

**Planning with Purpose:**  
**Landcare Group Action Planning**

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## Why plan at Local Group level?

A Landcare Group Action Plan is a blueprint for action. It articulates a shared vision about the future of a local area, identifies tasks that need to be completed to realize the shared vision, and says who will carry these out.

An Action Plan translates long-term aspirations into tangible, measurable actions that can be supported or funded by a variety of sources. It paves the way for using limited resources in the most effective way. It also communicates the Group's ideas and needs to partners and investors.

Sitting down to plan helps a Local Group to:

- work through, agree on and prioritise issues and ideas to which resources can be directed;
- identify alternatives to address the issues or realize the ideas;
- develop solutions and practical projects.

An inclusive, participatory approach will improve these ideas and the likelihood that the plan will lead to effective action. A plan based on agreement between landholders and residents provides strong support to the Group in bringing about positive change in the environment, and is more likely to be taken seriously by partners and investors.

Your plan will benefit from collaboration between members and partners, such as Local Government, Regional Water Authorities, VicRoads – in fact, any organisation involved in issues that matter to the Group. Involving these people in the planning process can result in partners making commitments, in advance, to the implementation of the plan. To summarise, developing a Landcare Group Action Plan can:

1. Build consensus amongst the Landcare Group members on priority issues.
2. Establish specific objectives which are realistic and achievable and agreed upon by the members.
3. Identify projects and activities that can be undertaken to respond to these issues and objectives.
4. Agree on ways of implementing the plan and assign tasks to appropriate people.
5. Communicate Group ideas and needs to partners and investors.

A Landcare Group Committee needs to agree on the value and purpose of developing an Action Plan and be committed to the process, either driving it directly themselves, or using a sub-committee of members to facilitate the process, with assistance from any paid staff if they are available.

Now we take you through the steps of making an Action Plan, with notes on actually running the planning sessions.

## Step 1. Create a purpose for planning

Discuss and seek agreement at a Landcare Committee meeting on the need to develop a Group Action Plan. As the first step in your planning process, write down the purpose for developing the Group Action Plan. For example:

*"Tonimbuc Landcare Group are developing a Group Action Plan to gather input from members, landholders and partners as to the types of activities and projects they are interested in. Input will be compiled into a plan to inform the actions of our Group into the future."*

Knowing why you are planning will help you maintain focus and communicate to others what you are trying to achieve.

## Step 2. Decide how to get people involved

**Elect a sub-committee** of Group members to design and facilitate the planning process and oversee the production of a plan. Various other people may be involved in the development phases, including Landcare Co-ordinators, consultants or staff from partner organisation.

**Involve others** including Group members and interested community residents from the very beginning, to ensure they feel their input is valued.

**Communicate right through the planning process.** A one page communication strategy can set down how you will let people know of the planning process and invite their involvement.

Type of communication	Message	Location(s)	Timing	Who will do it?
Poster on display	"Have your say on the long-term future of our landscape and Network"  "Here's the first event."	1. Notice board outside Supermarket, Post Office 2. Shire Offices 3. Health Centre	4 weeks before first event and update after each stage is complete, with new opportunities to be involved	Develop poster at a Network meeting, then one person manage each site

Consider the following:

- **Personal contact** (door-to-door, phone calling) from an active Group member or support staff. Personal invitation is usually the best method; however, it can be time-consuming. Committee members and any staff could take responsibility for inviting 2 - 3 people each from a cross section of members and partners.
- **A physical display** in a public place, central to your Landcare Group area, where: people will stop and read and where updates can be posted as the plan develops. Displays should be located in high-traffic, high-visibility areas, such as notice boards in supermarkets, produce stores or the main street in town.

- **Utilise other community organisations**, such as schools and community health centres. An announcement about the plan development, its purpose and opportunities to be involved can go in an ad or a flyer in their newsletters.



Make it easy for people to get involved:

- **Hold planning session(s) on a day that suits most people** – ask people in advance about days of the week, night or day etc that suits them
- **Avoid other meetings and event dates** in the local area and avoid those if possible
- **Include food** - a pizza night or shared meal of some sort is often a highlight in people’s memories of good events
- **Include a farm walk or bus tour** to see something new or interesting – this could be held in the middle of the session to re-invigorate people’s minds
- If the plan is being developed at Group meetings, **break up the process** into smaller more manageable bits, and complete the plan in sections.

