

Undergrounding powerlines

Community engagement
summary report

October 2022

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1. Overview

An Undergrounding Powerlines Policy was developed to consider the prioritisation of undergrounding powerlines in association with Council projects, public open space and the general street network. The policy also considers possible funding models and associated criteria for undergrounding works to occur.

Community engagement on the draft Policy was undertaken from 1 August to 4 September 2022 to help Council to refine the Policy and understand community sentiment regarding the processes and procedures that will feed into the policy.

Approximately 370 people participated in the engagement program via a variety of methods: 344 online survey participants, 12 contributions via correspondence, and presentations to the Bayside Healthy Ageing Reference Group and Disability Access and Inclusion Advisory Committee members.

1.1 Key findings

- **Strong desire for underground powerlines**
81% of participants would like their powerlines to be underground, with 12.5% opposed and 5.5% not sure. Three participants already had underground powerlines.
- **Prioritise undergrounding works on significant street upgrades and open space**
Significant street upgrades were the highest priority area for undergrounding among most participants, followed by public open space, and activity centres.
Car park upgrades were ranked as least important for undergrounding works.
- **Grants and Council-funding works preferred funding methods**
Government grants was the funding method with the highest level of support (87%), followed by Council-funded works (84%).
There was a mixed response to the Special Charge Scheme, with 74% of participants equally split between *Definitely consider* and *May consider* (119), and slightly less selecting *Would not consider* (91, 26%).
The least favoured funding method was full cost covered (upfront) by the community, with 201 participants (64%) selecting *Would not consider*.
- **Agreement that draft policy is clear, consistent and fair**
The majority of participants agreed that the draft policy was easy to understand, clearly outlines the funding options, and sets out a consistent and fair approach.
- **Fairly positive sentiment towards the policy**
Around one third of participants (122) liked the draft Underground Powerlines Policy and 31% (108) were “ok with it”. Among the remaining third of participants: 19% (66) had some reservations, 10% didn’t like it at all, and 3% were unsure.
- **Representative community groups had concerns about cost implications**
Community committees representative of older adults and/or people living with disability were supportive or neutral about the concept of undergrounding powerlines. However, they raised concerns about the financial implications of a Special Charge Scheme on vulnerable residents. These residents include people with a disability who are more likely to be underemployed and, therefore, least likely to be able to afford a Special Charge. It was viewed that robust support provisions would need to be in place for these residents.
- **Ideas to improve the policy**
Participants also provided comments to improve the draft Policy related to:
 - Electricity infrastructure providers, federal, state or local government should cover the cost(s), or compel developers to help cover costs

- Additional clarity on cost, timelines, responsibility, maintenance and relation to strategies and plans
- Consideration of other above ground wires, including internet
- Comments also provided in this section included support and prioritisation for undergrounding, contrasting with other participants that did not believe undergrounding is necessary and had a distrust of Council.

1.2 Next steps

Information gathered through the community engagement program will be considered by Council officers and amendments made to the draft Policy, as required.

Council will consider community feedback and whether to adopt a proposed Undergrounding Powerlines Policy at its November 2022 meeting.

2. Background

This document provides a summary of stakeholder and community feedback on the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy.

Putting powerlines underground can lead to more streets lined with dense tree canopies and help to prevent electricity outages during wild weather, however the costs can be very expensive (likely be more than \$17,500 – \$22,500 per property). As well as this, powerlines are not Council-owned infrastructure.

Some sectors of the Bayside community are keen to introduce undergrounding of powerlines to improve visual amenity and the impact on the environment.

The draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy provides four funding methods which could support any future undergrounding of powerlines, which are:

- Full cost to be borne by Council through Capital Works funded projects
- Government grants – No grants currently available, however would need to continuously monitor.
- Special Rates and Special Charge Scheme
- Full cost to be covered by community

A Special Rate and Special Charge Scheme enables councils to support the delivery of projects that directly benefit a select group of property owners. Property owners pay for part or all of the works over time through a charge on their rates notice. A special charge can also apply to property owners even if they don't support the project. As this was a funding method for undergrounding powerlines, a draft Special Rate and Special Charge Scheme Policy was also open from community engagement at the same time as the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy.

