

ELECTRONIC ATTACHMENTS

for

BUSINESS PAPER

6.30PM, TUESDAY, 10 OCTOBER, 2023

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INNER WEST



Engagement outcomes report
Verge Gardening Policy and
Guidelines

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Summary

This document provides an overview of the community consultation process and outcomes for review of the draft Inner West Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines.

From 18 November to 23 December 2022, the community could provide feedback on the policy and guidelines through an online survey via Your Say Inner West (YSIW) and help name the program by voting in an online poll.

During the engagement period over 1,900 people visited the Your Say project page. 135 participants completed the online survey and 102 people voted in the poll.

90% of respondents supported the draft Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines. Key suggestions for amendments prior to adoption include simplifying the documents and rules around compliance, simplifying the application process, removing fees for registration, allowing hard structures, and clarifying details around access and tree clearances.

Feedback has been reviewed, analysed and themed for inclusion in this report. All verbatim comments are contained in the Appendix.

Most votes in the online vote for a program name, nominated to name the program Living Streets and many of the respondents voiced their overwhelming desire to enjoy the environmental benefits and biodiversity outcomes of increased liveability in the community.

Council is investigating making amendments as a result of the feedback received. The recommendation is to remove any applicable fees to begin a verge garden, as thriving verges and community engagement are considered an asset for all.

Currently under review is the option to include hard landscaping and the necessary compliance issues of introducing regulated materials onto the verge space, as well as how to simplify the process, provide clarification on access and tree management and make the program easily accessible to the ever-growing verge gardening community.

Background

The Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines project originates from a need to ensure residents can maximise the benefits of gardening on the verge, whilst maintaining safe and accessible verges for the whole community.

An existing "Sustainable Streets" program was conducted in the former Marrickville Council area and has informed the draft Inner West Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines.

Verges and footpaths outside residential homes are public land used for a variety of purposes including:

- housing underground utilities
- providing a place to put bins and hard rubbish out
- providing a refuge for pedestrians crossing the road
- access for people getting in and out of parked cars

This means not all verges are suitable for verge gardens. It also means there are many issues to consider when designing, establishing, and maintaining a verge garden.

The Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines aim to provide a framework for resident participation in planting and caring for residential verges of the Inner West, whilst ensuring public land is managed in a manner that does not jeopardise public safety, access and other essential service or community needs.

The draft was reviewed in detail by the relevant Local Democracy Group, Council's Environment Advisory Committee, on 31 March 2022 and was supported.

The Verge Garden Policy aligns with many of the strategies set out in Council's adopted Community Strategic Plan, including:

- *Manage and improve Inner West's mid and understorey vegetation and protect, connect and enhance natural areas, biodiversity corridors and sensitive habitat* (from Strategic Direction 1: An ecologically sustainable Inner West)
- *Pursue integrated planning and urban design across public and private spaces to benefit community and local environment needs* (from Strategic Direction 2: Liveable, connected neighbourhoods and transport)
- *Provide facilities, spaces and programs that support community health and wellbeing* (from Strategic Direction 4: Healthy, resilient and caring communities)

At present, there are 418 registered Verge Gardens and 167 Expressions of Interest from residents seeking to be involved in the Sustainable Streets program.

Promotion

The project was promoted through the following channels:

- Email to existing verge gardeners (394 residents)
- Email to residents on the verge gardening waitlist (172 residents)
- Email to registered Bushcare and nursery volunteers (225 volunteers)
- Council's social media channels
- Posters and postcards at all local libraries (8)
- Posters at the two Council community nurseries
- Posters at Marrickville Music Festival 2022

Engagement methods

- Online survey on Your Say Inner West
- Online quick poll on Your Say Inner West
- Email, post and phone submissions

Online survey on Your Say

The community was asked to provide feedback on the policy and guidelines including identifying anything missing and assessing whether the documents are clear and easy to understand.

Participants were also asked whether they would support an amendment to the policy to allow regulated hard landscaping and objects on the verge.

Online quick poll on Your Say

The community were asked to vote on a name for the Verge Gardening program out of four potential options.

Engagement outcomes

This section provides an overview of ideas raised for the draft Verge Gardening Program and Guidelines.

517 community members downloaded a copy of the draft Verge Gardening Policy and 274 downloaded the draft Guidelines.

