



**Merri-bek**  
City Council

# Affordable Housing Action Plan

## Annual Report 2024



2-12 Wilkinson St, Brunswick.

39-unit social housing by Merri-bek Affordable Housing & Haven Home Safe in partnership with Merri-bek Council and Homes Victoria.

Image: MGS Architects

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 Moreland. We pay respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging, as well as to all First Nations communities who significantly contribute to the life of the area.

## Introduction

In December 2022, Council adopted the Merri-bek Affordable Action Plan (AHAP) 2022-2026, The AHAP has four Focus Areas under which achievable and effective actions are identified for implementation by officers across Council. These are:

1. Planning
2. Partnerships
3. Research and Advocacy
4. Support service coordination, information provision and advocacy for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness

Focus Areas 1-3 aim to directly increase the provision of affordable housing in Merri-bek.

The actions under Focus Area 4 are about services for those who do not currently have secure housing. Actions under Focus Area 4 are now progressed and reported on through the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan which was adopted by Council on 13 March 2024.

This report provides a summary of the progress of actions under the AHAP from December 2023 to November 2024.

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# Summary of 2023 activities and achievements

## Focus Area 1 - Planning

### Implementation Branches: City Development & City Strategy and Economy

#### Action 1.1: Facilitate affordable housing provision in planning permit applications

Officers in the Urban Planning and Strategic Planning Units, supported by the Principal Advisor Social and Affordable Housing, have seen an increase in positive outcomes through negotiated voluntary agreements from developers and landowners to contribute affordable housing in new developments. Agreements are usually secured through an agreement under section 173 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* which places conditions or restrictions on the use or development of the land.

The current year has seen an increase in permit applications issued by the Minister for Planning, reflecting the Victorian Government policy setting under the September 2023 Housing Statement. Despite Council not being the final decision-maker in these cases, officers remain significantly engaged with proponents and state government planners in the detail of affordable housing agreements conditioned on permits.

Notable planning permits with affordable housing contributions include:

- 8 Florence St Brunswick  
Nightingale Wilam Ganga - VCAT planning permit for 28 homes, 10% (3) provided to a community housing provider
- 718-724 Sydney Road, Coburg North  
VCAT amendment to planning permit including requirement of 100% of 147 units to be social and affordable housing
- 2-12 Wilkinson St, Brunswick  
Merri-bek Affordable Housing/Haven Homes Safe – Ministerial permit for 39 social housing apartments
- 24 Jessie St, Coburg  
Uniting Housing – Ministerial permit for 75 social and affordable homes.

#### Action 1.4: Promote affordable housing opportunities in strategic land use planning

- Social and Affordable Housing in Central: Coburg- Scoping Report

This 21-page report to Council in December 2023 aimed to provide Council with a general understanding of the opportunities to deliver affordable housing outcomes in the Central Coburg area.

#### Action 1.5: Support registered housing providers and other non-profit housing projects

Several community housing providers were provided with advice on potential developments and research and data assistance to support applications for project funding.

#### Action 1.6: Build Councillor, officer and stakeholder capacity, especially with new development models

- Councillors toured new Homes Victoria social housing at Harvest Square, Brunswick West and were briefed directly on Merri-bek Affordable Housing and opportunities to use council land for affordable housing development.

- 6 officers from the Urban Planning and Strategic Planning units attended workshops run by the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria on negotiating planning agreements.



Councillors and officers visit to new social housing at Harvest Square, Brunswick West

## **Focus Area 2 - Partnerships**

### **Implementation branches: City Strategy and Economy, Place Property and Design**

#### **Action 2.1 Support Moreland (now Merri-bek) Affordable Housing Ltd (MAH) to develop affordable housing**

- In December 2023 Council endorsed a new Memorandum of Understanding with MAH which reaffirms the reasons Council established MAH and provides an opportunity to confirm a common vision to provide affordable housing to benefit the Merri-bek region.
- MAH published its Strategic Directions, outlining how its activities will evolve in supporting its mission to increase the provision of social and affordable housing in Merri-bek.
- The 39-unit social housing development at Wilkinson Street, to be built on land sold to MAH in Brunswick, will begin construction in the first half of 2025.

#### **Action 2.2 Consider suitability for affordable housing as a use during strategic assessment of land or property that is undergoing change of use or potential sale**

- Officers provided a strategic assessment on five land sites for suitability for affordable housing.
- A Council owned two-bedroom villa unit at Sutherland St Coburg was sold on the open market in December 2024. After an arrangement for the property to be sold to a community housing provider did not eventuate, Council resolved for the proceeds of the sale to be put into the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy Reserve for use in future projects.

#### **Action 2.3 Explore partnership opportunities with Homes Victoria, other state agencies, residential developers and housing providers**

Officers proactively engage to reinforce the message to housing sector players that Merri-bek is a welcoming and facilitative Council in looking at potential new social and affordable housing developments or improving and expanding policy responses.



Council officers were hosted by Launch Housing at its Bellfield Social Housing Project to better understand how new social housing homes deliver deep social outcomes through design and on-site and community supports.



Council officers visit Launch Housing's Bellfield Social Housing

#### **Action 2.4 Partner with the Homes Victoria to implement the Social and Affordable Housing Compact and Local Agreements**

A draft Social and Affordable Housing Compact was supported by the Municipal Association of Victoria. is still awaiting state government sign-off. Officers have contributed to a co-design process for local area agreements with Homes Victoria and continue to engage, in particular, on the future of ageing public housing in Merri-bek.

