



Merri-bek
City Council

Merri-bek Open Space Strategy

endorsed 10 April 2024, updated 12 February 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

Merri-bek City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek. We pay respect to their Elders past and, present, as well as to all First Nations communities, who significantly contribute to the life of the area.

Acknowledgements

Merri bek’s Open Space Strategy was developed by Merri-bek City Council’s Open Space Design & Development Unit. Technical contributions and the Open Space Technical Report was undertaken by Mesh Planning.

Mayor’s forward

Merri-bek City Council wants diverse, inclusive, quality and sustainable public open spaces accessible across our community. Our public open spaces are important for many reasons – they provide the chance to connect with community members, catch up with friends and family, relax, play sport, exercise our dogs, experience nature and biodiversity and improve our physical and mental health.

As our Merri-bek community continues to grow and become denser, as well as conditions changing due to the climate crisis, our community’s open space needs are also changing. To meet these needs, the Open Space Strategy has a new Vision for Merri-bek, which is that:

We envision our open spaces to be welcoming and accessible for everyone. We recognise that a resilient, biodiverse and safe open space network is integral to the environment and the health and wellbeing of our community.

We honour the deep spiritual connection, belonging and identity our First Nations people and Traditional Owners have with open space. We recognise the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Owners of this land and waterways, today known as Merri-bek.

The Strategy lays out how Council will achieve this vision for our current and future population. It is supported by five key directions:

- 1. Providing parks close to home and enhancing existing open spaces
- 2. Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences

- 3. Ensuring our open space network is adaptive, biodiverse, cooling, healthy and resilient
- 4. Providing open space for everyone
- 5. Improving access to our open space network through better links, corridors and collaborations.

The accompanying Open Space Strategy Action Plan includes the key actions Council will take to fulfil these 5 directions and meet the new vision for Merri-bek.

The Strategy also highlights how future open space decisions will be made, through the inclusion of new objectives for open space. These includes emphasis on acknowledging and respecting the Traditional Owners and local First Nations history; enhancing the connection between people and nature; promoting healthy and active living; exploring how to make our public open spaces more inclusive and accessible to all; supporting local open spaces and access to nearby spaces; ensuring our open space network is adaptive and resilient in the face of a changing climate; supporting our biodiversity and nature; and increasing the amount of open space and canopy cover we have in Merri-bek.

We look forward to the Strategy guiding how we will improve open space in the future, and increase our diverse community’s ability to access, use and value them.



Cr Adam Pulford
Mayor of Merri-bek
(2023 – 2024).

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Technical Report



Community engagement



Draft Open Space Strategy



Draft Open Space Action Plan



Draft Open Space 20 Year Project List

The Open Space Strategy aims to achieve the vision by enacting the 5 strategy directions:



Providing parks close to home and enhancing existing open spaces



Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences



Ensuring our open space network is adaptive, biodiverse, cooling, healthy and resilient



Providing open space for everyone



Improving access to our open space network through better links, corridors, and collaboration.

The Open Space Strategy will provide direction for the future design, planning, provision and management of our open space network. The following principles will guide decision making about open space and when new open spaces are created and upgraded.

Traditional Owner input invited

Strategically aligned with overall Council policy

Intergenerational focussed

Evidence based decisions

Transparent and participatory

How designs address safety

How designs adapt to climate change and mitigate climate risk

How designs meet the needs of our diverse community

How designs respond to universal design principles

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Executive Summary

Merri-bek City Council is dedicated to ensuring the provision of quality, inclusive, sustainable and diverse open spaces throughout the municipality for both the current and future communities.

The Open Space Strategy acknowledges and respects the deep connection our First Nations people and Traditional Owners derive through the land and open space in Merri-bek. The Strategy recognises the role that local government has in enabling First nations self-determination and embeds this importance in the Strategy vision, directions and actions.

The Strategy and the accompanying Open Space Background Technical Report provide a strategic framework for the development and management of Merri-bek's existing and future open space network. The Strategy addresses and analyses the key influences, challenges and emerging trends impacting Merri-bek's open space network. Alongside forecasting of Merri-bek's residential and worker population growth and key areas of densification within the municipality, the Strategy provides key recommendations for open space projects to address the growing open space needs of the community. This includes specific actions and projects including key areas for land acquisition to create new open spaces.

The Strategy is underpinned by the development of five key actions. Each of the five directions has specific ongoing and short-term actions for the 2024/25 action plan as well as identifying medium (2025 to 2029) and longer (beyond 2029) actions that will help to achieve the Strategy vision. In addition, Strategy enabling actions have been identified to facilitate the implementation of the strategy, such as planning, funding, capital project listings and decision-making principles.



Image: Dad and daughter at Bulleke-bek park, Brunswick.
Photo taken by Simon Aubor



1

Introduction and context



1.1 Our First Nations history

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the City of Merri-bek is located. For tens of thousands of years, the area we know today as Merri-bek was a sparsely wooded forest with native grasslands governed and cared for by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people.

The Merri Creek, also known as the “Merri Merri” Creek, means “very rocky” in Woi-wurrung, the traditional language of this Country. The Moonee Ponds Creek was named after Moonee Moonee, an Ancestor of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. It is older than the Merri Creek, originally cut as deep as 10 metres into the sandstone. This landscape formed the foundation for the cultural, spiritual, economic, and social aspects of life for the Traditional Owners of this Country.

This land, including our waterways, was a vital food source for our First Nations people. Cultural artefacts such as scar trees have been found along the banks of these areas and pockets of native vegetation remain.

The Traditional Custodians continue to maintain a strong and enduring connection to Country. They have played and will continue to play a significant role in the stewardship of the land, water and the natural environment that is Merri-bek.

The Merri-bek Open Space Strategy acknowledges that our open spaces occupy the ancestral lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. The development of this strategy represents an opportunity to show a deeper level of respect for the land within our open spaces. Our goal is to further integrate Traditional Owner philosophies and perspectives into the way we utilise, manage, plan, and maintain our open spaces. We acknowledge that embedded within our First People’s culture is collective responsibility of caring for Country, and we look to their long-standing history of land custodianship as an outstanding example of sustainable practice for Merri-bek to adopt in this Strategy.

1.2 Defining public open space

This Strategy focuses on publicly owned open spaces, which are accessible and primarily intended for activities such as for sport and recreation, leisure, passive outdoor enjoyment, public gatherings, play, active commuting, nature conservation, as well as offering visual amenity benefits to neighbourhoods. These spaces provide for meeting people, relaxing and socialising, and are important spaces across our suburbs, high-density areas and Activity Centres. The term “open space” encompasses land used for organised sport, casual sports and recreation and active commuting. Public open spaces will often also include land with ecological and natural value, exemplified by our Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek Corridors, or land that can be improved to increase its ecological and natural value by improved management.

The broader term ‘open space’ can also include privately owned land, such as schools, golf courses and cemeteries, which may have restricted or limited public access. However, these spaces are not within Council’s control or management and so the focus of this Strategy is on public open space, which can be secured and managed by Council into the future for the ongoing benefits of the community.

The importance of open space

Thoughtfully designed and accessible open spaces deliver a multitude of environmental, economic and social benefits. The significance and value of these natural open areas were emphasised during the pandemic lockdowns in Victoria. These accessible local natural environments proved invaluable in promoting substantial mental and physical wellbeing within the community.

1.3 How we developed our Strategy

Prior to creating this Strategy, we spoke to our Merri-bek community extensively about how they use and value open space. The approach undertaken and a summary of feedback is provided in Appendix 1. There is also a detailed engagement report available.

Ways we heard that people use open space include:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Meeting people and friends | 2. Enhancing health, wellbeing and fitness |
| 3. Playing, including using playgrounds | 4. Celebrating birthday parties, events and cultural activities |
| 5. Playing casual sports and organised sports | 6. Exercising dogs |
| 7. Experiencing nature, natural bushland, creeks and animal | 8. Relaxing and being outside. |

1.4 Strategy purpose and approach

The Strategy will provide direction and assistance for the future provision, planning, design and management of Merri-bek’s open space network. It outlines the direction for future land acquisition and specify the types of new open spaces to be developed. It also offers guidance for Council to address the various challenges impacting Merri-bek and our open spaces, while also aiming for these spaces to be robust, ecologically diverse and accessible to all. In summary, the approach is:

- Listen to the input and feedback of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and the Merri-bek community to understand what is important to people in the management, protection and development of open space land and assets.
- Set strategic objectives and decision-making principles that respond to the feedback received.
- Review the function, diversity, setting and spatial allocation of our current open spaces and assess their accessibility across the entirety of Merri-bek, as well as within each suburb.
- Provide principles to establish a foundation for decision-making regarding future open space provision and development.
- Support financial and resource planning, asset management and open space maintenance.
- Explore the investment in open space needed in the next 20 years by creating a 20 year Open Space Projects List.

- Identify areas with insufficient open space provision based on current and future demographic profiles and priority precincts and propose strategies for acquiring or repurposing land for future open space.
- Identify gaps, challenges and opportunities within the existing open space network based on the characteristics and types of open spaces and their walking catchment.
- Provide actions and projects to deliver the Vision and objectives of the Strategy.



1.5 Existing open space in Merri-bek

Merri-bek has over 577 hectares of open space that together create our open space network, as seen in Figure 1. This network includes:

1. More than 54 dedicated facilities catering for both formal sports clubs and informal sports and recreational activities, featuring formal sports grounds and sports pavilions.
2. Over 130 playgrounds, offering a wide range of playground sizes, equipment and styles to suit various preferences.
3. Parks and open spaces with diverse amenities, such as public toilets, park shelters, BBQ areas and water fountains.
4. Features like skate parks, pump tracks and exercise equipment to promote physical activity and leisure.
5. Wetlands, raingardens and stormwater harvesting systems, designed to improve the health of our accessible open spaces and Creeks, reduce use of potable water for irrigation, reduce stormwater risk and improve local biodiversity and cooling.
6. Accessible open space corridors which provide extensive shared user paths for walking, running and cycling, connecting to other regional trails such as the Main Yarra Trail.
7. Extensive habitat, tree canopy, biodiversity and native vegetation, with some species protected under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.
8. Open spaces that adjoin Activity Centres, civic spaces, community buildings, aquatic centres and libraries, allowing users to use community facilities and open space together.

Merri-bek also features several regional shared path networks that provide extensive shared user paths for walking, running and cycling, including:

- The Merri Creek Trail, running along a significant portion of the municipality's eastern boundary, stretching from Fitzroy North to Fawkner.
- The Moonee Ponds Creek trail, which spans much of the western boundary of the municipality, extending from Brunswick West up to Gowanbrae.
- The Upfield Shared Path, which runs along the Upfield Railway corridor running along the length of Merri-bek.
- The Western Ring Road trail, located to the south of the Western Ring Road, which connects the Merri Creek Trails, the Moonee Ponds Creek trail and the Upfield Shared User Path.
- The nearby Capital City Trail which runs along Merri-bek's southern boundary shared with the Melbourne and Yarra City Council areas, and connects to the Upfield Shared Path, the Merri Creek Trail and the Moonee Ponds Creek Trail.

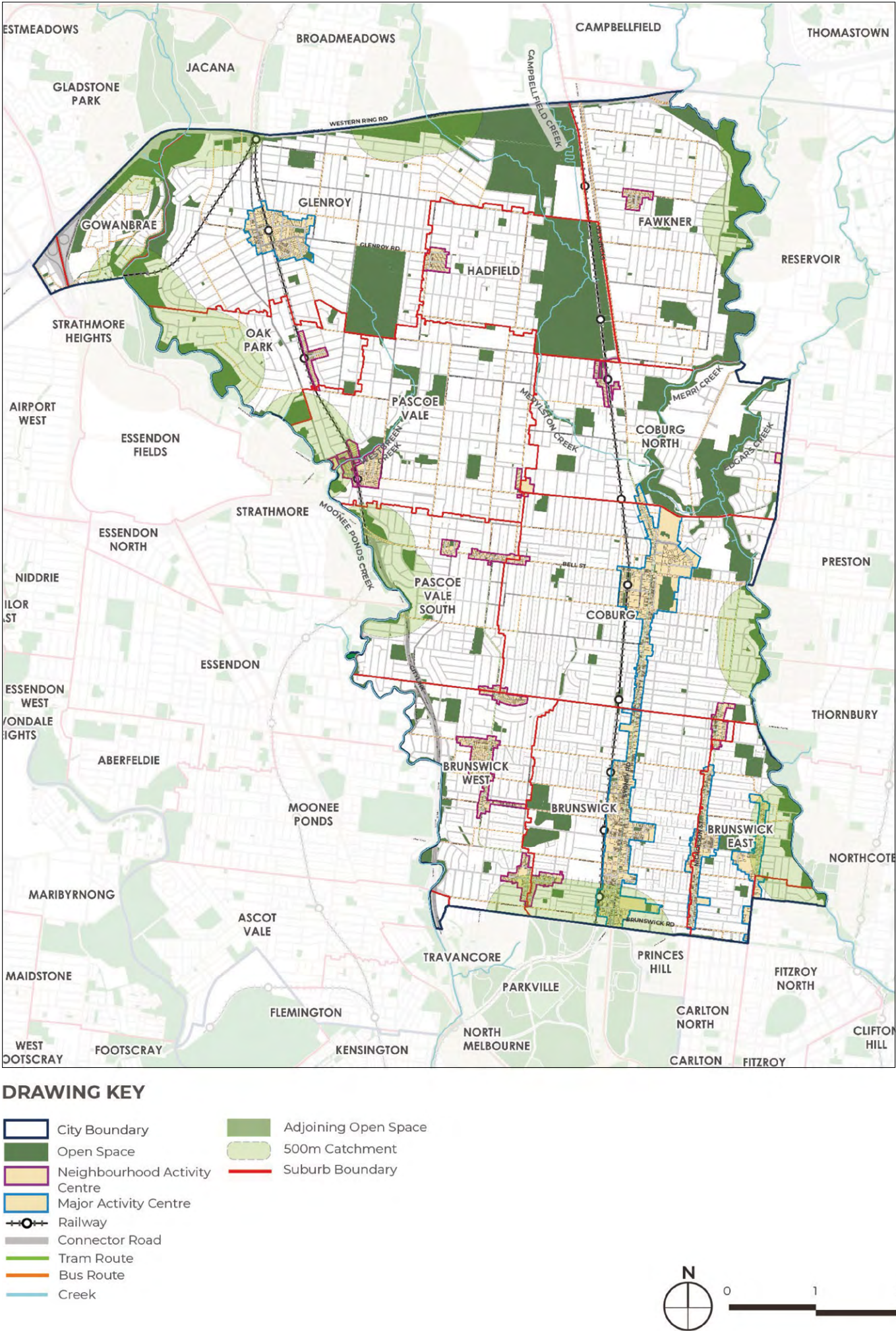
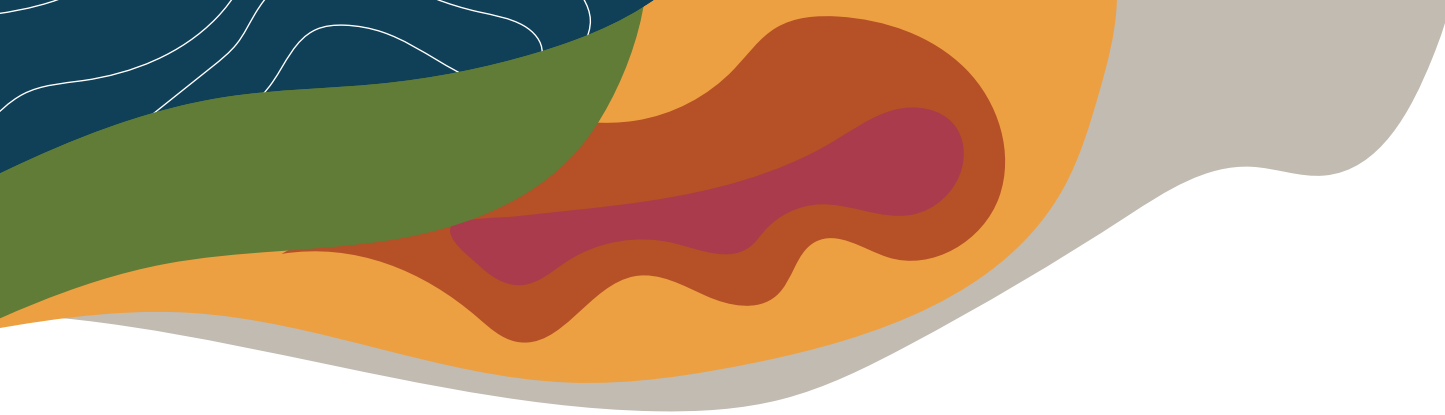


Figure 1: Map of Merri-bek open space and nearby significant open space.



