

2021 Price Submission engagement: Koo Wee Rup–Longwarry Flood Protection District ratepayers

Melbourne Water provides drainage and flood mitigation services to the Koo Wee Rup–Longwarry Flood Protection District (the District), former swampland that was drained from the 1800s to provide farmland for Victoria's expanding economy. The area remains susceptible to flooding, and therefore receives a higher level of drainage maintenance and capital works. These are funded by a special Precept Rate paid by property owners within the District instead of the metropolitan Waterways and Drainage Charge, and is collected via their water bills.

Objective

Engagement sought to inform any changes to service standards proposed for the District by:

- exploring community views on service levels for activities currently undertaken
- understanding issues of importance that service proposals should address
- identifying broader community preferences and willingness to pay for any changes to service levels.

Approach

A combination of face-to-face and online engagement methods were used to maximise participation from the District's ratepayers, and leverage existing relationships with their Advisory Committee. This is a group of 12 nominated representatives including residents, interest groups, local councils and Melbourne Water, who meet every three months to discuss District maintenance and priorities.

Table 1: Summary of engagement activities

District Advisory Committee activities 14 Nov 2019	<p>The Committee discussed the 2021 Price Submission process and timing, activities funded by the Precept Rate, and preliminary service proposals for testing with District ratepayers.</p> <p>District Advisory Committee members were also surveyed on their preferred level of service for activities currently undertaken within the District, and their views on the preliminary service proposals and current Precept Rate. This feedback was used to refine the service proposals.</p>
Online community survey 10 Feb – 23 Mar 2020	<p>An online survey was selected as the most accessible and efficient means of collecting feedback from ratepayers, who were asked to select their preferred service proposal (including associated cost) from a choice of five. They were also asked to nominate their preferred levels of service for each activity undertaken within the District.</p> <p>The survey was hosted on Melbourne Water's engagement platform, <i>YourSay</i>, with a unique 6-digit code used to confirm the validity of responses. An iPad prize draw was held to incentivise participation.</p> <p>Once confirmed, the results of the survey and service proposal were published online on 29 June 2020, and residents who had subscribed for updates were automatically notified via their nominated email address.</p>

Bulletin 6 Feb 2020	A hardcopy bulletin was mailed to all 3700 discreet ratepayers within the District. This contained a link to the online survey and a 6-digit code unique to each customer, ensuring they could only participate once.
Information sessions 12–19 Feb 2020	Three pop-up community information sessions were held to raise awareness of the survey amongst local residents, and answer any questions relating to the Price Submission process and Precept Rate. These were held outside supermarkets in the townships: two at Koo Wee Rup, and one at Longwarry.
Email reminders March 2020	Four emails were sent to 1700 ratepayers whose details were obtained from South East Water, to remind them to complete the online survey. These were sent on 3, 6, 12 and 17 March 2020.
Close the loop communications June 2020	An email was sent on 29 June 2020 to announce the results of the survey and service proposals included in the 2021 Price Submission. Our YourSay webpage was updated to communicate the proposed service levels and average price for property owners in the District.

Findings

District Advisory Committee

Early feedback from the District Advisory Committee in the survey and meeting was that:

- Current levels of service were generally adequate, but additional weed control, tree work and desilting – as well as climate change preparedness – were identified as priorities
- There was some appetite to increase the Precept Rate (rated 2.86 out of 5 on average); up to \$300 per person was deemed reasonable if the services covered were adequately communicated.
- There was a desire for the preliminary service proposals presented at the meeting to be more ambitious (rated 2.6 out of 5 on average).

The service proposals were subsequently updated to reflect this feedback, with an 'Additional maintenance' option added. The revised options were then incorporated into the online survey.

Online survey

The survey was viewed 759 times by 514 visitors during the survey period, and received 102 valid responses (i.e. unique responses from a verified District ratepayer, as determined by their 6-digit code) from a total of 118 responses. This represents a response rate of 2.76%, which does not constitute a representative sample but provides some insight into preferences.

The *Flood + waterway* package (which also includes all activities in the proactive maintenance, flood protection and waterway improvement packages) received the highest number of votes, at 37% of the total.

