



# What We Heard

## SBA Community Consultation Synthesis

Venue & Dates Consultation | October – December 2025

### Executive Summary

Over an 8-week consultation period from mid-October to early December 2025, Sunburnt Arts Ltd. engaged extensively with community stakeholders to inform decisions about future event venue and timing. This document synthesises feedback from eight consultation sessions across NSW, Victoria, ACT and online platforms, representing theme camp leads, team leads, general members, and interstate burners.

**Key findings:** There is strong support for the Capertee site. There is a desire for a collaborative, cyclical “national burn” every few years, bringing all the orgs across Australia to the table to co-create together as a long-term aspiration. These discussions will continue with further outreach to accommodate the ideas of all interstate Burner communities.

Significant concerns exist about October long weekend timing due to competing events and fire risk. A clear preference has emerged for April/May timing from 2027 onwards. The community wants action in 2026 to maintain momentum, even if imperfect. Interstate participants seek active inclusion strategies. There is collective fatigue from historical organisational trauma but strong enthusiasm for co-creating the future.

### Consultation Framework

#### Process Overview

The Board committed to an 8-week stakeholder engagement process using change management principles overlaid with community consultation practices. The approach prioritised face-to-face dialogue over written submissions for complex, sensitive topics requiring nuanced discussion.

## Consultation Sessions Synthesised

1. **Theme Camp Consultation – 22 October 2025** (Zoom, 80+ camps invited)
2. **Team Leads/All Comm Meeting – 23 October 2025** (Zoom)
3. **Regional Burning Man Contacts - 27 October 2025** (Zoom)
4. **Members Consultation (Site & Dates) – 29 October 2025** (Zoom)
5. **Newcastle In-Person Consultation - 2 November 2025** (The Lass, Wickham)
6. **Sydney In-Person Consultation – 13 November 2025** (Forrester's, Surry Hills, 15-20 attendees)
7. **Canberra Consultation – 28 November 2025** (ACT stakeholders)
8. **Melbourne Face-to-Face Consultation – 1 December 2025** (Great Northern, Carlton North (15+ attendees including CAV, Melburners, former organisers)

## 1. Venue & Site

### 1.1 Strong Support for Capertee

The proposed Capertee-Upper Nile Canyon site received overwhelmingly positive responses across all consultation sessions. The Sydney in-person consultation recorded "unilateral approval and excitement" with all attendees supporting either permanent use or a cyclical model.

#### Key advantages identified:

- Operationally less taxing with better logistics (sealed roads, existing infrastructure)
- More economical with predictable costs and favourable landowner agreement
- Significantly reduced travel for Brisbane participants (4–5 hours shorter)
- Only marginally longer for Canberra (approximately 30 minutes)
- Site described as "beautiful," "welcoming," and offering room to grow
- Local RFS captain ownership provides easier fire permit processes

*"The new site looks great... I'm pretty optimistic." – Members Consultation*

### 1.2 Matong: Grief, Respect, and Practical Barriers

Participants expressed genuine grief and emotional attachment to Matong, acknowledging its cultural significance and identity connection to the community's founding demographic. The Melbourne consultation noted it was geographically "between Sydney and Melbourne" and therefore more inclusive.

#### Barriers to return identified:

- Substantial restoration work required (ground coral damage, road and forest clearing)
- Strained relationships with Traditional Owners requiring 1.5–2 years of cultural restoration
- Local community relationships require significant reparation
- Financial unsustainability: insurance premiums increased from ~\$20,000 (2019) to ~\$50,000 (2025)
- Potential DA requirements due to dormant relationship with Paraway Pastoral

The Melbourne face-to-face session resulted in agreement that Victorian participants are willing to help organise working bees for land restoration, with a couple of key community members, Di and Daryl Paulger, taking lead on logistics for a small camping/working bee event.

## 1.3 Geographic Inclusion Concerns

Interstate participants (representing approximately 18% of the community based on survey data) voiced concerns about the geographic shift becoming "Sydney and Newcastle-centric" rather than nationally inclusive. Melbourne and Adelaide participants expressed feeling "left out" of both decision-making and future accessibility. The theme camp consultation captured strong concern that this represents "not just a site change" but "a cultural and demographic change."

