



Merri-bek
City Council

Merri-bek Open Space Strategy

2024/25 Action Plan

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

December 2023



Action Plan Structure

Action Plans are the way the Open Space Strategy's vision, objectives and directions are translated into tangible deliverables.

The actions are categorised according to the direction they most closely align with. The Strategy Directions are:

Direction 1: Providing parks close to home

Direction 2: Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences

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

Direction 4: Open space for everyone

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

In addition, there are actions relating to the enabling functions to support delivery of the Open Space Strategy. A sixth set of actions is included in the Action Plan for **Strategy Enablers**.

Timeframes for Action Plans

Action planning is intended to be a rolling process that recognises that changes to our context will continue to occur. While specific actions are appropriately articulated in the short term, longer-term actions are included in Action Plans to provide a transparent view of intended future projects. As new Action Plans are prepared, these will be reviewed, made more specific, considered in budget cycles as needed and scheduled for delivery.

This Action Plan provides specific actions for the first year (leading up to and including 2024/25) and indicates actions for future years with four-year Action Plans to be developed beyond the first year, lining up with Council Plan cycles. The Actions are divided into the time periods of those cycles, as follows:

2024/25 Actions (these are short term actions)

2025 to 2029 Actions (medium term actions)

2029 to 2033 and Beyond Actions (long term actions)

Under each Direction there are also **Ongoing Actions**. These guide day to day operations and respond to opportunities that emerge. They may involve an action to initiate a new way of working or principle to be considered in decision making, to then become an ongoing function hard-wired into Council's open space management and development work.

Direction 1: Providing parks close to home

This direction is focused on expanding access to open spaces for both residents and workers. It builds upon the successes of the Park Close to Home initiative and leverages the findings from the gaps analysis in the Strategy.

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

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

Furthermore, this direction emphasises the significance of establishing agreements with open space landowners within identified gaps, including schools that often possess underutilised open spaces and sports grounds. It also highlights the importance of continued collaboration with major open space landowners such as Melbourne Water, the GMCT and the Northern Golf Club, to preserve crucial open space nature and habitat while exploring opportunities for increased public access.

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
1.1	Acquire land for open space to create new open space in areas considered to be undersupplied by open space (and particular types of open space)
1.2	Acquire land for open space to expand existing open space where opportunities emerge to expand the size and function of heavily used open space in areas considered to be undersupplied by larger parcels or types of open space
1.3	Continue to invest in, upgrade and enhance our existing open spaces including existing parks, playgrounds, creek corridors, nature play areas, sports grounds and dog parks.
1.4	Create new open spaces, including pocket open spaces and neighbourhood open spaces, within existing Council owned land such as the streetscape / urban realm / repurposing streets and car parking.
1.5	Improve public access to open space owned by schools, through: a) Developing stronger relationships with schools regarding out of hours public access to grounds, and to resolve perceived liability / duty of care, and resourcing issues. b) Developing shared use agreements with schools across Merri-bek to increase use of schools for public open space and explore Council funding open space upgrades.
1.6	Continue to develop relationship with the Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust to increase public access to the Fawkner Memorial Park and the Northern Memorial Park (Glenroy) and explore how we can encourage uses of the Fawkner Cemetery and Glenroy Memorial Park (that aligns with the GMCT uses and vision for these spaces)
1.7	Identify illegal encroachments onto public open space and restore the land for public open space. This may be achieved through negotiation, reinstatement of boundaries and if necessary prosecution. Acceptable occupancies may be formalised through lease arrangements.

Action	Action and description
1.8	As part of reviewing statutory planning applications, Council to consider providing public open space as part of the planning application in lieu (or partially in lieu) of the Public Open Space Contribution as per Clause 53.01 of the Merri-bek Planning Scheme, as part of the subdivision stage, where deemed appropriate; such as where the development adjoins existing public open space, creek corridors or key areas of biodiversity or habitat.
2024/25 Actions	
1.9	Prepare new Playspace Design Guidelines that reflect the Vision, Directions and open space hierarchy within the Open Space Strategy, building upon the principles articulated in Council's <i>Play Strategy 2016 - 2020</i> .
2025 to 2029 Actions	
1.10	Improve public access to open space owned by schools by reviewing the process for developing memoranda of understanding for active and passive activities with schools regarding out of hours public access to grounds, liability/duty of care and what Council can contribute. Develop an operational policy on how and when memoranda of understanding should be used for open space.
1.11	<p>Prepare a Civic Spaces Action Plan for Brunswick, Coburg and Glenroy Activity Centres which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develops key principles and criteria to guide the location of civic spaces in Merri-bek's key activity centres in a place-based way and complementary with the Streets for People approach in Council's Transport Strategy - Identifies locations for new or improved civic spaces to inform future land acquisition and capital works plans - Builds on existing structure plans and streetscape master plans for Brunswick, Coburg and Glenroy

