



**Merri-bek**  
City Council



**2026 Victorian State Election**

# **Advocacy Priorities**



## Acknowledgement

Merri-bek City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek, and pays 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.

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# Mayor's Foreword

Merri-bek is a vibrant, diverse and growing community with a clear vision for a city that 'leads and leaves no one behind'; a city that is welcoming, sustainable, engaged and full of life.

As more people call Merri-bek home it is critical that our infrastructure, services and opportunities keep pace with community needs. Local government cannot do this alone. Strong and sustained partnerships with all levels of government are essential to ensuring our community has access to the infrastructure and services it needs, both now and into the future.

Our 2026 Victorian State Election Advocacy Priorities reflect what we hear from our community; their need for improved transport connections, their aspirations for community infrastructure and inclusive services, their wish to live and work in Merri-bek and their concern and care for our environment. These priorities respond directly to the challenges and opportunities we face as a growing city.

By working in partnership with the Victorian Government, we can deliver better outcomes for our community that support liveability, sustainability and social equity. These investments are critical to ensuring that Merri-bek continues to be a place where people can thrive, regardless of age, background or circumstance.

We look forward to working constructively with the Victorian Government to advance these priorities and to shape a future that reflects our shared commitment to strong, inclusive and sustainable communities.

## **Councillor Nat Abboud**

Mayor of Merri-bek



# About Merri-bek

The City of Merri-bek spans approximately 51 square kilometres in Melbourne's inner north, located between 4 and 14 kilometers north of Melbourne Central Business District.

Merri-bek forms part of the gateway to Greater Melbourne's rapidly growing northern region, encompassing the suburbs of Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Coburg, Coburg North, Fawkner, Glenroy, Gowanbrae, Hadfield, Oak Park, Pascoe Vale, and Pascoe Vale South, as well as parts of Parkville, Fitzroy North, and Tullamarine.

Merri-bek is a diverse and dynamic municipality known for its vibrant multicultural communities and active public spaces. It features a rich mix of residential neighbourhoods, and green open spaces and the city's character is shaped by its lively precincts and thriving shopping strips.

## Our population is growing



189,108 in 2025<sup>i</sup>



256,206 in 2051



35% increase<sup>ii</sup>

## Our community is proudly diverse



1 in 3 residents were born overseas



35% of residents speak a language other than English at home<sup>iii</sup>

## We have many different types of households



35% of households have children



28% of households are a person living alone, our fastest growing household type



24% of households are couples without children<sup>iv</sup>

i. id community demographic resources (June 2025) City of Merri-bek: community profile, accessed 12 June 2026.

ii. Quantify Strategic Insights Forecast (2024) Population and housing forecast data.

iii. id community demographic resources (June 2025) City of Merri-bek: community profile: Ethnicity, accessed 12 June 2026.

iv. id community demographic resources (June 2025) City of Merri-bek: community profile: Households, accessed 12 June 2026.



## Upfield Rail duplication, upgrade, extension and electrification to Wallan

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

**Duplicate and upgrade the Upfield rail line, extend (through Roxburgh Park) to the Craigieburn rail line and electrify to Wallan.**

The Upfield rail corridor services the growing populations of Merri-bek and southern Hume and is the gateway to Melbourne's booming northern region in Hume, Whittlesea and Mitchell Shire. The Northern Growth Corridor is projected to accommodate 30 per cent of Melbourne's future growth over the coming decades. This region will ultimately be home to more than 1.5 million people.

Key rail investments are needed now to resolve critical constraints on train services in the Merri-bek, Hume, Whittlesea and Mitchell municipalities to contribute to unlocking the potential of Melbourne's North, including:

- Duplicating and upgrading the Upfield rail line between Gowrie and Upfield stations to improve train frequency, accessibility, passenger experience and station amenity.
- Re-configuring the City Loop to separate the Upfield and Craigieburn lines to remove ongoing constraints to improved capacity, frequency and reliability for passengers along both lines.
- Extending the Upfield line through Roxburgh Park to the Craigieburn line and electrifying the Upfield line to Wallan with new stations, including at Beveridge and Cloverton, to support the rapidly occurring residential, commercial and industrial development in the region.

#### **Duplication, upgrade and City Loop reconfiguration**

The Victorian Government has earmarked Merri-bek to be home to an additional 70,000 to 80,000 dwellings by 2051 (subject to Ministerial feedback). With Brunswick and Coburg identified as Train and Tram Zone Activity Centres, these suburbs will welcome the bulk of new housing in Merri-bek and the Upfield rail line will be expected to service the increased population. Despite the importance of this corridor to both the current and future residents of

Merri-bek, the Upfield rail line has one of the least frequent peak-period services in Melbourne's rail network, with train services running every 15-20 minutes during peak periods, and every 20-30 minutes outside peak.

Single track service between Gowrie and Upfield stations and the Upfield and Craigieburn train lines sharing City Loop tracks creates significant bottlenecks and constraints to improved capacity, frequency and reliability for passengers.

Duplicating the track between Gowrie and Upfield stations will remove significant bottlenecks and constraints for the length of the Upfield line, allowing for improved, capacity, frequency and reliability.

The Upfield and Craigieburn train lines continuing to share the same City Loop tracks has been identified by Infrastructure Victoria as an ongoing constraint to improved capacity, frequency and reliability for passengers along both lines. A coordinated and timely reconfiguration of the City Loop could also allow for the line to be extended further north to Wallan.

Melbourne Metro 1 removed Sunbury line trains from the current loop, enabling more pathways at North Melbourne Railway Station. Securing these spots for northern group trains could contribute to improved frequency on the Upfield line.

### **Extension and electrification to Wallan**

In Melbourne's booming northern region, Hume, Whittlesea and Mitchell are expanding at rates far beyond forecasts. Mitchell's growth areas alone are expected to reach 80,000 people within 10 years and ultimately will support a population of over 230,000.

The growth communities in Mitchell and Hume including Wallan, Beveridge, Lockerbie, Donnybrook and the future Cloverton Metropolitan Activity Centre (MAC), are currently serviced by diesel V/line services only as the electric line and metropolitan train services terminate at Craigieburn – this cuts passenger capacity by more than half, as a V/Line train carries about 40 per cent of the passengers of a comparable electric metropolitan train.

V/line services were expected to reach capacity by 2030, but with higher than forecast growth occurring now, coupled with the State Government's fast-tracking of Precinct Structure Planning, reaching capacity is imminent.

Without an electrified Upfield extension to Wallan the communities of Melbourne's rapidly growing North will become increasingly reliant on the Hume Freeway, one of Australia's most important and heavily used routes. Substantially increased residential and commuter use of the Hume Freeway will have significant adverse impacts on freight movements, bringing Melbourne's principal freight route to a standstill.

### **Jobs closer to homes**

Merri-bek is home to more than 53,000 jobs,<sup>1</sup> with the majority of these jobs located either side of the Upfield line and Sydney Road. Connecting the 97,000 residents<sup>2</sup> from Roxburgh Park and Craigieburn to the Upfield corridor, along with residents from the burgeoning suburbs of Lockerbie, Donnybrook, Beveridge and Wallan, could create a vibrant and job-rich Sydney Road corridor, providing direct (and more sustainable) access for residents to jobs and education in northern metropolitan Melbourne, a greater pool of workers for businesses in Brunswick and Coburg, and the potential for a significant uplift in retail and hospitality demand along the strip.

