

15. MIDCOAST COUNCIL FLYING FOX CAMP MANAGEMENT PLAN

Report Author Nick Colman – Environmental Project Officer

File No. / ECM Index S0100-000251

Date of Meeting 28 July 2021

Authorising Director Paul De Szell - Director Liveable Communities

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The *MidCoast Council Flying-fox Camp Management Plan* (the Plan) has been prepared to guide the future management of flying-fox camps within the MidCoast Local Government Area.

The draft MidCoast Council Flying-fox Camp Management Plan was placed on public exhibition for a 6-week period from 7 June to 15 July 2021. A total of 12 submissions were received from the community which are summarised in this report.

The exhibited Plan has been amended in response to feedback from the community and is now presented to Council for adoption.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATION

That Council adopts the MidCoast Council Flying-fox Camp Management Plan.

FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

While there are no immediate financial implications in adopting the Flying-fox Camp Management Plan, the implementation of the Plan will require the allocation of staff resources to continue community engagement, apply for flying-fox related grant funding, and coordinate the implementation of on-ground actions.

Applications for funding may require matching contributions from Council, which will be delivered via appropriate and approved funding sources, including the Environmental Rate.

The formal adoption of a Flying-fox Camp Management Plan is a requirement of government funding programs.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Nil

ATTACHMENTS

A: Draft Flying-fox Camp Management Plan

B: Summary of Submissions

C: Submissions

Attachments A, B & C have been circulated to the Councillors and Senior Staff, however these attachments are publicly available on Council's website. The copies of Attachments B & C on the website have had the personal information redacted to protect the privacy of the members of the public providing submissions.

BACKGROUND

The MidCoast LGA is home to over 93,000 people, many who live in growing communities along the coast.

Three species of flying-fox also inhabit the LGA, including the Black Flying-fox (*Pteropus alecto*), Grey-headed Flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) and Little Red Flying-fox (*Pteropus scapulatus*). The Grey-headed Flying-fox is listed as a threatened species under the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* and the Australian *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* due to recent population decline and unmanaged threatening processes.

Flying-foxes play an important role in dispersing seeds and pollinating flowering plants and are crucial to keeping native forests healthy. Because flying-foxes are highly mobile, seeds can be moved locally and over great distances. When seeds can germinate away from their parent plant, they have a greater chance of surviving and growing into a mature plant. Seed dispersal also expands the gene pool within forests. Mature trees then share their genes with neighbouring trees of the same species and this transfer strengthens forests against environmental changes.

Of the 18 known flying-fox camps within the LGA, the following five camps are located (or at least partially) on Council owned land, within or adjacent to residential areas:

- Karloo Street Reserve Camp
- Cocos Crescent Reserve Camp
- Pacific Palms Camp
- Smiths Lake Camp
- Hawks Nest Camp

With funding assistance provided through the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Council engaged consultants, GeoLINK, to prepare a Flying-fox Camp Management Plan (Attachment A). The core objectives of the plan are to minimise the impacts of flying-foxes on the local residents, while conserving flying-foxes and their habitat.

DISCUSSION

A draft Flying-fox Camp Management Plan was presented to Council on 2 June 2021 and placed on public exhibition for 6 weeks from 7 June to 15 July 2021 to seek community feedback. The documents were made available on Council's website and promoted via media releases.

A summary of the submissions received during the public exhibition period including the issues raised and the corresponding staff response is presented in Attachment B.

Copies of the 13 submissions received from members of the MidCoast community, are provided in Attachment C with the majority re-affirming the difficulties of living near a flying-fox camp.

Summary of Submissions

The main issues raised in the submissions are discussed below under the following themes:

1. Difficulties of living in close proximity to a flying-fox camp

A high proportion of the submissions discussed the difficulty of living in close proximity to a flying-fox camp, with most of the submissions related to the Cocos Crescent Reserve camp. The majority of issues raised were regarding the noise and odour impacts posed by the flying foxes and the risk of disease. The Plan addresses these concerns by identifying a range of management options, to minimise the impacts of the camps on the community and to provide a reasonable level of amenity for residents surrounding the camps. The Plan also provides an educational platform to raise community awareness of the realities of disease risk and measures to reduce this risk.

