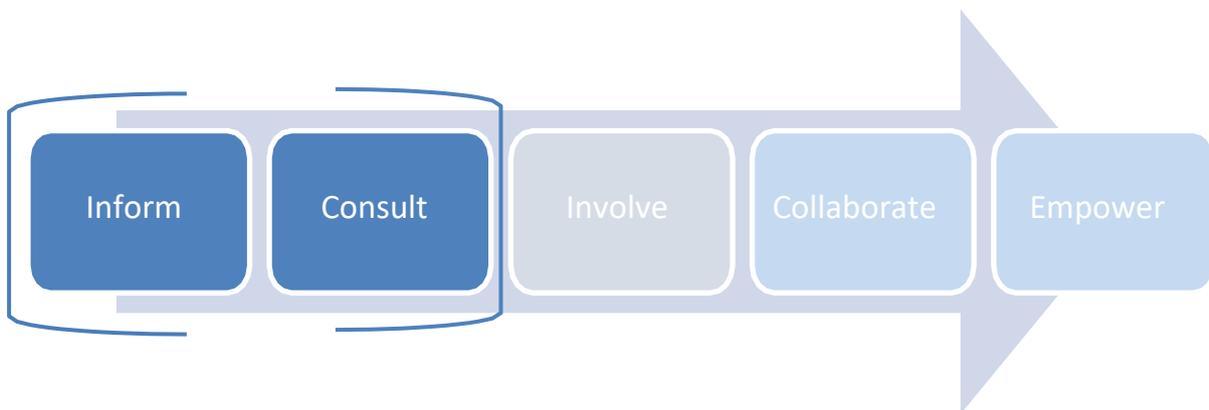


Figure 1: The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, where 'inform' is the lowest level of engagement, and 'empower' is the highest. More information on the spectrum can be found at www.iap2.org.au.

The proposed levels of engagement for *this project* are *inform and consult*.

Inform - to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, benefits and/or solutions

Consult - to obtain public feedback on the project and/or alternatives



Influence of engagement

There are a number of elements that we are seeking to **inform** our community about in relation to the draft Rural Strategy:

- The strategy has no new urban release areas or R5 large lot residential areas
- There will be a single rural zone
- There will be a single minimum lot size for subdivision across the MidCoast (40 ha)
- Bundook and Mount George will be zoned villages (average lot size 4000 square metres)
- Bunyah, Markwell Road and Newell Creek will change from village zones to rural zone
- Paper subdivisions/non-urban land are not identified for urban development
- Some areas in aquifer catchments in Nabitac and Tea Gardens will be zoned E3, environmental management
- Some areas adjoining E2 (environmental protection) zoned land and National Parks will be zoned E4 (environmental living).

The element we are seeking to **consult** our community about in relation to the draft Rural Strategy is:

- Rural zone land uses – we are interested in feedback from the community on plans to expand the number of uses that can occur on rural land. This provides more opportunity for rural landholders to diversify their operations.



Key issues to communicate

In communicating on the draft Rural Strategy to our community, and in particular to landholders who may be impacted, the following issues will be important to different groups of landholders :

- **The strategy has no new urban release areas or R5 large lot residential areas**

This is not covered in the rural strategy. The urban release areas across the MidCoast have recently been reviewed. Council will be undertaking a separate large lot rural residential study in the future.

- **There will be a single rural zone**

The three existing rural zones have different land uses and controls. A single rural zone will be used. This will mean that all owners of rural land property will have the same opportunity to start or expand agricultural activity on their property.

- **The 100 ha minimum lot size for subdivision in some rural areas across the MidCoast will be replaced with a new standard of (40 ha)**

This will provide a consistent lot size across the local government area. This means that rural land cannot be subdivided into lots less than 40 hectares, and provides a consistent lot size across the local government area.

This is the status quo for many former Greater Taree and Great Lakes property owners, and a positive change for landowners in the former Gloucester area and some in the former Greater Taree area, who were previously only able to subdivide to 100 hectares.

In rural areas that already have a lot size less than 40ha, your lot size will not change.

- **The minimum lot size for a building entitlement will be consistent (40 ha)**

Rural lots less than 40 hectares in size will not have a building entitlement. This is the status quo for many property owners in the former Greater Taree and Great Lakes. This is a positive change for landowners in the former Gloucester area and some in the Greater Taree area, where 100 hectares was required for a building entitlement.

This will provide a more consistent control across the local government area.

- **Bundook and Mount George will be zoned villages (average lot size 4,000 square metres)**

Bundook and Mount George are currently in a rural zone. A village zoning will mean land owners can apply to use their property for residential, commercial or industrial uses to provide goods or services to their neighbours and surrounding community.

- **Bunyah, Markwell Road and Newell Creek will change from village zones to rural zone**

Bunyah, Markwell Road and Newell Creek are currently in a village zone. Going to a rural zone will not change the existing use of these properties but will more accurately reflect the rural lifestyle and agricultural activities in these areas.

- **Paper subdivisions/non-urban land is not identified for development**

Most individual properties in paper subdivisions do not have any opportunity to build a dwelling. Most landowners have been sold their property with an expectation that this will change. The numerous constraints that affect paper subdivisions in the MidCoast mean



that there will be no change and no opportunity to build a dwelling on any existing individual property in any paper subdivision.

- **Aquifer catchments in Nabiac and Tea Gardens will be zoned E3, environmental management**

Our critical water resources need protection and private land in our Nabiac and Tea Gardens aquifer catchments will be rezoned E3 Environmental Management. These aquifers provide the water supply for large numbers of the community and the E3 zone will mean intensive plant and animal agriculture and other rural industries will not be allowed in these important areas.