Greater connectivity through Melbourne's northern corridor will also support improved access to other major commercial and industrial precincts including Merrifield, the future Beveridge Intermodal Freight Terminal, and the future Cloverton MAC. The residential development occurring in Mitchell Shire in particular is very unlikely to provide sufficient local jobs for the size of the community and efficient, accessible commuter rail services will be vital to ensure that residents of these communities have equitable access to employment opportunities.



## Improving bus networks

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Prioritise the delivery of the Bus Reform project in Melbourne's North specifically:

- More frequent and improved bus services across Merri-bek, particularly through east-west connections
- More weeknight and Sunday services on buses in Merri-bek

Merri-bek residents are renowned for embracing sustainable transport options, including, walking, cycling and public transport; research indicates 83 per cent feel it is important to work towards a future where people use more sustainable transport and 66 per cent of residents claim they are likely to increase their use of sustainable transport in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Yet transport services that fail to meet community needs continue to be a barrier to higher public transport use, particularly in the north of Merri-bek.

A 2023 study into Merri-bek transport found that poor reliability of some forms of public transport, particularly buses, and difficulty travelling east to west or west to east via public transport are major barriers to people using more sustainable modes of transport.<sup>4</sup> The most frequently reported reasons why participants are currently unable to use a bus more often are that it takes too long and it is not reliable or regular.<sup>5</sup>

The issues around our bus network play out across metropolitan Melbourne, where buses on average arrive every 40 minutes on a typical weekday, extending out to 50 minutes on Sundays. And without bus reform, 84 per cent of bus routes will get slower by 2036, limiting Melburnians access to jobs, education and services.<sup>6</sup>

Infrastructure Victoria's research shows that there are immediate ways to make buses more attractive, like fast and frequent services and operating for extended hours of the day.

Higher frequency services provide estimated benefits of around \$1.20 for every dollar invested and optimising the existing bus network through fast and direct routes with competitive travel times can be achieved for no or very little additional spend.

Extending operating hours to match passenger demand and improving timetable integration to better connect buses to other public transport services like trains can increase passenger numbers. Previous bus reform in Melbourne shows that expanding operating hours can grow patronage by around 10 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2022, the Victorian Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) conducted community consultation in Melbourne's northern suburbs to understand the community's aspirations for its local bus network as part of its Bus Network Reform Pilots.

Over 1600 people that live, work or play in Merri-bek, and other surrounding suburbs such as Preston, Thornbury, Northcote, Broadmeadows, Coolaroo and Campbellfield, took part in the survey. They told DTP that they want frequent and reliable buses that travel the most direct route for a faster journey.

In 2026, residents are still waiting for the delivery of the bus reform project in Melbourne's north; the Victorian Government should deliver the Bus Reform project now.



## Accessible Transport

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Invest in accessible tram stops along the Sydney Road Route 19 Tram Line.

Merri-bek City Council has long advocated for Victorian Government investment to ensure all public transport is accessible for people of all abilities. Accessible tram stops are critical for the higher number of residents in Merri-bek requiring assistance with core daily activities in comparison to greater Melbourne (6.5 per cent compared with 5.5 per cent respectively).<sup>8</sup>

Accessible tram stops can also deliver wider benefits for the community. They unlock access not just for people with disabilities but for seniors and parents with prams and offer safer boarding for all tram users and faster tram travel times.<sup>9</sup>

Level access stops also play an important role in urban renewal and improved economic outcomes for the nearby area. Accessible tram stops can transform the streetscape by widening footpaths, calming traffic and improving safety for all pedestrians – as well as creating spaces for greening, outdoor dining, and other public realm improvements.

Sydney Road is iconic in Melbourne, recognised as the longest shopping strip in the southern hemisphere. However, the community regularly reports dissatisfaction with the overall amenity of Sydney Road. It is a harsh urban environment dominated by cars, has a high vacancy rate of shopfronts, and few trees or other forms of shade. This lack of amenity is having a detrimental impact on local businesses.<sup>10</sup>

The *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) required that all tram stops must be fully compliant with the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002* (DSAPT) by 31 December 2022 and it is clear there are many other benefits to accessible tram stops.

*Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2025-2055* has recommended the State Government complete priority public transport stop upgrades to meet legal accessibility requirements and fund further upgrades; it should fund the highest priority stop upgrades and aim to finish them by 2030.<sup>11</sup>

In 2023 the Victorian Government's *Melbourne's Tram Plan* outlined a new corridor-based approach to delivery of accessible stop upgrades based on four broad criteria accessibility, safety, movement, and place.

The Sydney Road corridor – one of the most heavily used roads for motor vehicles, trams, cyclists and pedestrians in Melbourne – should be a high priority for accessible tram stop upgrades under the framework outlined in *Melbourne's Tram Plan*.

The 2026-27 Victorian State Budget included funding for planning for level access tram stops along Sydney Road in Brunswick and Coburg. Council welcomes the funding and urges the Victorian Government to further commit to the delivery of these upgrades that will be transformational for residents, traders and visitors in Brunswick and Coburg.



## Road Safety

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Prioritise and invest in road safety for all road users, specifically:

- Take a corridor-based approach to improve safety along Murray Road
- Deliver safer speed limits and pedestrian operated signals on Moreland Road
- Fund a feasibility study and designs for safe and accessible active travel over Bell Street Bridge
- Deliver pedestrian operated signals on Elizabeth Street
- Deliver 'Speed on Green' traffic lights and red turning arrows on dangerous Sydney Road intersections.

A total of 1,974 crashes occurred in Merri-bek in the five years from 2018 to 2023. This included 12 crashes resulting in a fatality, 621 crashes resulting in a hospitalisation, and 1,341 crashes involving other injuries.

Merri-bek has the second highest number of crashes in the inner-Melbourne area (Melbourne 9 local government areas), with only the City of Melbourne being higher. Vulnerable road users are disproportionately affected by crashes on our roads with 600 crashes between 2018 and 2023 involving a pedestrian or cyclist. This represents approximately 30 per cent of all recorded crashes.

Hotspots include Sydney Road, Bell Street, and other arterial roads with vulnerable road users more likely to be injured in a crash at a marked intersection.

Council is also experiencing increased reports of safety issues around schools, particularly concerns around driver behaviour. Prioritising student safety requires the Victorian Government to take a partnership approach with local government, to implement a mix of policing and speed enforcement, upgraded infrastructure including signalised intersections, more school crossing supervisors and community education.

The *Moving Around Merri-bek Transport Strategy* provides a framework for how Council works to create streets where everyone feels safe and reduce the frequency and severity of crashes on our roads. With many roads and intersections in Merri-bek the responsibility of the Victorian Government, Council seeks a collaborative approach with the Department of Transport and Planning to implement safety initiatives in these areas.

The following are key road safety priorities in Merri-bek that will require a partnership approach and funding from the Victorian Government.