2. Concern for the welfare of flying-foxes and support for the Plan

A number of submissions expressed concern for the welfare of the flying-fox and acknowledged the ecological role flying-foxes perform across the landscape. While further respondents showed support for the balanced nature of the Plan in balancing the needs of the community and the flying-foxes. Council acknowledges the ecological contribution and protected status of native wildlife within the Camp Management Plan. The Plan aims to enable the long-term conservation of flying-foxes, by ensuring that management is sympathetic to flying-fox behaviour and their biological requirements.

3. Concern raised over pressures of future development on flying-fox camp

One submission expressed concern that the Hawks Nest Flying-fox Camp includes private land, currently zoned E2 – Environmental Conservation, that may be developed in the future. While a small number of further submissions were concerned more generally over development applications in relation to harming flying-foxes.

The Flying-fox Camp Management Plan outlines the current footprint of the flying-fox camp and future development applications must address the impact on the flying-fox camp, particularly the Grey-headed Flying-fox due to its threatened species status under both State and Australian Government legislation. The potential developable land at this camp is zoned R2 Low Density Residential and R3 Medium Density Residential; and encompasses the secondary camp roost footprint (refer to Figure 22 of the Plan).

The Plan includes management actions aimed to reduce future flying-fox/human conflicts through appropriate land-use planning, including Development Control Plan (DCP) provisions to guide future development near flying-fox camps, including both greenfield and infill development. The DCP would include structural requirements or design guidelines for new buildings located in proximity to a camp to minimise the risk of future conflicts from flying-fox noise, odours and droppings. Greenfield development provisions would include appropriate urban design and landscaping provisions and ensure that adequate distances are maintained between future dwellings/sensitive receptors and existing or historical flying-fox camps across the LGA.

Other options include the possibility of including notations of flying-fox camps on Section 10.7 planning certificates and the potential to address flying-fox impacts under the Exempt and Complying provisions of Council's DCP.

4. Culling of flying-foxes (Black Flying-fox) / Relocating flying-fox camp

There are three species of flying-foxes recorded within the MidCoast LGA. All species are protected under the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. The Grey-headed Flying-fox is also listed as threatened under State and Australian Government legislation.

Management options for the flying-fox camps have been grouped into three levels, of which culling would fall under Level 3:

- Level 1: *Routine camp management* which aims to manage the camp in-situ and manage issues without directly impacting the camp.
- Level 2: *In-situ camp management* which aims to retain flying-foxes at the camp, however, create separation between roosting animals and adjacent sensitive receptors.
- Level 3: *Disturbance or dispersal* which aims to stop flying-foxes roosting at the site.

The Plan's approach to managing the five (5) flying-fox camps in the LGA is guided by:

- current scientific information about flying-fox behaviour and ecology;
- learnings from managing other flying-fox camps located in eastern Australia; and
- each camp's unique situation.

The Plan proposes actions that do not have the potential to exacerbate issues, result in harm to flying-foxes, or create new flying-fox camps which may result in more severe human/flying-fox conflicts. Furthermore, due to the nomadic nature of flying-foxes dispersal or culling has been found not to be effective, achieving only a temporary solution as other individuals arrive. This is largely driven by the availability of food resources in the region and the species' broader range.

As a result, the Plan adopts a combination of Level 1 and Level 2 camp management actions only. This approach complies with the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) guidelines (Flying-fox Camp Management Policy 2015) and seeks a form of intervention that is both low risk and low cost.

5. Target Issue: Subsidy for Noise, odour

One submission raised concerns about the potential excessive use of air conditioning to reduce the impact of noise and smell from flying-foxes, which results in increased electricity costs and energy consumption, and the generation of carbon emissions which contributes to climate change. Air conditioning is suggested as a property modification to alleviate noise and odour impacts for residents adjacent to the camp.

In response, the Flying-fox Camp Management Plan has been amended to include an action to investigate the installation of solar power and battery energy storage devices in association with air conditioning property modifications. Council's role would include informing the community about suitable property modification options and assistance with sourcing funding (including liaising with funding bodies in relation to grant funding opportunities).

