



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

ABN 38 686 119 087

PO Box 29 Wentworth Falls NSW 2782

Phone: 0490 419 779

E-Mail: bmcs@bluemountains.org.au Web Site: www.bluemountains.org.au

Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

To:

Mayor Mark Greenhill Email: mgreenhill@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

Deputy Mayor Romola Email: rhollywood@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

Deputy Mayor Sarah Redshaw Email: sredshaw@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

Suzie Van Opdorp Email: svanopdorp@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

Brent Hoare Email: bhoare@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

Mick Fell Email: mfell@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

cc Dr Rosemary Dillon, Chief Executive Officer, Blue Mountains Council
council@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

24 April 2023

Dear Councillors

Council Election 2021 Candidates' Questionnaire – Environmental Budget

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society is a community volunteer organisation with over 900 members. The Society's aim is to help conserve the natural environment of the Blue Mountains and to increase awareness of the natural environment in general.

For the 2021 local council election the Society asked candidates three questions related to Council's expenditure on the environment (see the Society's website at <https://www.bluemountains.org.au/elections/bmce21/documents/bmce21-questionnaire-3nov21.pdf>). These questions were:

1. Do you support increasing the Council's natural environment budget to at least 5% of the Council's overall budget in 21/22 and then ongoing? (Council's natural environment budget for 20/21 was 4% of Council's overall budget (Blue Mountains Council Operational Plan 20-21 p69). Since 2018 the natural environment budget, as a percentage of Council's overall budget, has remained at 4% and not increased. This is inadequate given the Blue Mountains is surrounded by World Heritage and the significant natural areas Council manage.)
2. Do you support reinstating transparent reporting of Council's yearly natural environmental budget? (Prior to 2013, Council provided much more detailed public reporting on the planned expenditure of the natural environment budget. This has been discontinued and Council currently only provide an overall budget figure under the heading "Natural Environment" in the yearly Operational Plan. Without this detail, budget changes cannot be compared from one year to the next.)

3. Will you advocate for the introduction of a new budget item within the Natural Area Visitor Facilities for maintenance? (Maintenance of visitor facilities does not currently have a budget. This means that skilled Council staff from other areas are often deployed to do this work. A specific allocation for maintenance of walking tracks and lookouts, toilets etc would ensure that Council assets do not get run down and require a major overhaul.)

We are now writing to you as a local councillor who was elected to Council and who supported all three of the above proposals. The other elected Councillors who supported an increase and greater transparency in relation to Councils environmental budget are

Ward 1 Suzie Van Opdorp (Labor) and Sarah Redshaw (The Greens)
Ward 2 Romola Hollywood (Labor) and Brent Hoare (The Greens)
Ward 3 Mick Fell (Labor)
Ward 4 Mark Greenhill (Labor)

Your responses can be found on the Society website at
<https://www.bluemountains.org.au/elections/bmce21/bmce21-wx.shtml>.

The Society has undertaken a review of the Council's budget since 2017, based on figures published in Council's Operational Plans (Attachment A). This review indicates that:

- Natural Environment expenditure has **fallen** as a percentage of the Council's overall budget from **5%** in 2017/2018 to **3%** in 2022/23.
- Water Resource Management expenditure has **fallen** as a percentage of the Council's overall budget from **6%** in 2017/2018 to **0.6%** in 2022/23.
- Natural Area Visitor Facilities expenditure has **increased** as a percentage of the Council's overall budget from **3%** in 2017/18 to **3.7%** in 2022/23.
- The combined budgets of Natural Environment, Water Resource Management and Natural Area Visitor Facilities has **fallen** as a percentage of the Council's overall budget from **14%** in 2017/2018 to **7.3%** in 2022/23.
- There **was no detailed breakdown of the Natural Environment budget** in the Operational Plans with only gross figures provided. Gross figures are also only provided for the Water Resource Management and Natural Area Visitor Facilities budget. It is noted that in the Operational Plans for 20/21 and 21/22 specific capital work budget items in the Water Resource Management and Natural Area Visitor Facilities areas were identified, but this did not occur in the 2022/2023 Operational Plan
- **No specific budget item for maintenance** was identified within the Natural Area Visitor Facilities budget in the 20/21, 21/22 and 22/23 Operational Plans.

The Society notes that the Natural Area Visitor Facilities budget has increased slightly as a percentage of the Council's overall budget since 2017/18. Given the significant maintenance backlog in terms of natural area facilities that Council has previously identified, and the fact that Council has previously identified this as a significant asset risk, the Society is supportive of this investment by Council. However, it is very concerning that the Natural Environment and Water Resource Management budget as a percentage of the Council's overall budget has declined significantly since 2017/2018.

The Society understands that Councillors are currently considering the Operational Plan for 23/24. The Society asks that you, as a Councillor who supported the proposals put forward by the Society in the council election questionnaire in 2021, ensure that in the Council's 23/24 Operational Plan:

1. Council's Natural Environment budget is at least 5% of the Council's overall budget.
2. There is transparent and detailed reporting of planned expenditure of the Natural Environmental budget.
3. A new budget item within the Natural Area Visitor Facilities budget for maintenance is included.

The Society looks forward to hearing from you that the commitments you made in the 2021 Candidates' Questionnaire will be realised in the Council's 23/24 Operational Plan.

If you have any questions in regard to this letter please contact me on email

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Yours sincerely,

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Tara Cameron
Senior Vice President
Blue Mountains Conservation Society