### Step 3. Get everyone on the same page

**Get the Group's story.** Some Landcare members were in Landcare when it began, and some joined last week. For most Groups, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge. A lot of things have worked well, some things have been disasters, and a lot has been learned.

People have all this in the back of their minds when they start planning—it's good to get it out in the open where it can be part of the shared memory.

Use the *timeline exercise*:

- Draw a timeline from when Landcare started in the area till now.
- Invite people to say when they joined Landcare, why, and one significant event for them in the life of the Group.
- Add these events to the timeline. Make sure people hear what was significant about the major events.
- If there's a big crowd, put up a few events from early in the timeline, then give people cards to write on and post up themselves. Then go over the big events and ask: "What was significant about this event?"

The timeline exercise shows new people what the Group has done, and it reaffirms for older members their achievements and what they have learned.

**What about the present situation?** The timeline brings you right up to the present, and helps people appreciate each others' histories and their shared Landcare story. What about the present situation? We each see it differently, and we don't all express in neatly in words.

Invite people to draw *a rich picture* of the situation the Group faces now.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/pages/rich/rp-miners.html> for a walk through a rich picture.

<http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/pages/rich/rp-what.html> for an intro to what a rich picture does

<http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/pages/rich/richAppendix.html> for some guidelines and conventions in making rich pictures

## Step 4. Put the Group's vision and mission into words

Your **vision** is the future you want to see. A vision statement is a picture of your landscape and its communities in the future, that answers the question, "**Where do we want to go?**" and "**What do we hope to create?**"

When creating a vision, a Group is articulating its dreams and hopes for what it would like to achieve. It's important to capture the passion and imagination of those involved in the Group. To help people picture the future and inspire them to be involved, go beyond one or two years, to 10, 20 or 50 years into the future. Don't worry for now about how you are going to get there.

Your **mission** is what you will contribute to making the vision a reality, a brief description of a Group's fundamental purpose. A mission statement answers the question, "**Why do we exist?**" The mission statement articulates the Group's purpose for members, for partners and investors, and for the community. It should be practical, concise and capture the heart.

### How to create a Mission Statement

1. *Make a list of all the things your Group does. For example....*  
Represent our member groups/Manage projects on behalf of our member groups/Advocate for Landcare at regional level/Broker partnerships
2. *Ask "why"? Why do we do those things and operate in that way? We do what we do so that ..... ?*
3. *Describe how you do it. What principles and values guide the way you operate as a Group? For example .....*  
'Make farming more sustainable' / 'Protect the environment' / 'Encourage innovation'
4. *Pick out the activities, the "whys" and the principles that feel most important, and try drafting some statements of purpose.*
5. *Make it concise and heartfelt. Pick the best of what you've got, then put heart into it.*  
  
*From "Our group's purpose is to promote sustainable farming practices through well managed projects to significantly increase their adoption across our Landcare Group area."*  
  
*To this: "Lexton Landcare Group manages high quality projects that help make farming more sustainable."*
6. *Put your mission statement to work. Use your mission statement in any material your group produces, such as membership forms, funding applications and group reports. Put it on your website.*

## Step 5. Draw together information about your Group

**Give the purpose of the Action Plan and how it was developed.** Say why the Plan has been developed, and the process used to create the plan:

- Was the plan developed at an ordinary Group meeting or a special workshop? How were people encouraged to become involved?
- Who contributed – you don't need to include names, but if there was broad representation, then a description of the geographical and organisational spread can be included.
- Were people given opportunities to have input other than attending the meeting, e.g. an interview by a neighbour or filling in surveys? giving feedback on a draft of the plan?

**Give a brief history of the Group.** Outline when and why your Group started and some of the Group's accomplishments. Highlight one or two significant successes that illustrate the Group's abilities and important values. Think of this as a mini résumé and the Group's opportunity to promote its achievements.

**Show the Group area.** Overlaying this on a topographic map or a Geographical Information System (GIS) computer program is a good idea. Be sure to include the nearest large town or known land mark so people can locate the area to a known reference, and include roads and waterways.

The same map with different layers will show features of the landscape relevant to your plan—for example contours, soils and vegetation types. These maps can be scaled down to sub-catchments or individual farms, and can be important assets in project planning and management.

Local Councils and CMAs usually have GIS Officers who can help create these maps for you if you are unable to, using their own GIS systems. This can be a good way of making your Group known to the Council or CMA if you are not already.