### **Murray Road, Coburg**

**Take a corridor-based approach to improve safety along Murray Road and around the Pentridge and Coburg High School areas for pedestrians and cyclists, particularly children travelling to school.**

Murray Road is a high-risk arterial road in Merri-bek, with 23 crashes in the last three years, including five serious injury crashes requiring hospitalisation (between Sydney Road and Elizabeth Street). Improved safety on Murray Road should be a priority, particularly for the high number of school students walking and riding to school.

### **Moreland Road, Coburg**

**Deliver safer speed limits and pedestrian operated signals near Queen Street to improve safety on Moreland Road.**

Moreland Road is a high-risk arterial road in Merri-bek, with 22 crashes in the last three years, including eight serious injury crashes and one fatality (between Sydney Road and Melville Road).

### **Bell Street Bridge, Coburg**

**Fund a feasibility study and designs for safe and accessible active travel options over Coburg's Bell Street bridge at the Nicholson Street intersection.**

Pedestrians and bike riders, including a large and growing number of Coburg High School students, are at risk every day on and around Coburg's Bell Street Bridge.

Bell Street carries more traffic than any other road in Merri-bek, yet pedestrian access on Bell Street Bridge is significantly narrower than other equivalent bridges in the area. The risk area, including the Nicholson Street intersection and tram terminus, and the Elizabeth Street intersection, is notorious for traffic collisions. In 2021 a Coburg High School student was hit by a car in the risk area.

### **Elizabeth Street, Coburg North**

**Plan and deliver pedestrian operated signals near Goff Street to improve safety on Elizabeth Street, Coburg North.**

Currently, there are no safe crossing points across Elizabeth Street between Murray Road and Bell Street. Providing a signalised pedestrian crossing would improve pedestrian and cycling access for students attending Coburg High School. It would also facilitate east-west cycling movements along a key Strategic Cycling Corridor linking Coburg and Preston Activity Centres.

### **Dangerous Sydney Road intersections, Coburg North**

**Deliver 'Speed on Green' traffic lights and red turning arrows on the most dangerous Sydney Road intersections north of Bell Street in Coburg North.**

Sydney Road, north of Bell Street, is a high-speed and high-volume road environment. Council has received feedback from the community about frequent speeding incidents and non-compliance when pedestrians have a green walking lantern. The installation of speed cameras, that operate even when cars have a green signal, and red-turn arrows on the main Sydney Road intersections north of Bell Street would improve safety for all road users and make crossing busy intersections safer for pedestrians.



## Active Transport

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Fund, plan and deliver critical missing links in our walking and riding network, including:

- Upfield shared path from Sages Road to the M80 Trail
- Craigieburn Shared Path from Oak Park to Glenroy
- Harding Street Bridge, replacing the old wooden bridge over the Merri Creek linking Merri-bek and Darebin.

The Victorian Government is aiming for 25 per cent of all trips to be made by walking or riding by 2030.<sup>12</sup>

In Melbourne, 60 per cent of people's trips are under five kilometres. Many of these trips are well-suited to a short bike ride, but less than two per cent of them are made by bicycle.<sup>13</sup>

In Merri-bek, a recent study found that cycling was the top response when asked what modes of transport people would like to use more often.<sup>14</sup> However by far the biggest barrier for people wanting to cycle more was that it does not feel safe. There is a desire for safer and more cycling-related infrastructure to encourage cycling.<sup>15</sup>

Infrastructure Victoria recently recommended that more protected and connected cycle corridors should be built in Melbourne and regionally.

Critical missing links in Merri-bek's walking and riding network include the Upfield Shared Path from Sages Road to the M80 Trail, the Craigieburn Shared Path from Oak Park to Glenroy and the Harding Street Bridge.

### **Upfield Shared Path: Sages Road to the M80 Trail**

**Fund, plan and deliver a missing link of the Upfield Shared Path, from Sages Road to the M80 Trail, including a signalised pedestrian crossing at Box Forest Road and shared path along Sages Road.**

The Upfield Shared User Path is one of the most popular bike riding and walking paths in Melbourne attracting around 2,500 users daily.

Transport Victoria are upgrading the Upfield Shared Path between Sages Road and the M80 Trail which will improve connections from Melbourne's north to key active transport routes such as the Merri Creek Trail, Moonee Ponds Creek Trail and the Capital City Trail.

A signalised pedestrian crossing over Box Forest Road - a very busy, high-traffic arterial road - will provide a safer route for bike riders and pedestrians and a shared path along Sages Road will make the entirety of the route safe for all ages and abilities.

### **Craigieburn Shared Path: Oak Park to Glenroy**

**Fund, plan and deliver a one-kilometre missing link of the Craigieburn Shared Path from Cartwright Street, Oak Park to Glenroy Road, Glenroy.**

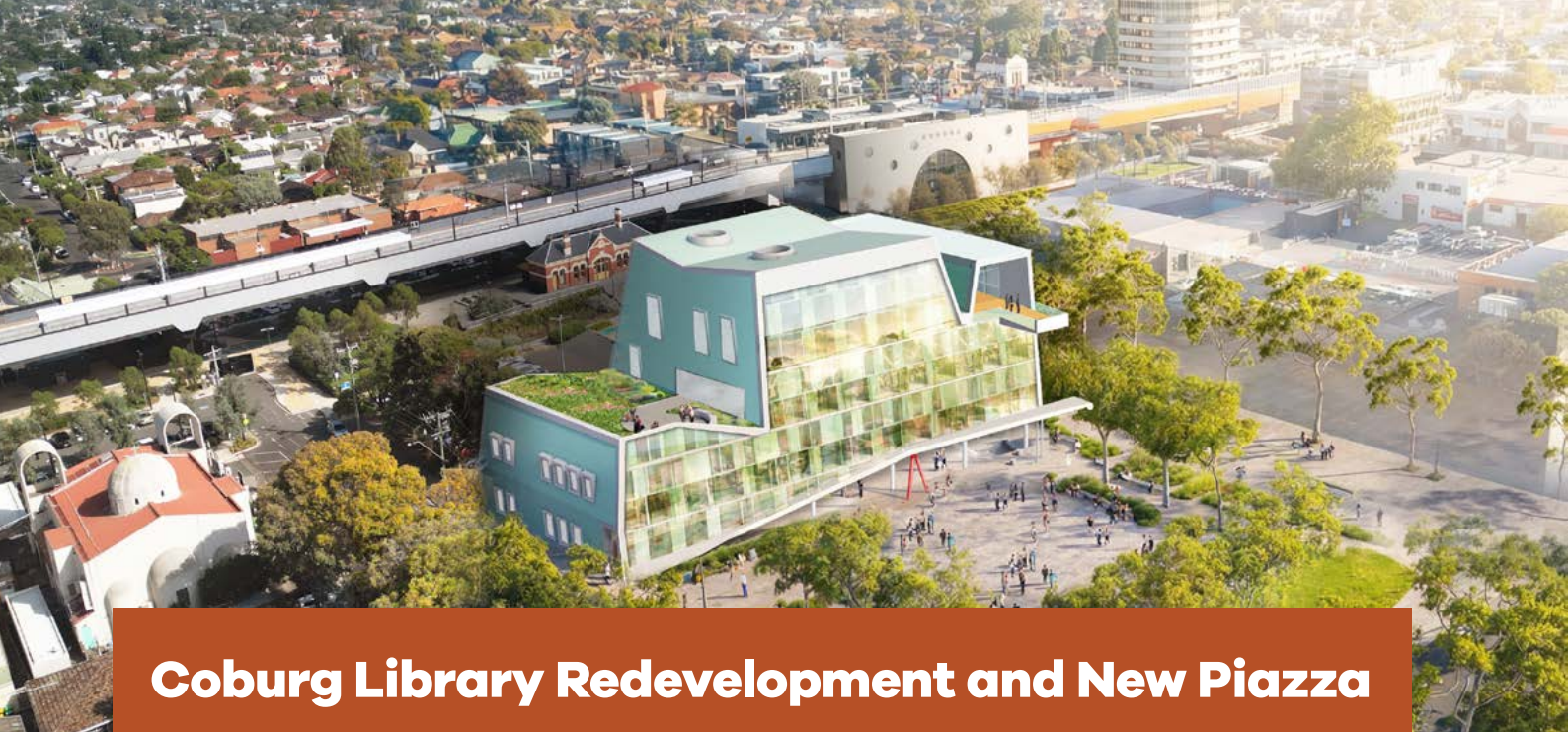
The Craigieburn Shared Path is a planned Strategic Cycling Corridor that follows the Craigieburn rail line and, once complete, will provide a safe and convenient recreational and commuter cycling route from Donnybrook Railway Station in the north and connecting to the Moonee Ponds Creek Trail near Bell Street in the south, including bike links to several railway stations.

