

THE CITY OF
GREATER GEELONG

RABBIT CONTROL PLAN – PRE-DRAFT CONSULTATION REPORT

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OCTOBER 2019

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Executive Summary

The City is developing a Rabbit Control Plan. This plan will have a long-term, integrated management focus to ensure the City can successfully control rabbits on City-managed reserves and roadsides.

The City receives many queries from the community about rabbits and how they are being controlled. Pest control is a complex issue and there are often varied and conflicting community views on what actions the City should take to control rabbits.

The City undertook a community consultation process prior to the development of the Draft - Rabbit Control Plan. This report has been written to provide a summary of the key findings and observations provided by the community during the pre-draft consultation period that occurred during two phases:

1. December 2018 and January 2019. 16 participants via a workshop and a feedback form.
2. August to October 2019. 90 participants via three workshops and a survey.

WHAT WE HEARD

- A total of 580 specific comments were received during the pre-draft consultation phases across all consultation options.
- The highest number of comments received (239) related to actions that the City could include in the Action Plan to fulfil a variety of roles to support the community. The next highest number of comments (176) identified problem locations or characteristics of rabbit prone landscapes.
- Over two thirds (68%) of respondents stated that the damage caused by rabbits has increased in the past three years. Only 7% thought that impacts had decreased.
- Ninety percent of survey participants were concerned about the damage rabbits are causing to native flora and fauna.
- The majority of the comments received about rabbit problem areas identified specific City-managed reserves and roadsides of concern.
- Participants who control rabbits on their land mostly bait using pindone, perform fumigation and remove harbour.
- Views expressed about the different control methods were both positive and negative for the use of pindone. Only positive comments were received for warren destruction activities and the implementation of an integrated control program.
- Over 40% of the total comments received related to how the community could be supported to control rabbits. Most of these comments related to program facilitation and coordination (95)
- Fifty of the facilitation/coordination comments were about how the City should coordinate and partner our efforts with the community and other stakeholders. Another 22 comments mentioned the different stakeholders the City can partner with as part of our rabbit control program.
- Over a third of the 91 community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regards to communication about rabbits and the harm they cause.
- Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help and more community rabbit control workshops/field days need to be held.

Introduction

Rabbits are declared established pest animals under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* and land owners/managers have a responsibility to take all reasonable steps to prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, established pest animals from their land.

The City has commenced the process of preparing a Rabbit Control Plan. To successfully control rabbits on any reserve or parcel of land a long-term plan with an integrated management approach is required.

The Rabbit Control Plan will outline how the City will:

- embrace an integrated management approach to reduce rabbit populations on City owned or managed land and outline how associated risks will be mitigated.
- utilise a range of rabbit control methods which will be evaluated to assess the benefits and limitations of each.
- implement a new rabbit control process to address rabbit populations on roadsides.
- prioritise where rabbit control activities are performed (for reserves and roadsides) and how the success of the control activities will be monitored and reported on.
- work in partnership with Landcare groups and other environment organisations, particularly in regards to opportunities for education and support programs for the community.
- explore ways to support and encourage rabbit control on private land, and
- outline how the City will respond to enquiries and or complaints about rabbits.

The City receives many queries from the community about rabbits and how they are being controlled. Pest control is a complex issue and there are often varied and conflicting community views on what actions the City should take to control rabbits.

It was very important to undertake a community consultation process prior to the development of the Draft - Rabbit Control Plan to ensure our community was involved from a very early stage.

Community Consultation

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – PHASE ONE

Initial, pre-draft community consultation activities commenced in November 2018. The City engaged Tim Bloomfield (a renowned rabbit management expert) to assist with the engagement process. A total of 16 responses/participants were involved in phase one.