**TIP:** The Biodiversity Interactive Map program on the Department of Sustainability and Environment web site is a great mapping tool where you can draw your Group boundaries over a topographic map. Go to: <http://mapshare2.dse.vic.gov.au/MapShare2EXT/imf.jsp?site=bim>

Victorian Resources Online (<http://new.dpi.vic.gov.au/vro>) has data linked to Catchment Management Authority areas.

Maps of threats (like soil acidity or salinity) can be accessed from the Australian Government Caring for Our Country web site <http://www.nrm.gov.au>) or CMAs local maps at better scales.

**Give a picture of your community.** A major strength of Landcare Groups is their ability to organise effectively within their community. Landcare Groups need to highlight this strength when planning projects and developing partnerships.

Ask your members to write a one page account of their sense of place within their community or Landcare Group area and select a couple of these stories for inclusion in the plan. Or ask people to draw on your geographic map where they feel the boundaries of their community lie and include this in the plan.

Demographic data can give an economic perspective and add value to a Group Action Plan, especially if the Landcare Group has a high percentage of one industry type for which research data is available. Demographic data can be found in Shire Strategies and is usually managed in the Economic Development area of the Shire. The Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics are also good sources of demographic data. Other sources include industry organisations such as Meat and Livestock Australia, Dairy Australia and the Grains Research and Development Corporation.

**TIP:** If you do draw on wider industry statistics draw them down to the Group scale. For example, if industry data says that each full-time dairying job creates three jobs elsewhere in the community, apply that to your Group ....

*“Supporting the sustainability of the 27 dairy farms in our Group area supports approximately 120 full-time jobs in our community”.*

Gathering social, demographic and biophysical data can be time consuming, but you will only have to do this once and review it every five or ten years. Including this type of information demonstrates good knowledge of your area and a rigorous approach to planning and management.

## Step 6. Find the priority issues

The Group needs to decide what the priority issues are and how they wish to tackle them. ***These are generally higher level issues such as soil health or water quality rather than actual projects or actions.*** Use a planning workshop, with additional input through surveys or interviews.

**Revisit old priorities.** Many Landcare Groups will already have a list of priorities, so this step may just be a matter of reviewing and updating that list. However, use this opportunity to foster new ideas which may give rise to new enthusiasm to tackle issues not previously thought of as Landcare's realm, such as energy efficiency and carbon sequestration

**Make people feel comfortable expressing their ideas without fear of reproach.** The quickest way to discourage people from participating is to respond to ideas put forward with "Yeah we did that 10 years ago and it didn't work" or "That's not Landcare business". A culture of welcoming *differing* views will aid in a positive airing of ideas and set the scene for prioritising them through open discussion. This could be included in the rules of the day set up during a Group planning workshop.

**Be outcome focused, not just problem focused.** Turn problems into outcomes. Focusing on salinity, vegetation decline and erosion still leaves the question of what you are aiming for. For example:

*"Address vegetation decline" might become .... "Establish vegetation corridors to link isolated patches and protect biodiversity."*

**Understand the underlying situation.** A clear understanding leads to well designed action. Identify what is known about an issue. Where knowledge gaps exist, filling them in should be the first step in acting on an issue. If you look for solutions before you fully understand the issue, you could have trouble clarifying what you want, and are able, to achieve.

**Document the priorities.** When the Group has decided on their priorities, they need to be listed and briefly described in the plan. In the description, a statement of the *preferred methods* to manage priority issues can be included if appropriate. Some *justification* as to why the methods have been chosen would also be good, such as documented best management practices that have been locally tested and proven successful. For example ....

*Priority issue* – Improve health of soils affected by acidification and loss of carbon.

*Preferred method to tackle the issue* – Host field days and establish farmer discussion Groups to share local knowledge of beneficial practices.

*Justification* – Several local farmers are getting significant benefits from methods such as aeration, liming and building soil biology. As these practices have proven effective in the local area we believe it is best to promote, share and build on this local knowledge.

## Step 7. Set objectives and actions

**Objectives** for each priority issue are *the end results that can be reasonably achieved within an expected timeframe and with available resources*. You may have more than one objective for each priority issue.

Make each objective SMART:

Specific,  
Measurable,  
Achievable  
Relevant and  
Time-framed.

For example:

"Promote local best management practices that protect soils and improve water quality to 20 farmers in our Group area over the next 12 months."