The community strongly articulated a desire to remain a nationally inclusive event. Melbourne participants were open to attending a well-run event despite distance, with one noting: "Don't underestimate the power of a good party to attract Victorians... if it's a great location and you've got the vibe, they'll come."

## 2. Dates & Timing

### 2.1 Strong Concerns About October Long Weekend

October timing drew consistent opposition across multiple sessions. One participant described competing with Dragon Dreaming (5,000-person event) as "very unwise."

#### Key concerns:

- Fire risk and unpredictable hot weather during fire season
- Volunteer and participant clash with Third Degree, Dragon Dreaming, Skydance (same long weekend), Neo, and Underland
- Exclusion of professionals and musicians who have work commitments on long weekends
- Uncertainty and risk associated with whether a signed DA will be in place at this time

*"I honestly think it's very unwise for us to try and compete [with Dragon Dreaming]. It's a 5,000 person event... I don't think people are going to find the time and the resources to do both." – Members Consultation*

### 2.2 Emerging Preference for April/May

A clear preference emerged for April/May timing from 2027 onwards, identified as having "the least amount of conflict with other burner events" and enough time to get a signed DA in place for the event. May 2026 was discussed as a potential alternative to October, with average temperatures of 18°C noted as acceptable – "not as cold as Embers."

The Sydney in-person consultation recorded "almost unilateral call" for a community poll on date preferences specifically in the context of Capertee, as many IBAG survey responses were made with Matong in mind. Participants suggested burners may opt for a cooler, mid-year event if it avoids clashes with other events.

#### Alternative dates suggested:

- Second half of May
- June long weekend (though rain concerns at Capertee noted)
- ANZAC weekend (Melbourne consultation)
- August

### 2.3 The 2026 vs 2027 Tension

Strong preference exists for a 2026 event to maintain momentum. Participants expressed fear that waiting until 2027 would reduce the community "flame to a tiny spark" and result in losing volunteers who "will get bored and drop out."

However, this was balanced against recognition that permits and proper planning may require longer timelines. The compromise position appears to be: accept October 2026 as a pragmatic option despite concerns, with April/May becoming the permanent timing from 2027 onwards.

*"Momentum is important, timing is important... the first burn should be about community, not perfection." – Theme Camp Consultation*

Some participants noted the "flywheel is starting to spin now" and expressed confidence momentum would continue regardless of exact timing, with 2026 described as potentially "a year of parties" with smaller interim events.

## 3. Momentum & Community Cohesion

### 3.1 Urgency to Maintain Energy

Participants repeatedly expressed concern about losing volunteers, energy, and community connection during extended planning periods. They want "something to aspire to and work towards" and fear fragmentation across many smaller events.

The Melbourne face-to-face consultation recorded "OVERWHELMING consensus to act" with the note that "community wants to see some action now." Participants across sessions described the community as "doers" who "get shit done".

### 3.2 Interim Activities

Strong support emerged for fundraiser events, and campouts regardless of main event timing. These were seen as community cohesion tools, not just financial mechanisms. Suggestions included:

- Work with Capertee landowners to hold working bees building and upgrading infrastructure on site
- Hybrid training/workshop events (ranger training, first aid, CPR) in Q2 2026
- Fundraiser events that maintain connection without burdening main organising team
- "Mini burner community activations" and park meetups
- Matong working bee/camping weekend for land and community restoration

### 3.3 Action Over Perfection

A recurring theme was willingness to accept "not perfect" conditions to make something happen. Participants advocated for letting go of perfection expectations, noting the first events should be about community reconnection rather than flawless execution.

*"If there's momentum... someone had a farm property, we went there, had no real plans... next thing you know someone's got speakers, someone's built an effigy... all of a sudden there's 50 people there, it was great, and that built the momentum." – Melbourne Consultation*

## 4. Governance, Trust & Process

### 4.1 Desire for Transparency and Inclusion

Participants consistently expressed wanting to be "taken along the journey" in decision-making, with genuine two-way communication rather than just announcements. The Canberra consultation emphasised wanting to feel "in the loop, not left guessing" with clear, simple documentation rather than scattered information across platforms.