3. Definitions and scope

The level of influence for this engagement program was at the consult level, where Council sought to obtain public feedback for analysis, alternatives, and/or decision-making.

The community consultation is able to influence the process and procedures which feed into the Undergrounding Powerlines Policy, but not the format of how a Special Charge Scheme would be initiated and carried out, as this is governed by the Local Government Act and selected Ministerial Guidelines.

Within this document, reference is made to stakeholders. These stakeholders are:

- Bayside residents

- Developers
- Environmental groups.

3.1 Related Council documents and consultations

- Draft Special Rate and Special Charge Scheme Policy
- Urban Forest Strategy 2021

4. Consultation process

4.1 Consultation purpose

The consultation was designed to provide stakeholders and the broader community with the opportunity to provide input into processes and procedures that feed into the Undergrounding Powerlines Policy.

4.2 Consultation methodology

There were four stages to this project: the first was to investigate options to support undergrounding powerlines and the second was drafting a policy. This report concludes the third stage, community consultation, to seek feedback on the draft policy. The final stage will consider the feedback and make relevant amendments to the draft policy, with Council expected to consider a proposed policy in November 2022.



4.3 Consultation phase

Approximately 390 people participated in the engagement program from 1 August to 4 September 2022 via a variety of different methods.

During the engagement, the following activities were undertaken:

Details	Activity
344 participants	Online survey Hosted on Council's Have Your Say digital engagement platform.
7 contributions 6 contributors	Online Q&A Question and answer forum hosted on Have Your Say
28 participants	Reference Groups Presentations to Committees of Council and reference groups, including the Disability Access and Inclusion Advisory Committee, and the Bayside Healthy Ageing Reference Group.
12 contributions	Correspondence 12 community members direct contacted Council officers(s) to provide feedback via email or telephone on the draft Policy, including some requests for underground their powerlines.

4.4 Communications tools

The following communication tools were used to encourage participation in the engagement:

- email notification to Have Your Say members (4,195)
- website news story and This Week in Bayside e-newsletter (11,000)
- Let's Talk Bayside magazine (41,000)
- Social media posts – organic and paid (50 likes, 59 comments, 2 shares)
- direct emails to key stakeholder groups
- Digital screens in Libraries and Corporate Centre
- Postcards and Corporate Centre (300).

5. Participant profile

The following table shows the 2021 Census data for the whole of Bayside compared to the demographics of participants. Participants were predominantly:

- 45 to 74 years old
- From Beaumaris, Brighton, Hampton, Black Rock, Brighton East and Sandringham.

There was only one participant aged 18 to 34 years old, despite this age group making up 15.6% of the population. There was also underrepresentation from Highett, Brighton East and Hampton East.

	Demographic	Bayside 2021 Census	Participants (%)
Gender	Male	47.8%	167 (49%)
	Female	52.2%	159 (46%)
	Unknown	-	13 (4%)
	Other identity	-	1 (0%)
Age	18-24	7.8%	1 (0%)
	25-34	7.8%	0 (0%)
	35-44	11.6%	41 (12%)
	45-54	16.0%	72 (21%)
	55 -64	13.8%	93 (27%)
	65 - 74	11.0%	74 (22%)
	75 - 84	6.8	41 (12%)
	85+	3.4%	7 (2%)
	Undisclosed	-	
Suburb	Beaumaris	12.8%	69 (20%)
	Black Rock	6.2%	35 (10%)
	Brighton	23.7%	71 (21%)
	Brighton East	15.6%	36 (10%)
	Cheltenham	3.9%	19 (6%)
	Hampton	13.6%	40 (12%)
	Hampton East	4.9%	10 (3%)

	Highett	7.6%	17 (5%)
	Sandringham	11.8%	42 (12%)
	Outside Bayside	-	1%

6. Consultation findings

The following section summarises the key themes which arose in community feedback on the draft Underground Powerlines Policy. In the interest of stakeholder and community privacy, individual quotes have not been included within this public document. Where there was more than one mention of a topic or item, the number of mentions has been specified in brackets and italics.