Funding and delivering the Oak Park to Glenroy section will provide access from the south to the Glenroy Activity Centre, and provide a safe active transport option to a number of schools and kindergartens.

### **Harding Street Bridge**

**Fund a new Harding Street Bridge over the Merri Creek.**

Merri-bek and Darebin City Councils are working together to design and construct a new bridge over the Merri Creek, replacing an old wooden bridge that has reached end-of-life. This bridge is a vital connection for communities on both sides of the creek, with many students to local primary and secondary schools using the bridge to get to and from school every day. Victorian Government investment in the new bridge would help Merri-bek and Darebin Councils make this vital connection safer, more accessible and more user friendly for pedestrians and bike riders while minimising impacts to the creek and local biodiversity.



## Coburg Library Redevelopment and New Piazza

### Coburg

#### **Our ask:**

Invest in the \$60 million development of a new Coburg Library and Piazza in central Coburg.

Merri-bek's Coburg Library is the busiest and most central of Merri-bek's five libraries.<sup>16</sup>

Merri-bek and Coburg are forecast to experience a 35 per cent and 39 per cent population increase by 2051 respectively.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Victorian Government has earmarked Merri-bek to be home to an additional 70,000 to 80,000 dwellings by 2051 (subject to Ministerial feedback). Brunswick and Coburg have been identified as Train and Tram Zone Activity Centres so these suburbs will welcome much of this new housing in Merri-bek. This increase in population and housing will increase demand on the Coburg Library, which will need to accommodate both the current and future community.

The Coburg Library opened in 1983 in a space that was once a supermarket and is now more than 40 years old. With a cultural shift in the role and function of libraries as public spaces over this time, and the increasing demand for library services in the heart of Coburg, the existing building does not have the space or specific facilities to meet demand.

A new fit-for purpose library and piazza will create new spaces, services and experiences for the growing Coburg community and be a key part of the revitalisation of Coburg.

The design for the Coburg Library and Piazza showcases a contemporary four-storey library building seamlessly connected to a new public piazza, creating a cultural and social anchor for the precinct. Key elements include:

- **A next generation library** with flexible spaces for reading, digital learning, creative and cultural programs, and community use.
- **A generous new open piazza**, designed as a welcoming and multifunctional public space framed by seating, lawn and trees.

- **Improved accessibility and precinct connections,** supporting inclusive movement and links to transport throughout the area.

Construction of Coburg's new Library and Piazza is expected to begin in mid-2028, and open in late 2029.

### **Libraries for health and wellbeing**

It is widely recognised that public libraries improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and the community. Library services have a positive impact by providing access to physical collections, meeting spaces, technology and the internet, or more recent programs targeted at holistic social, physical, and mental health and wellbeing.

Research commissioned by the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria in 2023 found the positive impacts of public libraries on communities outweigh the costs by double and that Victorian public libraries generate a net annual benefit of \$234.7 million in health and wellbeing benefits.<sup>18</sup>

### **Coburg revitalisation**

The new Coburg Library and Piazza is a key part of the revitalisation of Central Coburg. Council is developing a masterplan to lead the revitalisation of Coburg and maximise community outcomes including providing housing (including social and affordable housing) that meets the needs of our community, an expanded public space network and integrated ecological systems to improve climate resilience, water management and biodiversity.

The new Coburg Library and Piazza is estimated to cost \$60 million; Council will look to partner with other levels of government to make this catalysing project a reality.



## Brunswick Baths Gym Expansion and preparation for Electrification

### Brunswick

#### **Our ask:**

Invest \$8.75 million to expand Brunswick Baths Gym to allow more community members to access the facilities, and prepare for the future electrification of the Baths.

Brunswick Baths Gym is at capacity. Located in the heart of Brunswick, Brunswick Baths offers year-round fitness and swim programs and facilities to the growing local community.

The existing gym building was originally a 1960s school sports hall converted for temporary use in 2012 and then repurposed as a 24-hour gym in 2020 with minimal structural upgrades.

The gym currently has 3,600 members, 11.25 members per square metre, which is more than double the recommended industry benchmark of 5.1 members per square metre.

Brunswick is home to more than 65,000 people and that number is forecast to increase by 32 per cent to more than 83,000 by 2051.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the Victorian Government, in its effort to address housing shortages and affordability, has earmarked Merri-bek to be home to an additional 70,000 to 80,000 dwellings by 2051 (subject to Ministerial feedback). With Brunswick and Coburg identified as Train and Tram Zone Activity Centres, these suburbs will welcome much of the new housing in Merri-bek and even more of the increased population. Demand for gym and fitness facilities in Brunswick will only increase.

As more people call Brunswick and Merri-bek home, providing community infrastructure, including a fit-for-purpose Brunswick Baths Gym, is critical to contribute to the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of our current and future community, helping foster healthier and more connected populations.

### **Future electrification**

Brunswick Baths currently contributes 10 per cent of Council's corporate gas emissions, primarily from pool heating. Council is actively transitioning its public swimming pools from gas to electric heating as part of its Zero Carbon Merri-bek 2040 framework.

In an inner-suburban facility where ground space is limited, the gym expansion provides an opportunity to integrate space for rooftop heat-pump infrastructure to pave the way for electrification of the Baths in the future.

Engineering assessments have confirmed the former 1960s sports hall is not suitable for future expansion due to the extensive structural work needed to meet current building codes and strengthening works would be required to support an additional level, even if just housing heat pumps.

Expansion works would also address a range of functionality issues that would improve usage and access including better accessibility and flexible spaces for diverse community to utilise and train such as women's only and LGBTQIA+ zones.