Activities performed:

- A Rabbit Control Community Feedback Form was written to inform and guide community comments.
- A Bellarine Peninsula focused community workshop was held on 6 December 2018. Fifteen people attended the meeting including members of the Bellarine Landcare Group, Bellarine Victorian Farmers Federation, Bellarine Rabbit Action Group, Bellarine Bayside Committee of Management and Barwon Coast Committee of Management.
- The Rabbit Control Feedback Form was circulated throughout the Geelong Landcare Network Contact list in December 2018. Three feedback forms were returned.
- Tim Bloomfield was available to attend Landcare Group meetings. He provided copies of the feedback form to attendees to complete.

The development of the Draft Rabbit Control Plan was placed on hold from February to July 2019 because the Environment and Biodiversity Unit was planning, preparing and performing on-ground rabbit control activities during these months.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION – PHASE TWO

The development of the Rabbit Control Plan continued once the Autumn rabbit control program had been completed. It was decided that a second community consultation period would be arranged as the initial consultation phase had not reached as many in the community as the City had anticipated. A total of 90 responses/participants were involved in phase two.

The second consultation phase occurred from August to October 2019. Activities performed were:

- A survey containing seven questions about rabbits was written to guide community comments about the direction and potential content of the control plan. The survey was available on the “Have Your Say” page on the City’s website and hardcopies were available by request. A total of 72 surveys were completed during the consultation period.
- Three “open house” style community workshops (Figure 1) were held at Leopold, Lara and Geelong. Seven stations were available for attendees to provide their comments. Tim Bloomfield also attended the workshops that were held on the following dates:
 - 29 August 2019 10am to 12 noon (Leopold Community Hub) – 9 attendees
 - 30 August 2019 12 noon to 2pm (Lara Community Centre) – 5 attendees
 - 31 August 2019 10am to 12 noon (National Wool Museum) – 3 attendees



Figure 1: Workshop presentation in progress at Leopold (29/08/2019)

Results

OVERVIEW

A total of 580 specific comments were received during the pre-draft consultation phases across all consultation options. The highest number of comments received (239) related to actions that the City could include in the Action Plan to fulfil a variety of roles to support the community. The next highest number of comments (176) identified problem locations or characteristics of rabbit prone landscapes.

Table 1: The number of comments received by category

Comments relating to...	Number of Comments
1. Rabbit damage/impacts	46
2. Problem locations	176
3. Control techniques	56
4. Community support (community education and awareness, signs, workshops, incentives, partnerships, etc.)	239
5. Control Plan development (principles, budget, etc.)	35
6. Further suggestions	28
Total number of comments received	580

COMMENTS RECEIVED

1. The problem with rabbits

Comments received about the damage rabbits cause could be broken down into rabbit behavioural traits and what is impacted by that trait (Figure 2). Almost two thirds of these comments related to the damage rabbits cause from burrowing and/or grazing. Over a third of the comments received about rabbit damage mentioned a concern about the impacts rabbits were having to native flora and fauna.