Figure 1: Service package preferences

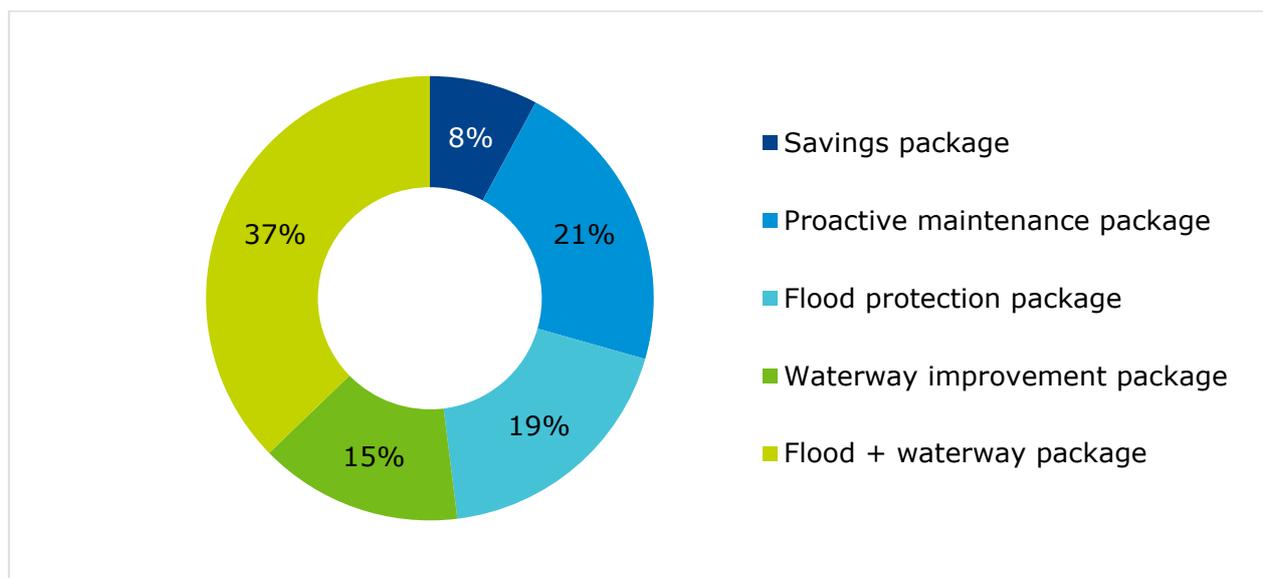


Table 2: Distribution of service package preferences

Service package	Number	Percentage
Option 1: Savings package	8	8%
Option 2: Proactive maintenance package	22	21%
Option 3: Flood protection package (<i>includes option 2</i>)	19	19%
Option 4: Waterway improvement package (<i>includes option 2</i>)	15	15%
Option 5: Flood + waterway package (<i>includes options 2, 3 & 4</i>)	38	37%
Total	102	100%

The above table shows the distribution of preferences for each service package. When considering packages 3 to 5 include activities also covered under other packages:

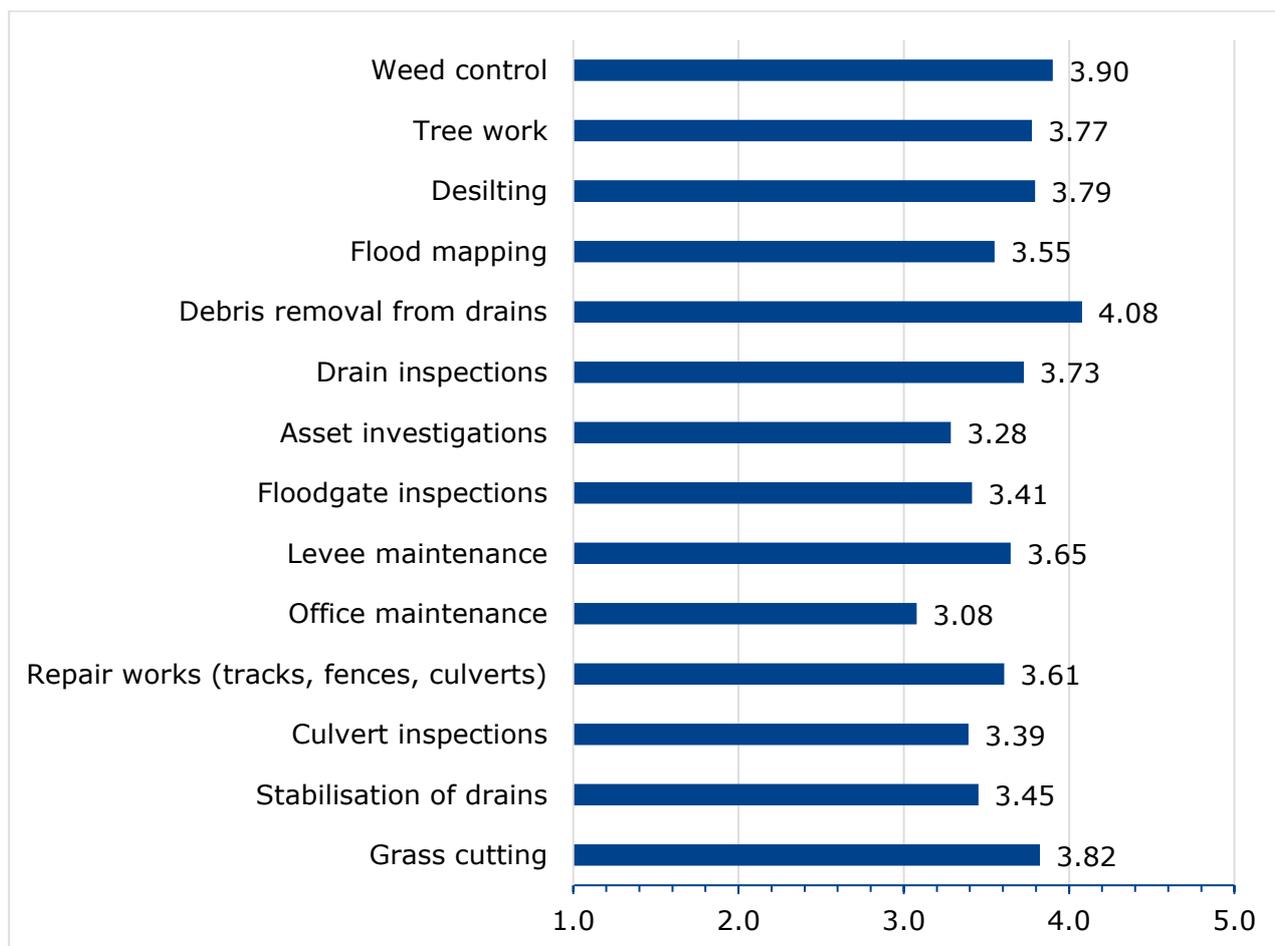
- 8% supported the savings package
- 92% supported proactive maintenance (also included in the flood protection, waterway improvement, and flood + waterway packages)
- 52% supported waterway improvements (also included in the flood + waterway package)
- 56% supported flood protection (also included in the flood + waterway package).