- **Some areas will be zoned E4 (environmental living).**

In the MidCoast many rural lifestyle properties are not used for agriculture. Where these properties are next to a national park, sensitive vegetation or waterway, they will be rezoned from rural to E4 Environmental Living. In the E4 zone a range of small-scale residential, tourist and rural lifestyle activities will still be allowed, but agriculture and other land uses that would impact on the environmental value of the property or adjoining areas will not.

- **Rural zone land uses will be consistent**

This will mean that all owners of a rural property will have the same opportunity to start or expand agricultural activity on their property. We are also looking to allow some small-scale retail, processing and tourism activities on rural land, so that farmers can diversify and increase on-farm productivity and profitability.

We are interested in feedback from the community on plans to expand the number of uses that can occur on rural land. This provides more opportunity for rural landholders to diversify their operations.



Communication goals

The main communication goal is to have a conversation with the community on:

- why we are undertaking this planning
- how it affects their property or land holding

In order to achieve these goals, we need to:

- provide timely and accessible information to allow the community to understand the draft strategy and impact on them, and to make an informed contribution on the aspects of the draft strategy that we are seeking feedback on

Key messages

There are several themes to be consistently applied through this consultation:

- currently we have three Local Environmental Plans that have different approaches resulting in inconsistent planning across the MidCoast
- having one MidCoast plan will provide more certainty for the development industry and the community and will achieve good planning outcomes
- The strategy guides well-balanced development and conservation outcomes across our rural landscape into the future.
- The strategy looks at ways we can identify and protect productive land and water resources, provide accommodation and services for rural communities and manage development in rural environments.
- It provides a consolidated platform which considers how land and water resources outside our towns and villages are expected to be used and developed in the coming decades.
- It will establish a program of actions Council can take to facilitate the sustainable use of the region's assets.
- this is not the only chance to be involved in the development of the MidCoast planning controls – this will continue at key stages in the development of the LEP and DCP controls.

Specific key messages will be developed for a number of the individual zoning groups based on what is and isn't changing for them and key issues property owners in particular zones need to be aware of as we consult on the draft strategy and review documents.



Key stakeholders

We will engage with a range of stakeholders during the consultation period including:

- Rural landholders
- Industry groups
- Village residents
- Landholders in non-urban land/paper subdivisions
- Ratepayers
- Groups of individuals, organisations, community groups, service providers
- Federal and State members
- State agencies
- Councillors
- Council staff

Activities will enable all of these groups to provide feedback. Specific types of activities and messages will be designed to target the various stakeholders, as described further in this strategy.

We acknowledge there will be some parts of our community that will be harder to reach than others and some will be more engaged in the process than others.



Activities

Below is a description of the engagement and communications activities that will be undertaken during the consultation period.

Activity / tools	Level	Details
Direct mail	Inform	Direct mail to property owners where a major zone change is proposed with a specific message about potential changes and how they can participate in the consultation and provide feedback for consideration.
Direct email	Inform	Inform all contacts on our email databases of the consultation period and opportunities to have a say.
Website information	Inform	Central hub of information on the project including the draft strategy and related draft zone reviews, fact sheets, frequently asked questions, project timeline and more. This will also involve a range of digital interactions including surveys and polls to gain an understanding of the community's view of the draft strategy
Information sessions Phone, zoom, in-person	Inform / Consult	Information sessions will provide landholders with an opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with our planning team about how the strategy and what it will mean for their individual circumstances, either via phone, zoom or via in-person sessions at relevant locations across the local government area.
Interactive mapping tool	Inform / Consult	Online interactive mapping tool to allow members of the community to view the changes that may apply to them.
Information sessions/webinars for groups	Inform / Consult	For target groups or groups that ask for a specific meeting to explain changes and will consist of a presentation tailored to the location or group to raise awareness of issues in the particular location. Given the large number of stakeholders who may live outside the LGA or who may be unable to attend drop-in sessions, additional one-on-one meetings (over skype or zoom) with a member of the project team will be available via an on-line booking system



Supporting communication activities

Method	Details
Media releases	Provide information about the consultation and activities scheduled across the period of consultation. Specific releases to target specific areas on those key elements that will impact on specific communities.
Advertisements	Newspaper advertisements to run across local areas promoting overall consultation and individual sessions. This will include utilisation of Council’s regular weekly advertisements and display advertising to draw attention to the program. It will also include advertisements in local community newsletters in appropriate locations to reach property-owners in areas impacted.
Social media	Promotion of consultation and how stakeholders can be involved
Radio	Promotion of consultation and how stakeholders can be involved
Videos	Information on key focus areas in the project to build understanding
Fact sheets	Information on key focus areas in the project to build understanding
Displays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stationary displays for locations • Portable displays for pop ups

Reporting and evaluation

Reporting

We will report back to our community on the outcomes of the engagement process, to ensure transparency and to close the loop with those who participated in the process.

Information gathered in the following ways will be recorded:

- feedback from information sessions
- Feedback from one-on-one phone calls/skype/zoom appointments
- have your say survey submissions
- formal submissions
- emails and letters received

The information collected during the information and consultation program will be reported back to Councillors through a report to a future council meeting, which will be a public document and available to the general community via Council's website.

Submissions will also be made public in accordance with privacy legislation.

We will also report back to those members of the community who have participated in the process and ensure we close the loop by letting participants know their input has been valued.

Evaluation

We will undertake an evaluation of the engagement activities to assist us in gauging whether the engagement program was successful.

This evaluation will also then be used when developing upcoming *Zoning in on our Future* engagement activities. Evaluation will be based on:

- the number of people who participate in phone, zoom or in person sessions
- the quality of submissions received, indicating an understanding of the issues
- digital engagement, including website visits, time on pages, downloads and use of participation tools