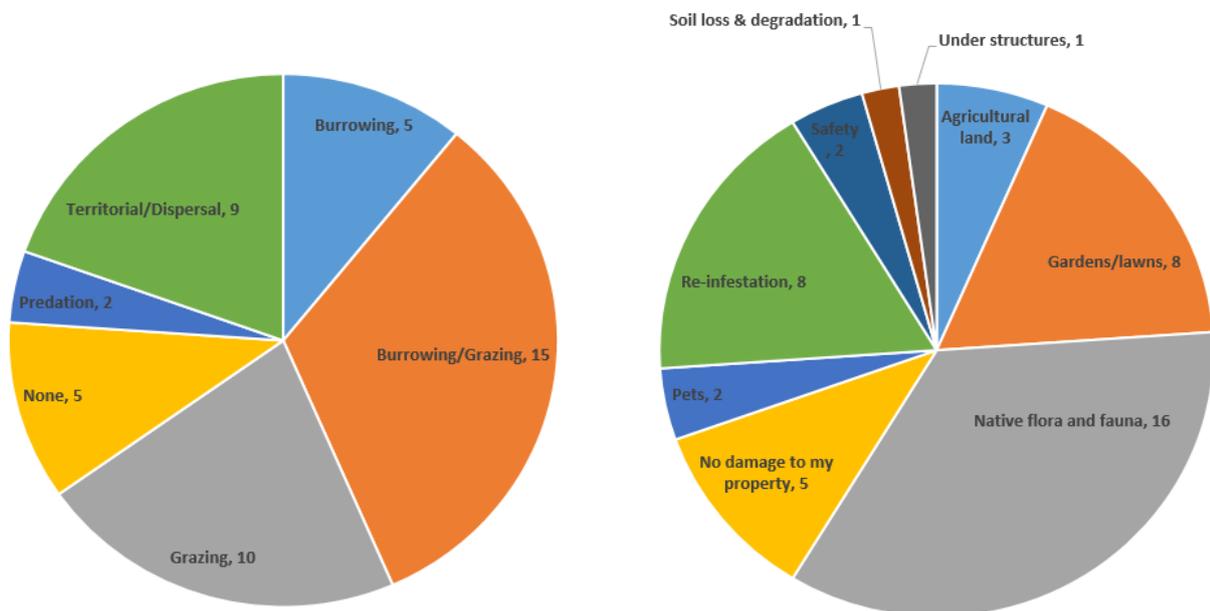


Figure 2: Rabbit problem behaviours (left) and what the behaviour is damaging (right)

Respondents were asked “Have rabbit impacts in your local area increased, decreased or remained steady compared to three years ago?” (Figure 3). Over two thirds of respondents stated that rabbit impacts have increased compared to only 7% who thought that impacts had decreased.

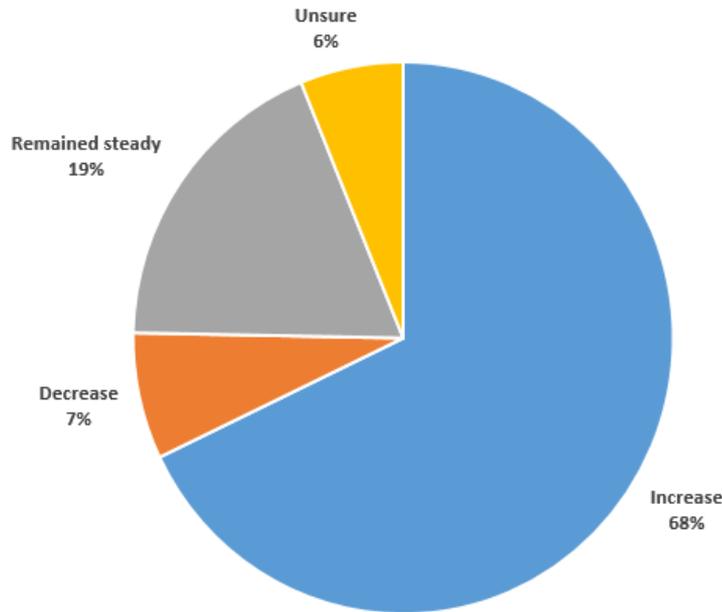


Figure 3: "Have rabbit impacts in your local area increased, decreased or remained steady compared to three years ago?"

The survey also included the question “What are your main concerns about rabbits?” followed by eight potential responses. Respondents could select as many responses as they wanted. Figure 4 (below) displays the responses received. The highest response received was “damage to natural areas” (90% of responders selected this option). The next highest responses were “rabbits not being controlled on public land” (63%) and “damage to agricultural areas” (57%). The lowest option selected (<21%) was “off-target impacts from pindone baiting”.

