

Submission to Creative State consultation



Merri-bek
City Council

About Merri-bek

Merri-bek City Council – located between 4 and 14 kilometres north of the Melbourne central business district – is home to 181,223 people. Covering 51 square kilometres and including the suburbs of Brunswick, Brunswick West, Brunswick East, Coburg, Coburg North, Fawkner, Glenroy, Gowanbrae, Hadfield, Oak Park, Pascoe Vale, Pascoe Vale South and part of Fitzroy North, Merri-bek is a wonderfully diverse and vibrant community with a longstanding and proud history of leadership and advocacy on many social justice, environmental and community issues.

Merri-bek's growing population, forecast to reach 234,281 people in 2041, presents many challenges and the municipality, like others, will continue to experience demand for more infrastructure, services and resources to support evolving community needs.

Merri-bek is renowned for its thriving arts sector and creative industries. They attract residents and visitors and play a significant part in Merri-bek's economy, contributing \$935 million to local output, generating \$423 million in the region and supporting 4,340 jobs (10.1%), 10.1%. Over 9,300 residents or 11.4% of our resident base worked in the sector, well above the Melbourne average of 9.7%¹.

Brunswick is home to a significant number of artist studios, artist-run galleries and artist-led initiatives and has a thriving design industry. Brunswick also has the largest population of songwriters in the country, and Coburg has the sixth largest.³ Live music venues are prevalent in the south and centre of the municipality. Coburg North industrial areas are thriving with pockets of artists' studios and event spaces and there is an increasing demand for opportunities for creation and presentation in the North of the municipality.

The Merri-bek community is socio-economically diverse, so while our creative community is thriving in the south, we must also recognise that access to arts and culture is often connected to location and socioeconomic background⁴. Those with lower incomes and reduced access to information are less likely to participate in arts activity. Hadfield/Glenroy/Fawkner 73-84% of suburbs across the nation have more socio-economic advantage. East Brunswick, 87% of suburbs have less socio-economic advantage.²

The Merri-bek community is also young and culturally diverse; 37.1% were born overseas and 29.1% of households use a language other than English. The median age is 35 and close to a third of the population is aged between 25 and 39.³

In 2023 Merri-bek City Council developed a new Arts and Culture Strategy with the vision to make Merri-bek a place where creativity and culture thrive. Our key priorities are:

Creation – a city that champions arts and cultural activity that is self-determined, intersectional, intergenerational, accessible and available across the municipality.

Connection – a city that foster connections between artists, audiences and community.

¹ 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data and NIEIR data.

² [SEIFA by profile area | City of Merri-bek | Community profile \(id.com.au\)](#)

³ 2021 Moreland, Census All persons QuickStats | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)

Investment – a city that invests in the creative community and generates opportunities for artists and the creative sector.

And we are committed to:

- Increasing employment for First Nations artists;
- Increasing arts and cultural programming and creative spaces in the North of the municipality;
- Delivering a refreshed festival program that is flexible, innovative, and more accessible across the municipality;
- Increasing access to spaces and funding for artists and creatives to make, collaborate and present work; and
- Public art to be built into Council capital works, urban design and open space projects.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Increased partnerships between State and Local Governments and an all of government approach to supporting the needs of artists and creative communities.
2. Significant and increased investment in artists, organisations and infrastructure.
3. Creation of a program that can support the provision of affordable living spaces with artists in partnership with local government, for example City of Sydney's creative live and work spaces program.
4. Removal of barriers to gaining grants through accessible application processes and opportunities for some State programs to be delivered through Local Government to better reach communities.
5. Increased funding for artists in schools' programs.
6. Revitalisation of the Brunswick Design District partnership.
7. Development of funded skills development programs that could be delivered in partnership with local government.
8. Increased support and training for organisations to be able to be responsive to change.

Response to Victoria's next Creative State strategy discussion paper

Building on success of previous Creative State strategies

Merri-bek Council believes that one of the key ways to build on the success of previous strategies is to create stronger relationships between State and Local governments. We believe in an all of government approach to supporting our creative industries to grow and thrive into the future. This would lead to a more collaborative approach to funding, and an increased ability for local government to deliver service and infrastructure needs on the ground within municipalities through its established relationships and local sector knowledge. Partnerships between State and Local government would enable the needs of artists and creative communities to be addressed in a more comprehensive and focussed way.

***Recommendation 1:** Increased partnerships between State and Local Governments and an all of government approach to supporting the needs of artists and creative communities.*

Home Grown, World Class

It is essential that significant resourcing is provided to the creative industries to create original, high-quality work that takes risk and captures audiences, locally, nationally and internationally.

Cash grants for development, presentation and touring are key, particularly in the current economic climate. Artists are being forced away from their practice due to the cost of living and presentation and touring costs have soared following COVID.