Merri-bek additionally benefits from significant regional open spaces in adjoining municipalities, including:

- Princes Park, Parkville, a 39 hectare open space, and Royal Park, Parkville, a 188 hectare park in the City of Melbourne, which are located to the south of Merri-bek. These spaces include various formal sports grounds, walking and running circuits, dog off-leash areas, key biodiversity areas, as well as many events and social activities.
- The Northcote Public Golf Course, a 25 hectare open space in Northcote next to the Merri Creek in the City of Darebin, that includes a public golf course and public open space.
- Jack Roper Reserve, a 52 hectare lakeside setting open space in the City of Hume, which contains various playgrounds and play spaces, walking trails, soccer field and shared user paths connecting to trails in Merri-bek, including the Western Ring Road Bike path.
- Boeing Reserve parklands, a large 23 hectare open space area in Strathmore Heights within the City of Moonee Valley. It contains a baseball field, community garden, dog off leash area and skate ramp and is accessible from Merri-bek by crossing the Moonee Ponds Creek via a footbridge at Devereaux Street, Oak Park.

While these nearby open spaces are important for Merri-bek residents and workers, there are often barriers to easily accessing these spaces in adjoining municipalities, such as waterways and major roads.

Merri-bek also contributes to a number of open space collaborations, including:

- The Chain of Ponds, an ambitious collaboration of 14 organisations together seeking to transform Moonee Ponds Creek and its tributaries into an iconic waterway.
- The Merri Creek Management Committee and Friends groups for the major waterways in Merri-bek.
- The Integrated Water Management Forums for the Yarra Catchment (including the Merri Creek) and the Maribyrnong Catchment (including the Moonee Ponds Creek).



Image: Little girl planting tree.

¹ The Chain of Ponds Collaboration includes: Merri-bek City Council, City of Moonee Valley, City of Melbourne, City of Hume, Parks Victoria, Yarra Valley Water, Greater Western Water, Kensington Association, Victorian Planning Authority, Melbourne Water, Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek, Living Colour Studio, Conservation Volunteers Australia and the Moonee Valley Bike Users Group.



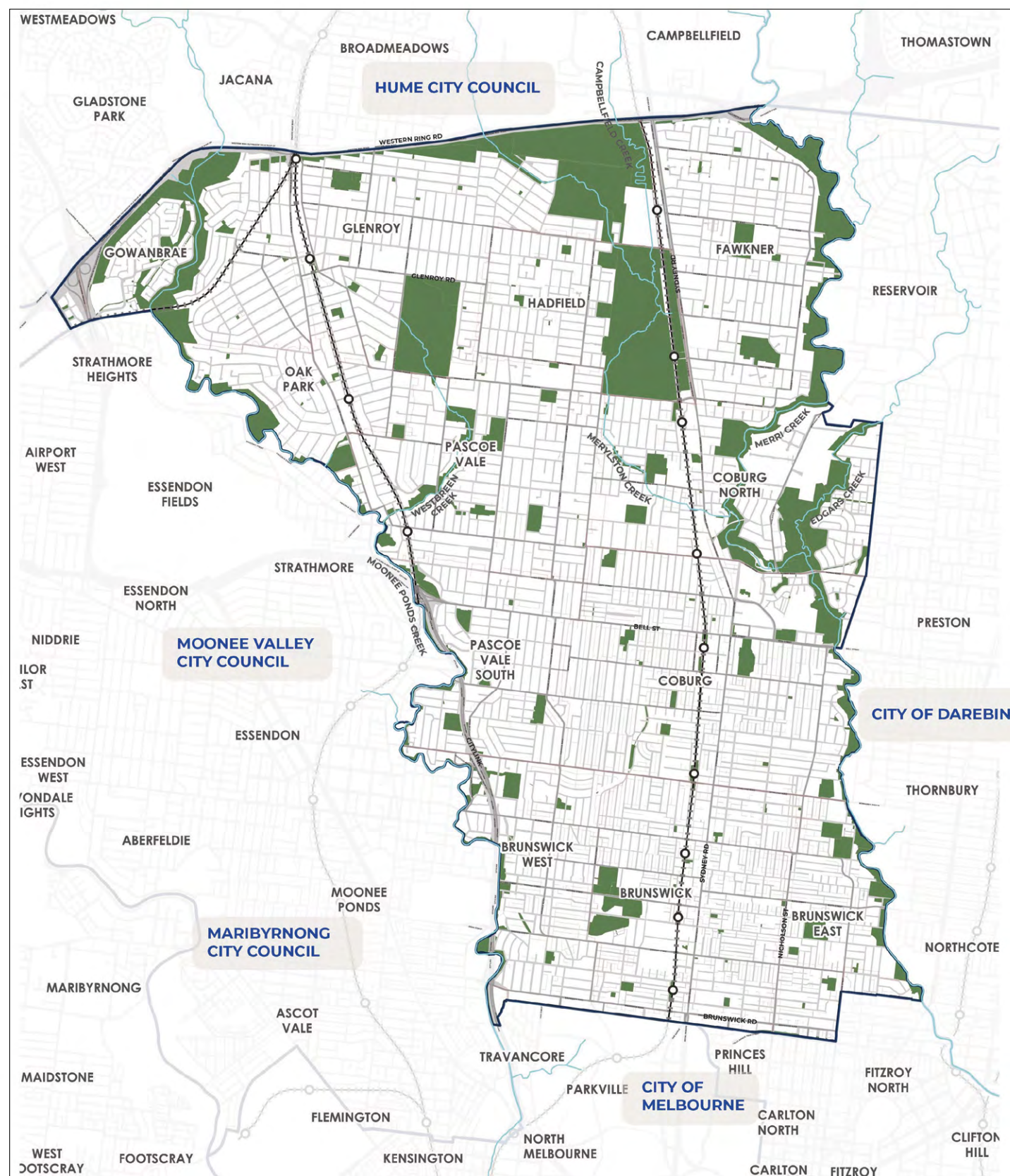


Figure 2: Map of open space in Merri-bek.

Merri-bek has many unique open spaces and natural experiences. The Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek corridors offer exceptional walking and running paths, opportunities for immersing oneself in nature and spaces for bush play. Our urban and suburban parks, playgrounds, and sports fields provide settings for more structured play, sports, and recreational activities, as well as immersing oneself in nature.

Council manages a diverse portfolio of open space, including playgrounds, sport grounds, wetlands, creek corridors and facilities such as barbecues. Furthermore, there are substantial restricted open spaces in Merri-bek that are owned or managed by other entities, including the Northern Golf Course in Glenroy and the Fawcner Memorial Park in Fawcner and Northern Memorial Park in Glenroy. As noted above, these spaces are not owned or managed by Council, and so while they can play a role in our network of open space, the focus on this Open Space Strategy is on delivering publicly accessible and secure spaces for the recreation and leisure needs of the community. Figure 2 shows all the open space within Merri-bek.

Council also has other, often smaller spaces, which whilst not being technically classified as public open space, serve as important areas for people living, working in, and travelling through Merri-bek. These spaces contribute to the wider open space network and include footpaths, large street verges or nature strips, median strips and land owned by authorities (such as service authorities). These spaces often contribute to how people access our public open space network, such as footpaths. The Strategy will work with aligning Council programs to enhance the amenity of these spaces and the vision of this Strategy, such as increasing tree canopy on footpaths to improve natural shade for pedestrians when accessing to public open spaces.



Merri-bek at a glance

The City of Merri-bek lies between 4 and 14 kilometres north of central Melbourne. It is bordered by the Moonee Ponds Creek to the west, Merri Creek to the east, Park Street to the south and the Western Ring Road to the north. Suburbs within Merri-bek include Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Coburg, Coburg North, Fawkner, Glenroy, Gowanbrae, Hadfield, Oak Park, Pascoe Vale, and Pascoe Vale South. There are also small sections of the suburbs of Fitzroy North and Tullamarine within the municipal boundaries. Merri-bek covers 50.9 square kilometres and is one of Melbourne's most populous municipalities, with the estimated resident population in 2021 being 195,418 persons.

Some 33 per cent of Merri-bek residents were born overseas, with 39 per cent speaking a language other than English. Our diverse languages include Italian, Arabic, Greek, Urdu, Nepali and Turkish. Immigration trends have influenced Merri-bek's rich cultural community, including our ageing Greek and Italian population and an increase in people arriving from countries including India, Nepal and Lebanon.

Merri-bek is renowned for its thriving arts sector and creative industries, including along the Sydney Road and Lygon Street precincts. It is also a municipality experiencing significant urban densification and population growth. In the next 20 years the Merri-bek residential population is expected to increase by 35 per cent to approximately 258,000 people².

Our residents in Merri-bek live in a diversity of household types: just over half of our home are separate houses, whilst 35 per cent are medium density townhouses and 13 per cent are high density apartments. An increasing trend of smaller households continues to emerge. Over 28 per cent of our households are lone persons, 24 per cent couples without children, 26 per cent couples with children and 9 per cent are one parent families, in addition to group households and other families. Merri-bek's suburbs and activity centre growth areas are seen in Figure 3.

Merri-bek serves as an important business hub, with a unique location near the Melbourne Central Business District, as well as large land holdings for industrial businesses. The Sydney Road corridor includes a 4 kilometre long retail strip home to a mix of shops, bars, cafés as well as various types of open spaces. The municipality supports a diversity of businesses, factories, and commercial premises, and in 2019 supported 46,840 jobs³.

Image: Girls playing football.

² This figure is from .ld Consulting population forecasts, 2020.

³ This figure is taken from the 'A Job in Merri-bek' data, March 2021.

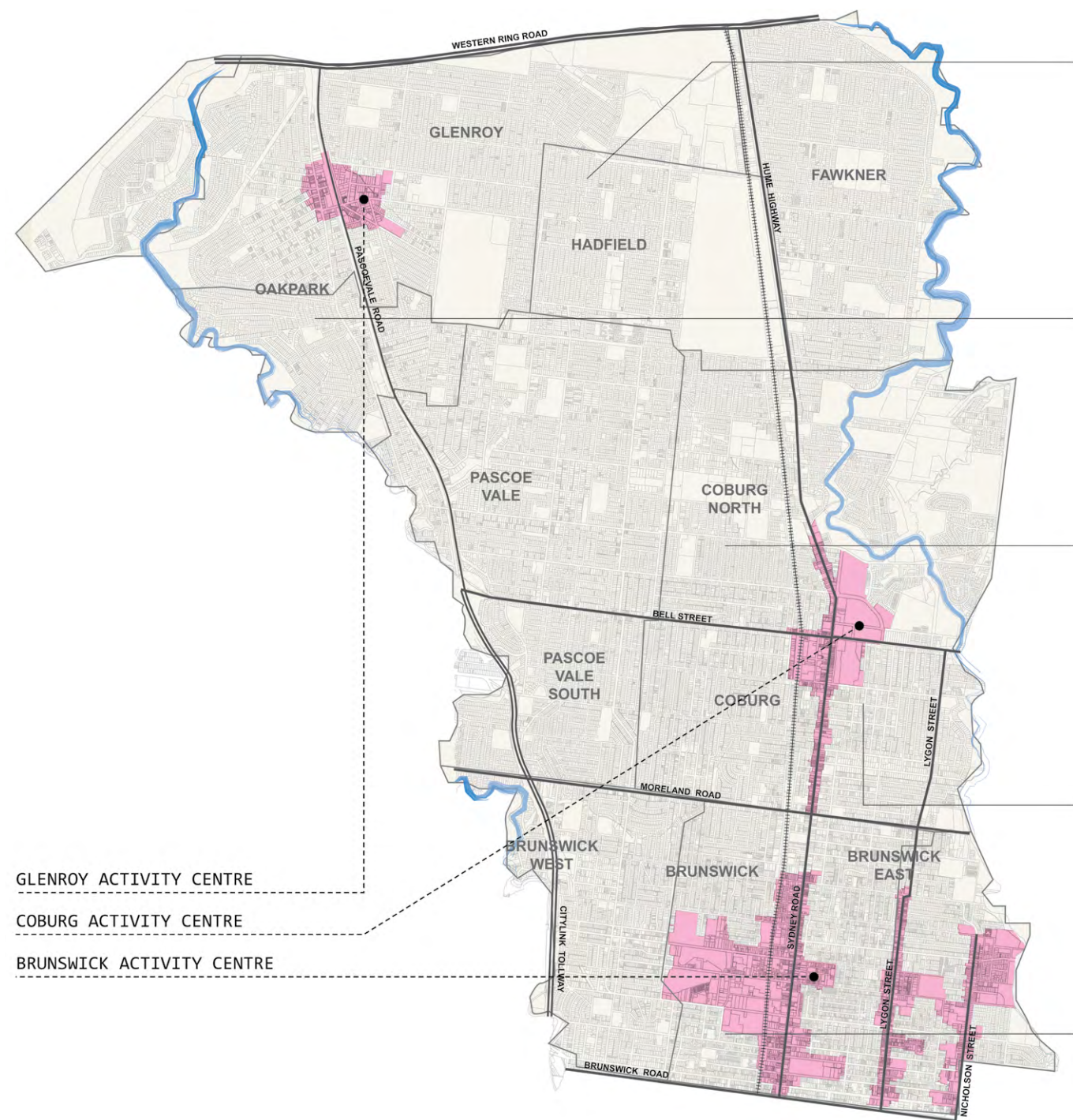


Figure 3: Merri-bek's suburbs and key Activity Centre growth areas.

