This survey was undertaken as part of LGNSW’s Council Roadside Reserves Project.

This project has been supported by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.
1. General Overview

1.1 Background
The Council Roadside Reserves project, funded by NSW Environmental Trust and managed by LGNSW, supports councils to embed roadside reserve management into their planning, reporting and asset management systems.

As part of this project LGNSW developed a short natural assets survey, inviting all councils in NSW to respond. The survey (Appendix 1) sought to obtain a better understanding of how councils manage their natural assets (such as trees, waterways, bushland and roadside reserves) and to better understand the barriers, opportunities and interest in including natural assets in council’s overall asset management planning.

The responses to the survey will be used to develop guidelines and practical advice on integrating natural assets into existing systems.

2. Responses

2.1 General
The survey was open from 28 August 2018 until 12 September 2018, with 54 completed surveys submitted. Responses were received from a wide range of councils of all sizes and from urban, regional and rural areas (see Appendix 2).

Responses were received from 44 different councils and were completed by a broad range of council staff, including asset managers, environmental officers, natural area managers, engineers, open space staff, tree officers and planning officers.

2.2 Systems and Natural Assets
These questions related to the type of natural assets councils manage and the systems they use for their wider asset management planning. 70% of respondents indicated that their council uses a specific asset management IT system, and of these over 50% use either TechOne or Civica.

Councils manage a range of natural assets as outlined in Figure 1. Examples of “other” natural assets include; waterbodies, wetlands, beaches, foreshores, gravel quarries, dunes and raingardens.

![Figure 1: Natural Assets that are managed by councils](image)
Many councils have included natural assets in council policies and plans, see Figure 2. “Other” policies and plans include; council reserve plans, roadside environment guides, tree management plans, environment policies, operational plans, section 94 plans, plans of management, community strategic plans and delivery plans.

![Figure 2: Natural Assets included in council policies and plans](image)

2.3 Councils that have Integrated Natural Assets into their Asset Management Systems

The responses and information provided in this section relate only to those councils that indicated they have integrated natural assets into their asset management system.

46% of respondents indicated that they have integrated some or all of their natural assets into their asset management system. Benefits listed, include:

- Risk identification
- Raised awareness across council departments of natural assets to ensure they are considered in designs, planning, maintenance works, etc.
- Placing a value on them to ensure appropriate funding is allocated for their maintenance and capital improvements
- Raised awareness of natural assets for councillors and the community
- Strategic management and prioritisation.

Common difficulties that were identified, include:

- System compatibility and integration
- Difficult to get buy-in from other divisions
- Time consuming
- Availability of staff
- Classification of asset classes
- Resourcing asset capture
- Definition of natural assets
- Different priorities within the various council divisions, also competing for funding
- Challenge to find suitable method to predict future maintenance costs.

Common drivers, include:

- Cost capture
- Improved efficiency and reporting
- Legislative requirements
- Efficient planning
Better management
Risk reduction
Improved recognition of natural assets and their value
Holistic approach to asset management and decision making
Management directive
Community expectations.

2.4 Councils that have not Integrated Natural Assets into their Asset Management Systems

The responses and information provided in this section relate only to those councils that indicated they had not integrated natural assets into their asset management system. Approximately 50% of councils indicated that they had either not integrated natural assets into their asset management system or were not sure.

- 83% thought that integrating natural assets would be of benefit to council
- 87% indicated that they would be interested in updating their Asset Management Plan to include natural asset information (see Figure 3 below)
- 62% indicated that they have considered integrating natural assets into council systems and are interested in more information
- 21% indicated that they have not considered it, but may do in the future, and
- 14% have thought about it, but have decided not to integrate, the reasons provided include:
  - Lack of support from within council
  - Small size of council and
  - Complicated nature of integrating with no good examples.

Councils indicated that the following resources could help them with the integration process:
- Assistance in capturing the natural asset information
- Assistance in determining the valuation and depreciation of the asset
- Examples of how other councils have integrated natural assets into planning
- Seminars
- Templates
- Natural asset plan development guidelines and standards
- Funding
- Technical assistance.

Figure 3: Systems councils are interested in updating to include natural asset information
2.5 Natural Asset Data Collection

The responses and information provided in this section were for all respondents.

70% of all respondents indicated that they do collect natural assets data, of these:
- 33% indicated that they store their natural assets data in the same way as the infrastructure or built asset data
- 42% store it in a different way, and
- 21% were not sure.

89% of Natural Asset condition assessments are undertaken by council staff

71% of those who collect natural asset data undertake condition assessments of their natural assets. The funding for undertaking these assessments is predominantly from council budget (86%) (eg operational budget, revenue, environmental levy) or grants. Figure 4 shows the frequency of these condition assessments.

![Figure 4: Frequency of condition assessment](image)

2.6 Natural Asset Maintenance and Management

Nearly 72% of councils indicated that they use documents to guide their natural asset maintenance. Figure 5 indicates the variety of documents used by councils, noting that many use a combination of documents. Standardised documents assist councils to define what to maintain, how often and why. The documents also assist when maintenance is undertaken by a variety of staff and contractors.

Over 90% of natural assets are maintained (either in part or wholly) by council staff, see Figure 6
Maintenance of natural assets varied across councils, with council staff, contractors and volunteers predominantly undertaking the maintenance work, see Figure 6 below. Many councils indicated they use a combination of the above to undertake their maintenance work.

While the management of natural assets differs from council to council, the responsibility is predominately within council’s environment team, see Figure 7.
2.6 Natural Asset Funding and Valuation

Funding for the maintenance and management of natural assets is often highlighted as a major challenge for councils. As indicated in Figure 8, the majority of funding comes from councils’ internal budgets.