### **New double storey gym**

Council has developed a concept and costing report for a new double storey building within the footprint of the existing sports hall. The design offers around 1,200m<sup>2</sup> of floor space including an 845m<sup>2</sup> gym, with a new extended foyer and a cantilever roof over the existing outdoor training zone to allow for year-round use. The design also includes the roofing infrastructure needed to transition from gas to electric in the future.

Construction could take place in 2030.



## Ballerrt Mooroop

### Glenroy

#### **Our ask:**

Invest in the development of the first Aboriginal Gathering Place in Northwest Metropolitan Melbourne, led by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation

The Ballerrt Mooroop site, located on Hilton Street in Glenroy, holds significant cultural and historical value to the local First Peoples community. It is home to a spiritual healing tree and sacred ceremonial grounds, and was previously the site of Ballerrt Mooroop College, one of four Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) schools to operate in Victoria.

In December 2025, the Victorian Government announced that the Ballerrt Mooroop land title will be returned to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, recognising the Wurundjeri community's aspirations for self-determined community, economic and social outcomes.

Wurundjeri Elders, supported by community, have identified the establishment of a Wurundjeri-operated Aboriginal Gathering Place as the priority activation of the site to support cultural practice and knowledge transfer, create pathways for employment and training, strengthen health and wellbeing outcomes, and provide culturally safe space for Wurundjeri people and the broader First Peoples community across Merri-bek and Hume.

Wurundjeri Elders invite interest and engagement from the broader community and local, State and Federal Governments to support the development of Ballerrt Mooroop as a Wurundjeri-led Aboriginal Gathering Place. Investment in the site will progress Victoria's statewide Treaty commitments to transfer decision-making power and resources to Traditional Owners to make decisions about the matters that affect their lives.

As a community-controlled initiative, Ballerrt Mooroop will align its operations and programming with traditional knowledge sharing and healing Country. Profits will be reinvested into targeted, closed programming that support the social and emotional wellbeing of Wurundjeri and the local First Peoples community.

Ballerrt Mooroop will also embrace reconciliation, social cohesion and stronger people to-people relationships with the local non-Indigenous community, through expanded Wurundjeri-led education programs, events and activities that promote truth-telling and cultural understanding in Merri-bek and Hume.

In 2021 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Merri-bek and Hume was almost 3,000. From 2016 to 2021, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population increased by 30 per cent in these two municipalities, where the average annual population change over the period was 5.4 per cent. This catchment also includes 65 schools, 24 Early Learning Centres with bush kinder grants and the First Peoples North Metro Network.

Nearly half of the First Peoples community in Merri-bek and Hume are under the age of 25, and it is expected that in the coming decades, this community will grow not only numerically but also proportionately in the region. Existing Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Merri-bek and Hume provide services for Elders and an ageing population, although with the large proportion of the First Peoples population under 25, there is a gap in delivery of services, supports and programs locally.

Wurundjeri's Gathering Place provides a strong opportunity for State and Federal Government to demonstrate their commitment to self-determination and reconciliation by enabling the development of Ballerrt Mooroop as a place that meets the needs of the Wurundjeri community, local First Peoples and non-Indigenous communities in the cities of Merri-bek and Hume.



## All-Abilities Playground

### Glenroy

#### **Our ask:**

Invest \$2 million to provide an All-Abilities Playground at Sewell Reserve, Glenroy.

An All-Abilities Playground at Sewell Reserve in Glenroy will expand Council's recent renewal of the existing play space into a regionally significant all abilities destination, supporting inclusive play, improving access for children and carers with disability, and strengthening Glenroy's role as a community hub.

Inclusive playgrounds deliver community, health and social benefits. Accessible design supports participation by children with diverse physical, intellectual, neurological and sensory needs, while also improving usability for parents, carers and grandparents. All-Abilities Playgrounds also provide a welcoming space for integrated play between disabled and non-disabled children, helping reduce barriers to participation and supporting stronger community cohesion.

An All-Abilities Playground aligns with the Victorian Government's *State Disability Plan 2022–2026* aim to create inclusive communities, including creating more inclusive parks.<sup>20</sup> They remove physical and social barriers, ensuring children of all abilities can play, socialise, and develop alongside their peers.

All-Abilities playgrounds can include a range of different features that make the playground accessible to children with different disabilities. These can include:

- Wider spaces and ramps to give access to wheelchairs and other mobility devices.
- Sensory play equipment such as the Little Tikes Braille Panel or Beat Blocks.
- Swings designed to accommodate larger children.
- Wheelchair-accessible trampolines, sandpits and swings.
- Modified slides with ramps for additional support and modified climbing frames for blind/partially sighted children.

- Soft surfaces, appropriate luminance and colour contrasts, textured surfaces to explore with touch, auditory features to make sounds and noises
- Cosy nooks and quieter zones

### **Sewell Reserve**

Sewell Reserve is an established community destination in Glenroy and is home to a range of community facilities including a play space, sporting oval and pavilion, netball courts, a skate park, outdoor gym equipment, a shelter, circuit paths and open space. As a multi-use reserve, it is well suited to expanded inclusive play infrastructure.

Sewell Reserve can accommodate access and parking facilities for families from Merri-bek and surrounding areas.

Merri-bek City Council has recently invested \$837,000 in the renewal of the existing play space. Victorian Government funding will enable delivery of an expanded play space to include a dedicated 'all abilities' area and fully accessible amenities.



## Sporting Facilities

### Merri-bek

#### Our ask:

Invest in upgrades of sporting facilities across Merri-bek to support increasing participation in competition sport and outdoor recreation activities and the health, wellbeing and social benefits sport and physical activity provides.

Merri-bek's sporting grounds are some of the most heavily used public assets in the municipality. Our open spaces and sportsgrounds serve as the primary venues for various organised community and formal sports activities. They also provide open space for informal and recreational sports.

Over the past decade, participation rates in most outdoor recreation activities have risen, particularly in junior and women's teams in competition sport, youth and young adults in social unstructured sport and middle and older adults in informal recreational activities like cycling, running, gym, swimming and dog walking.

Merri-bek's population is forecast to increase by 35 per cent by 2051.<sup>21</sup> Coupled with strong sports participation rates and trends in the municipality, existing sport infrastructure in Merri-bek will not support future growth.

Council has identified several sports grounds in Merri-bek that would benefit from upgrades to enable continued and increased club and community use. Investment in upgraded sporting facilities will benefit organised and informal sport and create a healthier, more connected and more equitable community.

#### **Shore Reserve Oval, Pascoe Vale South**

**\$2.8 million (Ground Redevelopment: \$2.4 million, Lighting Upgrade: \$400,000)**

- Home to the West Coburg Sporting Club (football and cricket)
- Ground redevelopment will maximise space and include new drainage and irrigation, fencing and coaches' boxes.
- Lighting upgrade will include four-pole lighting design to AFL lighting standards (150 lux).

### **Raeburn Reserve, Pascoe Vale**

#### **\$2.8 million Ground Redevelopment**

- Home to the Pascoe Vale Football Club
- Ground redevelopment will include new drainage and irrigation, new turf and coaches' boxes.