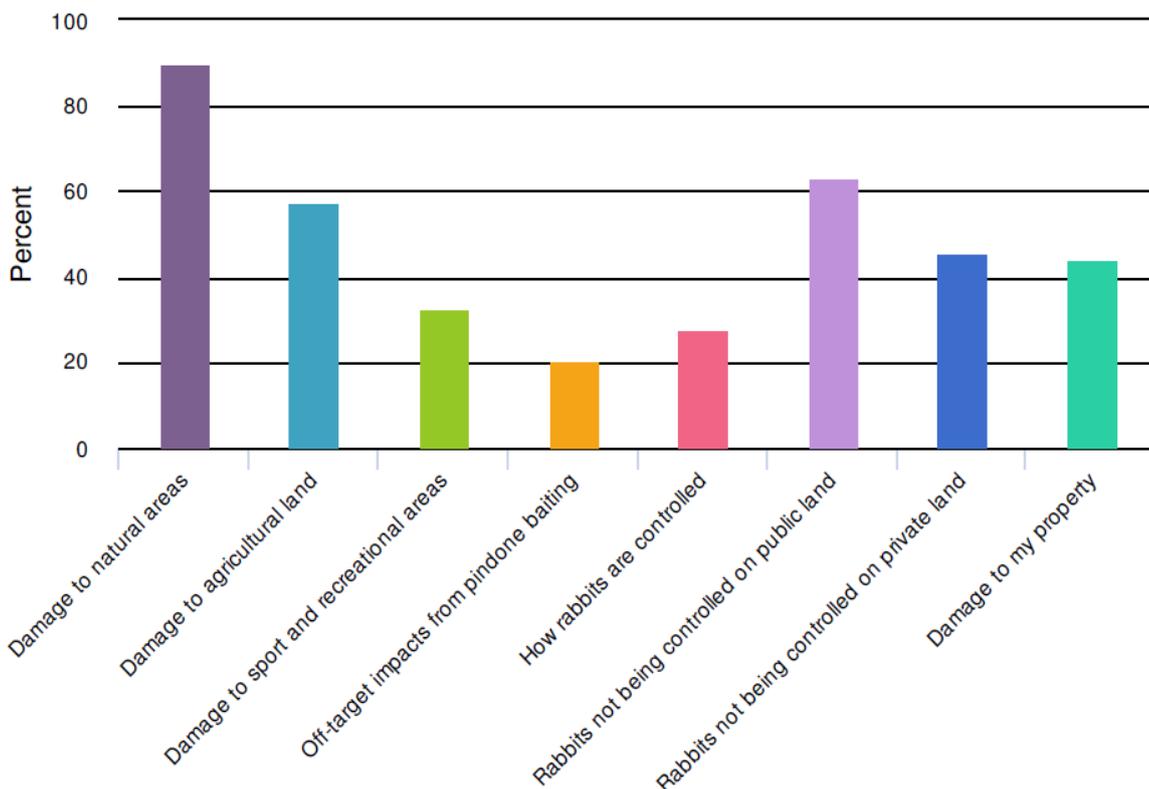


Figure 4: "What are your main concerns about rabbits?"

2. Problem locations

The 176 comments received about rabbit problem areas could be broken down into the categories identified in Table 2. Twenty-five comments were received that identified problem localities. Localities receiving more than one comment were Drysdale (5), Bellarine Peninsula (4), Wallington (4), Curlewis (2). Two-thirds of the localities identified were on the Bellarine Peninsula. Almost two thirds of the comments received mentioned rabbit problem areas on public land. The majority of the public land areas mentioned during the consultation period were City-owned and/or City-managed reserves and roadsides.

Table 2: Comments received about problem locations

Comment category	Examples	Percentage of all problem area comments
Public land	Mostly specific names of City-managed reserves and roadsides, rail reserves, etc.	63%
Localities	Bellarine Peninsula, Drysdale, etc.	15%
Private property	Absentee landholders, large farms, small lifestyle blocks, etc.	13%
General rabbit prone landscapes/habitats	Waterways, sandy soils, peri-urban areas, etc.	8%
Other	Unaware, location outside of the municipality	1%

Comments received about problem public land areas are grouped as follows:

- Public reserves - 54%
- Roadsides - 39%
- Rail Reserves (active lines) – 4%
- Other (ie. airport) – 3%

A total of 19 comments (or 33% of problem reserve comments) stated that the Bellarine Rail Trail was an issue for the City to resolve. Other reserves with several mentions were the Barwon and Moorabool River Reserve (7%), Hovells Creek, Lara (7%), Waurm Ponds Creek (5%), Basin Reserve, Drysdale (5%) and Lake Lorne/Drysdale Pony Club (5%)

Of the thirty comments received about roadsides as rabbit problem areas that mentioned a specific roadside, the highest number of comments was Knights Road, Mannerim (23%). Other roadsides with high mentions were Manifold Road, St Leonards (20%), Curlewis Road, Curlewis (13%) and Grubb Road, Wallington (13%).