Image: Growling Grass at Moomba Park wetlands, Fawkner.
 Photo taken by Luisa Macmillan.



1.6 Context changes

The Open Space Strategy recognises that the role of open space is evolving due to shifts in Merri-bek, including population growth, urban densification, and the escalating challenge of climate change. Creation of a new Strategy also allows for an exploration of how Merri-bek is changing and how this impacts our open space needs, therefore allowing Council to better meet these needs.

There have been significant changes in our context since the Moreland Open Space Strategy 2012 – 2022 was created, and Merri-bek will continue to face further changes and challenges in the future.

Context changes since 2012

Some of the most significant changes affecting open space in Merri-bek since 2012 are:

- 1. Population increase:** The 2012 – 2022 Strategy estimated Merri-bek's population to reach 177,777 persons by 2032; however, by 2021 the population already exceeded 195,418 persons.
- 2. Escalating costs:** There has been a substantial increase in costs associated with land acquisition, construction, and maintenance over the years, with Council encountering construction costs escalating by 30 per cent to 70 per cent and land costs doubling. The amount of funding available for new parks and development of open space has however not risen at the same rate.
- 3. Rapid rise in dog registrations:** Merri-bek has witnessed a large surge of dogs, with dog registrations in recent years increasing by over 300 per cent.

- 4. Increased participation in formal sports:** Participation in formal sports, including soccer, football and hockey, has grown notably across the whole of Merri-bek. Female participation in community sports has also grown rapidly, as has the desire for more access to open space for informal sport and community / organised sport.
- 5. Changing community expectations:** Council has heard from our community that they want to be able to use more open space locally, including being able to walk or cycle to different types of open spaces near their homes or workplaces. Our community has also expressed a greater understanding of the importance of open space with respects to health and wellbeing, fitness, social needs and the value of biodiversity.
- 6. Climate change and climate risk:** The impact and risk of climate change has become more understood in recent years, including the impact it will have on open space and the role open space will need to play to reduce risks by supporting cooling, absorbing rainwater, and other functions of the natural environment.
- 7. Rise in build-to-rent development sites:** As these developments do not subdivide, a Public Open Space contribution may not be required or made to Council to account for the new open space demand being created by the development.

Current and future changes and challenges

In preparing a new Open Space Strategy, it is prudent for Council to review the previous strategy, reflect on what has been achieved, what has changed, and determine what is needed for the future.

The changes of the last decade will continue to impact Merri-bek into the future as population continues to grow through densification and people's expectations continue to change. Increases in costs and continued growth in demand and ambitions for open space will lead to growing need to explore fresh opportunities for funding.

The Strategy also recognises that the way we live and work has and continues to change, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes more people working from home and desire for local access to open space. Furthermore, Council recognises the growth in mental health challenges which makes open spaces more important for people's wellbeing, such as being in nature and providing for social connection.

Our open spaces will become increasingly important in climate risk mitigation and adaption. This includes the importance of open spaces for cooling our city and also the need to further enhance and protect our accessible open spaces and their biodiversity.

The Open Space Strategy also needs to respond to the Victorian Government's Metropolitan Melbourne Open Space for Everyone strategy which has introduced new dynamics and considerations for open space planning.

The development of this Strategy also provides an opportunity to analyse our existing open spaces, including their location, type, and the activities they accommodate.





2

Our Strategy





2.1 Strategy vision

As introduced in section 1, the vision for the Open Space Strategy is:

We envision our open spaces to be welcoming and accessible for everyone. We recognise that a resilient, biodiverse and safe open space network is integral to the environment and the health and wellbeing of our community.

We honour the deep spiritual connection, belonging and identity our First Nations people and Traditional Owners have with open space. We recognise the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the traditional owners of this land and waterways, today known as Merri-bek.

The vision for the Merri-bek Open Space Strategy promotes holistic open space planning and management, ensuring that open spaces are not only beautiful and accessible but also serve as a platform for unity, connection, and wellbeing for all members of the community.

2.2 Objectives for managing open space

The vision is supported by objectives that apply to open space for people and open space for nature.

- 1. Traditional Owners Commitment:** Merri-bek City Council acknowledges First Nations history and aims to pay respect to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung, as our First Peoples and Traditional Owners. As documented in the Merri-bek Statement of Commitment, Council is committed to working towards self-determination and local, regional or national Treaty or Treaties that enshrine the rights of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. We recognise that open space and its management can play a role in achieving this.
- 2. Connecting people and their open space network:** We want to promote the connection between people and their open space network. This includes reinforcing the importance open space and nature has towards improved health and wellbeing, as well as highlight the need for Council and our community to continue caring for Merri-bek's nature and biodiversity.
- 3. Healthy, active and well:** We want to enable a resilient and safe open space network, because this is essential for the health and wellbeing of the community and the environment. Open spaces are important places for recreation, relaxation, social connection, connection with nature, and physical and mental well-being.
- 4. Inclusive and accessible:** Merri-bek's open spaces should be welcoming and accessible to everyone, irrespective of their background or age, housing situation, culture, or abilities.

- We want to provide a diverse mix of open spaces within the network that are multi-functional, safe and inclusive for diverse community needs.
- 5. Supporting long-term local living:** We want Merri-bek's open spaces to be connected in a network, and close to where people live. The network will provide for different experiences so open spaces benefits are close to everyone, even as urban areas densify and household patterns change.
 - 6. Adaptive and resilient:** We want Merri-bek's open spaces to be resilient in the face of climate change and for ongoing maintenance and renewal. As largely permeable spaces, they also play a significant role in integrated water management. Open spaces need to be able to adapt to a changing world.
 - 7. Biodiverse and regenerative:** Substantial creek corridors and other wildlife corridors support biodiversity of plants and animals. We want the natural environment within our open space network to thrive. To do this we need to restore habitat and rehabilitate open spaces and their waterways from the effects of litter and contamination and protect them from pollutants and damage from other human activities.
 - 8. Supporting canopy cover:** Open spaces are critical to addressing the urban heat island effect and provide refuge from heat as well as contributing to overall reduction in average temperatures. We want to enable urban cooling by doing tree planting and protection in our open space network. Doing this will improve the city's tree canopy cover for our urban forest.

Image: Child playing soccer Coburg Lake.
Photo taken by Simon Aubor.



2.3 Strategy directions

Arising from the vision and objectives are five directions. Each of these directions are accompanied by a set of specific actions that will support delivery of the directions and the overarching vision. The directions are:

- 1. Providing parks close to home and enhancing existing open space.
- 2. Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences.
- 3. Ensuring our open space network is adaptive, biodiverse, cooling, healthy and resilient.
- 4. Providing open space for everyone.
- 5. Improving access to our open space network through better links, corridors and collaboration.

1. Providing parks close to home and enhancing existing open spaces

This direction is focused on expanding access to open spaces for both residents and workers. This direction builds upon the ‘Park Close to Home’ strategy which actively creates new open spaces and Council’s program of enhancing and upgrading existing open spaces.

This direction involves ongoing investment in existing open spaces, which includes upgrading facilities, enhancing playgrounds, and expanding amenities like BBQ areas and park shelters. It also continues the creation of new open spaces via land acquisition.

Importantly, this direction is deliberate in its approach to offer a diverse range of new open spaces. The decision-making process for these spaces is guided by the analysis further discussed in the Strategy, striving for a balance between smaller pocket parks and larger local public open spaces.

Furthermore, this direction emphasises the significance of establishing agreements with open space landowners within identified gaps, such as exploring opportunities to partner with schools for greater public use of open spaces. It also highlights the importance of continued collaboration with major open space landowners such as Melbourne Water, the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust and the Northern Golf Club, to preserve crucial open space nature and habitat while exploring opportunities for increased public access.

2. Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences.

This direction is centred on creating open spaces that are inviting, engaging, enjoyable and inclusive. It seeks to achieve this by increasing the presence of artwork and sculptures, and organising events like sports classes, tai chi groups and yoga classes. These will help promote greater activation of open space and make all persons in our diverse community feel welcome and represented. Additionally, the direction aims to enhance community participation in open space management and encourage collaboration with neighbouring entities like businesses and community groups. The direction is underpinned by collaboration with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and actions emerging from this relationship.

3. Ensuring our open space network is adaptive, biodiverse, cooling, healthy and resilient.

This direction is dedicated to the enhancement and conservation of Merri-bek's natural habitats and biodiversity whilst also ensuring our open space network is healthy and adapts to climate change. It also highlights the important role our open space plays for urban cooling in our warming climate and responding to extreme flooding and heat events. This direction has key actions to enhance these critical features of open space, such as exploring the need for dark parks to preserve and enhance night-time habitat for local animals and explore changes to land to integrate water into the urban landscape and enhance public open space waterway corridors.

4. Providing open space for everyone

The purpose of this direction is to enhance the accessibility of our open spaces and the open space network to a wider and more diverse range of individuals. This encompasses persons with disabilities, women, children, teenagers, the elderly, dog owners, those who are uncomfortable around dogs, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and people of all generations.

To achieve this direction, specific actions concentrate on the development of dedicated infrastructure, such as the creation of an All Abilities Access playground, dedicated dog parks and youth-friendly open spaces. Furthermore, alterations to existing open spaces will include the installation of additional seating and park furniture to better cater to the diverse and evolving needs of our community.

5. Improving access to our open space network through better links, corridors and collaboration.

This direction aims to expand access to our open space network through better connections between open spaces and collaboration with private landowners and state agencies. Actions include exploring land acquisitions to increase physical access to existing open spaces and exploring opportunities to better link existing open spaces to the regional Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek corridors. It also directs Council to promote this direction when collaborating on future Victorian State Government projects, such as future level crossing removal projects, which may create new open space that will need to appropriately link to existing corridors.



2.4 Strategy enabling actions

In addition to the Strategy directions, there are some key enabling actions that will ensure the Strategy is able to be implemented. These include actions to:

- Develop and maintain a long-term list of capital projects for open space.
- Support securing funding for open space projects, including construction and long-term maintenance.
- Review regulations of land use and development to protect and enhance open space.
- Support decisions in open space management, allocation, prioritisation and investment.

This section outlines the scope of the enabling actions and the associated specific actions separately documented in the Action Plan.

Open space project list

To inform the likely public open space projects that Council needs to deliver in the coming years, a 20-year Projects List has been created. This includes:

- Recommended projects for suburbs across Merri-bek, as detailed in Appendix 4, which are intended to address increasing demand and need for additional open space to accommodate residential and worker population growth and continued urban densification.

- Projects in open space that complement and address key challenges and emerging trends in open space, such as: new wetlands, stormwater harvesting systems, raingardens, dog parks, playground upgrades, works to improve sports facilities, and new picnic facilities such as BBQs, shelters and drinking taps.
- Land acquisitions required to support projects and fill gaps in the open space network.

The Projects List, which accompanies the Strategy, is also being assessed in relation to review of the city's public open space contribution rate in the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.

The Projects List will inform future work planning and budget decisions. The Projects List is not exhaustive nor definitive. Council's overarching objective is to deliver a diverse open space network that meets the needs of the community and as such, may need to make strategic investments in open space as opportunities arise. As such, Council may deliver other capital projects that are identified from time to time, consistent with the strategic intent and objectives of the Open Space Strategy. The timing of some projects will also change to account for changes in condition, usage and to ensure that Council can capitalise on opportunities that arise over the life of the Strategy.

Open space funding

Funding for the development and management of open space in Merri-bek mostly comes from Council's Public Resort and Recreation Land Fund (PRRLF), in addition to government grants and annually collected rates. The PRRLF is funded from developer contributions collected via the Merri-bek Planning Scheme. Collectively, these provide for Council:

- Planning and designing for open spaces and its infrastructure.
- Renewing open spaces and its infrastructure, when at end-of-life.
- Upgrading open spaces and its infrastructure.
- Creating new open spaces with infrastructure.
- Acquiring land for larger or new open spaces.
- Maintaining open spaces and its infrastructure.

Many of these open space activities are expensive and must be carefully prioritised to ensure Council can deliver the Open Space Strategy in a manner which ensures responsible long-term financial management. The Strategy's vision, directions and action plan together help guide future investment in open space across Merri-bek. They also inform Council's long-term budget planning for its open space portfolio and corresponding maintenance and management. These are ultimately enabled by the Council Plan, Council Action Plan, 4-year Budget and 10-year Asset Plan.

When a public open space contribution is required as part of a subdivision or development application, there are circumstances when Council may opt (or partially opt) for land contribution instead of a monetary public open space contribution. These include when land:

- Is considered more beneficial to the wider Merri-bek community than a monetary contribution.
- Helps widen an existing public open space network or corridor, such as along a creek corridor.
- Will add to an existing public open space or will help increase the benefit of the existing open space to the benefit of the Merri-bek community.
- Improves or creates an open space network link or connection, such as a connection between existing or future open spaces.
- Meets the objectives and vision of the strategy better than a monetary contribution.



Land use and development

The Open Space Strategy explores various land use and development matters, such as population increase, densification, existing open space, demands for types and uses of open space, and needs for future enhancement and investment across Merri-bek's open space network. Many of these relate to Council's role in managing our city's growth and open space provision. The Merri-bek Planning Scheme is one of Council's key vehicles for managing these changes and needs.

The following implementation actions for the Merri-bek Planning Scheme ('Planning Scheme') therefore arise from the Strategy:

- 1. Updating the Merri-bek Planning Scheme's Planning Policy Framework:** Council will use the Strategy to update the city's strategic direction for its open space network in the Planning Scheme.
- 2. Updating public open space contribution rates:** Council will use the Strategy, the accompanying Technical Report and Projects List, to inform strategic work that will consider if, and to what extent, updated public open space contribution rate/s are justified for inclusion in Clause 53.01 of the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.
- 3. Reviewing Planning Zones and Overlays:** Council is in the process of reassessing planning zones and overlays to better protect open spaces. This includes themes for sunlight access, habitat preservation, biodiversity, and environmental protection.

Decision making framework

When decisions need to be made about the development, protection and use of open space, it is important that they account for a range of community views and user needs and are clear about which objectives are being given highest priority. To achieve this, it is helpful to use a decision-making framework that allows consistent approaches.

Principles to guide decision making are required to establish a decision-making framework.