6.1 Support for actions

When asked “Would you like the powerlines to be underground on your street?” 81% of participants (279 people) responded “yes”, with 13% responding “No”, and 6% unsure.

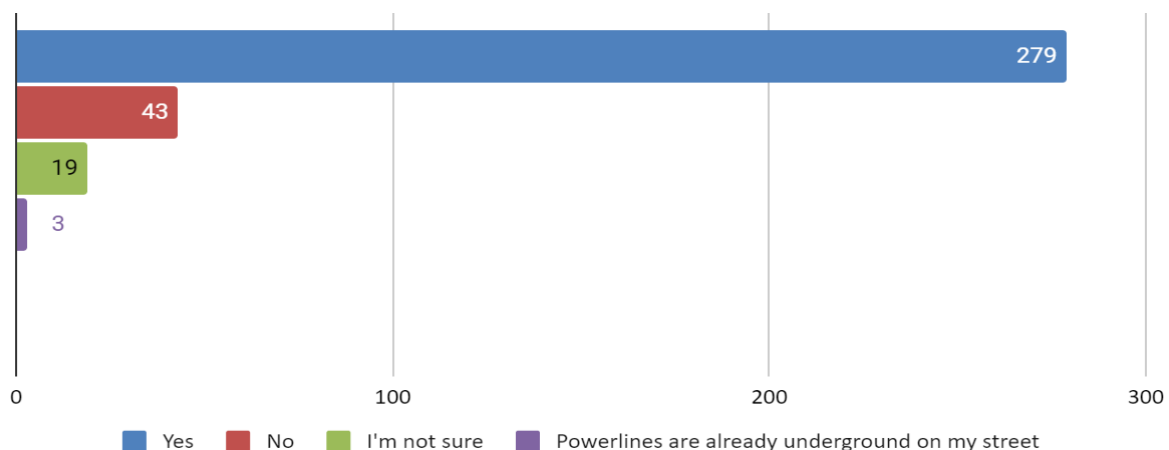
35% of participants (122) liked the draft Underground Powerlines Policy overall and 31% (108) stated “I’m ok with it”. 19% (66) had some reservations, 10% didn’t like it at all, and 3% were unsure.

6.2 Item-specific feedback

6.2.1 Preference for underground powerlines

Participants were asked if they would like powerlines to be undergrounded in their street, with 344 responses provided. 81% stated they would like their powerlines to be underground, with 12.5% opposed and 5.5% not sure. Three participants already had underground powerlines.

Chart 1: Would you like powerlines underground on your street?



6.2.2 Funding methods

Participants were asked “Under which funding methods would you be likely to consider supporting the undergrounding of powerlines on your street in the future?”, with the options of selecting *Definitely consider*, *May consider* and *Would not consider*.

The funding method with the highest level of support was Government Grants, with 294 participants selecting *Definitely consider*, followed by Council-funded works with 277 participants.