Direction 2: Having a mix of open spaces and open space experiences

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

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
2.1	Increase public art in open space that: a) Acknowledges, celebrates and welcomes our First Nations history, prioritising artwork from Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung artists. b) Acknowledges, celebrates and welcomes our diverse cultures, communities and identities. (This includes continuing to include public artwork in new open spaces and open space projects, as well as new artwork in existing open spaces and boundaries of open space shared with residences and businesses. Artwork could include a mix of commissioned artwork, sculptures, park furniture or equipment with an art element).
2.2	Explore new ways of working with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and First Nations communities to create greater opportunities for mutual decision making and reflect First Nations cultural values and practices in our open spaces. (Examples include decisions around education signage, artwork, indigenous vegetation, namings).
2.3	Explore partnerships and collaborations with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and adjoining Councils to achieve regional open space improvements. (An example includes working with the Cities of Hume, Mitchell and Whittlesea and the Marram Baba Merri Creek regionals parklands).
2.4	Explore how to strengthen Council's relationships with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, recognised as the Traditional Owners and other First Peoples communities (as documented in Council's Statement of Commitment), including preparing for and supporting the future Traditional Owner Treaty negotiation process and how open space can strengthen this.
2.5	Engage with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and First Nations people about ways to promote knowledge of First Nations history and Connect to Country in our open spaces. (Examples include facilitating events in open space and creating neighbourhood cultural education hubs in open space, such as: a) Partnering with tours of open spaces led by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung. b) Hosting Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung events in Merri-bek open spaces and nearby community buildings c) Exploring facilities in open spaces that can facilitate Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung events and activity.)

Action	Action and description
2.6	Explore opportunities to increase activation of open spaces. (Examples include such as frequent activities, one-off activities, yoga, tai chi, music practice and performance, dog training, markets, personal training).
2.7	Explore opportunities to increase collaboration with uses that adjoin open space. (Including adjoining Neighbourhood Houses and Scout Halls, to explore ways to improve open space use and activation).
2024/25 Actions	
2.8	Investigate creating new consistent wayfinding guidelines for open space across Merri-bek. (Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using 'Wayfound Victoria' guidelines to increase consistency with other municipalities and organisations - Locations such as along the Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek trails - Distances by foot and by bike and nearby communities facilities such as public amenities.
2.9	In order to encourage nature play (independent of designed playgrounds) in open space, write a bush kinder guide for Merri-bek which includes program registration, site selection notes and opportunity to address risk management.
2025 to 2029 Actions	
2.10	Explore opportunities for encouraging and promoting nature play (independent of designed playgrounds) in open space. (Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Trial designated nature play at selected open spaces across Merri-bek. b) Provide support for families through facilitated nature play sessions at these designated sites. c) Work with bush kinder programs to further foster environmental stewardship behaviours through activities such as planting days or litter clean-ups with groups).

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

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

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
3.1	As opportunities arise, acquire land to create a vegetated buffer of a minimum 30 metres wide measured from the edge of the embankment on each side of the creek corridor along Merri Creek, Moonee Ponds Creek, and Edgars Creek (where possible). A minimum of 50 metres wide from the creek edge on each side should be sought to create a public open space corridor.
3.2	Explore opportunities to increase biodiversity, cooling, greening, habitat and nature across Merri-bek's open space network, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Continuing to increase canopy cover and vegetation in our open spaces b) Increasing the diversity and structural complexity of indigenous and native vegetation (including all open space, not only along creek corridors) c) Improve vegetation biodiversity value through new techniques (i.e. direct seeding) and better vegetation management programs (i.e. strategic mowing to reduce weed seed production and increasing pollinator plants) d) Land acquisitions / land purchase (as per Action 3.1 above) to increase landscape connectivity and create wider corridors. e) Properties within the Public Acquisition Overlay).
3.3	Review existing planning controls on private land along waterways and adjoining or opposite open space and the need for new or amended planning controls to preserve open space values such as biodiversity values and access to sunlight.
3.4	Continue to enhance protection of Council open space through the statutory planning process, including protection of our open space biodiversity, public access and enjoyment. For example, from private development that may increase overshadowing of public open space, reduce public access to open space, adversely impact adjoining habitat or nature through artificial lighting or noise, etc.
3.5	Continue to implement the Westbreen Creek conservation development plan and improve its connection as a linear open space to the Moonee Pond Creek corridor.
3.6	Continue to implement the Merlynston and Melville Creek conservation plans, including working proactively with Melbourne Water and the GMCT.
3.7	Undertake audits for the open space network from a climate risk perspective in accordance with the audit program and take or seek funding for corrective actions identified in accordance with risk.

