

Vegetation Management Engagement Program

Aurecon Engagement Feedback and Summary Report

Overview

Ausgrid is working to embed community engagement as a core part of its day to day business of planning, constructing, operating and maintaining the electricity network.

As part of this commitment, Ausgrid identified that tree trimming around the electricity network was an area of significant interest to the community and where there was opportunity for greater engagement.

While working with the local community has been a key part of the tree trimming program, there has been no broad engagement program in place to support this work.

In 2014/15, Ausgrid recorded an increase in complaints relating to tree trimming and satisfaction with the work and the appearance of trees both decreased.

In response to the feedback received and the introduction of Ausgrid's community engagement policy, a dedicated engagement program was initiated for tree trimming with the following objectives:

1. To understand the community's interests and views about vegetation management and consider how they can be incorporated in future decision making wherever possible, including the balance between aesthetics, safety and cost to the consumer.
2. Provide an opportunity for the community members with an interest in the issue to 'have a say'.
3. Improve the community's understanding of tree trimming around power lines.
4. Establish a solid baseline level of engagement with the community on this issue.
5. Provide a framework for ongoing engagement by Ausgrid.

Ausgrid considered that this program would be planned and delivered in a number of stages, with feedback received during the initial stage guiding development of further ongoing engagement.

Aurecon was engaged by Ausgrid to plan and implement the initial stage of the community engagement program. The aim was to understand community interests, develop a shared understanding of the need for managing vegetation and help improve the way Ausgrid performs this critical maintenance in the future.

This document is Ausgrid's response to the report prepared by Aurecon from this first stage of engagement. By publishing the report and this response, Ausgrid wants to demonstrate its commitment to community engagement and open communication.

The Aurecon report

The key findings of the report coming out of the engagement process indicate there is a significant scope to improve engagement around tree trimming and broader vegetation management. The report also found that there is an opportunity for Ausgrid to better align its management of vegetation with community values in relation to street trees in particular. Ausgrid accepts these key findings.

There were seven recommendations made in the report. The recommendations align with one or a number of the objectives set at the start of the engagement program.

Ausgrid accepts the recommendations and plans to adopt each one. For recommendation 2 'Establish a vegetation management notification process', it is likely that a number of options will be trialled to determine the most effective way to notify the community on an ongoing basis.

The table below outlines Ausgrid's response to each recommendation, the actions proposed to address the recommendations and target dates for implementation of the actions.

Recommendation	Ausgrid response
<p>1. Develop a dedicated vegetation management engagement program</p> <p>Develop a dedicated program to engage all stakeholders in regards to vegetation management. This would aim to increase awareness of Ausgrid and vegetation management, as well as proactively understand issues and concerns. This would establish Ausgrid's commitment to, and processes for, the facilitation of ongoing engagement and relationship building with local councils.</p>	<p>Ausgrid accepts the need for greater engagement in this area. A comprehensive engagement program will be planned and implemented to enable effective ongoing consultation with stakeholders.</p> <p>Action: Ongoing engagement program to be developed and implemented by the end of 2016.</p>
<p>2. Establish a vegetation management notification process</p> <p>In line with current industry practices a targeted notification process would proactively inform impacted stakeholders about future vegetation management in local communities. This would include a minimum notification period where residents would be informed prior to any tree trimming being undertaken in their local street. The process would also enable stakeholders and communities to provide feedback on the service. This could provide an opportunity to collaborate with local communities and Councils to ensure that specific issues and preferences are considered.</p>	<p>Ausgrid accepts there is a need for improved communication regarding planned tree trimming works. Currently tree trimming contractors notify by letter where they need to access private property or where they are trimming private trees. A broader notification process has been recommended.</p> <p>Feedback from the community survey during the first stage of engagement did not establish a preferred communication channel for notification. Ausgrid proposes to trial different forms of notification for planned tree trimming to assess their effectiveness before implementing an ongoing notification process.</p> <p>Action: Trial of notification channels to be completed between August and December 2016, with an assessment of this trial guiding recommendations for development of an ongoing notification process.</p>
<p>3. Engage stakeholders in a review</p> <p>To ensure Ausgrid understands and meets all stakeholder expectations, it should review existing guidelines and documentation to incorporate and reflect stakeholder's views. By undertaking a review stakeholders would be provided with the opportunity to be involved. This would specifically target local councils, industry experts and community groups through further engagement such as workshops, a working group or survey.</p>	<p>Ausgrid accepts that there is the opportunity through community engagement to better meet stakeholder expectations and enhance vegetation management.</p> <p>As part of Ausgrid's ongoing engagement in this area, Ausgrid will involve the community as part of a review of policies and procedures.</p> <p>Action: Community stakeholders will be part of a review of key policies and procedures to improve Ausgrid's tree trimming program and broader vegetation management. This review is expected to be completed by early 2017.</p>
<p>4. Review accessibility of information</p> <p>Conduct a review of information available to the public regarding tree trimming with the view of developing improvements to increase accessibility and transparency. This would include existing website, social media and digital content as well as printed material.</p>	<p>Ausgrid agrees the content of community information regarding tree trimming should be refreshed and expanded. The accessibility of information will also be reviewed.</p> <p>ACTION: A review of accessibility of public information to be carried out and recommendations made by the end of 2016.</p>

5. Develop a framework to assess alternative vegetation management proposals

Develop a framework to assess the costs and benefits of proposals for tree trimming alternatives such as remove and replant programs or aerial cable bundling. This provides guidelines for local councils when developing proposals to Ausgrid and considering alternatives. A comprehensive process for considering alternatives would increase the transparency of decision making and enhance the relationship between Ausgrid and local councils. Once completed the framework should be made available through physical and digital media so communities and stakeholders are aware of the choice of tree species and why.

Ausgrid acknowledges the need for alternative vegetation management options alongside trimming of trees.

A framework currently exists for assessing alternative proposals, but Ausgrid accepts the need for this to be published to ensure the process is transparent.

Action: Framework for assessing alternatives to tree trimming to be documented in consultation with key stakeholders and published. This is targeted for completion by the end of 2016.

6. Establish a service charter

Involve contractors in the development of a vegetation management service charter that outlines how stakeholders and communities will be informed, consulted and involved. This would ensure consistency across the Ausgrid network and outline what stakeholders can expect from contractors and Ausgrid. The charter would include information about clearance requirements, trimming frequency and practice, as well as a commitment to notify residents and work with local councils.

Ausgrid agrees that a charter would present an opportunity to bring greater focus to service delivery in this critical, high profile work program.

Informed by the outcome of the tree trimming engagement program to date, Ausgrid will work with its contractors to establish a service charter.

Action: Charter to be developed and implemented by the end of October 2016.

7. Implement an awareness campaign

Based on the findings, it is recommended that Ausgrid undertake an awareness campaign to target all stakeholders and consumers regarding the importance of vegetation management. This could include how Ausgrid is provided with funding and the relevance of the AER. The awareness campaign could utilise existing Ausgrid communication channels and publications as well as exploring other engagement methods through physical and digital media similar to those adopted in this engagement program.

Ausgrid accepts the need to raise awareness about all aspects of vegetation management.

This will be included as an element of the ongoing engagement program to be developed.

Action: To be included as part of wider Ausgrid awareness campaign regarding the electricity network and ongoing public information releases during 2016-2017.