### **Wallace Reserve, Glenroy**

#### **\$500,000 Precinct Upgrade**

- Home to the Glenroy Lions Football Club and the Moreland Eagles Football Club
- Precinct upgrade will focus on community safety, reduction of rubbish dumping and amenity uplift.

### **JP Fawkner Reserve East and West, Oak Park**

#### **\$4.5 million Ground Redevelopment**

- Home to Penola St Francis Moreland Community Sports Club Inc. and the Oak Park Football Club
- Ground redevelopment will include new drainage and irrigation, flood mitigation, new goal posts and new turf to increase ground use of both ovals up to 25+ hours of play per week and new nets on the west ground.

### **Balfe Park, Brunswick East**

#### **\$1.1 million Ground Redevelopment**

- Home to Brunswick Zebras Football Club
- Ground redevelopment will include improved drainage, reshaping and levelling the ground to improve safety and ease of use, to ensure the ground can sustain the level of community use.

*Please note: Estimated project costs provided reflect current industry standards.*



## Growing Basketball in Merri-bek

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Invest \$10 million towards a multi-court basketball stadium at Coburg High School that will facilitate education and community use and provide basketball infrastructure to support one of Merri-bek's fastest growing sports.

Basketball is one of the fastest growing team sports in Australia, with 1.3 million people playing the game nationwide. It also ranks as one of the top five most played organised sports among children aged 5 to 14, with over 350,000 regular junior participants and participation among girls and women has increased by 25 per cent since 2022.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly true for Victoria, which leads the way with 31 per cent of the nation's basketball participants and this number is expected to grow.<sup>23</sup>

The Coburg Basketball Association has over 1,000 junior and senior local competition teams and just under 5,000 participants, with approximately 78 per cent of players aged under 20. They also have representative teams for juniors and seniors, alternative formats like 3 x 3 competition and community programs such as all abilities, entry-level and holiday programs.

The Coburg Basketball Association currently uses 22 basketball courts across 18 venues within Merri-bek, Darebin and Hume and faces the constant challenge of an inadequate supply of courts. Merri-bek only has seven indoor basketball courts across four locations. The main stadium, Coburg Basketball Stadium, was opened in 1968 and has four courts, none of which are compliant with contemporary sporting regulations.

Merri-bek City Council completed the Coburg North Sports Hub Masterplan in 2025, focusing on the area in Coburg North that is home to five key sport and recreation facilities, trails and open spaces that are well used by the community.

The Coburg North Sports Hub Master Plan of the current stadium site identified the significant mismatch of supply and demand for indoor basketball courts. In early 2026, Council completed a basketball feasibility study to identify options for more indoor basketball courts in Merri-bek. The study evaluated more than 900

sites across Merri-bek and has identified the Coburg High School as a preferred option for a new multi-court basketball stadium, with support from the Coburg Basketball Association and Coburg High School.

A new stadium at Coburg High School would enable shared school and community use to include education spaces, community spaces, basketball courts and female friendly amenities and gym.



## Coburg Social and Affordable Housing



### **Our ask:**

Invest through Homes Victoria, Development Victoria and the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance, including partnership programs with the Commonwealth Government, to unlock the development of social and affordable housing in Central Coburg.

Australia is facing a housing crisis. Housing supply is not keeping up with our growing population, and many renters and first-home buyers are experiencing rising house prices and worsening affordability.

Central Coburg is ideal for all types of households, including those on low income or in need of subsidised housing. It has excellent train, tram and bus links, a range of fresh food and grocery outlets, schools and leisure facilities.

Council owns 45,000 square metres of land in central Coburg between Bell Street and Munro and Harding Streets. Council has developed a Framework Plan to deliver over 1,000 homes, new parks, new commercial and retail spaces, multi deck public parking, open spaces and many other public realm improvements in Central Coburg. As part of this, Council is proposing that 23-30 per cent of the housing will be social and affordable. However, Council cannot deliver this alone and partnerships with other levels of government, developers and housing providers are critical to make the social and affordable housing commitment a reality.

The case for government partnership and investment is compelling. Council's vision for Coburg aligns with the Plan For Victoria action to increase the number of social and affordable homes<sup>24</sup> and tallies with the Housing Statement commitment to unlock under-used and surplus government land for new homes<sup>25</sup>.

At the Commonwealth level, the Victorian Government has agreed to the National Urban Policy commitment "to collaboratively govern and holistically plan our cities within existing footprints first and with housing affordability as a primary goal"<sup>26</sup>. The National Housing Accord, which cites a target of building 1.2 million new homes by 2030, and Housing Australia programs further endorse an all-levels-of-government approach.<sup>27</sup>

Merri-bek needs between 9,100 new affordable homes by 2051. While the number of homes in Merri-bek has increased by 25 per cent since 2001, the rate of increase in homes in Coburg has been lower than the municipality at 17 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

As affordability worsens, renters are suffering high levels of housing stress, paying more than 30 per cent of their household income for housing costs – and this is particularly high in Coburg. The median weekly rent in Coburg has risen more than twice the rate of inflation from \$200 to \$600 since 2003.<sup>29</sup> For private renters on low incomes (less than \$800 per week), 75 per cent are in housing stress.<sup>30</sup>

Merri-bek also needs more social homes – currently public or community housing makes up less than 3 per cent of homes in Merri-bek, of which very few are in Coburg.



## Creating cooler greener spaces and community connections to nature

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Invest in priority corridor and parklands projects in Merri-bek that improve biodiversity, urban cooling, stormwater outcomes and community connections with nature.

Victoria's *Climate Change Strategy 2026-30* recognises the need to strengthen our natural environment to protect communities from increasing heat, flooding and climate extremes. Expanding green spaces, planting canopy trees and protecting and enhancing biodiversity will help reduce pollution, combat urban heat and improve climate resilience.<sup>31</sup>

The Victorian Government's *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050* also recognises the need to maintain and improve our natural habitats, including waterways, both for habitat and biodiversity conservation and as opportunities for people to enjoy regular contact with nature in urban environments.<sup>32</sup>

Merri-bek is bordered by the Moonee Ponds Creek to the west and the Merri Creek to the east; these waterways and open spaces offer connections to nature close to our dense urban areas. Investment to deliver improvements to our creek corridors can help to cool our neighbourhoods, restore nature, manage stormwater and create healthier, more connected communities.

Council has completed strategic planning for priority creek and parklands projects and seeks Victorian Government investment to deliver cooler, greener spaces for our community.

### **Chain of Ponds Moonee Ponds Creek Plan**

**\$2.035 million**

The Chain of Ponds Plan and *Chain of Ponds Prospectus 2025-2028* identify priority works along the Moonee Ponds Creek catchment to achieve First Nations cultural uplift, naturalisation, litter and pollution reduction, improved access and social inclusion, and integrated water management. Victorian Government investment would enable delivery of high-priority projects, including planning, wetland construction, habitat restoration, nature trails, public realm improvements and bridge renewal.