3. Control Methods

Survey participants and workshop attendees were asked to list the control methods they use to control rabbits on their land (Figure 5). Pindone baiting with was the highest response received (29). Fumigation (20) and harbour removal (20) were the next highest responses. It is hoped that the implementation of the Rabbit Control Plan will help to influence the number of people destroying warrens via ripping and/or implosion methods.

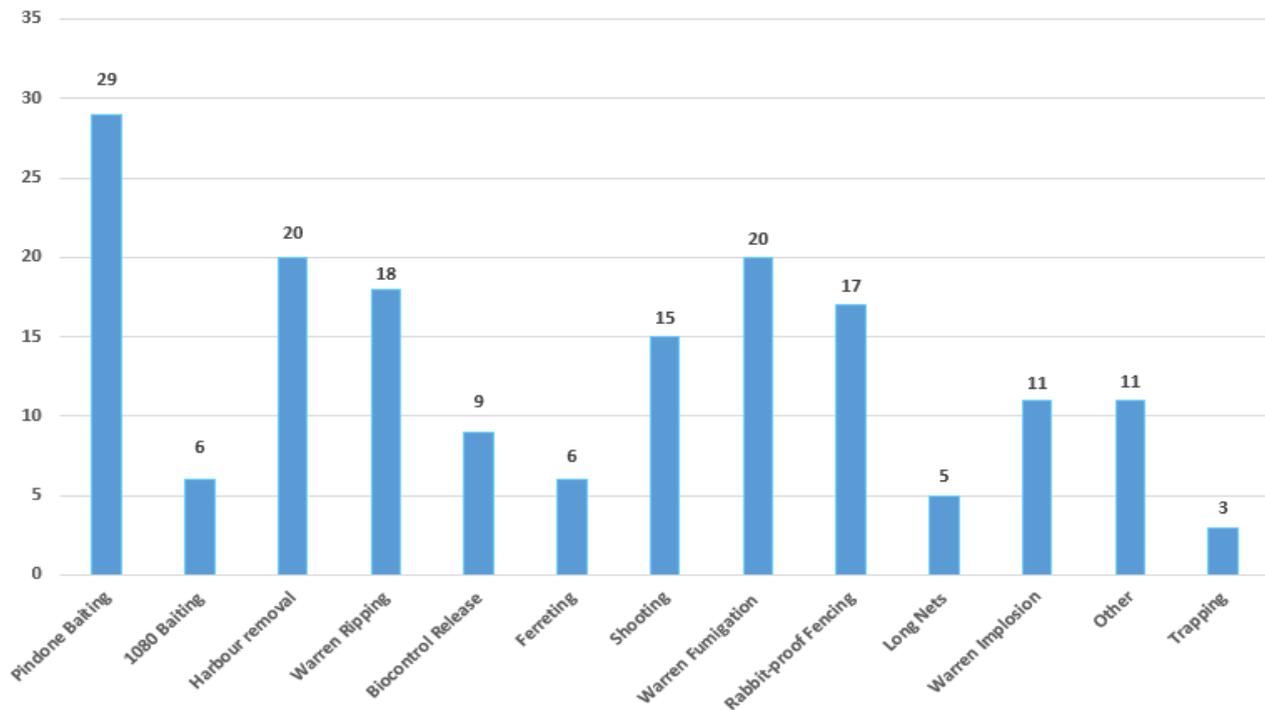


Figure 5: Number of responses to "How do you control rabbits on your land"

Participants were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of different control methods. Pindone baiting (13) and warren destruction activities (12) received the most comments (