Action	Action and description
3.8	Continue creating a positive relationship with the Northern Golf Club to preserve and enhance nature and biodiversity on the site.
3.9	Explore land acquisition or public use of significant strategic open space sites should they become available for purchase.
3.10	Continue to progress the Chain of Ponds plan along the Moonee Ponds Creek corridor and tributaries such as Westbreen Creek, with the Chain of Ponds collaboration
3.11	Continue to advocate to Melbourne Water to undertake bed and bank habitat restoration works along Merri-bek's waterways, including the removal and / or modification of concrete lining.
2024/25 Actions	
3.12	Develop a new Merri-bek Nature Plan Action Plan to commence in 2025
3.13	Update municipal-wide biodiversity mapping and the Merri-bek Indigenous Land Assessment mapping to establish current priorities for ecological habitat connections across the municipality so we can better assess property acquisitions from a biodiversity perspective and give directions to existing projects.
3.14	Consider the role of 'dark parks' in the preparation of Technical Notes for Public Lighting, drawing on guidance from the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water's 'National Light Pollution Guidelines for Wildlife' (2023).
3.15	Develop a program of audits for the open space network from a climate risk perspective so that open space with the highest climate vulnerability is audited and corrective actions identified at least once every four years.
2025 to 2029 Actions	
3.16	Develop guidelines to be considered in design of open space projects that assist with consideration of best practice stormwater management, biodiversity sensitive design, incorporation of biodiverse plant palettes, canopy increase, improved soil health, passive and active irrigation for cooling, and other ways to ameliorate the impact of the urban heat island effect.
3.17	Identify pilot locations for 'dark parks' and, with appropriate accompanying public education, undertake up to three pilots of 'dark parks' and evaluate their success.
3.18	Develop guidelines for irrigation of open spaces that considers the watering needs of vegetation and cooling effects of water in the landscape and different future drought scenarios, low rainfall scenarios and possible water restriction, aligning these with programs including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Merri-bek Integrated Water Management Strategy and our existing and future stormwater harvesting systems and active and passive recreational needs. - The Merri-bek Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2020 - Sports allocations within open spaces
3.19	Explore the economic valuation of our open spaces and the benefits they provide to Merri-bek, to assist with open space advocacy and to improve understanding of the value of biodiversity, nature, soil health, cooling, waterway ecology, canopy, sport, health and wellbeing.

Direction 4: Open space for everyone

This direction is designed to enhance the accessibility of our open spaces and the broader open space network to a more diverse range of individuals and enable all persons who live, work or visit Merri-bek. This encompasses persons with disabilities, women, teenagers, dog owners, those who are uncomfortable around dogs, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and people of all generations.

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

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
4.1	Identify opportunities to improve public passive surveillance in existing open space. This may include exploring ways to alter fencing shared with private properties adjoining open space, installing low-level foot lighting at appropriate locations, alter existing boundary fencing to improve views from the private to the public realm.
4.2	Explore opportunities for establishing additional community gardens across Merri-bek's open space. This may include: a) Establishment of an indigenous growing space / garden b) Development of the market gardens as proposed in the Fawcner Merri Parklands plan. c) Exploration of locating additional community gardens near other facilities such as public transport routes, existing community facilities (libraries, childcare centres, maternal and child health centres, Neighbourhood Houses), etc. d) Exploration of locations across Merri-bek to create multiple new community gardens e) Supporting the community to establish food trees in Open Space. f) Planting edible plants in open space and community gardens to help improve food security.
4.3	Explore opportunities for additional facilities in open spaces for ageing persons. This may include exercise equipment, walking loops and types of park furniture.
4.4	Install additional open space seating and furniture across Merri-bek which offers varied types of open space furniture to meet diverse open space needs. This may include seating with backs, seating in circles or grouped facing each other, platforms for lounging.
4.5	Continue to engage with our diverse community (including girls, gender diverse persons, teenagers and young adults, our culturally and linguistically diverse communities) about specific open space needs and barriers to using open space and investigate opportunities to better meet these needs and address these barriers.
4.6	Investigate opportunities for leasing arrangements for community facilities in open space to include additional requirements regarding access and custodianship of surrounding areas when leases are renegotiated.