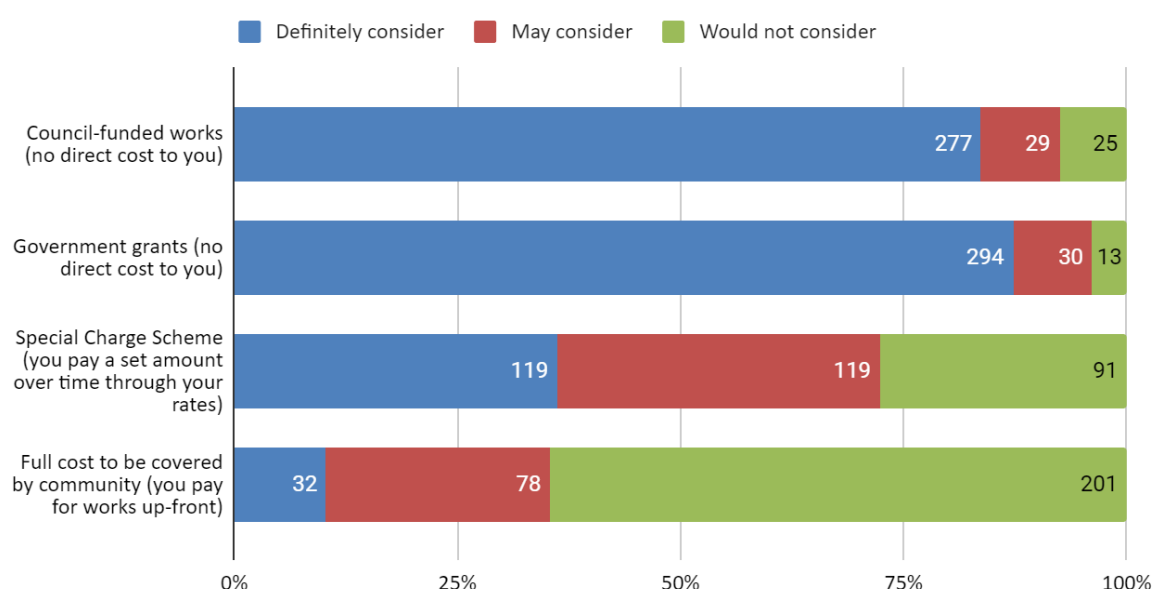
Participants shared a mixed response when asked if they support a Special Charge Scheme as a funding source for undergrounding of powerlines, with equal numbers of participants selecting *Definitely consider* and *May consider* (119, 32%), and slightly less selecting *Would not consider* (91, 28%).

The least favoured funding method was full cost covered by the community, with 201 participants (67%) selecting *Would not consider*.

Under the draft Special Charge Scheme Policy, which was also open for consultation at the same time, for a Special Charge Scheme to progress beyond initial request it must have the support of at least 80% of affected property owners. Exceptions to this include where drainage is required for public health reasons or Council is a significant contributor to the scheme.

While a Special Charge Scheme would apply to a small area, such as a specific street, if participant views were seen to be representative of the broader Bayside community, 80% agreement would be a high threshold to achieve.

Chart 2: Likelihood of consideration of funding methods to support underground powerlines on your street

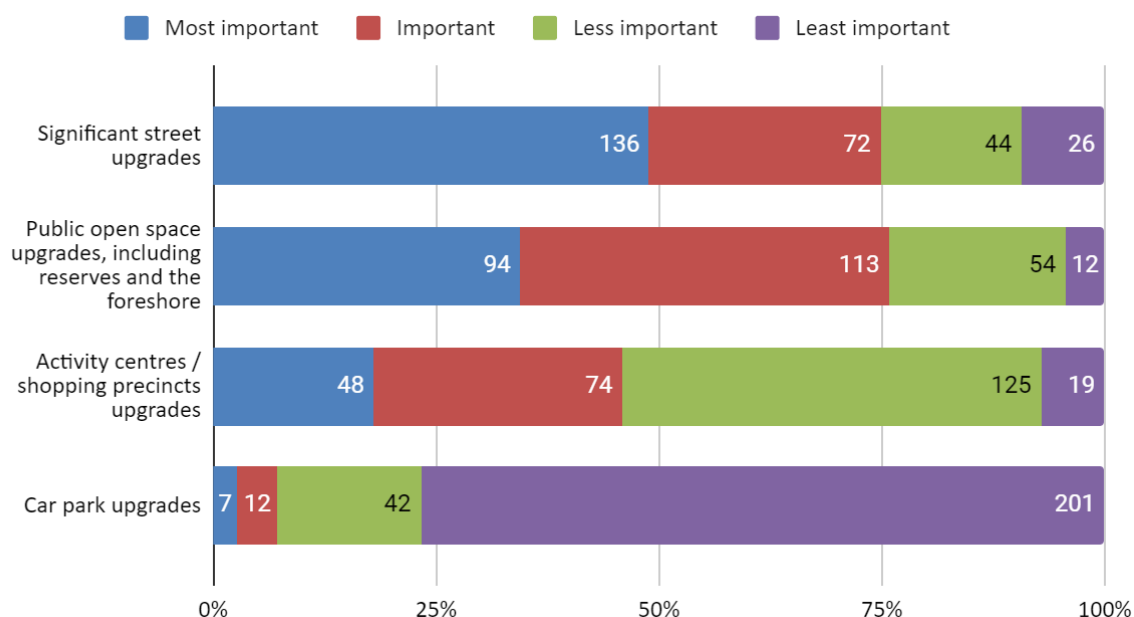


6.2.3 Areas to prioritise underground powerlines

Participants were asked “Where do you think Council should prioritise undergrounding works?”, with participants able to select areas in order of priority - with 1 representing most important and 4 the least important.