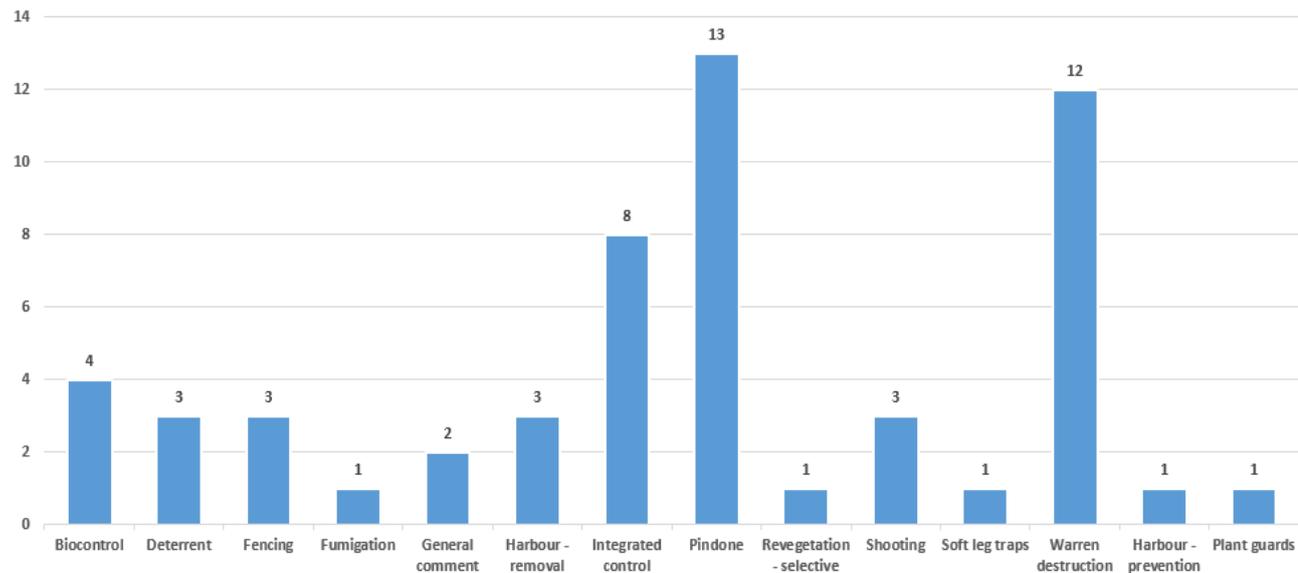


Figure 6). None of the comments about warren destruction or integrated control (8) were negative. Pindone baiting comments were the most varied. Some participants (3) raised their concerns about off-target impacts while others stated that they had noticed a large reduction in local rabbit populations from past baiting efforts.