The consultation process itself was met with relief and appreciation – participants noted they felt "finally ready to talk about it" after extended periods of uncertainty.

### 4.2 Confusion About Roles and Decision-Making

Confusion persisted about who is responsible for what, how decisions are made, and where authority sits. The Canberra consultation noted repeated questions about what the "board" does versus the "leadership team" versus "operations." This lack of clarity was identified as directly contributing to conflict and frustration.

### 4.3 Balancing Consultation with Leadership

A productive tension emerged between desires for deep consultation versus appetite for action. The community appears to want informed, transparent leadership that listens but ultimately decides. Multiple sessions captured the message: "we elected you to lead".

*"Sometimes you also have to give it a vector... change that path later on if needed." – Melbourne Consultation*

The Team Leads consultation addressed pushback about whether the board was making decisions rather than collaborating. Directors responded that they didn't want to come to the table "without presenting some options" but that these were vetted options for community input, not predetermined outcomes.

## 5. Organisational Health & Culture

### 5.1 Collective Fatigue and Trauma

Across sessions – particularly Canberra and Melbourne – participants acknowledged collective burnout from previous years' leadership issues, lack of transparency, and organisational chaos. The Canberra synthesis described this as "collective burnout, not individual reluctance" with "hesitancy to re-engage without feeling safe, respected, and supported."

The Melbourne consultation noted the "Burning Seed" name "carries trauma" and this came up repeatedly. People have "hurt feelings based on the past, and misunderstandings" that haven't been addressed.

### 5.2 Need for Closure and Healing

Participants expressed a need for clarity on past events and accountability. Melbourne sessions surfaced the desire to "acknowledge the past directors and management who went before them, even if there are disagreements, because without them, there would be no burn."

There was enthusiasm for the community restoration process being undertaken, with Melbourne participants "100% behind" a ritual/ceremonial approach to closure, potentially culminating in fire and rebranding. Suggestions included using a Matong working bee as an opportunity to "put the name to rest" with ritual significance.

## 5.3 Desire for Healthy Volunteer Culture

Clear articulation of wanting: accountability without blame, psychological safety, respect for volunteers' time, clear boundaries, and a culture reflecting Burner values in practice not just rhetoric. The Canberra consultation noted participants want to be "treated as human first, volunteer second."

Practical concerns included sustainable workloads and bold dreams "grounded in real constraints." The Melbourne consultation also raised awareness of "white-boy club" culture that discourages female participation and can create unhealthy dynamics.

# 6. Interstate Inclusion & National Identity

## 6.1 Victorian Inclusion Strategies

Despite geographic challenges, strong creative energy emerged around solutions. The Members Consultation described "immense amount of support" from the Victorian community and "genuine sadness" about distance but understanding of operational need.

### Innovative solutions proposed:

- **"Burn surfers" buddy tent system:** Community members provide tents/gear for interstate visitors who contribute volunteer work. Described as "friends supporting friends" exchange model.
- Increased transport grants for Victorian camps
- Rest stops with camping and resources along the drive route (help with logistics)
- Theme camp mentorship (experienced camps mentoring others)

*"We want all of our friends... we will do everything we can to make it a supportive inclusive place." – Members Consultation*

## 6.2 Future 'National' or 'Federal' Burn

Appetite exists for combined national burn every few years. How this conversation started: What is behind the name, *"Burning Seed"*? When Burning Seed was born, the event was *the national* Burn event in Australia. The last two Burning Seed events were held in 2019 & 2023, with 2019 running at its peak with nearly 5000 participants. The org responsible for "Burning Seed" has undergone significant changes from that 2019 event, and is now appropriately owned by its community membership.

The Melbourne consultation recorded universal agreement that both NSW and Victoria want a "national burn" and that "all the orgs should be involved and offer volunteers." The cyclical model (Capertee normally, with special larger national events every 3–4 years) received support.