The majority of participants selected significant street upgrades as the highest priority area for undergrounding, followed by public open space, and activity centres. Participants ranked car park upgrades as the least important for undergrounding works.

Chart 3: “Where do you think Council should prioritise undergrounding works?”



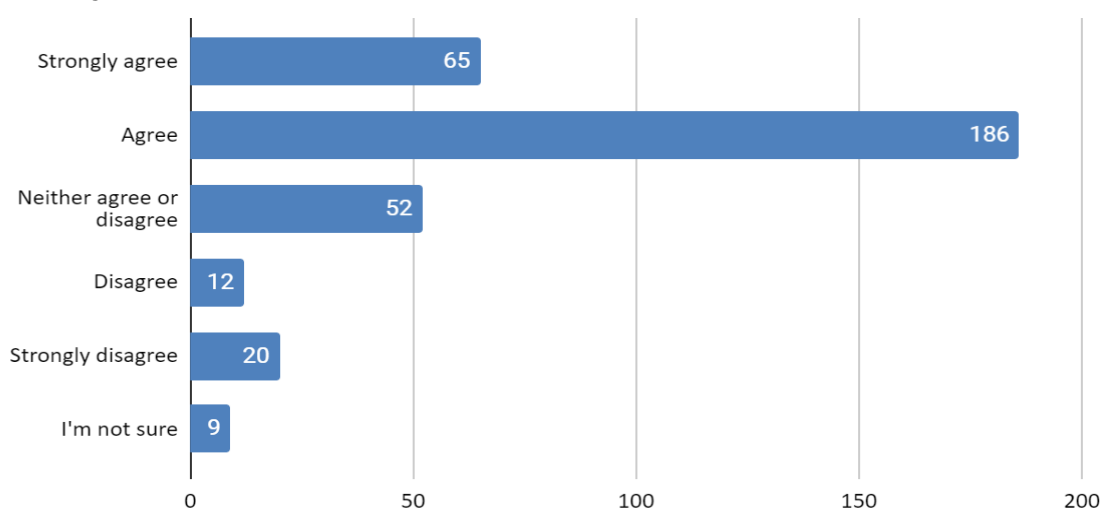
6.2.4 Agreement with statements about the draft Policy

Participants were asked “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the below statements about the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy?”, with the option of selecting strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, strongly disagree and I’m not sure.

6.2.5 Easy to understand

The majority of participants agree that the Undergrounding Powerlines Policy is easy to understand, with 18.9% (65) of participants strongly agreeing, and 54.1% (186) agreeing. There were 15.1% (52) of participants that neither agreed nor disagreed with the policy being easy to understand, with 3.5% (12) disagreeing and 5.8% (20) participants strongly disagreeing.

Chart 4: ‘easy to understand’