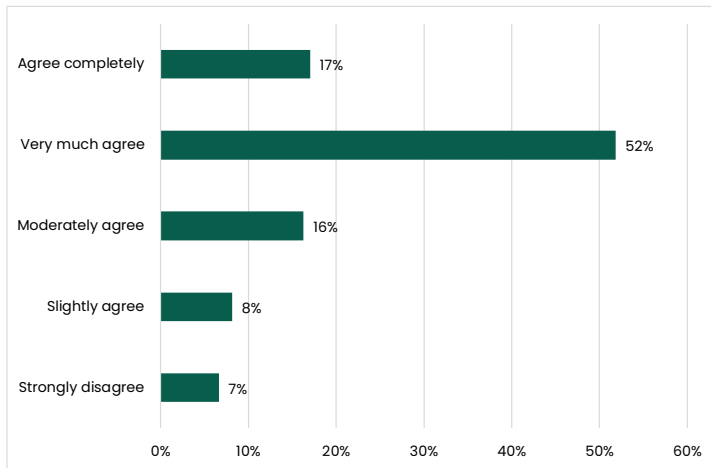
Part one – Online survey results

Community members were asked to comment on specific aspects of the draft policy and guidelines and to provide an overall level of support for the documents. Where respondents were unsure or not in support of the policy or guidelines, they were asked to explain their answers.

Note: staff have reviewed, analysed and themed the comments submitted in the open-ended response sections. Verbatim comments can be found in the Appendix.

1. The policy was clear and easy to understand. (135 responses)

69% of people very much agree or agree completely that the policy is clear and easy to understand.



1. a) You stated that the policy was not/was only moderately clear or easy to understand. Please let us know what was unclear, and why? (42 responses)

Why the policy was unclear	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Too detailed/complex	24%	10
Distance between garden and other structures	7%	3
Language too formal	7%	3
Location of garden in relation to property	7%	3
Same rules don't apply to Council	7%	3
Location of garden in relation to property	7%	3
Accessibility	5%	2
Existing gardens process	5%	2
Liability	5%	2
Plant height	5%	2

The following points were mentioned once: no explanation to some conditions; unclear about clearance around trees, size of gardens and the process if a garden is left unattended.

Suggestions for changes	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
More information on plants	5%	2

The following suggestions were mentioned once: combine the policy and guidelines into one document; provide information on how to manage dogs; add a clause advising that the garden can only be installed out the front of the resident's own property; remove registration fees; provide simple guidance on how to change an existing verge garden; include information on weeds and Council's involvement; include information on planting trees and examples of approved gardens.

Missing information	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Details about cost	5%	2

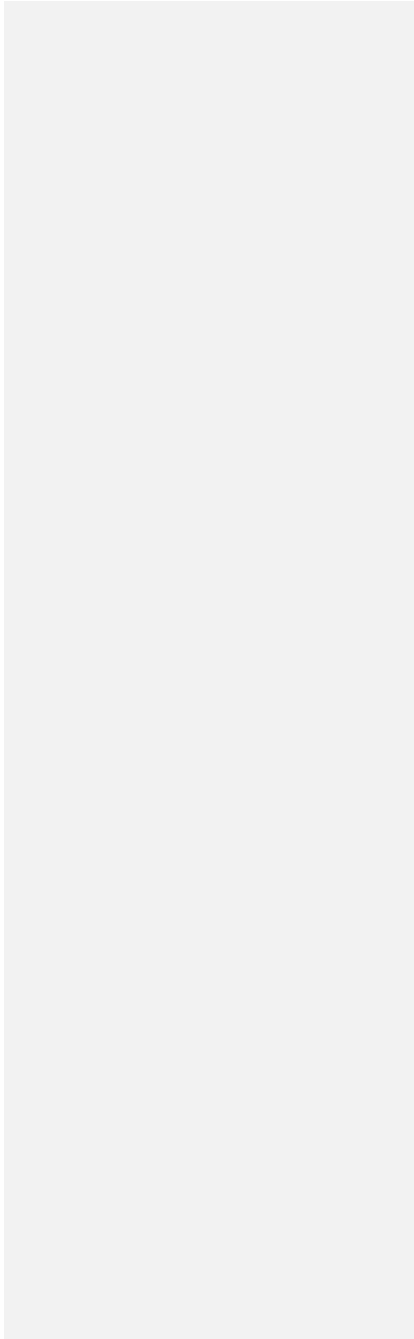
The following were mentioned once as missing from the draft policy: assessment process, appeal process, explanation of exclusion around power poles and parking signs.