### **Fawkner Merri Parklands Plan**

**\$5.7 million**

The Fawkner Merri Parklands Plan provides a framework to protect and enhance environmental, cultural heritage and community open space values across a 71-hectare corridor in Fawkner and Coburg North. Victorian Government funding would support conservation management, improved walking and cycling connections, rest areas, essential public amenities and low-impact recreation opportunities that increase safe and inclusive use of the parklands.

Delivery of these works will improve access, comfort and amenity while protecting ecological values and supporting healthier, cooler neighbourhoods.

### **Westbreen Creek Conservation Plan**

**\$1.4 million**

The Westbreen Creek Conservation and Development Plan identifies priority works to protect and enhance environmental, cultural heritage and community open space values along the Westbreen Creek corridor in Pascoe Vale. Priority projects include Austin Crescent Reserve Westbreen Creek Naturalisation and critical flood mitigation works with new pedestrian and cycling link between Westbreen and Moonee Ponds Creeks. Victorian Government funding would support naturalisation, biodiversity outcomes, flood mitigation and improved pedestrian and cycling connections, while balancing recreation needs with the creek's role as a key biodiversity corridor.



## Building better homes through environmentally sustainable design



### **Our ask:**

Engage with Victorian Councils to introduce stronger climate resilient design standards for all buildings to create homes that are healthy and affordable to live in, now and in the future.

In the face of rising energy costs and a warming climate, the need for thermally comfortable, energy efficient and well-designed homes is more pressing than ever. Designing and building homes with Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) principles, particularly simple measures that reduce community vulnerability to heat waves, will remove the need for costly future retrofits and create homes that are healthy and affordable to live in.

Many existing apartment buildings are not ready to withstand current and growing climate-related pressures. Australian building standards lag behind international best practice for sustainability and climate resilience. According to an Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute report, less than 5 per cent of newer apartment buildings meet minimum sustainability standards, with many older apartment buildings falling well short.<sup>33</sup>

University of Melbourne research released in 2017 showed that if a heatwave hit and the power blacked out, most apartment buildings would bake, with indoor temperatures quickly exceeding international health standards.<sup>34</sup>

Recent Victorian Government planning reforms have greatly reduced the impacts of local ESD planning policies. Even simple requirements for shade, ventilation and insulation have been removed with the intent of streamlining planning processes and addressing housing affordability. However, analysis by Merri-bek Council suggests that homes being designed now are likely to get warmer during hot weather, be more vulnerable during heat waves, will cost more to cool and will require future generations to make costly modifications or rebuilds to withstand climate change.

In 2025, over 30 Council's across Victoria had a local policy for sustainability requirements in their planning scheme, improving building quality and reducing energy bills for residents and businesses.

In Merri-bek, positive outcomes included, more energy efficient homes and buildings via improved glazing, insulation and ventilation, improved natural daylight access and additional greening. Merri-bek Council also demonstrated that the ESD policy did not hinder or detract from the planning application process; rather it helped improve development quality demonstrating there is a way to deliver healthy, well-designed homes quickly for the community.

Merri-bek together with Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) seek opportunities to engage with the Victorian government to embed simple, statewide rules that ensure every new building is future-proofed against climate extremes with design standards that cut energy bills, protect households from heatwaves and flooding, and give industry the certainty it needs. This means every new home and building is affordable, healthy and climate-ready from day one.



## More businesses and more jobs in Merri-bek

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

Attract and facilitate investment to support business and job growth in Merri-bek by:

- Collaborating with Council to identify vacant and underutilised government owned land and infrastructure that could deliver local economic and community benefits.
- Investing in the supporting infrastructure businesses need to operate efficiently.

In 2021, 19 per cent of Merri-bek's resident workers were employed locally in Merri-bek. This is one of the lowest rates for any municipality in Victoria. The gap between the number of employed residents and the number of local jobs in Merri-bek has been widening for over a decade, increasing by 38 per cent from 2012 to 2022.<sup>35</sup>

The Victorian Government has earmarked Merri-bek to be home to an additional 70,000 to 80,000 dwellings by 2051 (subject to final Ministerial feedback), a near doubling of the current 70,000 households. The ability to work locally has environmental, social and economic benefits. Increasing local jobs can further recognise these benefits.

#### **Identify vacant and underutilised government land to deliver local economic and community benefits**

Vacant and underutilised government land in Merri-bek holds significant potential to unlock hundreds, even thousands, of jobs in Merri-bek.

The transformation of 420 Victoria Street, a government-owned former school in Brunswick, demonstrates the potential for government owned sites to be a key source of jobs. The site and its two former school buildings were run down and partially unoccupiable, operating below optimal potential as a not-for-profit, publicly funded, business incubator. A transformation project involving a 20-year public-private partnership has seen a private sector-lead tenant (BRUDI) invest more than \$3.2 million in the site to substantially renovate the building and unlock previously unusable floorspace, more than doubling the number of jobs on site.

## **Investing in supporting infrastructure**

Investing in rail infrastructure is critical to attracting job-creating investment in Brunswick and Coburg.

Cremorne, a former industrial neighbourhood like Brunswick, has transformed in recent years to become a major tech and jobs hub. In comparison, Brunswick's job growth has been more incremental and less impressive. A key difference between Cremorne and Brunswick is its proximity to six suburban rail lines that can draw a catchment of two to three million people living across greater south-eastern Melbourne, giving Cremorne's employers access to a vast labour pool. In contrast, the Upfield rail line, serving Brunswick, terminates far short of the outer Northern Growth Corridor, and accesses a population catchment of only 300,000 people.

When selecting a business location, large employers look at workforce access. If Merri-bek is to realise its potential as a major employment hub, investment in improved rail infrastructure – including the extension of Upfield rail line to the Craigieburn rail line and Wallan, is critical.

Enabling infrastructure is also critical to supporting job growth. Inadequate and antiquated electrical infrastructure has often limited business investment and economic growth in Merri-bek. In Brunswick and Coburg, old electricity infrastructure can be ill-suited to modern electricity demands driven by increasing use of computers, food production, scientific and other types of machinery, and by electric heating and cooling systems.

Business such as scientific laboratories, creative spaces and distilleries have faced significant time delays and cost barriers when trying to invest and expand. Privately owned grid operators are not financially incentivised to proactively plan for grid enhancement, and upgrade infrastructure subject to demand and payments from businesses in a piecemeal manner. Ultimately, this drives up costs, delaying and discouraging investment, and restricting local economic and employment growth.

Merri-bek advocates for State Government support to better encourage, incentivise and support the upgrade of local electrical infrastructure to meet the critical needs of businesses, with the aim of supporting businesses investment and employment growth in Merri-bek.



## Social Justice Initiatives

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

State and Federal Government to partner with Merri-bek to protect and promote human rights by ensuring that all people in our community have dignified and equitable access to information, goods, services and life opportunities as a result of good governance and democracy.

Merri-bek is committed to advancing inclusion and social cohesion throughout our community, as outlined in Council's Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 and associated plans.

#### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community**

Council renewed its Statement of Commitment to Australia's First Peoples in 2021 and continues to strongly support processes 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.

The Council Plan 2025–2029 commits to continuing work to preserve First Peoples culture by supporting Elders, empowering younger generations, promoting truth-telling, and recognising culture's foundational role in wellbeing. Council also committed to prioritising First Peoples self-determined solutions that promote culture, connection and community strengthening.