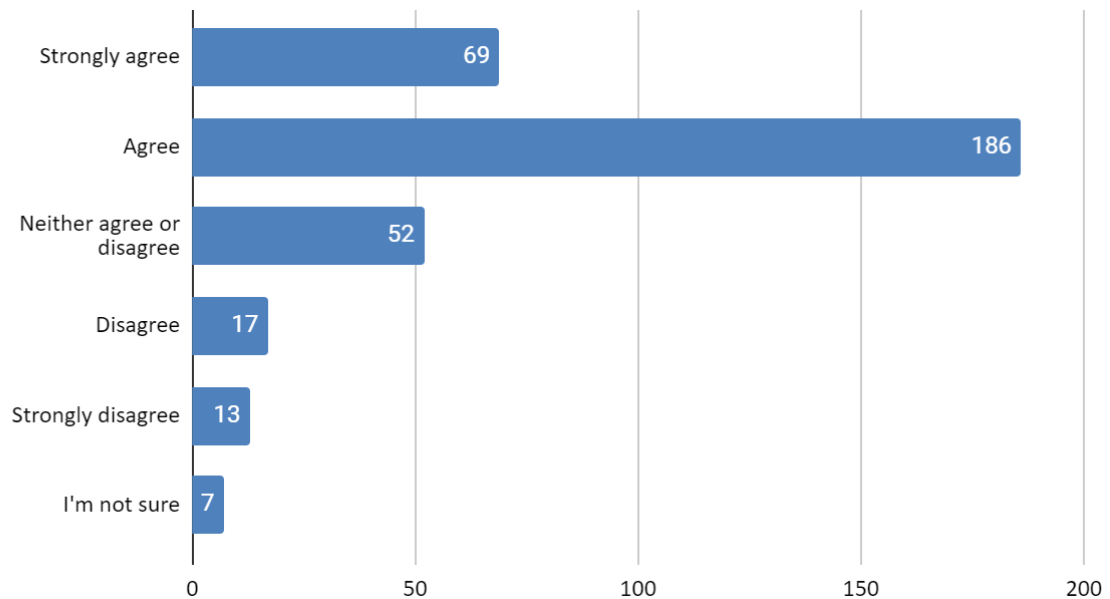


6.2.6 Clearly outlines the funding options

The majority of participants selected that they agreed that the funding options in the draft policy were clearly outlined, with 20% (69) of participants strongly agreeing, and 54.1% (186) agreeing. There were 52 participants (15.1%) that neither agreed nor disagreed that the

policy clearly outlines the funding options, with 4.9% (17) participants disagreeing and 3.8% (13) strongly disagreeing.

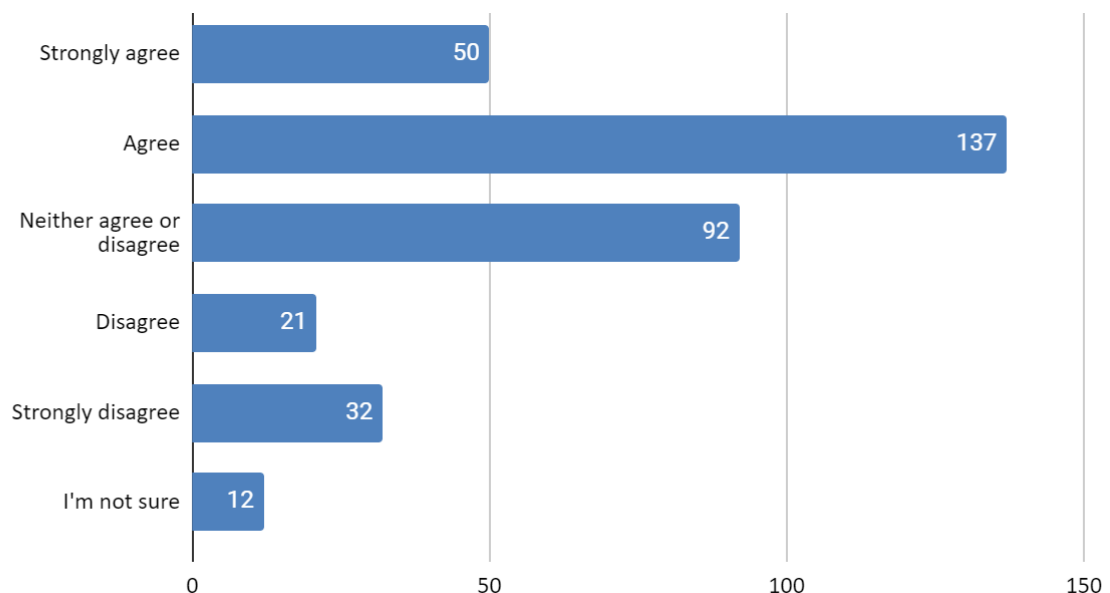
Chart 5: Clarity of funding options



6.2.7 Sets out a consistent and fair approach

The majority of participants agreed with the statement that the draft policy “Sets out a consistent and fair approach” (50 participants strongly agree and 137 agree). A smaller proportion disagreed with the statement (21 participants selected disagree and 32 strongly disagree). Over a quarter of participants neither agree or disagree with the statement (27%, 92 participants).