**Decide on actions for each objective.** This is where most landholders like to give their ideas. The following questions will generate actions (see next page for a sample Action Table):

- What action(s) are appropriate to this objective? In what sequence?
- What resources will be needed? (people, money, materials, partnerships and on-ground locations). Where will these resources be found?
- Who will do them? Who are the potential partners?
- When will each step happen?

**TIP:** Identify when in a year actions are best undertaken, but avoid putting a year to them until all actions for each objective are completed.

**Prioritise the objectives for each issue.** Prioritising is a negotiation between peoples' belief or passion about the urgency of issues, a judgement as to the best time to take action, and finally, the availability of resources. The Group probably can't work on *all* the objectives for an issue, at least not right away. What are the obvious starting points?

**Don't over-commit.** Tasks always take longer than you think they will. Be generous, and give yourself ample time to do things well. Ensuring people are not over-committed will mean everyone can keep going, rather than getting exhausted and giving up.

## Example Action Table

### Priority Issue: Improve Best Management Practices on farms

Objective	Action Steps to take	Resources required	Who will do this?	When will this be done?
<i>Promote local best management practices that protect soils and improve water quality to 20 farmers in our Group area over the next 12 months</i>	Identify farmers who are implementing best practices and ask if they would provide demonstration sites for field days and farm walks	Collective knowledge of the group	Committee - at a meeting; Delegate person to speak with farmers	July 2010 meeting Approach farmers and report back to August meeting
	Organise two field days at demo farms – one in spring, one autumn. Promote days to members, through newsletter, town notice boards and personal invites.	People to organise; \$300 for promotion and; \$400 for catering	John Bush and Celia Brown	Promote days 6 weeks before event.
	Create a set of notes on the practices for farmers to take home.	Person to collate notes; \$200 for printing	John Bush	Complete two weeks before field day
	Host field days, aiming for a minimum of ten farmers at each day	People to help set up and pack-up; Morning tea and lunches	Four volunteers from committee; host farmers	Organise catering prior to event. Set-up & down on the days
	Provide feed-back forms to gather information on success or otherwise of the days	Feedback forms; person to hand-out and collect	Committee person to ask CMA staff to assist with creating form	Create form by September meeting. Hand-out and collect on days
	Go through feedback and agree on improvements for next day	Group discussion	Committee at a group meeting	November meeting
	Collect names of people attending field days who would like to form a discussion group to support on-going practice change	Person to ask the question and record names	Volunteer from committee	At the field days
	Plan and hold inaugural discussion group meeting on farm and plan six activities for the year	Host farms, BYO lunches,	Volunteer to plan first meeting; commitment of members	First meeting one month after field days, then bi-monthly

## Notes on running the planning sessions

### Preparing for the planning

**Look for someone to facilitate.** Using an external facilitator frees up office bearers to contribute in the planning sessions. Call in your Network facilitator. CMA's, Department of Primary Industries or Sustainability and Environment, local council or other community organisations sometimes have people skilled in planning processes and facilitation. Ask around, there may be someone in your community who can help - especially with facilitation on the day of a workshop or meeting.

Ask Landcare Group Facilitators or Regional Landcare Co-ordinators or Facilitators if grants are available to pay for a facilitator. Ask neighbouring Landcare Groups or networks to recommend someone who would suit your Group's needs.

**Decide whether to complete the whole process in one day or over several days.** One day is achievable if the Group is familiar with planning and has a Mission Statement, Vision and earlier objectives and actions. The event would then be a one day review and update of the plan.

If this is the Group's first foray into planning, several half day planning sessions might be needed, dealing with:

- I. History of the Group, Vision, Mission
- II. Priorities Issues and Objectives
- III. Action Plan – Steps, resources, who and when

**Set a time frame** for preparing, developing and completing the plan.

Include:

- I. Promotion of opportunities for people to contribute – how, when and who to contact
- II. Schedule of events
- III. Preparation of draft and circulation for comment. (Be sure to give everyone who has contributed or who will be responsible for undertaking actions the opportunity to comment on the draft plan.)
- IV. Finalisation and launch of plan.

**Prepare the presentation material.** Prepare your material at least a couple of weeks before the event and show some other people so they can check it beforehand. A Powerpoint presentation can be used to take people through the steps of developing a Group Action Plan. At each step, prepare questions that need to be answered, definitions and examples of things like Mission Statements, to project these on a screen for everyone to see.

Gather any old plans or relevant documents such as past project reports that may be useful to refer to on the day.