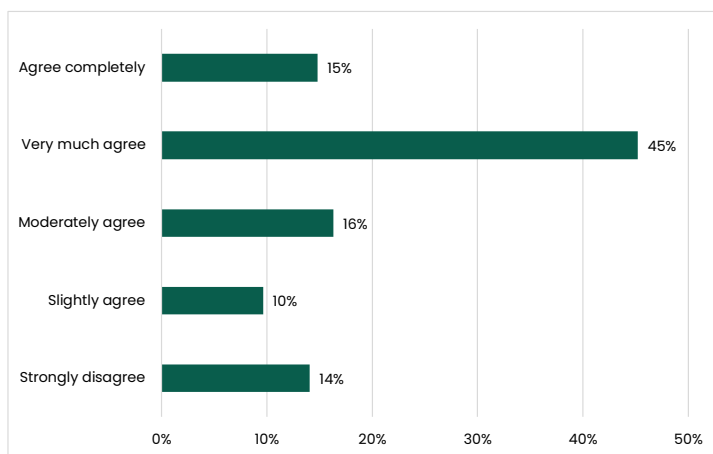
Other relevant topics

The following points were mentioned once: hypocritical to state that every verge is different but create one policy; do not agree with the 12-month period and there are more important issues for Council to focus on.

2. The guidelines provide the necessary information to help residents create biodiverse verge gardens that also maintain safety and accessibility. (135 responses)

60% of people agree completely or very much agree that the guidelines provide the necessary information to help residents create biodiverse verge gardens.





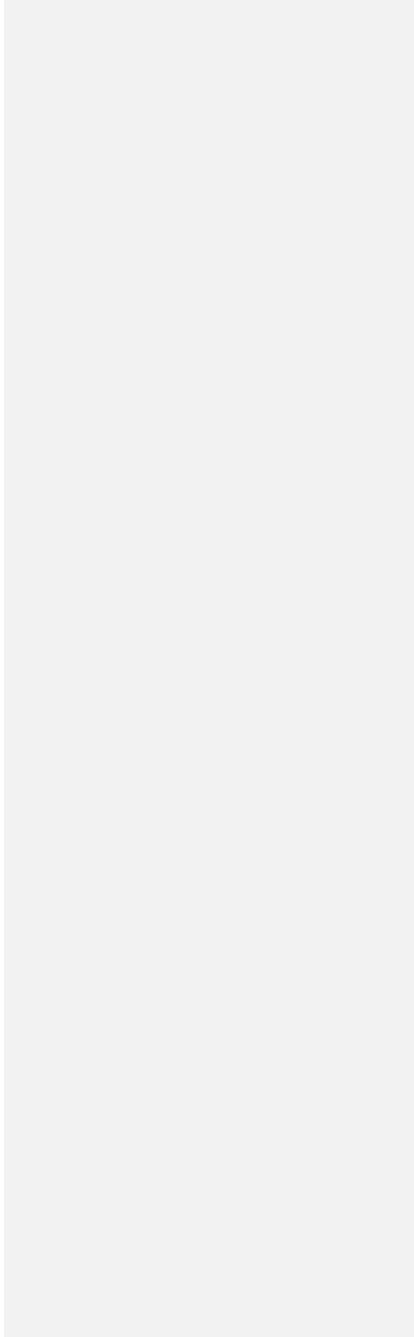
2. a) You stated that the guidelines do not provide/only moderately provide the necessary information. Please let us know why. (54 responses)

Missing information	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Information on access	13%	7
Application process	9%	5
Further information on plants	7%	4
Responsibility if the garden becomes neglected	7%	4
Compliance process	6%	3
Cost of the application	6%	3
Managing dogs	6%	3
Examples of approved gardens	4%	2
Process for existing gardens	4%	2

The following were mentioned once as missing from the guidelines: promotion of broader community action; guides to manage excess run-off; guides to grow fruit and vegetables safely; information on Council's nurseries and further clarification around clearance of trees.

Suggestions	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Safe hard objects should be included	6%	3

The following suggestions were mentioned once: distance from footpath to verge should vary; plants should be no larger than 1 metre; remove the registration process; combine the policy and guidelines into one document; Council should supply upkeep material; Council should inspect before installation and plant height should be increased.

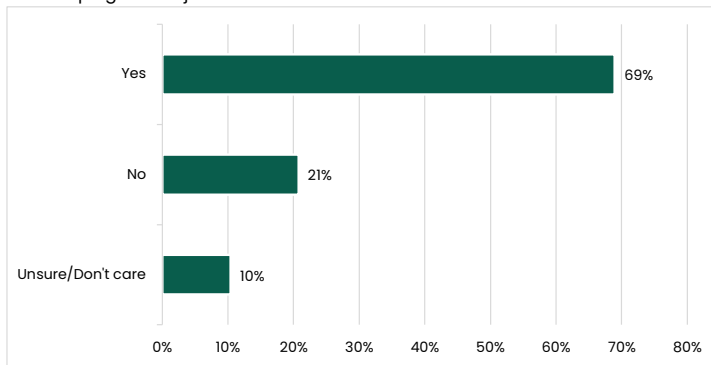


Other relevant topics	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Document is too long and compliance heavy	15%	8
Barriers are required to implement these gardens	4%	2
Current verge gardeners are not following these guidelines	4%	2

The following points were mentioned once: disagree with the banning of structures; disagree with the banning of laneway gardens; disagree with the 12-month period; hypocritical to state that every verge is different but create one policy; size of garden beds is unclear; document is too open for interpretation and Council is too busy to manage this policy.