Chart 6: Consistent and fair approach



Overall, the majority of participants find the draft policy easy to understand, clearly outlines the funding options, and sets out a consistent and fair approach.

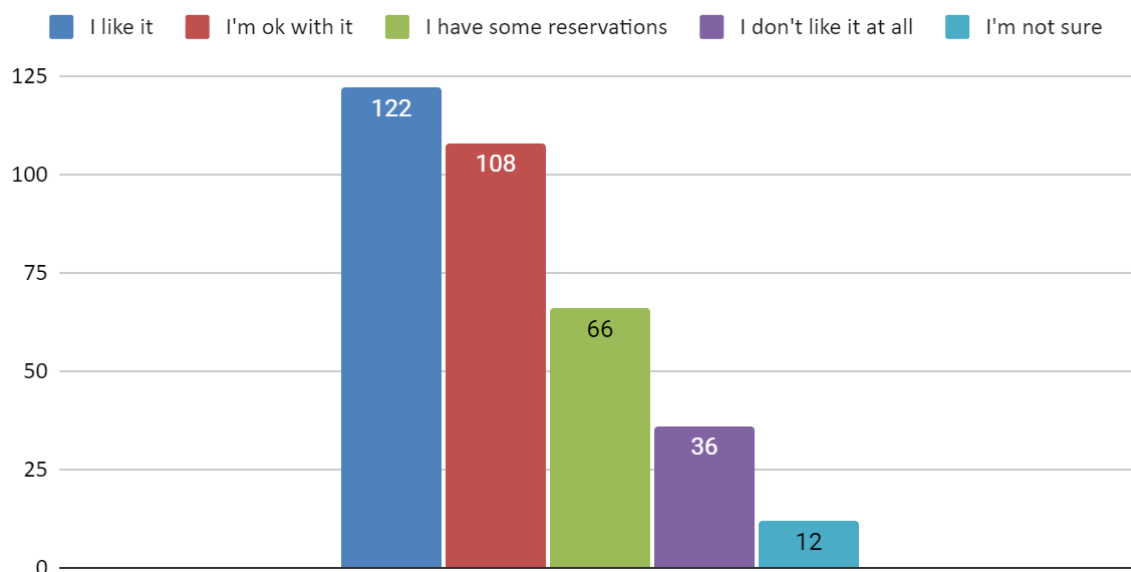
6.2.8 Sentiment on draft Policy

Participants were asked “How do you feel about the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy overall?” with the ability to select the following options:

- I like it
- I’m ok with it
- I have some reservations
- I don’t like it at all
- I’m not sure.

The highest selected sentiment was “I like it” with 35% of participants (122) selecting this option, followed by “I’m ok with it” with 31% (108). There were 66 participants (19%) that had some reservations about the policy, and 36 participants (10%) that selected “I don’t like it at all”. 12 participants selected “I’m not sure” about the policy overall.

Chart 7: “How do you feel about the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy overall?”



6.2.9 Suggestions to improve draft Policy

Participants were asked “Would you like to suggest any ways we could improve the draft Undergrounding Powerlines Policy?” with 183 participants responding.