## Running the planning session

**Start with the purpose.** Give the purpose of the planning, and how the Action Plan will benefit those who have come. Say what has happened so far, and give the focus of today's session. Tell people how the work in this session will contribute to the Plan.

**Thank everyone** for making the time to come along, and identify the kinds of people who have come—farmers, small lot owners, people from town, etc. Ask three questions designed to solicit 'yes' answers. This will help put people in a positive frame of mind.

**Run through of the tasks for the day,** including timing. Write this up on butcher's paper where the Group can see it and know what to expect. Remember to schedule morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, breaks etc..

**Give the 'rules of the day'.** Ground rules gives you and participants a reference point to guide each other when people talk too long or things go off track. For example:

- i. All ideas put forward need to be heard and respected
- ii. Everyone needs to be heard – but not for too long!
- iii. Park ideas on the 'Parking lot of ideas' for discussion later

**Set up a 'Parking Lot'** for ideas that come up that are not directly relevant to the current task or discussion. Invite people to write up ideas at any time as they occur to them so they don't lose them, and use the parking lot yourself when people raise issues that aren't on the agenda right now.

**When developing Vision and Mission,** move between whole Group discussion, individual work and discussion in pairs or threes,. If you stay talking as a large group all the time, some people will dominate and the discussion can bog down.

**For priority issues, objectives and action steps,** create small groups of three to five people to put ideas together, then bring these back to the whole group.

**Note when people are tired** and take spontaneous five minute stretches and a breath of fresh air if inside.

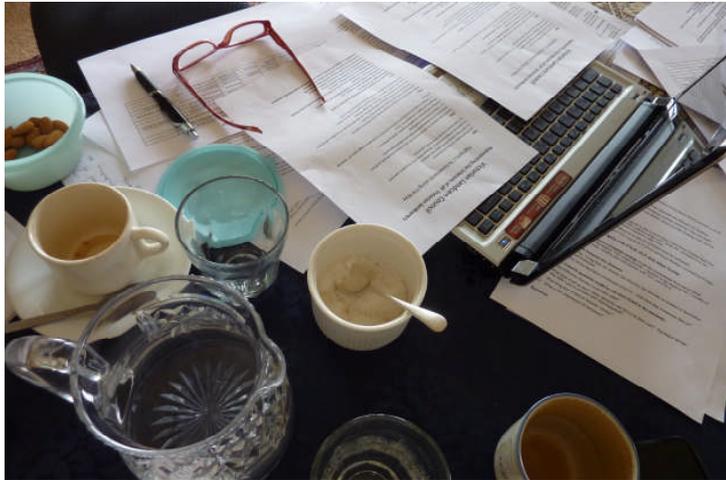
**Negotiate any changes** to the day's events with the whole Group for a consensus outcome.

**At the end of the day, outline what steps come next** so participants know what to expect and how they can contribute further if appropriate. Letting everyone know a draft plan will be circulated and by when will increase the likelihood of them providing feedback.

## Finishing the Action Plan

All of the information gathered from surveys, interviews, workshops etc., needs to be compiled into the plan. The sub-committee elected to facilitate the plan's development have primary responsibility for ensuring this happens.

Your Group may be lucky enough to have a paid person to complete this task. Regardless, the sub-committee needs to see the draft version and possibly fill some gaps in before the draft is circulated to members for comment.



Set reasonable timeframes for circulating the draft plan, receiving feedback and incorporating it into the final version. Remember, most volunteers are time-poor but are able to contribute if given adequate notice and time to respond.

When the plan is completed it is important to:

1. **Thank everyone who contributed.** This can be done by putting a note in the newsletter; a press release; thanking them personally; at the launch.
2. **Have a launch** – this can be:
  - I. Low key at a Group meeting
  - II. An addition to another event – a field day or regular social gathering
  - III. A special event – this can be valuable if you have partners to acknowledge or potential partners to impress.
3. **Produce an abridged version** of the plan in a poster or booklet that can be circulated easily – put up or made available in community places, e.g. supermarket wall, doctor's waiting room, Community Centre.
4. **Send copies to anyone who will be involved in delivering the actions.**
5. **Send copies to your partner organisations** to keep them updated as to the Group's plans and activities. You may wish to set up meetings with partners to work through how your Group Action Plan aligns with their plans and strategies. Opportunities to collaborate on projects or to provide paid services are likely to arise from these discussions.

## Using the Action Plan

Congratulations for making it this far! Now it's time to use the Plan.