The following principles set the scene for decisions about open space:

- **Traditional Owner input invited:** In line with Council's commitment to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people, an invitation will be open for Traditional Owner participation in any decisions.
- **Strategically aligned:** Supports achievement of the Open Space Strategy vision and objectives and other Council decision making frameworks.
- **Evidence based:** Scientific and social data and research inform decisions.
- **Transparent and participatory:** Community engagement forms a key pillar of decision making in the management of open spaces and processes guiding decisions are transparent. This includes a variety of media and platforms, such as online, in person, in language, using community facilities and organisations, etc.

- **Intergenerational:** Decisions will be made with the long-term future in mind, so that future generations of all ages will continue to experience the benefits of the decisions we make today regarding open space. This includes the 'Child's Voice', the 'Voice of the Youth', older persons, adults, etc, and organisations that support future generations (such as early years services).
- **Stakeholder focused:** Stakeholders, partnership and collaborations (such as Integrated Water Management forums, Merri Creek Management Committee, Friends groups, Sports clubs, etc) are involved.

- Other types of decisions that could benefit from decision support guidance include:
- Working through specific scope and locations to implement a strategy action.
 - Determining the best use of particular open space or prospective open space.
 - Significant changes to the way open space (or specific open spaces) are managed or used.
 - Confirming where dogs can be off leash and where on-leash restrictions should apply.
 - Determining which open spaces have facilities such as toilets, BBQs and picnic shelters.
 - Exploring which open space will be dark parks without substantial illumination.
 - Design outcomes to be applied when project scope is determined.

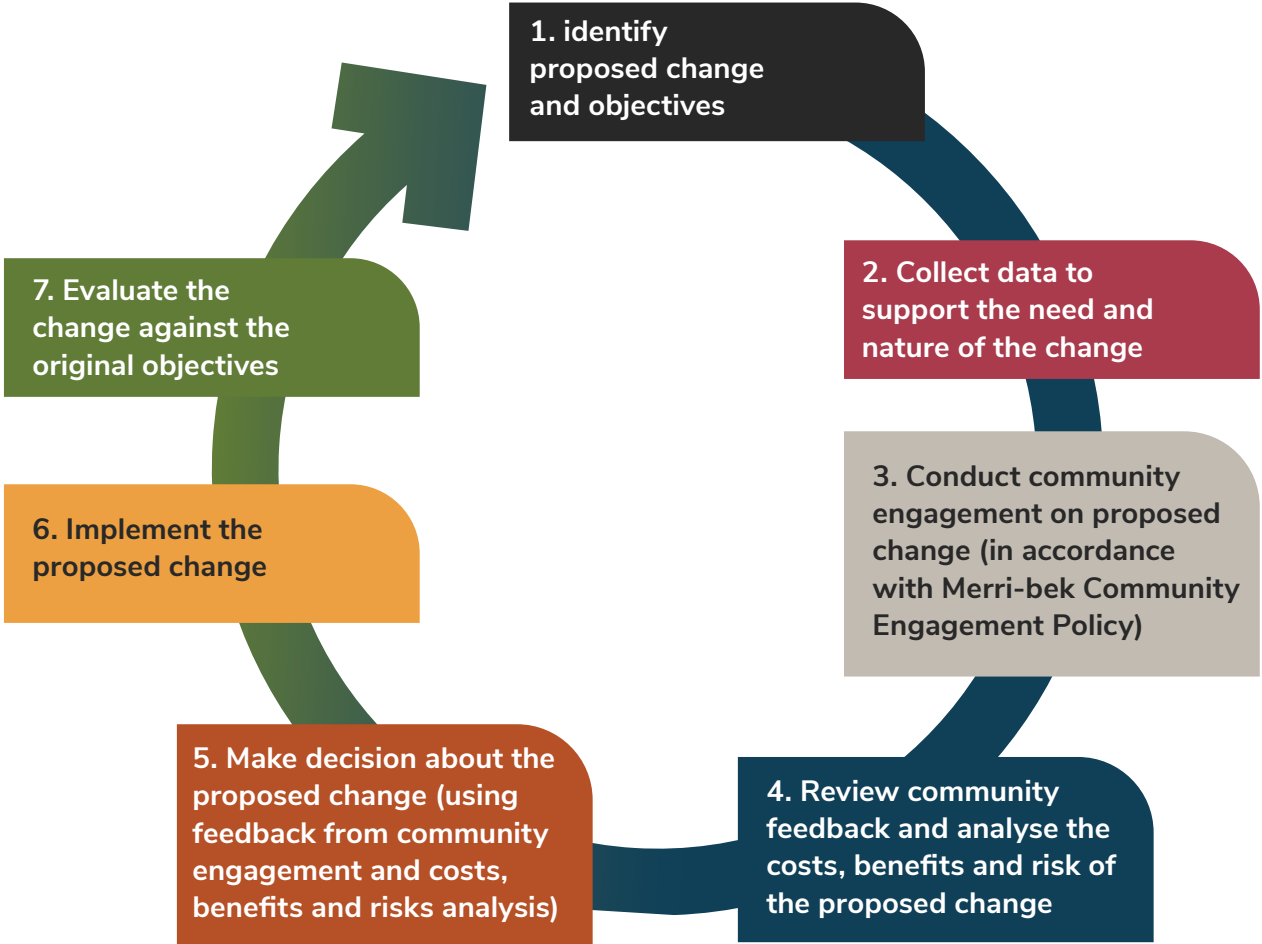
Decision support guidance

There are many different types of decisions that need to be made in the prioritisation, development, maintenance, and allocation of open space. Some of these decisions are at the highest level, foreshadowed through the priorities and actions identified in this Strategy. Others will be at the specific, detail level and will require a different type of consideration at different times.

Decision support guidance already exists for some decisions, such as the Merri-bek Strategic Property Framework which guides open space property decisions, and the Merri-bek Sportsground Surface Policy which guides decisions about surfaces for sportsgrounds.



- On this last point, the following considerations are provided to illustrate the benefit of a decision support process in the upgrade and creation of new open spaces (such as parks and playgrounds):
- How the design addresses safety through Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).
 - How the design adapts to climate change and mitigates climate risk (such as flooding, excessive heat, water sensitive urban design, cooling methods, increase canopy and vegetation coverage) and improves biodiversity, habitat, and nature.
 - How the open space meets the needs of our diverse community (including persons with a disability, all ages, all genders, differing cultures).
 - And how the design responds to universal design principles (disability lens perspective and inter-generational perspective).
- The following diagram is a high-level decision-making framework showing the pathway decisions will step through to create a final decision. It highlights how specific steps will be undertaken and analysed to make a decision. Further development of these decision paths will be progressed through the implementation of the Open Space Strategy.





2.5 Action planning, strategy monitoring and review

Action plans

Action plans will play a pivotal role in advancing the implementation of the Open Space Strategy. An initial Action Plan is proposed for the period until the end of Financial Year 2024/25 and then subsequent Action Plans will be four-year Action Plans aligned with Council Plan cycles. This periodic assessment ensures that the outlined actions continue to align with the evolving needs and circumstances of the community and Merri-bek.

The actions within the Strategy's Action Plans are organised under the strategy's five key directions. Collectively, these directions and their actions work in harmony to realise the Open Space vision.

Implementation of these actions relies on a number of factors (including budget, contributions received, population growth, the level of development activity and the availability of land to purchase in appropriate locations).

The Open Space Strategy Action Plan is an accompanying document to this Strategy.

Monitoring and review

To maintain the relevance and effectiveness of this Strategy in the face of evolving circumstances, regular reviews and updates are essential. These reviews should consider changes in factors like population growth, new legislation, shifts in community needs and values, and available funding resources.

The recommended review schedule for the Open Space Strategy is:

- 1. Population Statistics Review:** Update population statistics and assess their impact on the Open Space Strategy and action plan when new population modelling data becomes available / at a minimum, every five years aligned with the Census.
- 2. Action Plan Review:** Review the action plan after 12 months and thereafter every four years to align with the Merri-bek Council Plan. This will ensure its alignment with the evolving needs of the community and the Strategy's objectives.
- 3. Strategy Review:** The Victorian Government state guidance on the development of open space strategies recommends strategies to be reviewed at approximately 10-year intervals. On this basis, it is considered that a new strategy will be needed on or before the mid-2030s.

These regular reviews and updates will help ensure that the Open Space Strategy continues to effectively address the needs of the Merri-bek community and remains a valuable and adaptable resource over time.

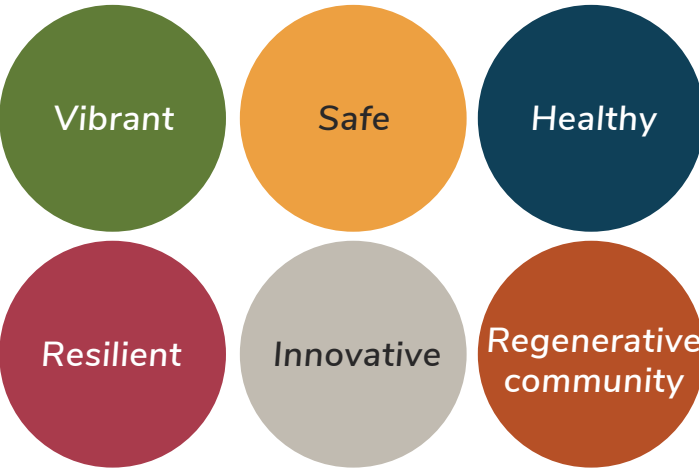
2.6 Council strategies

The Open Space Strategy aligns with Merri-bek City Council's various policies, strategies and programs (which are listed in Appendix 3). These have been considered and helped inform the Strategy.

Merri-bek Community Vision

The Merri-bek Community Vision provides the overarching pathway for our future Merri-bek. The Open Space Strategy plays a significant role towards achieving the Merri-bek Council Vision:

“Merri-bek is our home. We respect and look after our land, air, waterways, and animals. We care for our people and celebrate our diverse stories, cultures, and identities. Merri-bek is enhanced by all of us supporting our local businesses, arts communities and social organisations. We work together proactively and transparently to continue to create a: Many faces, one Merri-bek.”



The five themes to achieve this Vision and reflect the aspirations of Merri-bek’s diverse and growing community in 2031 are:

- Theme 1: An environmentally proactive Merri-bek
- Theme 2: Moving and living safely in Merri-bek
- Theme 3: A healthy and caring Merri-bek
- Theme 4: Spaces and places in Merri-bek
- Theme 5: An empowered and collaborative Merri-bek

The explanation of these themes and how they relate to the Open Space context is provided in Appendix 2.

Moreland Open Space Strategy 2012 – 2022

For the past 10 years, Council’s approach to managing and upgrading open space was informed by the Moreland Open Space Strategy 2012 – 2022.

In 2017, Council released ‘Park Close to Home: A Framework to Fill Open Space gaps’. It aimed to meet the Open Space Strategy goal of “providing parks close to home” by providing open space within 500 metres of all residential properties and 300 metres to all residential properties within activity centres. This has seen Council purchase land across our suburbs and create seven new open spaces since 2018, being: Bulleke-bek Park (Brunswick), Garrong Park (Brunswick), Citadel Park (Glenroy) and Kirrip Biik (Coburg), and three under construction at 260 Sydney Road (Brunswick), 14 Frith Street (Brunswick), and one being designed on York Street (Pascoe Vale South).

In addition, the 2012 – 2022 Open Space Strategy has seen:

- Purchase of land to create new public open space along the Moonee Ponds Creek corridor in John Street (Oak Park) and at Outlook Drive (Glenroy).
- Purchase of land to create a new all ability access ramp at Spry Street (Coburg North) to improve access to the Merri Creek corridor.
- Creation of four new dedicated dog parks at Gilpin Park (Brunswick), Richards Reserve (Coburg North), Moomba Park (Fawkner) and Kingsford Smith Ulm Reserve (Glenroy).

- Creation of new urban pocket parks, such as Wilson Avenue (Brunswick), and community open spaces such as Bridget Shortell Reserve and the Wheatsheaf Community Hub (Glenroy).
- Renewal and upgrade of over 30 open spaces such as Wylie Reserve in Brunswick West and Charles Mutton Reserve in Fawkner.

Complementary strategies and plans

Complementary strategies include the Nature Plan and associated Implementation Plan, the Urban Forest Strategy, Urban Heat Island Effect Action Plan and the Sport and Active Recreation Strategy. These are discussed in later sections of the strategy and a longer list included at Appendix 3: Relevant Merri-bek City Council policies, inter-Council Strategies and Victorian State Government legislation.



2.7 State Government policy context

The Open Space Strategy aligns with Victorian State Government legislation and aligned state government strategies (an extensive list is provided in Appendix 3). Some of the key guiding policies and strategies are outlined below.

Plan Melbourne and Open Space for Everyone

The Victorian Government framework for Melbourne, Plan Melbourne 2017 – 2050, seeks to establish a network of accessible and diverse public spaces. These spaces should provide for multiple uses, including:



Plan Melbourne aims for all residents to have open space within a 20-minute return journey from their home or place of work. This is supported by the metropolitan Melbourne Open Space for Everyone strategy which provides guidance for open space at a metropolitan level. This strategy acknowledges that Councils such as Merri-bek share an open space network with our neighbouring Councils and wider Melbourne.

The Local Government Act and the Victorian Planning System

The Local Government Act 2020, Merri-bek Local Laws and Victorian Planning system provide requirements and guidance for how Merri-bek plans, delivers and manages our open space.

The Local Government Act articulates that “the role of a Council is to provide good governance in its municipal district for the benefit and wellbeing of the municipal community” (section 8 (1)). This aligns with the Vision of the Open Space Strategy.

The Merri-bek City Council Local Law provide clarity about responsibilities in our open spaces, including on-leash dog areas in our parks and playgrounds and protection of our natural environment in open spaces.

Via the Planning and Environment Act 1987, and the Merri-bek Planning Scheme, the Victorian Planning system governs much of the development of land within Merri-bek. Merri-bek is experiencing substantial population growth and densification which is changing our open space needs. Through the Merri-bek Planning Scheme and the Subdivision Act 1988, developments which subdivide land (subject to some specific exemptions) are required to make a contribution to public open space (whether that is in cash or equivalent land). These contributions are used to upgrade existing open space as well as create new open space. The Merri-bek Planning Scheme also includes controls on private and public land to protect and enhance public open space.

Image: Gilpin Park, Brunswick.
Photo taken by Simon Aubor.



3

Open space needs



This section discusses a suite of open space influences, challenges and emerging trends that together inform Merri-bek’s open space needs. Many of these factors stem from the ongoing transformations driven by increased population growth and densification. Other needs are linked to the evolving nature of both Merri-bek, greater Melbourne and Australia, reflecting broader shifts in societal dynamics as well as our changing world. Addressing these needs will help Council to achieve its vision for open space.