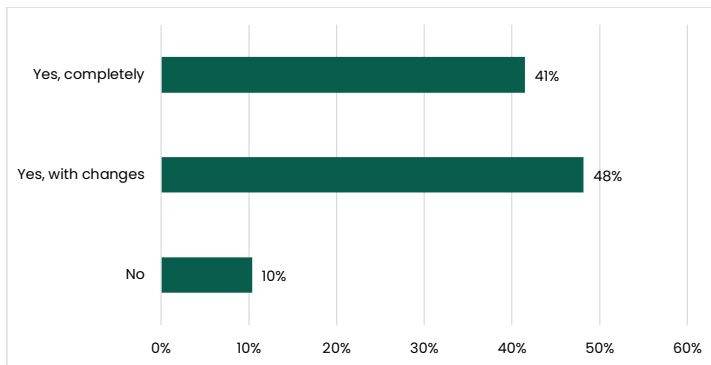
3. Would you support an amendment to the proposed policy to allow regulated hard landscaping and objects on the verge, including planter boxes and barriers of limited sizes and designs? (135 responses)

69% of people support amending the proposed policy to allow regulated hard landscaping and objects.



4. Do you support the Verge Garden Policy and Guidelines as a whole? (135 responses)

90% of people support the Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines as a whole, including 41% who support the documents completely and 48% who support with changes.



4. a) You stated that you support the policy with changes. Please let us know what we need to change. (65 responses)

Suggestions for changes	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Allow hard structures	31%	20
Further clarification about clearance around trees	11%	7
Include information on access	9%	6
Remove fee	9%	6
Remove registration/application process	8%	5
Further information on plants	6%	4
Responsibility if the garden becomes neglected	6%	4
Legacy gardens should be exempt	5%	3
Site specific policies	5%	3
Council should supply materials	3%	2
Further information on application process	3%	2

Managing dogs	3%	2
More information on trees	3%	2
More options for strata approval	3%	2

The following suggestions were mentioned once: make it clearer that fruit trees are not allowed; make it clearer that parking should not be impacted; limit plant options; further promotion of community action; suggest that neighbours must provide consent; stronger language that the verge is public property; process should be different for existing verge gardens; disallow strata to apply; provide guidance on how to remove grass correctly; allow laneway gardens; further information on available resources; change wording on 2 sections and move Council's insurance information to the top of the policy.

One comment mentioned a spelling mistake.

4. b) You stated that you do not support the policy. Please let us know why. (14 responses)

Reasons	Percentage of theme mentions in total number of comments	Number of theme mention in comments
Too many rules	21%	3
Compliance issues	14%	2
Gardens should be maintained by professionals	14%	2
Gardens won't be maintained	14%	2
Safety issue	14%	2
Same rules don't apply to Council	14%	2

The following reasons were mentioned once: there is no need for a policy; the policy bans laneway gardens; registration requirement; existing gardens do not follow guidelines; traffic hazard; not a Council priority; should include hard structures; site specific policies would work instead and gardens will become not uniform.

Part two – Other responses from individuals

Residents were encouraged to email and phone council to discuss the Verge Garden policy and guidelines. Council received 12 emails from individuals and 1 strata body corporate email, summarised below.

All responses, including late responses, were considered.

The following points were mentioned: streetscape appeal and amenity: too regulated or not regulated enough: clarification on compliance issues: accessibility and concerns verge gardens will be ignored by council mowing teams and subsequently destroyed.

Lots of commentary regarding council's current high maintenance mowing and lawn replacement schedule from residents seeking a more sustainable and socially inclusive management style.

Accessibility themes were echoed in the responses as well as concerns about resourcing to bring existing gardens up to standard.

While maintenance remains the responsibility of the registered verge gardener, Inner West Council Sustainable Streets Officer is here to assist the delivery of all aspects of the program. Verge gardening happens on public land, with various stakeholders operating in the multi-purpose public space. Council is committed to the success of verge gardening and will provide a selection of free plants from the community nursery. In this way, the right plants are planted in the right place to begin with, and council can help legacy verge gardens comply.