**Use the plan to develop projects.** The Action Plan is a jumping off point for planning projects—see Part 4 of these guides on *Landcare Project Planning*.

**Align the Group Action Plan with other plans strategies and funding programs.** When a Group has a strong Action Plan it gives clear guidance on its direction and activities. A Group is less likely to be 'pulled off course' and be involved in things that aren't relevant or important to their members.

It is however, still important to be kept informed of and involved in issues of broader importance than the Group's immediate interests. It can be beneficial to Group activities and to their catchment to identify important links between the Group Action Plan and priorities of partner and investor organisations.

***This is particularly important when developing project ideas and proposals, as funding is most often tied to investor priorities that will be identified in their plans and strategies.***

Seek a volunteer or ask paid staff to research linkages between the objectives in Group Action Plans and other plans and strategies which can be demonstrated in a simple table and possibly included in the Action Plan.

**TIP** – Number and set out your objectives across the top row of a table. Then list relevant objectives or strategies from other plans down the first column, and tick the cells in each column where linkages occur.

Most Landcare Networks will have a process of integrating the Action Plans of their member Groups with the Network Strategic Plan. The Network can then look for opportunities to assist with your priorities.

If your Group is not a member of a Network, seek out Landcare support staff in your CMA and ask them to look for opportunities that will assist with Group priorities.

## **Monitor, evaluate and review the Action Plan**

**Monitor progress as a standing agenda item.** Make time for discussing implementation and monitoring progress of the Action Plan at each Group meeting. Ideally, 20 to 30 minutes at the beginning of each meeting will keep things ticking over. Considering results of activities and events that have occurred since the last meeting can offer timely reflections on what worked well, what didn't and what you might do differently. You can make any immediate adjustments to future events and activities or simply keep a note of comments to feed into the annual review of the Action Plan.

Alternatively, ask the sub-committee who managed the plan development to continue to oversee its implementation or co-opt a new sub-committee to do this. They should review progress regularly.

One reason for monitoring progress is to check that the Plan is being used and to assess if the objectives and actions really are **Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely**. If they are and things are happening, then the Group will feel good and the value of the plan will be in evidence. Each step forward will keep enthusiasm in the Group high.

If changes need to be made to timing, outputs or resources required, then the earlier the Group is alerted, the sooner adjustments can be made. It's likely that parts of the Plan will have to be tweaked or even dramatically revised. This is not a failure of the Group and its plan, but part of learning through action.

**Evaluate the Plan's effectiveness.** In most cases, this can be done annually. Evaluation questions are best written as part of the initial plan—they can then guide the collection of any information. The simplest questions are:

*What's working well (and why)?*

*What's not working so well (and why)?*

*What do we need to do differently to improve our results?*

A report card of achievements can be produced that demonstrates how the plan has been put into action and what the Group has achieved—a good start to the Annual Report. Provide opportunities for people to contribute to the evaluation – invite them to the session or use surveys or interviews once again.

**Review and renew the Action Plan.** A good life span for an Action Plan is five years. If a Plan is actively used, monitored and evaluated, it will be much easier to review and update at the five year mark. First, assess the **benefits** of actions achieved from the previous plan. Ask questions such as:

*Did we achieve the targets set in our objectives?*

*What have been the results and benefits?*

Then consider whether to continue with the issues in the Plan, or modify that focus:

- Do we still have work to do on each issue?
- Do we need to set new objectives?
- Do we need to adjust our activities from being problem to solution focussed?
- Do we need to seek expert advice or undertake research to fill some knowledge gaps to better inform our actions?
- Can we let go of this issue now and move onto other priorities or new issues?

If your Group has used your plan well, there is likely to be a lot of achievement to recognise. Design a workshop to review and celebrate achievements, then progress into planning the next phase of action and the next iteration of the Group Action Plan.

This Guide is current as of May 2013, and downloadable from [www.basscoastlandcare.org.au/resources](http://www.basscoastlandcare.org.au/resources) .

References, useful web sites and templates for use in planning processes are provided in a separate, alphabetically listed document . These will also be revised from time-to-time.

We value your thoughts about the Guides, and your experiences as you use them. Send a note to [moragh@vic.chariot.net.au](mailto:moragh@vic.chariot.net.au) .

***Good luck with creating your plan and be sure to ask for assistance from partners and other community Groups if you need it – what you are doing is for community benefit and it's in everyone's interests that it be done well.***