The idea of a "burner council" being organised at BoNZA with representation from all regional burn organisations was raised and received positive reception.

## 6.3 Name and Identity Questions

Melbourne consultations raised significant discussion about whether "Burning Seed" still accurately reflects a potentially smaller, NSW-centric event. Some suggested this presents an opportunity for rebranding and "cathartic" renewal, while others wanted to honour the legacy.

### Suggestions from Melbourne:

- NSW-focused events use a new name ("Pilot Burn" suggested)
- "Burning Seed" reserved for a national burn only, until it is changed (see below)

- Use a national event for ritual/catharsis and "burn" the name to create something new

Directors confirmed this naming/identity question requires its own consultation process (potentially larger than the current one) and should be addressed separately after site and date decisions are made.

## 7. Family, Accessibility & Values

### 7.1 Family-Oriented Focus

Participants advocated for more family-oriented programming rather than competing with established "doof culture" festivals. This was framed as attracting "new, invested constituents" and creating differentiation.

#### Ideas proposed:

- Activating Junior Rangers program
- Grants for teen theme camps
- Focus on skills sharing
- Families identified as a distinct stakeholder group requiring targeted engagement

### 7.2 Accessibility Needs

Theme camps identified specific accessibility and logistical needs:

- Power infrastructure at new venue for medical equipment
- Assistive camping for people with disabilities
- Village network concept from past events
- Transport costs and distances from storage

A smaller initial event was identified as an opportunity to test and improve accessibility features before scaling up.

## 8. Overall Emotional Tone

Across all consultations, the emotional landscape consistently blended:

- **Hurt and fatigue** from the past
- **Cautious hopefulness** about the current process
- **Warmth and affection** for the community
- **Relief** at being asked for input
- **Desire for healing and reconnection**
- **Strong creative energy** for reimagining the future
- **Optimism** grounded in realistic constraints

*"The group feels like a family that has been through something hard and is finally ready to talk about it." – Canberra Synthesis*

## 9. Key Decision Points Emerging

Based on community input across all consultation sessions, the following decision points are clear:

### Site

Strong support for Capertee with the appetite for a cyclical “national burn” as long-term aspiration (3–4 year cycle suggested)

### 2026 Date

October remains contentious; May 2026 emerging as an alternative worth polling. The community wants something in 2026 regardless of timing.

### 2027+ Date

April/May timing preferred as a permanent fixture from 2027 onwards.

### Event Scale

Start at 500–1,000 with realistic expectations clearly communicated. Do not over-promise.

### Interim Activities

The community wants interim events in 2026 regardless of main event timing – fundraisers, campouts, training events, working bees.

### Interstate Inclusion

Active strategies needed: logistical mapping, transport grants, cyclical national events, Victorian participation in Matong restoration. These discussions will continue with further outreach to accommodate the ideas of all interstate Burner communities.

### Date Polling

Near-unanimous request for community poll on dates specifically in context of Capertee (not Matong assumptions).

### Name/Identity

Requires separate consultation; suggestions include reserving “Burning Seed” for national events and using a new name for NSW-focused events, with the potential for a complete rebrand in the future.

## 10. Opportunities Identified

The consultation process uncovered several clear leverage points for rebuilding:

1. **Build clear governance maps** – roles, decision paths, responsibilities clearly documented
2. **Establish predictable communication rhythms** – e.g., fortnightly "What We're Working On" updates
3. **Create volunteer pathways** – onboarding, training, mentorship, sustainable workloads
4. **Adopt a culture of transparency** – share the "why" not just the "what"
5. **Address organisational trauma** – normalise rest, boundaries, conflict-safe spaces; community restoration process
6. **Centre community** – co-design is what will rebuild trust
7. **Develop inter-organisation collaboration** – burner council concept, shared resources, national burn coordination
8. **Theme camp volunteerism policy** – consider requiring camps with 10+ members to fulfill volunteer shifts at event

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*This document synthesises community input to inform Board decision-making. It is not a decision document. The Board will consider all feedback alongside operational requirements, financial constraints, and regulatory considerations in making final determinations.*

Prepared by Sunburnt Arts Ltd | December 2025