3.1 Traditional Owner recognition in open space

Our vision as a Council for reconciliation is respectful and inclusive recognition of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. They are the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek. In October 2021, Merri-bek City Council, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents signed a Statement of Commitment. This Commitment strengthens and formalises Council’s commitment to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities of the City of Merri-bek via the following seven commitments:

- 1. Building partnerships with Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities.
- 2. Engaging the Traditional Owners in delivering Welcome to Country and other traditional ceremonies.
- 3. Engaging Traditional Owners to provide Aboriginal cultural competence learning.
- 4. Consulting Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people to inform key decisions.

- 5. Protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage and continuing to protect the Aboriginal history of Merri-bek.
- 6. Protecting our waterways, communicating Aboriginal water values, and interpreting landscapes.
- 7. Bringing cultural values and cultural practices to natural resource management.

The Victorian Aboriginal and Local Government Strategy 2021 – 2026 provides guidance for Councils to help embed the voices and priorities of Aboriginal communities at a local government level.

Figure 5 below identifies the important role of Local Government in creating stronger relationships and progressing self-determination and reconciliation.

Council is also mindful that the Victorian Government is progressing towards the landmark step of establishing Treaty to acknowledge the sovereignty of First Nations and to improve the lives of First Peoples, and that Treaty may occur in the lifetime of this strategy.

In alignment with our Statement of Commitment to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities of the City of Merri-bek we will enhance this relationship, acknowledgement and self-determination in our open spaces. This includes the Ballarrt Mooroop site in Glenroy, in which Council is seeking for transfer of this land from State Government to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation to allow the creation of a unique Community Hub. Council will also investigate ways to better integrate caring for Country in our open space, increase local employment of First Nations people in our open space and educate our wider community on our First Nations history.

Council will also explore partnerships with adjoining Councils such as the Hume and Whittlesea City Council areas as part of the marram baba Merri Creek regional parklands. These parklands, which will be an area of over 2,778 hectares along Merri Creek, will be 16 times larger than Royal Park.

PROGRESSING SELF DETERMINATION TOGETHER

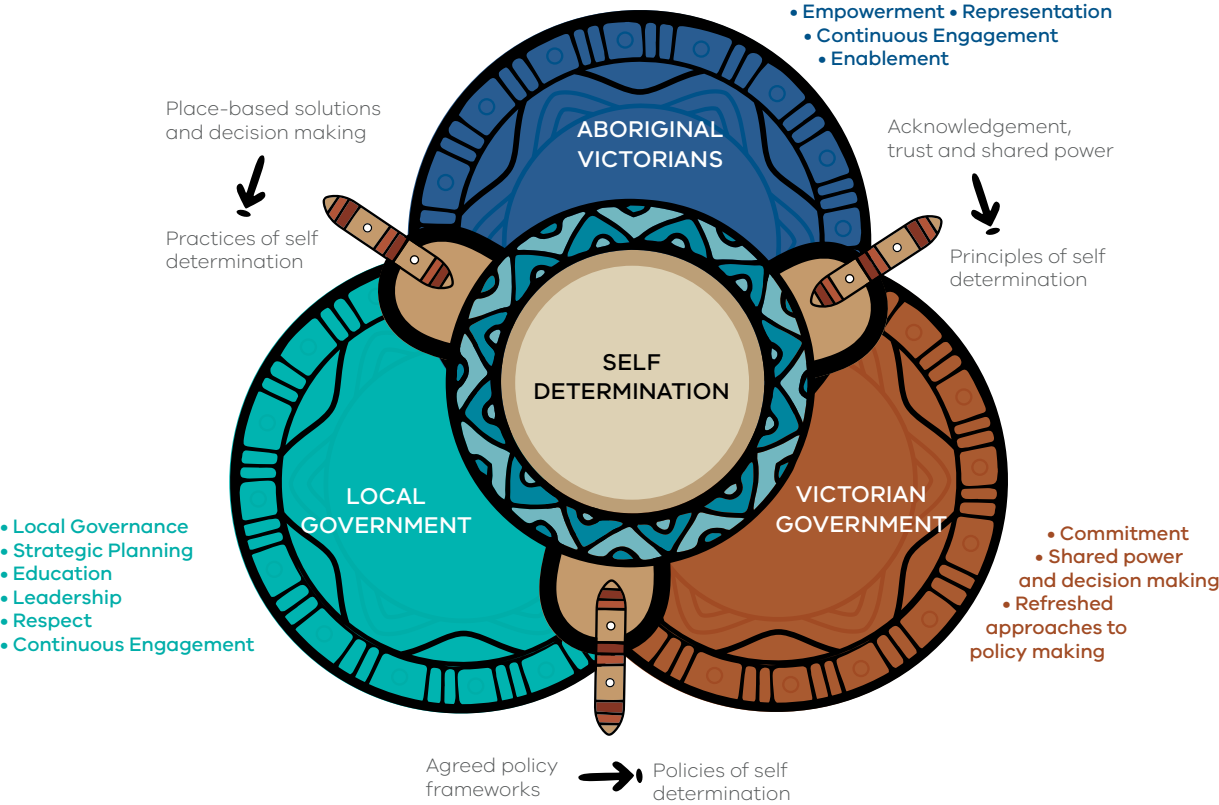


Figure 5: Progressing self determination together - from the Victorian Aboriginal and Local Government Strategy 2021 – 2026 pathway to self-determination through stronger. Source: Department of Jobs, Precinct and Regions, 2021.

3.2 The impact of population growth on open space

A growing Merri-bek

Merri-bek's population is diverse, growing and densifying. The population of Merri-bek in 2021 was 195,418 persons³, an increase of 48,000 additional residents since 2011 when the former Open Space Strategy was written.

Merri-bek's population will continue to increase across all suburbs (except Gowanbrae) to a total forecasted population of over 258,400 people by 2041⁴. Table 1 below shows the forecasted population increase across our suburbs:

Table 1: Forecast residential population change from 2021 to 2041 by suburb. Source: id. consulting (2020)

Suburb	2021 Resident Population	2041 Resident Population	Residential Population Change (2021 - 2041)	% change
Brunswick	30,287	40,687	10,400	26%
Brunswick East	16,737	23,458	6,721	29%
Brunswick West	18,035	24,190	6,155	25%
Coburg	30,126	42,438	12,312	29%
Coburg North	9,182	13,302	4,120	31%
Fawkner	15,769	19,925	4,156	21%
Glenroy	24,770	29,096	4,326	15%
Gowanbrae	3,179	3,149	-30	-1%
Hadfield	7,350	9,488	2,138	23%
Oak Park	7,610	8,582	972	11%
Pascoe Vale	20,042	27,801	7,759	28%
Pascoe Vale South	12,331	16,286	3,955	24%
Total	195,418	258,402	62,984	24%

This population increase is linked to the continuing densification of Merri-bek, where land which previously contained commercial or industrial buildings and low-density single dwellings, is being redeveloped to create townhouses, apartments and high-density buildings.

³ .Id Consulting population forecasts, 2020.

⁴ As above.

To manage this residential growth, Merri-bek directs growth to areas known as ‘activity centres’. Activity centres are areas which have good access to public

transport (key bus routes, train stations and tram routes) and services (such as shops, schools and existing parks).

As seen in Figure 6, Merri-bek has a hierarchy of 3 types of Activity Centres:

1. Major Activity Centres in Brunswick (largely along the three corridors of Sydney Road, Lygon Street and Nicholson Street), Coburg and Glenroy, which are to accommodate a substantial residential/mixed-use growth and change to create a new character of increased density and scale of built form.
2. Neighbourhood Activity Centres located throughout Merri-bek suburbs, largely centred around a key junction, which are to accommodate an increase in density and scale of built form appropriate to their role in the Activity Centre Hierarchy, but at a lesser intensity and scale to the larger centres of Coburg, Brunswick and Glenroy.
3. Smaller Local Centres, which are to accommodate growth and change respectful of the existing built form.

Merri-bek’s Activity Centres will continue to play pivotal roles in accommodating this growth, with 54 per cent of Merri-bek’s future residential growth expected to be in high density apartments and 27 per cent of this growth to be in the Coburg and Brunswick Activity Centres.

A growing workforce

With a population of over 195,418 persons, Merri-bek is home to an estimated 46,840 jobs⁵. Whilst traditionally, many Merri-bek workers laboured in factories, workshops and warehouses, many workers these days are found in offices, clinics and classrooms and working from home.

Alongside residential population growth, our Merri-bek workforce is growing. Whilst it is more difficult to forecast worker growth than residential growth, Council estimates that between 2020 and 2035, employment is forecast to increase by 9,361 jobs. Targeted strategies and investment can influence this trajectory and a more ambitious growth scenario (Scenario 2) could see jobs grow by up to 16,373.⁶

⁵ From ‘a Job in Merri-bek’ 2021.

⁶ From ‘a Job in Merri-bek’ 2021



Figure 6: Merri-bek’s Activity Centres within the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.

Future open space needs

It is critical that Council ensures all residents and workers in Merri-bek, whether living in detached homes, townhouses, or apartments, working in factories or offices, have access to adequate open space.

As urban development changes our city open space needs are changing too. Council has the following measures to ensure open space needs are met in the face of urban development:

- 1. Designing individual developments to have access to open space and improve the interface with open space, ensuring access to sunlight and reduce overshadowing of public open spaces.
- 2. Explore opportunities for private developments to contribute to waterway buffers wide enough to improve the long-term sustainability of our creek corridors.
- 3. Explore opportunities for strategic redevelopment sites to provide on-site public open space and a public open space contribution that reflects the greater needs created by these sites⁷.

- 4. Using money collected through open space contributions (Clause 53.01 of the Merri-bek Planning Scheme) to purchase and develop new open space, including in identified gap areas to service the existing and growing community, and provide other open space improvements (such as park upgrades).
- 5. Establishing a fit-for-purpose open-space contribution rate for the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.
- 6. Seeking to negotiate the provision of open space contributions in either on-site land or monetary contributions from private developers of high-density residential buildings which are not planned to be subdivided (built to rent).
- 7. Enable sympathetic design outcomes for building facades in the backdrop of the city's open spaces, by maximising use of natural, non-reflective materials and colours for facades visible from abutting open space.

Image: Image: Kookaburra in open space.
Photo taken by Anna Lanigan.

⁷ Strategic redevelopment sites are sites which are larger sites providing significant housing or commercial growth. These sites are anticipated to generate increased demand for accessible public open space in comparison to average-sized sites where few dwellings or less commercial floorspace are created.



3.3 The impact of climate change on open space

Climate emergency and climate risk

Climate change is having a huge impact on the community and the environment. In 2018, Council declared a Climate Emergency. Through the implementation of the Zero Carbon Merri-bek Framework and associated 5-year Action Plan, Council aims to achieve a 75 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 (against the 2011/12 baseline), net-zero emissions by 2035, and even drawdown ('negative emissions') by 2040, for its own operations.

Merri-bek's open spaces, encompassing parks, creeks, sporting grounds and civic areas, are susceptible to the ongoing impacts of climate change and climate related risks. These changes encompass future weather patterns marked by prolonged droughts, more frequent heatwaves, increased flooding, and changes in seasonal patterns. Some impacts may include vegetation loss from dry conditions, especially for newly established trees and their replacement costs, less use of playgrounds that are not shaded and storm impacts and their potential damage to shade sails. Natural assets in open spaces such as trees, vegetation, and wetlands, have the ability to help mitigate and reduce the severity of some of these impacts.

The Merri-bek community has shown strong support for environmental action during the engagement process for the Open Space Strategy. Many people identified climate change, reduced biodiversity, and habitat loss as key challenges for the Council and our open spaces. The Merri-bek Climate Strategy outlines how the Council will proactively plan for and respond to the inevitable impacts of climate change. It aims to manage climate risks, enhance climate resilience throughout the community and ensure that no one is left behind in creating a sustainable and liveable community. This includes ensuring our open spaces are still able to be used by our community in this changing climate, as well as preserving and enhancing our nature and biodiversity.

It is therefore vital for Merri-bek to ensure that our open spaces both mitigate the impact of climate change risk as well as adapt. Climate change also interacts with other longer-term changes in Merri-bek, such as increase in population and density pressures. The use of open spaces to deliver cooling, respite from urban heat, retain water in our landscapes and to manage rainwater (inundation and rainfall) will become all the more important. Our open spaces play a critical role in delivering on Council and Community ambitions outlined in our Integrated Water Management Strategy 2040: Towards a water sensitive Merri-bek.

The urban heat island effect

A climate risk that can be lessened with open spaces is the impact of the urban heat island effect (UHIE). The Merri-bek Urban Heat Island Effect Action Plan highlights how this occurs during hot weather when urbanised areas retain heat more than non-urban areas. This can lead to additional heat stress for residents, workers, and wildlife. The UHIE Action Plan aims to significantly reduce this heat retention during hot weather by implementing measures such as creating cooler, greener open spaces.

Figure 7 is an example of the UHIE in central Coburg, where the red colour can be seen along and around the dark and impervious areas along Sydney Road, whereas the green colour can be seen around the irrigated, green, and shaded open space at Bridges Reserve.

The Open Space Strategy recognises its role in managing climate risk within open space, such as helping to mitigate the UHIE, as well as other climate risks such as stormwater inundation risk.