District residents were also asked to rate their preferred level of service for activities currently undertaken in the District, where 1 = much less and 5 = much more.

Across all activities, preferred levels of service ranged from 3 (the same amount) to 4 (somewhat more) on average. The top five activities where a higher level of service was desired were:

- debris removal (average 4.08)
- weed control (average 3.90)
- grass cutting (average 3.82)
- desilting (average 3.79)
- tree work (average 3.77)

Figure 2: Average rating (out of 5) for preferred level of service across activities currently undertaken



This was largely consistent with the 21 comments received, the majority of which focussed on issues affecting drainage performance. Comments were centred on the following themes:

- A desire for existing drains to be better maintained (8 comments)
- A desire for increased removal of blackberries and weeds, which were considered to present a fire risk; some landowners also noted having to resort to undertaking weeding on their own properties (6 comments)
- Reports of existing drainage being insufficient to prevent flooding (6 comments)
- A desire for increased grass cutting (3 comments)
- An appreciation for the environmental values of the area, including habitat corridors for threatened species, and suggestion to divert water to create a wildlife park (2 comments)
- Other comments include concerns about the safety of open drains, the need for more education for those in flood-prone areas, and that drainage should be a shared responsibility across Victoria rather than user-pays.

COVID-19 engagement

As part of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic we added an additional stage to our engagement program. Noting that the final stage of our engagement program ran concurrently with the emergence of the pandemic and the first stage of social restrictions, this additional consultation sought to test and refine draft proposals on how we might ease bill impacts in the community in the immediate (year one) and medium term across the regulatory period.

For Koo Wee Rup–Longwarry Flood Protection District direct service customers, we proposed to delay the price increase and associated increase in service level for 2021-22 (i.e. continue with current levels of service and charge), with the intention to revisit our approach in 2022-23, subject to further community engagement at that time.

District Advisory Committee members and property owners were contacted via email to outline our proposed approach and invite feedback. Responses were received from 24 people, representing a very small proportion of about 0.65 per cent of the approximately 3,700 affected properties (a similar response rate to previous surveying of this community).

- Of the 24 people who responded to the email, 18 people supported the proposed delay (4 did not support the delay and 1 did not know).
- A majority of respondents (18) were very concerned about the financial impacts of COVID-19, and about a third (8) were personally financially impacted. A little over half were either very concerned (6) or slightly concerned (7) about being able to pay their bills.

Recommendation

For the Koo Wee Rup–Longwarry Flood Protection District, we will delay the price/service increase previously proposed for at least the first year of our Price Submission.

The proposed increase would have seen a moderate uplift in service levels (a combination of options 3 and 4), which represent a combination of activities to increase proactive maintenance, waterway improvements and flood protection at an average cost of \$237 per property per annum. This balances affordability with majority customer support to lift services above current levels on a fee-for-service basis.