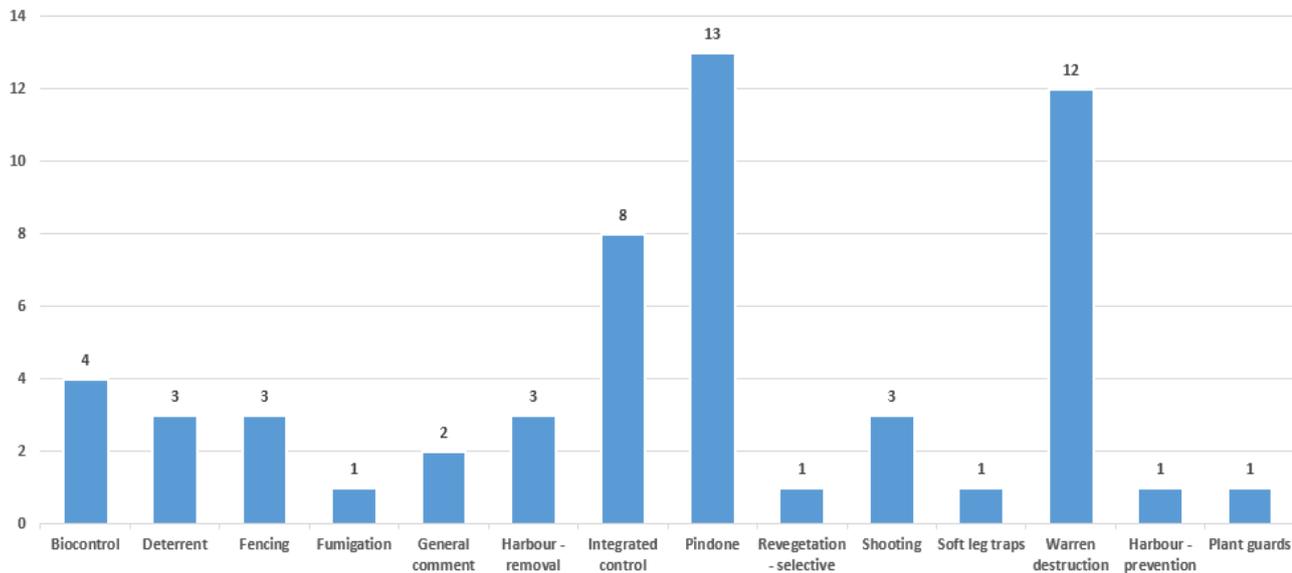


Figure 6: Comments received about the different control methods available

4. Supporting our community

Over 40% of the total comments received related to how the community could be supported to control rabbits. These comments were grouped into four categories (Over a third of the community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regard to rabbits and the harm they cause. Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help, and more community rabbit control workshops/field days needed to be held.

Table 3). Most of these comments related to program facilitation and coordination (95) and community education and awareness (91). Fifty of the facilitation/coordination comments were about how the City should coordinate and partner our efforts with the community and other stakeholders. Another 22 comments mentioned the different stakeholders the City can partner with as part of our rabbit control program. Providing advice and support to the community was another role requested by the community.

Over a third of the community education and awareness comments mentioned the importance of the messaging the City must use in regard to rabbits and the harm they cause. Many comments suggested that the development and distribution of rabbit control factsheets would help, and more community rabbit control workshops/field days needed to be held.

Table 3: Community support comments

Category	Number of comments
Facilitate/coordinate	95
Community education and awareness	91
Private land incentives	37
Compliance and enforcement	16
TOTAL	239

Participants provided many comments about a potential private land incentive program, and some suggested the City introduce a rate rebate. Others proposed that the City could provide funding for or subsidise the cost of pindone baiting or warren destruction activities.

Sixteen comments were received that highlighted the key role that compliance and enforcement plays in ensuring landholders control rabbits. Agriculture Victoria is responsible for overseeing and enforcing rabbit control under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*. Six comments stated that the City could introduce a local law to ensure landholders control rabbits on private land.

5. Other Control Plan development considerations

Table 4 contains the breakdown of the other comments received about the control plan (excluding community support). Participants stated that it was important for the City to take a big picture strategic approach to rabbit management. Two key principles for the Control Plan will be “Leading by example” and “Learn from the achievements of others”.

Table 4: Control Plan comments (non-community support aspects)

Category	Number of comments
Strategic planning	12
Principles – Leading by Example	6
Principles – Learn from others	6
Monitoring and reporting	4
Action Plan – importance of	4
Budget – increase rabbit control budget	3
TOTAL	35

6. Further suggestions

A range of other further suggestions (28) were provided that didn’t fit in the other sections. These were mostly statements about the development of the rabbit plan. Some commented that they were pleased that the City was developing the plan and they are happy to be involved. Others said that the City needs to hurry up and finish off the plan and get on with performing on-ground control activities.

Some of the more “left field” comments were about encouraging rabbits as a food source and that the City could neuter the rabbits so they do not breed so quickly.

Next steps

The City will use the comments provided to inform the development of the Draft - Rabbit Control Plan. It is anticipated that the Draft will be available for community consultation in 2020. This report will be an attachment when the Draft is submitted through the Council approval for consultation process. This report will also be available on the City's rabbit control section of the website.