In addition to grants, it is vital that artists and the creative industries can access affordable making and living spaces. Government should be providing rent subsidies on studios and theatres and ensuring there are affordable living options for artists where they need to work. Access to affordable spaces within our municipality is rapidly declining leaving artists without development and presentation spaces. Support from all levels of government to address access to arts infrastructure is urgently required, ensuring that artists and audiences across the State can easily participate in arts and cultural activity.

Recommendation 2: Significant and increased investment in artists, organisations and infrastructure.

Recommendation 3: Creation of a program that can support the provision of affordable living spaces with artists in partnership with local government, for example City of Sydney's creative live and work spaces program.

A Creative Society for all Victorians

Accessibility in all its forms is essential to ensure social cohesion and intercultural understanding. The creative industries are an essential tool for this social change. Accessibility needs to include disability access, multilingual access, affordability of creative experiences and availability of creative experiences across the State. Accessibility should be a key requirement of State funded creative organisations and programs. Ongoing professional development and resources need to be provided to ensure that this important work can be prioritised.

It is vital to recognise the role that libraries play in the arts and culture sector. No other institution offers the same safe and inclusive public spaces with free and equal, life-changing access to art, ideas, education and social engagement. The Australia Council for the Arts National Arts Participation Survey 2020 found that 'the majority of Australians' are reading for pleasure, and Australians are increasingly connecting through book and literary events. In addition to providing essential and free access to literacy and literature, public libraries support creative expression and arts-making and attendance through workshops, public programs, gallery and theatre spaces, access to equipment and Maker Spaces.

The removal of barriers to gaining grants at all levels of government is also vitally important to ensure the diversity of stories and creators. We would also propose that dissemination of some State grants through local government channels could provide significant benefits to communities across the country as we see and respond to the daily needs of community.

There is also a great need for increased support for arts programs in government schools. This could include larger school arts residency programs, or programs delivered through the curriculum. Many schools in Merri-bek don't have arts programs, and this needs to be urgently addressed to ensure our future generations of artists.

Recommendation 4: Removal of barriers to gaining grants through accessible application processes and opportunities for some State programs to be delivered through Local Government to better reach communities.

Recommendation 5: Increased funding for artists in schools' programs.

Innovative and Thriving Creative Organisations and Businesses

Creative Victoria, RMIT and Merri-bek City Council worked in partnership to create the Brunswick Design District (BDD), a distinct design and creative district in the heart of Brunswick. The aim of BDD is to harness institutional strengths, local, global and industry knowledge; and land, buildings and shared assets, to provide systems and structures that will support a thriving and resilient creative community and economy. BDD aims to connect people and places, strengthen pathways to education and employment, grow jobs and enterprises and link and transform buildings and infrastructure to create shared and affordable spaces for collaboration and creativity. A fantastic example of how State and Local government can work together with other partners, this partnership requires increased commitment and the creation of tangible outcomes to ensure its success.

Merri-bek artists and creative industry workers regularly request professional development in business and market development skills. State and local governments could collaborate on a skill building program

across the creative industries, which could also serve to link businesses within each LGA and across Victoria.

Recommendation 6: Revitalisation of the Brunswick Design District partnership.

Sustainable Creative Careers

As discussed above, access to creative subjects in the State education system needs to be addressed urgently and is the starting point for building sustainable creative careers.

As detailed in recent Creative Australia research, artists and musicians are predominantly unable to create a sustainable career from their creative practice alone. To ensure that artists can continue their practice there needs to be sufficient grants and affordable housing available, which the State government can provide.

Through our presentation of Brunswick Music Festival, we have identified ongoing underrepresentation of women and gender diverse music productions staff. To address this, programs need to be created where they can develop their skills in a safe environment. We were funded by Creative Victoria to run a program that addressed this gap that was very successful, with participants building their confidence and finding future employment within the industry.

Recommendation 7: Development of funded skills development programs that could be delivered in partnership with local government.

Creating in a Changing World

It is important that there is State government support for technological change in the creative industries. Providing seed funding for innovative projects, and support in bringing these to market and local and international stages is vital.

All State funded creative organisations should be required to address their impact on climate change and the impacts of climate change on their work, and resources and training need to be provided to do this work. As an example, at Merri-bek we are trialling zero carbon events and are planning on eliminating diesel generators from our events. We are also redesigning our festival program to ensure that we can present safe events in extreme weather.

With many arts organisations in Victoria in a precarious financial state, it is vital that the State support artists and organisations so that they can respond and thrive through times of unprecedented levels of change.

Recommendation 8: Increased support and training for organisations to be able to be responsive to change.

We look forward to opportunities to work with the State Government to assist on delivering on these priorities and commitments as part of the Creative State Strategy, to support the Merri-bek creative community.