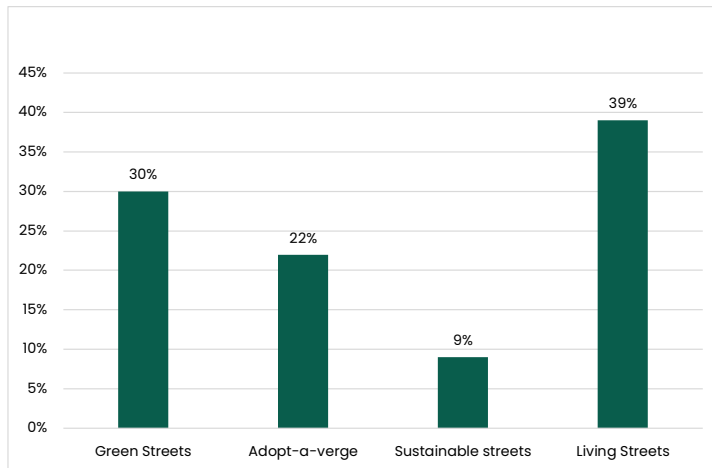
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Part three – Online poll results

Help us name the program (105 responses)

Community members were asked to choose their preferred name for the program out of 4 options. The top choice was 'Living Streets' with 39% of the votes.



Officer comments

Staff have provided responses to main themes raised during the consultation. This section also details where updates have been made to the Policy and/or Guidelines in response to community comment.

Theme	Officer response
Policy is too detailed/complex; too long and compliance heavy	A detailed policy and guidelines document promotes a risk reduction approach when engaging community members in the design and maintenance of public spaces. This helps to ensure public land is managed in a manner that does not jeopardise public safety, access, infrastructure and essential services, as well as other community needs.
Need to provide more information on access (wheelchairs, prams and from cars)	Not all verges are practical to establish a garden in. Site restraints, access, traffic conditions will all be accessed during the application process.
Missing necessary information about the application process; application process should be removed/simplified	Council will work to streamline the application process for all applicants taking into consideration comments and suggestions from this community consultation period. Verge gardens can also be a source of conflict between gardeners, neighbours, and other users. All stakeholder aims are taken into consideration when a resident applies for a verge garden and assessed on an individual basis.
Policy should allow hard structures	Council has a commitment to explore the option of hardscaping. The introduction of hard structures on the footpath requires a risk reduction approach to ensure hard materials will meet with compliance.
Provide further clarification about clearance around trees	Trees are maintained by Urban Forestry for tree health, longevity, and safety. The 500mm easement is required for access to monitor and

	maintain trees. The gap between the tree trunk and the verge garden is necessary to protect the small plants so that they are not damaged during routine maintenance.
Streetscape appeal	Concerns were raised on the improved and/or reduced amenity of public streets. With comments in favour of traditional lawn verges in some conservation areas to retain heritage values. Most comments indicating the opportunity for more biodiversity on the street is aesthetically appealing, creating a sense of place, and has clear and improved environmental benefit for all users. Each application will be assessed on an individual basis.
Remove fees	A clear request from residents is that any verge gardening fees are removed. Council will look to remove all application fees to help residents access and participate in the verge gardening program and retain the grassroots values of sharing public space to improve the liveability and appeal of our streets.
Process if a garden is left unattended	Residents are responsible for advising council if they are moving or no longer wish to maintain the verge garden. Should a verge garden continue to remain unattended council staff may take necessary action to resume maintenance of the verge, which may include re-installation of grass in the verge.
Accidental damage	Verge gardening is a garden on public land which is prone to unpredictable damage and impacts by members of the public, service providers and maintenance to ensure essential public services are maintained. Accept

	that re-establishment of the garden may be required at some point in time and costs will be covered by the resident.
Compliance of new and existing verge gardens	Support will be provided, as requested, to resident verge gardeners including help with initial design, ongoing advice and monitoring, including expert advice on plant selection and plant identification. All new and existing gardens will be supported by council to best practise level.

Issues raised around Electricity line tree pruning, Tree management and Streetscape mowing regimes were out of scope for the project. However, feedback will be passed on to all relevant stakeholders, including teams within council and essential service providers.

Next steps

Where possible key themes identified in the engagement will be incorporated into the final Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines. The project team will balance the needs and wishes of different user groups and consider potential conflicting and complementary uses.

The final Verge Gardening Policy and Guidelines will then be considered by Council for adoption.

All community members who provided feedback will be advised when the final Policy and Guidelines will be considered by Council.