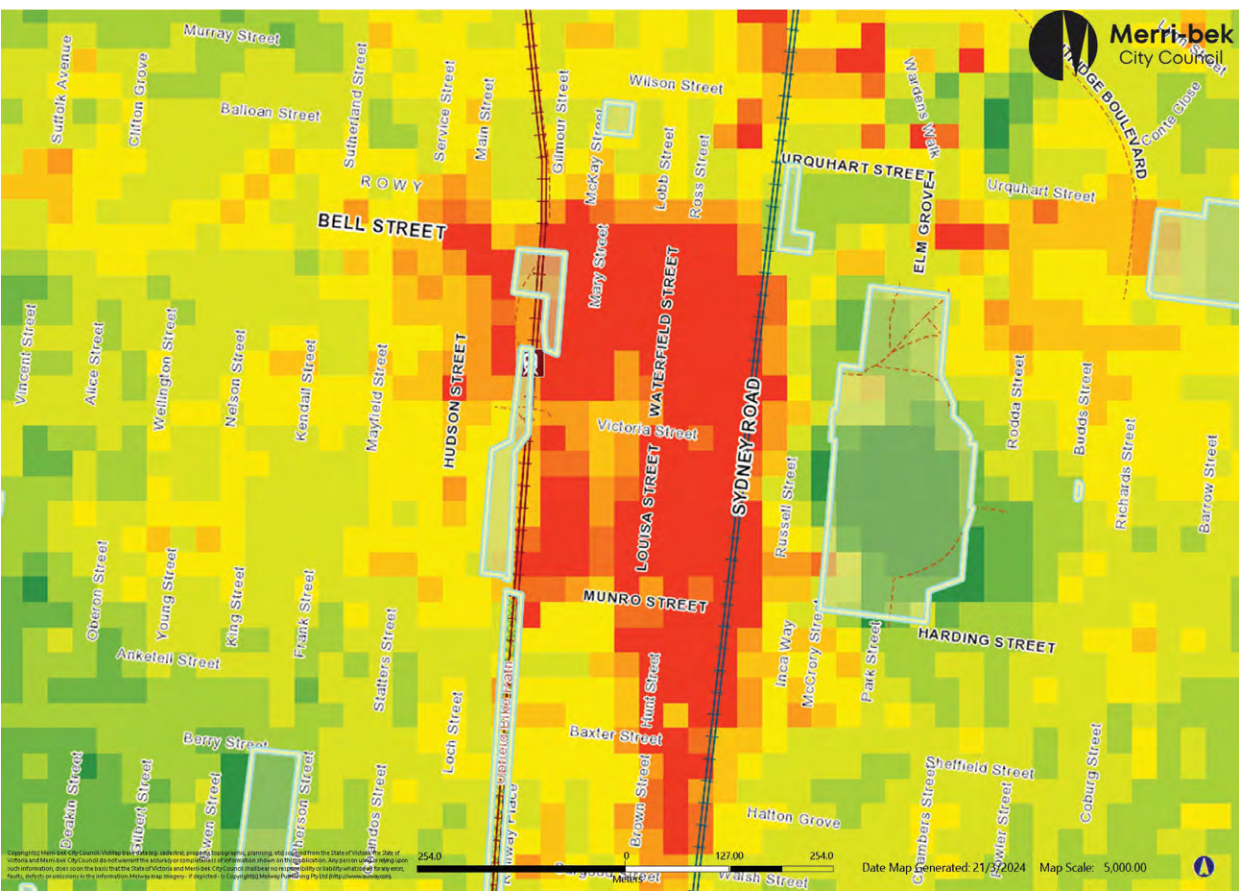
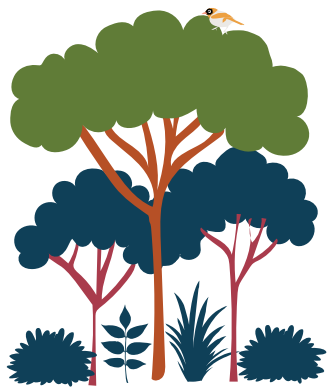


Figure 7: The Urban Heat Island Effect in central Coburg



3.4 The role of open space in protecting nature

Merri-bek Urban Forest Strategy

Merri-bek's Urban Forest Strategy is geared towards transforming the municipality into a place where trees and vegetation become integral to the urban landscape and open spaces. This strategy outlines several key objectives, including:

- **Doubling Canopy Cover:** The goal of increasing canopy cover across Merri-bek to 29 per cent by 2050 to help mitigate the impacts of heatwaves and increase shade, cooling and evapotranspiration.
- **Tree Health and Establishment:** Improving the health and successful establishment of Council trees.
- **Tree Protection:** Protecting existing trees through enhanced planning and enforcement measures.
- **Community Collaboration:** Working closely with community groups and residents to support initiatives that promote greenery while fostering positive community attitudes towards the urban forest.
- **Tree Planting:** Continuing the planting of canopy trees in Merri-bek's streets and parks to fill vacant sites and replace underperforming trees.
- **Water Sensitive Urban Design:** Improving tree health and cooling through the integration of water-sensitive urban design.

Much of Merri-bek's existing canopy is found in open spaces, including large canopy trees in parklands surrounding sports grounds, playgrounds, along Creek corridors and near wetlands. As the Urban

Forest Strategy expands our canopy, a substantial portion will be planted in streetscapes, nature strips and open spaces. This expanded canopy offers various benefits to open spaces, such as creating shaded and comfortable areas, increasing physical activity and fostering a stronger connection to nature. Furthermore, it enhances the municipality's resilience to climate change by providing relief from high temperatures, cooling open spaces and offering cooler places for people during excessively hot weather.

Merri-bek Nature Plan

Merri-bek offers an array of nature experiences, including areas of original (remnant) vegetation, grasslands, creek corridors, wetlands, and habitats for a diverse range of native animals and birds. The Merri-bek Nature Plan aims to enhance and enrich our nature and biodiversity, as well as highlight challenges such as climate change, habitat fragmentation, loss of biodiversity and the adverse impact of increasing urban development, via four key themes:

1. Protect and enhance biodiversity conservation.
2. Seek opportunities for the private realm to contribute positively to biodiversity.
3. Connect people to nature.
4. Improve governance and collaboration in natural resource management.

The Nature Plan is supported by four year Action Plan. A new four year Action Plan will be prepared when the current Action Plan expires.

The Open Space Strategy acknowledges its crucial role in achieving the Nature Plan and these themes. Figure 8 below illustrates that much of our critical nature and biodiversity exists within accessible open space and restricted open space. These areas include our creek corridors, the Northern Golf Course, the Fawkner Cemetery and Northern Memorial Park in Glenroy.

The Merri-bek Indigenous Vegetation Assessment 2011 (MIVA) provides the most recent detailed assessment of remnant and revegetated areas across Merri-bek. It confirms that much of our indigenous

vegetation is on public land along waterways and also in private land at the Northern Golf Course and the Fawkner Cemetery and Northern Memorial Park in Glenroy.



Figure 8: Map of Merri-bek showing key identified critical habitat corridors. The open spaces are indicated by the light green shapes, waterways are indicated in blue and tree figures and their buffer areas indicate key habitat corridors.



The Merri Creek

The Merri Creek and its tributaries, including the Edgars, Merlynston, and Campbellfield Creeks, form a rich environmental, heritage and recreation open space corridor. Together they create open space corridors that offer significant environmental and recreation values and flow down into the Yarra River. A shared user path runs along the Merri Creek, allowing for walking, running, and cycling from the south of Merri-bek in Fitzroy North up to the north of Merri-bek in Fawkner. It also includes a diversity of nearby open spaces such as playgrounds, sports facilities, and picnic areas.

Across 2021 - 2023, Council created the Fawkner Merri Parklands plan to manage and plan for the areas of Merri Creek from Coburg North up to Fawkner (in excess of 71 hectares). It details key open space projects, including:

- New dog parks to provide dedicated dog facilities and reduce dogs entering key biodiversity areas such as the Merri Creek.
- Additional access paths to improve community access to this creek corridor.
- A community garden.
- Specific facilities including new play spaces, toilets, BBQs and cricket wickets.
- Water sensitive urban design projects, such as new swales, raingardens, and wetlands.

There remain challenges in maintaining the nature and biodiversity within the Merri Creek corridor, such as continued urbanisation, increased artificial lighting, construction waste and additional stormwater run-off. Furthermore, Council has long aimed to increase the areas and widths of waterway corridors to provide contiguous access and protect creek riparian habitat. This is also reinforced in the Merri-bek Planning Scheme, which requires public open space corridors along the creeks to be setback a minimum of 50 metres and the 30 metres within the embankment to be vegetated corridors. There are however private allotments as close as 6.0m to the Merri Creek within Merri-bek, due largely to historical subdivisions and development patterns.

The Moonee Ponds Creek

The Moonee Ponds Creek and its tributaries, including Melville Creek, also form a significant linear open space corridor in Merri-bek. The Moonee Ponds Creek is a major tributary of the Maribyrnong River, bordering much of Merri-bek’s western boundary in the suburbs of Brunswick West, Pascoe Vale South, Pascoe Vale, Oak Park, Glenroy and Gowanbrae.

Originally a series of ponds and wetlands, the Creek has undergone significant human alterations since the arrival of Europeans, including transformation from a chain of ponds into a single concrete drain. Merri-bek and 13 other organisations have together formed the Chain of Ponds collaboration to return the Moonee Ponds Creek to its former natural state. This has led to substantial open space and environmental improvements to the Moonee Ponds Creek and surrounding land, including concrete parts of the drain being removed to allow the re-introduction of the natural Moonee Ponds Creek setting.

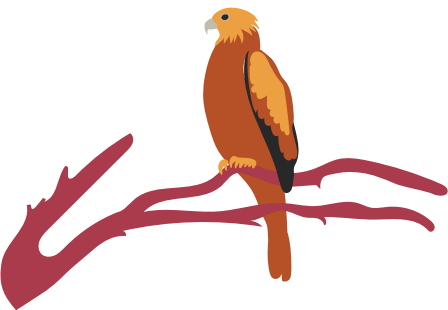
Image: Cyclist on the shared user path at Merri Creek, Fawkner.

The Northern Golf Course

The Northern Golf Course is a privately owned 50-hectare course of restricted open space in Glenroy. It contains highly significant vegetation around the fairways from different vegetation communities, some of which are otherwise poorly represented within Merri-bek. The Westbreen Creek also traverses through the course and several wetlands and ponds provide further habitat.

Red Gum Woodlands mostly dominate the course containing approximately 800 mature River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and approximately 40 Yellow Gums (*Eucalyptus leucoxylon*). Many of these are very large, having circumferences of over 3 metres, and contain tree hollows providing valuable shelter and breeding habitat for parrots, owls, bats, and other native wildlife. Vegetation along the Westbreen Creek and around dams on the site add to the diversity of habitat at the course, supporting a range of waterfowl and frog species.

Council is working with the Northern Golf Course to protect remaining native vegetation, tree hollows and use sympathetic land practices, which is planned to continue.



Fawkner and Glenroy Cemeteries

The Glenroy Northern Memorial park and the Fawkner Cemetery, managed by the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (GMCT), exceed a combined 210 hectares of restricted open space. The Merlynston and Campbellfield Creeks both travel through the cemeteries which also contain pockets of remnant woodland vegetation and stands of old trees. The sites contain Grassy Woodland, potentially meeting the definition ‘Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain’ community under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Expansive areas of this type are likely habitat for the Golden Sun Moth (*Synemon plana*) which is also listed under the EPBC Act as a threatened species and has been observed at the site on one occasion. Whistling Kite and Brown Falcon, both characteristic grassland raptors which require extensive, relatively secluded areas to hunt, have also been observed.

Challenges to this nature and biodiversity include clearing as a result of cemetery expansion. Council is continuing to work with the GMCT to preserve this important habitat and biodiversity, as well as explore how the community can continue to use the cemeteries for open space (such as walking, cycling, experiencing nature and biodiversity).

Bababi Djinanang grasslands

The Bababi Djinanang grasslands is a large four-hectare area along the western banks of the Merri Creek in Fawkner. Initially set aside as a freeway reservation, they contain some of the best quality examples of grassland vegetation in the municipality. It has been protected and intensively managed for conservation since 1995 in collaboration with the Merri Creek Management Committee. Nearby, some smaller grasslands at Emma and Hare Streets in Fawkner also offer important grassland habitat.

The need for dark spaces

In 2023, Council engaged the University of Melbourne to research wildlife connectivity across Merri-bek. This included existing habitat for arachnids, birds, frogs, fungi, insects, mammals, plants, reptiles and other invertebrates, such as the Superb Fairy Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*), the Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*), the Swamp Wallaby (*Wallabia bicolor*), the Eastern Blue-tongued Lizard (*Tiliqua scincoides*) and the Blue Banded bee (*Amegilla asserta*).

This research highlighted the need to protect our existing spaces for nature as well as undertake key open space actions to improve habitat, biodiversity

and wildlife corridors, including: land acquisition complementary to key biodiversity areas and known wildlife corridors, increase specific vegetation such as understory shrubs and creek riparian habitat, create artificial tree hollows and crossing structures for wildlife over creeks and large spaces to avoid roads, and protect and extend darker night-time skies by reducing artificial illumination. Figure 9 below is an example of recommended actions, such as protecting and extending night-time sky for the Lesser long-eared bat (*Nictophilus geoffroyi*).

The Open Space Strategy aims to promote, enhance and protect these significant open spaces for nature, habitat, and biodiversity.

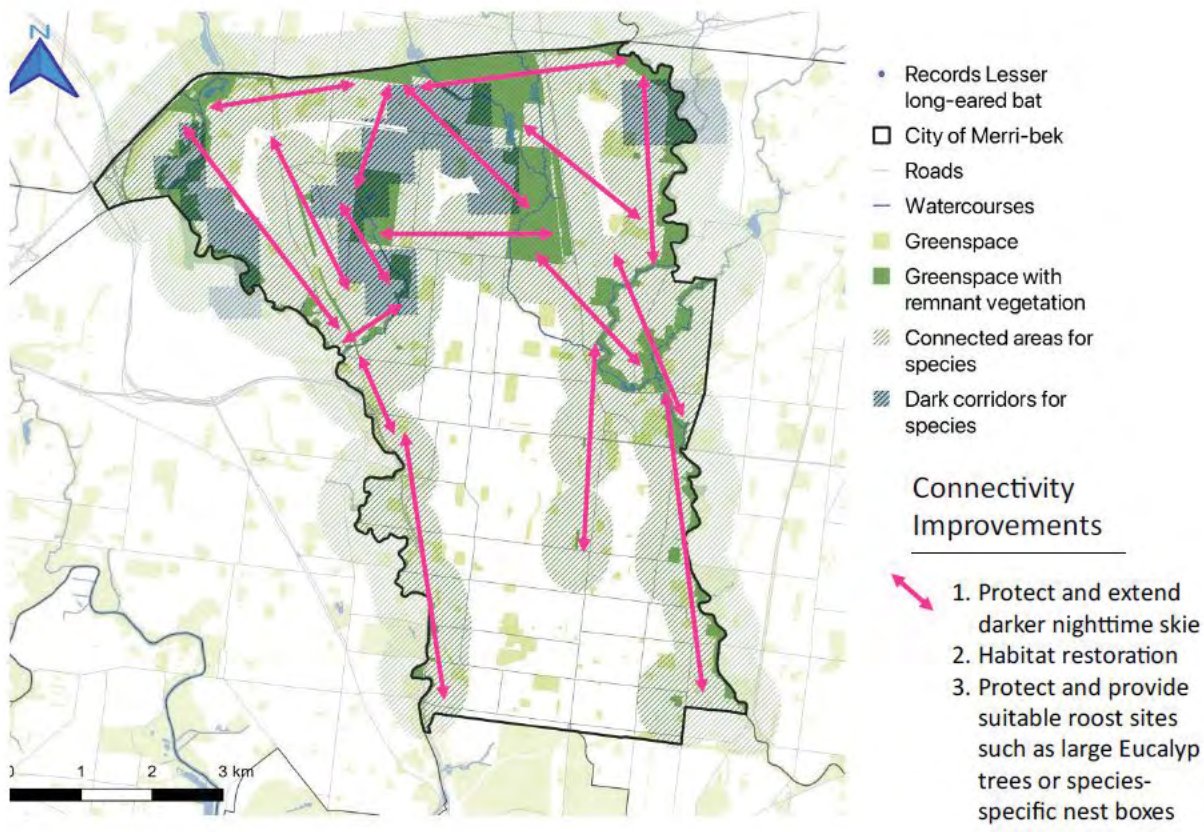


Figure 9: Example of areas to investigate protecting and extending night-time sky to improve connectivity for the Lesser long-eared bat (*Nictophilus geoffroyi*) and other species. Source: Hahs AK, Mata L, Palma E, Schiller J (2023).