A range of suggestions were obtained:

Topic	Community feedback
Electricity companies, Federal, State and Local Government should cover the cost (43)	Responsibility of Energy Companies Responsibility of State Government Responsibility of Federal Government Residents should not cover the costs
Clarity (36)	Clarity regarding overall cost to ratepayers Comparison of costs across different council areas More details on the funding options, payment options for residents and exclusions More details on the timeframe of the project Need to understand maintenance costs of overhead lines currently

	Importance of the policy being linked to other Council and State policies and strategies
Prioritise undergrounding (30)	Start the process now Believe it is good idea Desire for it to be high priority
Unconvinced it is necessary (18)	Not necessary in the current financial climate Do not see benefit There are more important issues that Council should focus on
Internet, phone, cable, power and light poles (16)	Concern this will not address NBN, phone and cable lines/wires
Compel developers (10)	Property developers should bear the majority of the cost of undergrounding in the area of their developments
Safety (10)	Believe that overground wires are dangerous / a safety hazard
Distrust of Council (8)	Concern that Council does not manage current responsibilities Believe that this policy is a waste of time

Other suggestions to improve the content of the draft policy include considering the significant inconvenience to residents (5), the importance of prioritising main streets (4) or residential streets (3), including long-term payment options (4) and options for people on low incomes (4).

There were a small number of comments with suggestions on improving the format of the policy; suggesting it is in plain English, more concise and enticing to read.

6.3 Direct feedback

Council received feedback from 12 residents in addition to the online survey, and notes some of these residents had completed the survey as well as sending direct feedback.

The key points from the direct feedback are:

- Expressed interest in undergrounding for their street (7)
- Concern regarding other overhead cables (2)
- Not in favour / waste of time and money (2)
- Lighting and other infrastructure needs to be considered at the same time (2)
- Alternative funding model (1)
- Electricity company is responsible for powerlines (1).

6.4 Presentations to key stakeholder groups

Presentations were made to Council's Bayside Healthy Ageing Reference Group and the Disability Access and Inclusion Advisory Committee to seek feedback from representatives of key community stakeholders.

Bayside Healthy Ageing Reference Group

Members generally viewed undergrounding powerlines positively, however, members were concerned about high potential costs that would be imposed of older members of the community under a Special Charge Scheme scenario.

Some were not in favour of undergrounding powerlines as they are used by native possums to cross the road, and this could lead to more road kill.

Disability Access and Inclusion Advisory Group

Members expressed strong concerns about the costs to undergrounding powerlines, and the Special Charge Scheme funding option, for the following reasons:

- These costs can push people over the edge or force them to move from an area.
- People with a disability more likely to be underemployed and may be least likely to afford this.
- Need more detail on Financial Hardship Policy to ensure our most vulnerable residents are protected if they oppose a Special Charge Scheme.

7. Project evaluation

This report presents the findings from the analysis of the community feedback gathered during community engagement from 1 August to 4 September 2022.

The engagement program received a total of 356 direct responses, including 344 surveys completed via Have Your Say and 12 email or phone submissions.

Communications to encourage participation attracted 1,570 unique visitors to the project page, and were sent to every household via an article in *Let's Talk Bayside* magazine, as well as to over 11,000 community members via email newsletters or notifications.

Broad stakeholder reach was achieved:

- Broad participation spread across the municipal demographics, noting some suburbs underrepresented.
- The demographic profile of the survey respondents was skewed towards older over younger respondents, which may have an impact on the results.
- Very high level of participation, particularly for engagement on a policy document.
- The community engagement project was not a random sample survey of the community, and the results reflect the views of those in the community sufficiently engaged with both Council and undergrounding powerlines issues to choose to participate in the consultation.

Engagement targets for the Have Your Say webpages were that:

- 20% of visits would last at least one active minute (exceeded, 53%)
- 10% of visits would have at least two actions performed, such as moving around the project page or clicking on links (exceeded, 35%)
- 5% of visits had at least one contribution made (exceeded, 19%)

Satisfaction with engagement process

Survey participants were highly satisfied with the consultation process and materials, with nearly all participants selecting they had the required information to participate, and it was very (50%) or mostly (38%) easy to find/understand. Almost 4% reported it was mostly hard to find/understand and 3% found it very hard, another 5% were not sure.

Error corrections

Some residents provided direct feedback, noting the dates published in *Let's Talk Bayside* magazine for the consultation period were incorrect. The survey was reopened to enable participants to provide feedback beyond the official consultation close of 4 September 2022.

Engagement plan

The Engagement Plan Overview for this project was published and is available to view at:

yoursay.bayside.vic.gov.au/powerlines/engagement-plan-overview