Only 19% of respondents indicated that their council undertakes financial valuation of their natural assets. Of these, 60% of them undertake their valuation every 2 to 5 years. The most commonly used software to guide valuations, include:
The challenges to valuing natural assets were varied, however those commonly reported include:

- Expertise, time, resources and budget
- Compatibility with data collected and software
- Lack of an agreed standard for costing/valuation
- Resistance within council in assigning a dollar value to a natural asset (not environmental value)
- Environmental issues such as drought.

3. Conclusion

The responses to the natural assets survey indicate there is considerable interest in this topic from council staff. It also identifies that councils manage and integrate their natural assets in various ways. Councils clearly sought more information and additional resources to support them in this process. Nearly all respondents indicated that they would like to receive more information about LGNSW’s natural assets project and would welcome further involvement and engagement in building their skills and expertise in natural asset management processes.
Appendix A: Natural Assets Survey Questions

Q1. Contact details

Q2. Does your council use a specific asset management IT system? (eg TechOne, Civica, Confirm).
   • Yes, please specify
   • No
   • Not sure

Q3. What natural assets does council currently manage? (select all that apply)
   • Bushland
   • Street trees
   • Waterways
   • Roadside reserves
   • Parkland
   • Other (please specify)

Q4. Have you integrated any of these natural assets into council’s Asset Management System? If yes, please specify which natural assets are included, for example roadside reserves, street trees, bushland, waterways)
   • Yes
   • No
   • Not sure

Q5. Are natural assets included in any of the following council policies, plans, etc? (select all that apply)
   • Asset Management Policy
   • Asset Management Plan
   • Resource Plan
   • Financial Plan
   • No, not currently included
   • Other (please specify)

The following questions were only asked of those who have not integrated natural assets into council systems (those who answered no or not sure to Q4)

Q6. Do you think integrating natural assets into council’s system, plans or policies would benefit council? If yes, please indicate how.
   • Yes
   • No
   • Not sure

Q7. Have you considered including natural assets in council’s asset management system?
   • No, and not interested at this stage
• No, but may include in the future
• Yes, and interested in the findings of LGNSW's current investigation
• Yes, but decided not to include (please share your reasons behind your decision not to include)

Q8. Which systems would council be interested in updating to include natural assets information?
• Asset Management Plan
• Asset Management System
• Financial Plan
• Asset Management Policy
• Resource Plan

Q9. Are there any specific resources that could assist you in this process? (open ended question)

The following questions were only asked of those who have integrated natural assets into council systems (those who answered "yes" to Q4)

Q10. How has integrating natural assets into council’s systems, plans or policies benefited council? (open ended question)

Q11. Please provide some general advice on the process council followed in integrating natural assets into council's Asset Management System (open ended questions)
   What was the integration process?
   Would you repeat it?
   Would you change anything?

Q12. Did you experience any challenges, and how did you overcome them? (eg system compatibility, difficult to get buy-in from other divisions) (open ended question)

Q13. What were the drivers behind integrating natural assets into your asset management system? (eg efficiency, cost-benefit) (open ended question)

Q14. Do you have anything else about the integration process that you would like to share? (open ended question)

Q15. Would you be willing to have your experience documented as a case study for the LGNSW project?
   • Yes
   • No

The following question was asked of all respondents

Q16. Do you collect natural assets data?
   • Yes, please specify (eg type, age, location, maintenance requirements)
   • No
• Not sure

The following questions were only asked of those who answered “yes” to Q.16

Q17. Is the natural assets data stored in the same way as the infrastructure or built asset data?
   • Yes
   • No
   • Not sure

Q18. Do you undertake condition assessments of your natural assets?
   • Yes
   • No
   • Not sure

Q19. If you undertake condition assessments, please provide additional details below (open ended questions)
   How often do you assess the condition?
   How is the frequency determined?
   Who undertakes the assessment (eg council staff, contractors, consultants)?
   How do you fund the assessments (eg council budget, grants)?

The following questions were asked of all respondents

Q20. Have you developed any of the following to guide your natural asset maintenance? (Please select all that apply)
   • Maintenance specifications
   • Standard operating procedures
   • Levels of service
   • Performance measures
   • None of the above
   • Other (please specify)

Q21. Who maintains your natural assets? (please select all that apply)
   • Council staff
   • Contractors
   • Volunteers
   • Other (please specify)

Q22. How do you fund maintenance and management of natural assets? (please select all that apply)
   • Council budget
   • Council levy
   • Grant funding
   • Other (please specify)
Q23. Who has responsibility for managing your natural assets? (Please select all that apply)
- Asset Management Team
- Environment Team
- Engineering Team
- Other (please specify)

Q24. Do you undertake a financial valuation of your natural assets?
- Yes
- No
- Not sure

The following questions were only asked of those who answered “yes” to Q.24

Q25. How often do you update or revalue your natural assets?
- 0-1 years
- 1-2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years
- Never

Q26. Do you engage specialists to undertake the natural assets valuation?
- Yes, who undertakes this valuation for you?
- No
- Not sure

Q27. Is there any specific software you use to guide the natural assets valuation? (open ended question)

Q28. What challenges did you face, or are you facing, in valuing natural assets? (open ended question)

The following questions were asked of all respondents

Q29. Any other comments you would like to make?

Q30. Would you like to receive further information about our Natural Assets project?
- Yes, please
- No, thanks

Q31. Are you happy for us to contact you if we have any further questions?
- Yes, please
- No, thanks
### Appendix B: Councils who responded to the natural assets survey

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<th>Lake Macquarie City Council</th>
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<td>MidCoast Council</td>
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<td>Bayside Council</td>
<td>Mid-Western Regional Council</td>
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<td>Narromine Shire Council</td>
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