Council continues to host 26 January Mourning Ceremonies, advocating for Australia's National Day of Celebration to be moved to a date that is inclusive of all Australians and supports healing, reconciliation and Treaty.

#### **Mental health**

Significant mental health challenges face the community, with more than one in four adults experiencing anxiety or depression.

Mental health promotion and early intervention is critical to preventing the onset and escalation of common mental health conditions. Merri-bek City Council, in partnership with local service providers, community organisations and regional networks, plays a

key role in delivering place-based responses that support community wellbeing.

This includes a broad suite of initiatives such as family violence prevention, youth engagement programs, Maternal and Child Health services, community development and social connection programs, advisory committees that elevate lived experience, and arts and cultural initiatives that foster belonging and inclusion.

Merri-bek advocates for stronger recognition of local government as a critical partner in mental health promotion and prevention. This includes sustained investment to support community-based initiatives, primary prevention services including improved access to mental health services across Melbourne's north, and enhanced data collection and research capability to better identify emerging needs, service gaps and opportunities for targeted intervention.

### **Family violence prevention**

In 2024-2025 around 1,900 incidents of family violence were recorded in Merri-bek.

Council's 2019 Gender Equality Commitment promotes local actions to address and prevent family violence in the community, including promoting a culture of safety and respect through participation in the annual 16 Days campaign and collaborations with community partners, such as early years, sports and recreation, youth education and culturally diverse communities.

Council supports those at risk of or experiencing family violence through convening the Merri-bek FV Network and joint advocacy for housing, resources, funding and cultural change to create safe spaces for all gender identities and their children to escape violence. Based on feedback from local service providers, Council supports strengthening Victims' Support through further investment in family violence services, with a specific focus on children, young people, and victims-survivors of sexual violence.

### **Raise the Rate**

The 'Raise the Rate for Good' Campaign seeks to reduce poverty and inequality throughout Australia. The key recommendations for the campaign include increasing the base rate of JobSeeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$82 a day so everyone can keep a roof over their head and food on the table. Supplementary payments should be paid to people with disability and illness and single parents that reflect the additional costs they face. Commonwealth Rent Assistance should also be more than doubled to reflect rents paid by people on low incomes. Ongoing indexation of payments should be increased in line with wage movements at least twice per year.

### **Social, affordable and public housing**

In 2025 an estimated 6,873 affordable homes were needed in Merri-bek. There is an urgent need for safe housing options for people who need emergency or transitional housing. Council's Affordable Housing Action Plan (AHAP) aims to increase affordable housing in Merri-bek through policy, advocacy, applied skills and investment.

Council asks Homes Victoria to deliver a minimum of 1,000 new social homes in Merri-bek by 2036. Old and substandard public housing sites in Coburg North, Glenroy and Brunswick West also need to be renewed.

### **People experiencing homelessness**

Homelessness exists in Merri-bek in many forms including in overcrowded, insecure and inappropriate housing and, the most visible form of homelessness, rough sleeping. During the 2021 calendar year, VincentCare recorded 264 people rough sleeping in Merri-bek. This number has likely increased since 2021.

In 2024, Council launched Merri-bek Zero, coordinating local services to improve housing outcomes for rough sleepers and aim for

homelessness to be rare, brief and non-recurring. Council funds an Assertive Outreach program to provide enhanced access to specialist homelessness and other critical support services for rough sleepers. Merri-bek aims to ensure a human rights approach to people in public space and is committed to responding to homelessness in ways that protects people's agency, dignity and safety.

### **Gambling harm prevention reform**

In Merri-bek there are currently 639 poker machines, which took more than \$64 million in losses from our community in 2024-2025.

State Government research found that the financial impact of gambling on Victorians has doubled over the past decade, reaching a total of \$14.1 billion in 2023.<sup>36</sup> Data on annual player losses for 2024–2025 indicates that electronic gambling machines account for the largest share (43 per cent), followed by wagering and online betting on sports and racing (33 per cent).<sup>37</sup> The existing regulatory framework is not adequately addressing the significant social harm experienced by the community. Council urges the Victorian Government to prioritise gambling harm prevention within the State's Gambling Regulations.

Young people in Australia are increasingly exposed to environments in which gambling is normalised, including sport, media and digital platforms – increasing their risk of gambling-related harm.<sup>38</sup> The currently proposed reforms do not adequately address this issue as they allow the industry to retain substantial capacity to promote its products to young audiences. Council calls on the Federal Government to support advocacy efforts led by local governments and other stakeholders for a comprehensive ban on gambling advertising, and to implement all recommendations from the 2023 Parliamentary Committee report, You win some, you lose more.<sup>39</sup>

### **Social cohesion, racism and fair refugee determination processes for all**

Merri-bek has a long history of welcoming migrants from across the globe over successive generations, and has proudly worked to support and advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. Through the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce for Supporting People Seeking Asylum, we have led the 'Back Your Neighbour' Campaign to help ensure the rights and wellbeing of asylum seekers remain on the Federal Government's agenda. The campaign calls for the Federal Government to:

- Provide a pathway to permanency for people with a long-term unresolved immigration status
- Provide people with a valid Bridging Visa and the opportunity to work
- Expand access to health care, income support and essential services so that people can fully participate in society.

Council recognises the harmful impacts of racism and discrimination for individuals and communities, and in undermining social cohesion. Australia's National Anti-Racism Framework (NARF), released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2024, provides a vital 10-year roadmap with 63 recommendations to eliminate racism through coordinated action in law, health, education, and workplaces. Yet, without government endorsement or funding, implementation is stalled.

Action is required amid surging racism, including rising abuse against First Nations Peoples, antisemitic attacks, Islamophobia, anti-Arab/Palestinian incidents, anti-immigration rallies in major Australian cities and rising racism targeting people of Indian heritage. We urge federal and state governments to formally adopt NARF, fund the Taskforce, and lead public sector change for accountability and community-led progress.

## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and Aromantic communities (LGBTIQA+)**

Merri-bek has a large and diverse LGBTIQA+ population. Council is committed to working with our LGBTIQA+ communities through both our Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 and LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026 to amplify the voices and advocate for our LGBTIQA+ population.

Council calls on the Federal and State governments to continue to support LGBTIQA+ programs, strategies and plans, including Safe Schools, Pride in our Future and the National Action Plan for the Health and Wellbeing of LGBTIQA+ People.

Merri-bek is concerned by an increase in violence and discrimination directed at LGBTIQA+ people in public places. We ask State and Federal governments work collaboratively with local LGBTIQA+ organisations, leaders and communities to ensure our communities are safe and free from violence.

Council remains concerned about the increasing barriers facing our transgender and gender diverse population. This has seen a rise in discrimination, violence and vilification directed towards transgender and gender diverse people in health settings, the public domain, employment and education. Merri-bek calls on all levels of government to ensure anti-discrimination legislation equally protects transgender people from vilification and expands the positive duty requirements in appropriate settings. Merri-bek has been disappointed to see a reduction to healthcare for transgender people in other jurisdictions. Council calls on all levels of government to commit to gender affirming healthcare that is accessible and free from discrimination.

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