Integrated water management

The Merri-bek Integrated Water Management Strategy 2040 is dedicated to transforming Merri-bek into a water-sensitive city that can withstand the challenges of future population growth and climate change. The overarching vision is to integrate water into all aspects of the municipality. This Strategy aligns with the Open Space Strategy as much opportunity for creating a water-sensitive Merri-bek lies within our open spaces. This is because our open spaces provide opportunity for cooling and greening and are all critical parts of our water system where rainwater can be direct and allows water to permeate (such as sports fields and parks). This aids in stormwater retention and reduction of floodwater. Integration of water into our open space will help create a city that is not only healthy, green cooler and productive, but a city that is more resilient in the face of climate change with vital habitat for our plants and animals.

The Open Space Strategy incorporates a direction and actions which will help achieve the Integrated Water Management vision. This commitment underscores Merri-bek's dedication to sustainable water management practices within its open spaces and aligns with the broader objective of creating a water-sensitive and resilient community.



Image: Tawny Frog Mouth Westbreen Creek.
Photo taken by Anna Lanigan.



3.5 The role of open space for people

Health and wellbeing

The Open Space Strategy reinforces recognition that there is a strong connection between public health and wellbeing and the physical design of spaces in urban places, including our open spaces. It is also mindful that our open spaces provide land for natural recreation and opportunity to access and experience biodiversity for our residents. There is great evidence that green spaces are vital in the support of positive physical and psychological impacts for users. During the COVID-19 pandemic this became even more apparent, and Council is aware of the important role that our open spaces played during this tough period.

The Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan within the Merri-bek Council Plan 2021-2025 further acknowledges this and includes the following goals for open space, which are incorporated in the Open Space Strategy vision, directions and actions:

- Protect existing trees and plant more trees through development controls on private land and plant and nurture canopy trees on public land where needed most.
- Use open space in ways that protect and enhance biodiversity and tree canopy, creating spaces for nature to thrive and gives the community fair access to a wide range of passive and active recreational opportunities.

- Strategically increase accessible and inclusive open spaces based on local needs and other priorities for parks, playgrounds, dog parks, sporting facilities, community gardens, eating, toilets, etc.
- Invest in an integrated approach to water management in public spaces and private developments to improve water usage and water quality entering our local waterways and respond to flash flooding and the urban heat island effect.
- Use open space in ways that gives the community fair access to a wide range of passive and active recreational opportunities while still enhancing and protecting biodiversity, waterway health and tree canopy.



Image: Young girl playing at Martin Reserve, Hadfield.
Photo taken by Simon Aubor.

Open space and places for children, young people and youth

The Merri-bek Children, Young People and Families Plan integrates planning for children, young people and families. It aims to support children and young people through their life stages, from birth to adulthood, and improve overall health, wellbeing and educational outcomes. Key objectives within this Plan relevant to open space include:

- Develop inclusive and accessible activities, programs and services
- Increase opportunities for social cohesion
- Progress the child-friendly cities and communities initiative
- Develop and activate child, young people and family-friendly places and spaces
- Provide infrastructure which meets the needs of the growing population
- Provide opportunities for participation in physical and creative activities
- Involve children, young people and families in decision making on matters that impact them.

The Merri-bek Youth Strategy, Full Potential: a Strategy for Merri-bek’s Young People, focuses on young people aged 12 – 24 years and aims to help young people meet their full potential. It identifies key focus areas for Council to create positive social and collective impact, by enhancing youth voice and participation, supporting health and resilience and providing youth friendly spaces and places.

Children, young people and their families and carers are key users of open spaces. This includes spaces designed with children in mind as key users, such as playgrounds, to other spaces such as sportsgrounds, dog parks and our creeks. Children and young people often use or access open space differently to adults, such as needing to rely on walking, cycling, public transport or adults to get to these spaces. We have heard during community engagement for the Strategy that while many open spaces have excellent facilities for children and young people, that some needs and aspirations in open space are not always being met. Specific challenges we heard include:

- Being made to feel unwelcome in some open spaces, especially for older children or teenagers.
- Insufficient fun and welcoming open spaces, activities or facilities in our open spaces.
- Difficulty accessing open spaces as they are not located near public transport or safe cycling paths.
- Perception of open spaces as unsafe due to insufficient lighting, inactivity or other users.

Council works closely with our diverse youth population, including at the Oxygen Youth Space and initiatives such as the Youth Ambassadors. We will continue to explore how we can help fulfil the Youth Strategy and better meet the needs and aspirations of children and young people in our open spaces. This includes continuing to consult and engage young people to explore what additional youth open spaces are needed, the types of facilities, infrastructure or features that are desired and where they are located.

Image: Public art at Garrong Park, Brunswick.
Photo taken by Simon Auber.



Play

Public open spaces, including formal playgrounds and our creek, provide important opportunities for play. Play areas within public open space are invaluable, critical aspects of our open space, providing our community with free and valuable activities and experiences that are often not available in their home. These contribute to children and young people's personal development through physical and mental stimulation and help children's understanding of the world expand.

Play spaces also contribute to the development of social connections in our community, as groups of families, friends and carers with children often choose a play space with picnic facilities for weekend gatherings and celebrations. Providing spaces which encourage physical activity and social interaction are also vital in addressing some of the physical and mental health challenges we face today.

Council is committed to providing a diverse range of play spaces which are fun, inviting, challenging and cater to children and young people of all abilities and ages. The Open Space Strategy Direction Providing Open Space for Everyone includes specific actions designed to make our play spaces across Merri-bek more accessible via universal design principles and a new premier All Access Abilities playground. Council is also exploring ways to increase open space funding to better cater to our growing community and continue investing in our existing playgrounds.



Bush play, nature play and bush kinder

Outdoor play in nature brings many benefits for children, while cognitive, social and emotional development are all shown to be greatly enhanced by time spent in nature. Time in nature also has positive effects on children's mental health and emotional regulation while outdoor play increases physical activity fitness and imagination. In addition, fostering nature connection in children develops positive environmental behaviours and is a common trait among those engaged in environmental protection in adulthood.

Nature play is a term used to describe outdoor play in a natural or naturalistic setting with natural materials. It can occur in natural landscapes or in designed landscapes which provide naturalistic elements such as rocks, logs and soil.

Bush kinder and bush playgroups describes early childhood education programs for three- to six-year-olds which are delivered outdoors in bushland settings with nature play opportunities. They can be informal or formally organised. Whilst Council aims to increase these activities, the Open Space Strategy recognises there are both challenges and opportunities for promoting nature play, bush play and bush kinders.

As this type of play usually occurs in landscapes along our creek corridors, Council needs to strike a balance between promoting this important play with environment protection. These areas also require a different maintenance approach to typical grounds, and a key aspect of this management is to regularly refresh play materials (such as retaining pruned tree branches, plant selection to include loose parts such as nuts or cones and add seasons interaction such as colourful fruit or flowers).

Community feedback on play spaces

Feedback from the community revealed that open spaces, particularly play areas such as playgrounds, skate parks, BMX parks, and bush play areas, are of great importance to children, young adults and caregivers alike. It also highlighted several challenges associated with these play areas, including:

- 1. Need for more playgrounds:** There is a need to increase the number of playgrounds throughout the municipality and to upgrade existing playgrounds to better cater to our growing population and needs such as disability access.
- 2. Lack of shade:** Many residents have expressed concerns about the absence of adequate shade in playgrounds, whether in the form of trees or mechanical shade (including shade cloths).
- 3. Dog-related concerns:** Concerns have been raised about the presence of dogs (and dog waste) in or near playground areas.
- 4. Facilities near playgrounds:** Feedback has highlighted the need for additional amenities near playgrounds, such as public toilets, to improve the overall experience for visitors.

The Open Space Strategy and Action Plan seek to address the above challenges. This includes continuing to create more open spaces and playgrounds, upgrade existing playgrounds, creation of new playspace guidelines (which will explore matters including provision of shade and park infrastructure) and seek to improve compliance with the Local Laws regarding dogs in open space.



Shade in playgrounds

Having well planned shade in playgrounds protects kids from the sun and also helps make sure our playgrounds can be used in hot weather. Council's preference is to provide shaded places to play, where possible, by placing play equipment under the shade of nearby trees. Council will also plant new trees to create future shaded areas.

It will not be appropriate in certain circumstances to rely on natural shade and the use of mechanical shade such as shade sails may be required. Examples of this may include a skate park, where debris from the trees can create safety issues for users or where a playground is in an exposed location.

Council aims to have a mix of play experiences, some which will include built shade cover and some without, as covered playgrounds may remain wet from rain in colder months, which can make them dangerous or unsuitable for use.

The creation of new playspace guidelines will help further explore guidance for shade.

Civic spaces and public forecourts

Civic spaces are a type of open space that can include urban plazas, squares, pedestrian malls and forecourts in our activity centres. They are ideally located to support the large numbers of people from all across our city who work in and visit civic facilities, commercial centres and cultural destinations, providing them with a place to spend time while out and about, and to connect with others.

These spaces are considered to be an extension of the community itself and a forum for public life, particularly in key areas of densification. They serve the many diverse groups and individuals in our community by providing free, inclusive and comfortable spaces for public activities such as: celebrations, festivals and events, protest, social gathering, cultural activities, and relaxation and enjoyment.

Civic spaces are also particularly important spaces for young people. Council heard during the Strategy engagement process that many young persons do not feel welcome in open spaces such as playgrounds, and that civic spaces and forecourts, such as the civic forecourts within Pentridge, Coburg, are important spaces for youth to feel safe to recreate and socialise. Council is aware of the importance of these spaces and commits to designing these spaces with users such as young people in mind.

Good civic spaces help to create a unique identity for a neighbourhood or place, and through this engender a strong sense of community belonging and ownership, as well as a mutual sense of pride. These are critical to our community's health and wellbeing, particularly in combatting issues of loneliness and mental health. Civic spaces also provide important benefits to the local and cultural economy by providing spaces for creative exchange.

Examples in Merri-bek include the Victoria Street Mall in central Coburg, a vibrant space used for enjoying the local cafes, socialising, and providing local human connections and interaction. The Open Space Strategy recognises the benefits of these unique open spaces and the important role they will continue to play in Merri-bek, especially in our key areas of densification in the Brunswick, Coburg, and Glenroy activity centres.

Connectivity within and to open space

Council is committed to improving local walking and cycling opportunities within the municipality, recognising that these initiatives not only contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community but also play a vital role in reducing carbon emissions, alleviating traffic congestion, and enhancing the overall quality of life in Merri-bek.

Open spaces play a pivotal role in how people move and travel across Merri-bek, with open space often serving as a destination for people to travel to and using open space to travel to other places. Our open spaces form a network connecting various locations, streets, schools, sports reserves, community facilities and key transport nodes and routes. These spaces are interconnected, such as the Merri Creek trail, which stretches from Fitzroy North to Fawkner. Similarly, open spaces like Fleming Park in Brunswick East serve as vital connectors between streets on either side, forming part of an established cyclist corridor.

The Open Space Strategy aims to enhance the links, trails, and corridors within our open space network. It seeks to improve the safety of passive users within these open space corridors by making shared paths wider and exploring the needs of users, such as separated paths for cyclists and walkers. It is also important to acknowledge that while our open spaces play an important part in walking and cycling networks, they may only meet some travel needs as they may not be suitable for night-time travel due to lack of passive surveillance or lighting (such as along creeks corridors) and are not suitable for higher speed cycling as the shared paths are used by many users.

The Strategy is consistent with the transport strategy, *Moving Around Merri-bek*. The two strategies' Action Plans identify the need to explore promotion of pedestrian and cyclist travel through improved connections between open spaces and other facilities.



Image: Pedestrian path at Moreland Station.
Photo taken by Simon Aubor.

Formal and informal sport

Sport, including community sport, clubs and organisations, help foster community connection and social cohesion across our diverse community. Many of our sports clubs have long-established communities and histories and are a strong part of Merri-bek's cultural fabric. Interacting with others through sport allows people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and identities to feel welcome and participate in activities that improve physical and mental wellbeing.

Our open spaces and sportsgrounds serve as the primary venues for various organised community and formal sports activities, such as club baseball, football, netball, soccer, tennis, athletics and running clubs. These spaces and grounds also provide open space for informal and recreational sports, such as jogging, running, impromptu games and casual team sports.

The Open Space Strategy recognises the significance and value of sports and active recreation in our community and the benefits they enable across many stages of life.

Council supports community sports through the Sports and Recreation Strategy, including the building and maintaining sportsgrounds, lighting, club rooms and funding for clubs and teams.

Through the consultation for the Strategy, Council heard support for the continuation of providing open space for sport. We also heard of complex challenges, including:

- Increasing participation in sports and growing demand for female sports teams, such as surge in soccer, football, and tennis participation and the emergence of sports like hockey, necessitating continued investment in maintaining and enhancing the quality of existing formal sports facilities as well as new facilities.
- Concerns with dogs using sportsgrounds, including at the same time when sports training or games occur and instances where dogs have impacted quality of sports grounds by digging and leaving waste (which can cause nuisance and even injury to other users).
- Not enough suitable spaces for informal and non-club based sports, particularly those with night-time lighting and irrigation.
- Condition of sports grounds being inadequate for play due to damage from dogs, flooding, inadequate drainage, appropriate facilities, and overall maintenance.
- The needs for additional facilities and maintenance, such as new or improved lighting, club rooms or storage.

The Sport and Active Recreation Strategy

The Sport and Active Recreation Strategy helps guide the planning, provision, promotion and advocacy of sport and active recreation across Merri-bek. It aims to increase both formal and informal sport participation and provides a roadmap for further development and investment in sports (including facilities and club development).

It has three key strategic directions to provide a range of sport and recreation participation opportunities over the next ten years:

1. Increasing participation by Merri-bek residents in sport and active recreation and fostering strong relationships with local recreation clubs, associations, peak bodies and government agencies.
2. Ensuring an adequate supply and distribution of good quality sporting infrastructure used in the most effective and efficient manner possible.
3. Ensuring Merri-bek City Council's approach to sport and active recreation provision is underpinned and well informed by robust policies, strategies and plans.

Through both the Open Space Strategy and the Sports and Recreation Strategy, Council will continue to explore to continue supporting sport and active recreation in open space. The Action Plan contains specific actions to facilitate this, including actions aimed at better sharing open space, exploring the need for more specific sports facilities and reviewing the maintenance of open spaces and sportsgrounds.