#### **Action 2.5 Strategically use the Merri-bek Housing Strategy Reserve**

In June 2024 Council endorsed an administrative update of the guidelines for operation of the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy Reserve (previously known and as the Housing Strategy Reserve) to align with the parent policy, the Financial Reserves and Capital Management Policy. The new guidelines now clearly express:

- officers responsible for the management of the Reserve
- financial reporting requirements
- authorisation of transfers from the Reserve either through the annual budget allocation or a resolution of Council, and
- simplification of expressed principles for the allocation of funds.

### **Focus Area 3 – research and advocacy**

#### **Implementation Branch: City Strategy and Economy**

##### **3.1 Collect data and undertake research to support future policy development**

Opportunities to better understand affordable housing need in Merri-bek and provide voice for the perspectives and concerns of community members include:

- Merri-bek Housing Monitor (Housing id)

In January the housing Monitor web portal was launched offering a powerful, publicly accessible tool which provides rich spatial and quantitative data on housing including affordable housing need and the affordability of housing for rental and purchase.

- Coburg Revitalisation

With input from over 1300 people, the Coburg Conversation reported that high quality social and affordable housing was an important community deliverable in future Central Coburg.

### 3.2 Consult the Affordable Housing Reference Group as key community voice on affordable housing matters

The Affordable Housing Reference Group was convened 3 times during 2024. Topics for discussion and feedback included:

- Victoria's Housing Statement.
- Current state of emergency accommodation responses.
- Design outcomes for new public housing developments.
- Social and Affordable Housing Strategy Reserve.

### 3.3 Work with M9 Group of Councils, Inter-Council Affordable Housing Forum (ICAHF), Municipal Association Victoria (MAV) on relevant campaigns and advocacy

Council continued its active engagement with the M9 Group of Councils, MAV and the Inter-Council Affordable Housing Forum to progress advocacy and information-sharing on social and affordable housing matters. In August Council hosted more than 70 local government officers in person and hybrid at Brunswick Town Hall for a bi-monthly ICAHF meeting.



Inter Council Affordable Housing Forum tour of Brunswick Affordable Housing sites.

In February, Council's Principal Advisor Social and Affordable Housing presented to the Affordable Housing Development and Investment Summit on the topic of building capacity in councils to achieve affordable housing outcomes. In May they presented to the 6<sup>th</sup> National Housing and Homelessness Forum on the topic of fostering local initiatives for affordable housing.



Council presenting to the Affordable Housing Development and Investment Summit in February

## Focus Area 4 – Support service coordination, information provision and advocacy for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness

### Implementation Branch: Community Wellbeing

Council endorsed the *Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan* on 13 March 2024. It aims to address the multi-faceted issue of homelessness in Merri-bek, encompassing identifying needs and gaps, direct Council responses, and early intervention and prevention measures.

As **Focus Area 4** of this *Affordable Housing Action Plan* is duplicated and expanded upon in the *Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan* (except for 'Convene Merri-bek Family Violence Network' which is captured in the *Gender Equality Commitment Action Plan*), actions under Focus Area 4 are to be progressed and reported on through the *Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan*.

## Additional actions and activities

### Submissions

Issues related to social and affordable housing were identified in a number of Council submission in 2024:

- Plan For Victoria
- National Urban Policy
- Minimum Standards for Rental Properties and Rooming Houses regulations 2024

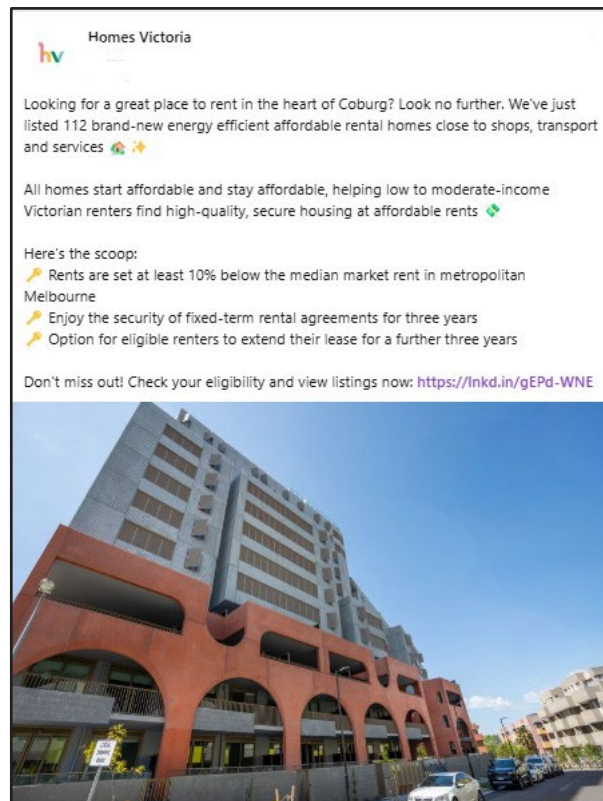
### Support for rough sleepers

Support for people in housing crisis included an assertive outreach service partnering with Merri Outreach Support Service and the initiation of the Merri-bek Zero project



## Abandoned vehicles income for Moreland Housing Reserve

In 2018 Council resolved to allocate 50% of the funds from the proceeds of the sale of abandoned vehicles by Council to the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy. \$18,562 was transferred to reserve from abandoned car sale revenue in 2022-23 and \$13,461 in 2023-24.



Social media post promoting new affordable rental housing in Coburg – delivered via a section 173 agreement negotiated by Council with developer, PACE and Victorian Government's Big Housing Build