6. Public Education

Three submissions raised the importance of flying-fox education programs that demonstrate the ecological role of flying-foxes and their positive influence across the landscape. The Plan provides information on the natural history of flying-foxes, rationale behind Level 1 and Level 2 management practices that seek to balance the ecological needs of the flying-fox – further ecological information on flying-foxes can largely be found in the appendices of the Plan.

7. Landscape Regeneration for fauna including the Flying-fox

A minor number of submissions supported actions that seek to acquire funding to remediate and promote flying-fox (and other species) habitat/ food resources across the landscape within the LGA. This action is supported by the Plan, for example, Section 6.6 of the Plan investigates the regeneration of the Wingham Foreshore Recreation Reserve for flying-foxes and other fauna. By promoting suitable habitat within the feeding range of our urban camps, it may lessen the overall need for the flying-foxes to utilise the urban camps – it will not reduce it completely.

8. Loss of wildlife within the Flying-fox camp and a need to redesign the camps to include parkland features i.e. footpaths

A submission commented on the loss of wildlife within the reserves. Flying-foxes are a native species and provide environmental/key stone services which are important to the local biodiversity consisting of both flora and fauna. Furthermore, the vegetation and habitat within the reserves are of high conservation and biodiversity value, which is discussed in the Plan. In regard to redesigning the reserves for urban purposes, the reserves have been zoned to protect these significant biodiversity values.

CONSULTATION

The draft Flying-fox Camp Management Plan was developed in consultation with key Council staff, especially in regard to on-ground works surrounding each camp.

Extensive effort has been made to engage with the community regarding the subject flying- fox camps to:

- understand the issues directly and indirectly affecting the community;
- raise awareness of flying-foxes within the community;
- correct misinformation and help allay fears; and
- seek ideas and feedback about possible future management options.

The types of engagement that have been undertaken include:

- promotion of contact details of responsible Council officer
- telephone conversations and emails to record issues and complaints
- media releases about the project (radio, print, social media)
- website pages and links
- flyers posted to landholders within 300m of the camps (February 2021)
- webinar information session (8 February 2021)

- community information booths at all five camps (9 and 10 February 2021, attended by approximately 74 people)
- direct contact with known community groups with an interest in each camp by phone and email
- an online survey (Flying-fox Engage) for all the subject camps (1 February to 12 March 2021).

The Flying-fox Engage survey was the main platform for recording community feedback on the proposed camp management options. A total of 139 valid survey responses were received. The survey found that the community consider it important that flying-fox camp management measures:

- reduce the impact of noise and odour from flying-foxes at the camp on nearby residents (67% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- reduce the impact of flying-fox excrement on the property of nearby by residents (68% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- do not move the flying-fox camp to other areas that may also be near residents or businesses (65% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- ensure the risk of disease transmission remains low (77% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- have a low financial cost to residents living near the camp (65% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- can be implemented quickly (61% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- provide a long-term solution (86% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- do not harm flying-foxes (58% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- do not degrade the natural or ecological values of the site (70% of respondents considering this very or extremely important)
- do not change the visual appeal or recreational opportunities currently undertaken at the site (58% of respondents considering this very or extremely important).

These community expectations were used to inform the development of the Flying-fox Camp Management Plan.

COMMUNITY IMPACTS

The Flying-fox Camp Management Plan seeks to reduce the impacts of flying-fox camps on the local community by providing support programs for neighbouring residents and through the implementation of combination of Level 1 and Level 2 management options as per the NSW Flying-fox Camp Management Policy (OEH 2015). The adoption of the Plan will enable Council to obtain the necessary planning approvals for on-ground works and seek government funding to implement the actions in the Plan.

ALIGNMENT WITH COMMUNITY PLAN/OPERATIONAL PLAN

The draft Plan is aligned with Strategy 7.1 of the Delivery Program & Operational Plan (2020-2021):

“Value, protect, monitor and manage the health and diversity of natural assets, wildlife and ecosystems”.

TIMEFRAME

The timeframe to enact the actions of the Flying-fox Camp Management Plan is five years.

RECOMMENDATION

That the MidCoast Council Flying-fox Camp Management Plan provided in Attachment A be adopted.