Older persons

As we age, our open space needs, values and challenges can change. During community engagement, we heard from many people about their new relationship with our open spaces as persons have aged and many suggestions for ways to better improve continued access and enjoyment of our open space network.

People we spoke with talked about the importance of open space however they also spoke about their increased challenges using open space or accessing it. This included insufficient shade, not enough or unsatisfactory seating (and types), a lack of activities and events in open spaces, and open spaces that were often perceived as unwelcoming and unsafe.

We also heard that many older persons not only use open space for their use, however also when taking up carer responsibilities, for partners, friends, and children. Barriers to performing this role were apparent, such as surfaces in playgrounds not being supportive for older persons or persons with a disability.

We also heard of many barriers people experience in physically getting to our open space along the street network and that pedestrians, particularly older pedestrians, face difficulty due to the often poor and sometimes dangerous condition of footpaths and streets leading to open space.

Key actions in the Action plan will reinforce the Living and Ageing Well in Merri-bek Framework and explore how our open spaces can be more suitable for our population as it ages, including ensuring open spaces are designed with all ages in mind.



Exercising dogs

As the human population of Merri-bek continues to grow, so does our dog population. The registration of dogs in Merri-bek has surged by over 300 per cent between the 2017/2018 and 2022/2023 financial years. Merri-bek has over 20,000 registered dogs, including dogs that live in detached homes with sizeable backyards, dogs who live in townhouses with smaller yards and courtyards, and dogs who live in apartments. We therefore want to ensure we are appropriately catering to our dog population.

The community engagement process for the Open Space Strategy confirmed that a common way people use and value open space is for playing with, exercising and socialising their dogs. Providing dogs with proper exercise and stimulation in safe environments is essential. Additionally, interacting with and walking dogs offers a valuable opportunity for individuals to socialise and establish human connections and walk more, which contributes to healthy lifestyles.

We also heard that not everyone feels comfortable around dogs and that the presence of dogs can be a barrier for some people using or feeling comfortable in open space. We heard that dogs can cause concern to sports users during formal sports and training and participation, and adversely impact recreational runners and cyclists.

Merri-bek offers a diverse range of open spaces for dogs, including parklands designated as off-leash areas, sports grounds where dogs can roam freely when formal sports activities are not in progress, purpose-built dog parks equipped with agility apparatus and an assortment of trails and shared paths designed for dog walking on a leash. The Open Space Strategy will continue to explore the need for these types of open space facilities, as well as explore actions aimed at balancing the needs of dogs and dog walkers and overall open space users.

Commercial leases

Use of open space for commercial purposes can create opportunities which support local businesses and provide for important service utility infrastructure. A diverse mix of commercial leases operate in our open spaces, including small cafés to telecommunications operators.

We heard varied feedback about commercial leases. Many people reiterated their support for leases in open spaces that would enhance their use of existing spaces and activate them more, such as cafés, yoga classes and events. We also heard concerns with some leases, such as telecommunications leases and associated infrastructure. Future decisions about leases in open space align with the vision of the Open Space Strategy and the 5 key directions, as well as aligning with the decision-making framework further outlined in Section 2.



Safety

Concerns of personal safety in our open space has been highlighted as a major barrier to people using our open spaces and feeling comfortable when using them. Safety and perceptions of safety are very complex. Perceived safety and fear can depend on a combination of an individual's characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background and so on, as previously discussed) and the physical environments to which they are exposed. It is widely recognised that societies need to improve safety overall, including in our public and open spaces.

Concerns about safety were widely expressed by our communities – including women, homeless people, transgender and gender diverse people, teenagers, our culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD communities), older persons, persons with a disability and our LGBTIQ+ community. We received feedback about specific safety concerns, including:

- Concerns when using our open spaces, including areas along Creek corridors like Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek, due to spaces often being considered isolated or idle.
- Being made to feel unwelcome due to the persons cultural background when using parks and sports grounds, both during the day and at night.
- Concerns expressed by homeless people about their safety in public open space.
- Feeling unsafe due to insufficient lighting in open spaces at night, a lack of activity during the day and evenings in many areas, and specific locations with restricted view lines and obscured entry and exit points.

- Concerns when actively commuting, including cyclists, particularly in the evenings and during the winter months.
- Frequent observations that open spaces felt safer during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 as they were busier with more people around.

This feedback reaffirmed results from the YourGround research commissioned by the Victorian Government between April and July 2021. This research, undertaken by the XYX Lab and Crowdspot, provided a digital mapping platform whereby over 6,000 submissions highlighted detailed lived experiences in locations across Victoria. Merri-bek was mentioned throughout, with participants detailing significant safety concerns in our open spaces.

Council also commissioned XYX Lab to explore safety along the Merri Creek in Coburg, which identified various key interventions aimed at improving women's experience and safety in open space, including: infrastructure and amenity improvements such as lighting, wayfinding signage, improved entry and exit points and path etiquette; communication and engagement, including promoting the important of respect and equity in open space; and inclusion of women in open space decision-making such as infrastructure design.

Council is also working in partnership with Darebin City Council and CERES in development of the Merri Merri Wayi, which is a community-led collaboration to enable our natural and urban worlds to thrive along the Merri Creek. This includes exploring ways to build improved community connection with the Creek, Indigenous ecological and cultural knowledge, connecting to and caring for nature, enhance recreational use, and to promote safety.

The Strategy acknowledges the complexity and challenges associated with safety in open spaces and recognises that achieving positive change and improvement extends beyond the strategy and the Council's scope. Council is dedicated to collaborating with the community, institutions like Victoria Police and social organisations to make society as a whole safer and more inclusive.

The Strategy outlines actions designed to help improve safety in open space, such as:

- Exploring safety in infrastructure, which includes lighting, promoting activity, ensuring unobstructed view lines, and clearly marked entry/exit points.
- Actions to foster social cohesion to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their identity, feel safe and welcomed.
- Highlighting the importance of designing and managing open spaces to enhance the perception of safety, incorporating principles such as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).

Key actions also highlight the need to balance these with other considerations, including the impacts of artificial illumination along open spaces in key biodiversity areas. Actions including the creation of a holistic dark parks policy that will help balance these objectives.

Open space for girls and gender diversity

Council is aware from talking with our community, and from campaigns such as the Make Space for Girls campaign based in the United Kingdom, that many of our open spaces do not adequately cater for girls, young women or gender diverse persons.

The Strategy includes actions to explore open space needs and how to better cater for these needs. For example specific ideas such as social seating allowing girls to face each other or lounge together, walking loops and social events such as park dances, were discussed during community consultation, as seen in in figures 10 and 11 below.



Figure 10: Example of Better design suggestion for parks by Make Space for Girls. Source: Make Space for Girls 2023.

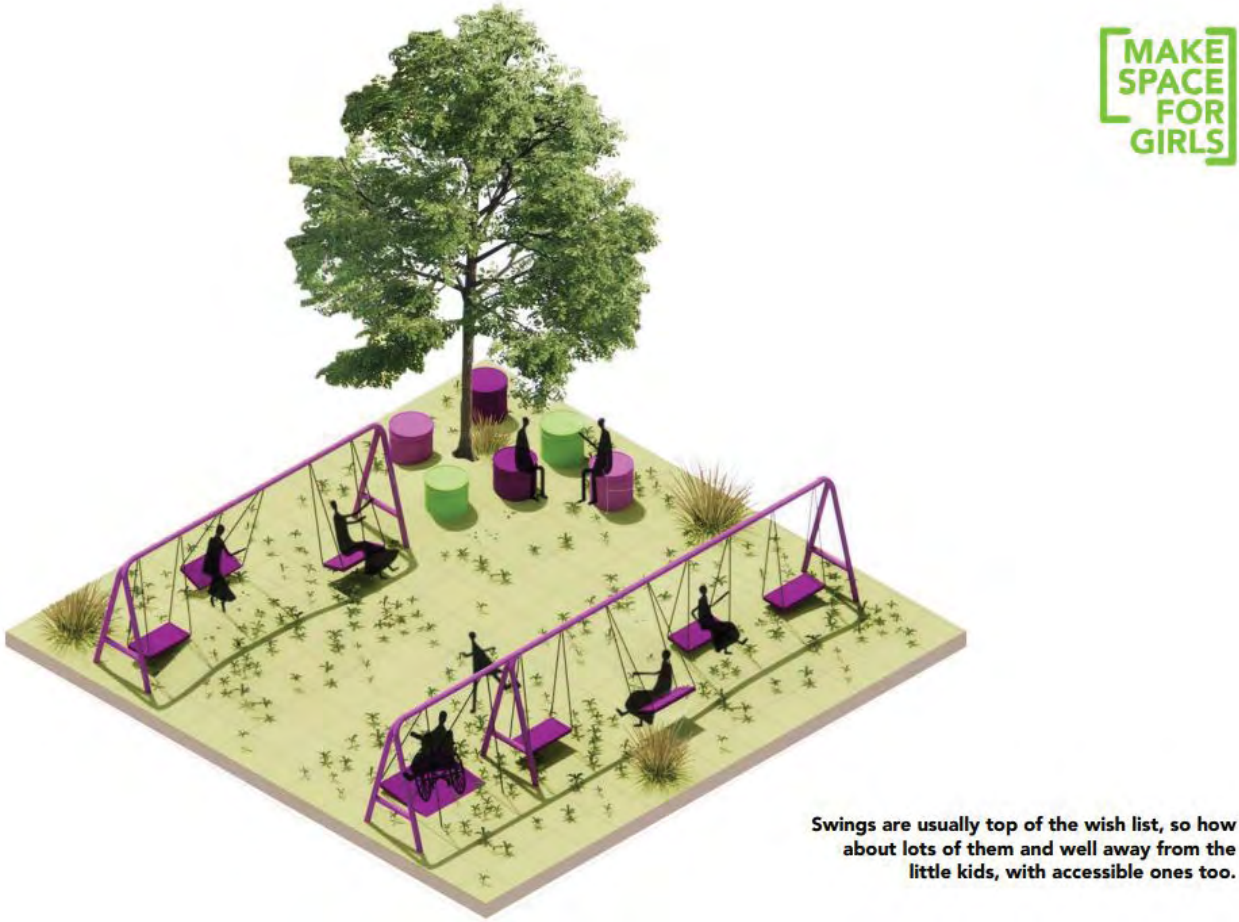


Figure 11: Example of Better design suggestion for parks by Make Space for Girls. Source: Make Space for Girls 2023.

Gender equity and diversity

Council's Human Rights Policy 2016-2026, Gender Equality Commitment and first LBTIQA+ Action Plan promote that the principles of gender equity must extend beyond traditional gender binaries. Council's work at the local level is supported by community voices from the Human Rights and Inclusion Advisory Committee, the Gender Equality Reference Group and the LGBTIQA+ Reference Group to ensure that the rights of everyone are respected and included, regardless of their gender identity or expression. Council's work is further strengthened by the Gender Equality Act.

Council will continue to explore how our open spaces can better provide for all our community, regardless of their gender or diversity. This includes exploring how to make all people feel welcome, such as by looking at new artwork and events in open spaces.



Child safety

Merri-bek City Council is committed to being a Child Safe organisation and has zero tolerance for child abuse. We believe children and young people have the right to be and feel safe and that their safety and wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone. All child safe incidents will be treated seriously and responded to promptly.

At Merri-bek we support and encourage the empowerment and participation of all children and young people. As an inclusive organisation we recognise and respect diversity. We are committed to providing culturally safe environments where all children and young people are heard, respected, and encouraged to reach their full potential.

We recognise the distinct history and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and their families and encourage the expression, enjoyment and sharing of their cultures.

The Open Space Strategy reinforces our commitment to complying with, and championing, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Victorian Child Safe Standards, including ensuring that children and young people have a say on decisions that affect them, such as within open spaces.



Cultural diversity

Merri-bek boasts a culturally diverse population, with 33 per cent of its residents born overseas and 39 per cent speaking languages other than English, according to 2021 data. Immigration patterns have greatly contributed to the rich cultural tapestry of the community, with notable groups including the Italian and Greek populations among the elderly, as well as an increasing number of people arriving from countries like India, Nepal, and Lebanon. The diversity of languages spoken in Merri-bek is wide-ranging and includes Italian, Arabic, Greek, Urdu, Nepali, and Turkish.

Certain suburbs within Merri-bek have higher concentrations of specific cultural communities. For example, Glenroy has a substantial Nepalese population, while Fawkner has approximately 10 per cent of its residents speaking Urdu.

This cultural diversity presents unique opportunities for the design and provision of open spaces. Consideration must be given to facilities catering to emerging non-traditional sports, accommodations for female-only participation, spaces for larger social gatherings, and safety concerns.

Throughout the consultation process for the Open Space Strategy, we heard of the need to better acknowledge and incorporate the various cultures present in open spaces. This entails providing cultural facilities in or near open spaces, such as prayer rooms, as well as offering more events and activities in open spaces. Additionally, there is a demand for inter-generational facilities in open spaces, such as areas equipped with playgrounds, BBQ facilities, shelters, and public toilets to cater to diverse community needs and foster inclusivity. Council will continue to explore these throughout the five strategy direction and actions.

Homelessness

Merri-bek City Council is dedicated to designing and providing public spaces that support homeless individuals. The Merri-bek Homelessness Strategy aims to enhance outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. This includes recognising the universal right of all people, including those experiencing homelessness, to access public spaces and facilities and participate in society to improve overall well-being.

Understanding the health implications of homelessness, Council is taking a human rights and health equity approach, including actively engaging with individuals with lived experiences to create welcoming spaces (including open space), acknowledging the value of informal architecture and considering essential facilities such as toilets in open space, and fostering stronger communities and a more equitable, connected and compassionate community (including within open space).

Open space for all abilities

Merri-bek is committed to ensuring that persons with a disability have equal access to opportunities, support and assistance, enabling them to fully participate in and engage with their community. During the community engagement process for the Open Space Strategy, Council received feedback from many individuals who expressed their struggles in adequately accessing open spaces or utilising open space as desired. These concerns highlighted a range of barriers, including:

1. Inappropriate surfaces in playgrounds, rendering them physically inaccessible for wheelchair users.
2. Playground equipment that is not equipped for children or adults with physical disabilities.
3. Insufficient or unclean public toilet facilities in open spaces.
4. Inadequate facilities for neurodiverse children and adults.
5. Concerns related to poor dog behaviour, dog waste and safety.

The Merri-bek Disability Access and Inclusion Plan sets out our role and commitment in removing barriers and increasing opportunity for people with a disability in Merri-bek, including providing accessible places and spaces. The Open Space Strategy aims to address these barriers, concerns and challenges, and commits to exploring how to make our open spaces more accessible. Actions grouped under Direction 4 'Providing open space for everyone' include developing an All Access Abilities playground, Changing Places Facilities and Universal Design Guidelines, which together will assist in ensuring that all community members, regardless of their abilities, can fully engage with and benefit from the open spaces within Merri-bek.