Action	Action and description
4.7	<p>Create a public education campaign and undertake actions to promote harmonious sharing of open spaces, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Audit existing signage about dogs in open space. (This includes at sports fields, playgrounds, shared user paths and civic forecourts). b) Identify particular open spaces or signs that have signage that needs to be updated to make the intent clearer or more consistent. c) Create a template for new signage to be rolled out across the municipality. This is to include consistent images, languages and rules, to ensure signage about dogs in open space is consistent and clearly understood. d) Explore other opportunities for improving sharing of open spaces.
4.8	<p>Periodically continue to promote responsible dog ownership in line with Council's Domestic Animal Management Plan, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Educating the community (dog owners and sports clubs) about open space and the shared nature of it. b) Educating on the importance and benefits of dog registration (funds go towards dog facilities, help Council plan facilities, etc) c) Promoting the Local Laws and rules about dogs and why the rules exist (e.g. no dogs within 15m of a playgrounds). d) Educating and promotional campaign about picking up and appropriately disposing of dog waste. e) Promoting existing dog parks and facilities. f) Promoting puppy schools and dog behaviour schools.
2024/25 Actions	
4.9	Identify a suitable location, design and construct and develop a premier destination All Access Abilities playground in Merri-bek.
4.10	Audit Coburg Lake Reserve (our premier open space) and identify opportunities to apply Universal Design principles.
4.11	Create a Merri-bek accessibility charter and Merri-bek Universal Design guidelines to apply to open space projects and include the design aspects into the new Playspace Design Guidelines being prepared. Create Open Space Design Guidelines to support staff in designing public places that are disability and age friendly and accessible to all. This may involve discussions with organisations such as Amaze, Pay Australia and Dementia Australia.
4.12	Identify open space locations which are suitable to have a 'Changing Places' facility and include in the Projects List.
4.13	Investigate opportunities to improve compliance with legislative requirements regarding dogs in open space.
4.14	Undertake a risk assessment of sports grounds where open space users are concerned about stray balls and sports equipment to identify high risk sites that warrant treatment such as new signage, access arrangements, fencing or netting and include them in the Projects List.

Action	Action and description
4.15	Include in the Playspace Design Guidelines consideration of opportunities for shade within playgrounds when they are renewed and upgraded, including natural and mechanical shade.
4.16	Investigate opportunities for lighting sports grounds at night-time in the evenings (when training is not on) to allow open spaces to be illuminated for open space users and build guidance for this into the forthcoming Technical Note for Public Lighting
2025 to 2029 Actions	
4.17	Develop a Merri-bek Open space map and website, promoting Merri-bek's diverse open space experiences to increase open space use, activation and knowledge. This may include: a) Information about dogs in open space / dogs in general, including how to register your dog, why to register you dog, where to walk and take them, nearby puppy schools and vets, and maps on on-leash and off-leash facilities. b) Training and game times for premier sports grounds so dog owners know when the shared sports grounds are free or in use.
4.18	Review Disability Parking provision in or adjoining open spaces to determine whether there are sufficient spaces and whether the spaces meet current disability parking design standards.
4.19	Undertake an audit of the Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek corridors and identify improvements for physical access (from a physical access and safety perspective).
4.20	Investigate need and opportunity for open space infrastructure for dogs, including dog parks, agility equipment and dog beaches and include in the Projects List.

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

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

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
5.1	Undertake land acquisitions to improve connections between the street network / existing open space / open space linear trails.
5.2	Undertake land acquisition to improve access to the Moonee Ponds Creek corridor, the Merri Creek, Edgars Creek, Westbreen Creek and Merlynston Creek, to enable access to these open space corridors and shared user paths and walking and cycling connections.
5.3	As part of park upgrades, explore the need for and feasibility of creating additional access points so people walking and riding can access without needing to dismount or walk through car parks from as many directions as possible
5.4	Enhance linear and linking open spaces via land acquisition, land swaps, shared use agreements with private or public landowners. For example, the Melville Main drain.
5.5	Collaborate with the Victorian Government and other agencies to ensure open space outcomes reflect the Open Space Strategy and its Vision and goal. (For example, the Brunswick Level Crossing Removal project).
2024/25 Actions	
5.6	Adapt the Healthy Streets approach to assessing street health as articulated in the Transport Strategy to through routes within open space to help identify priorities for increasing natural shade along shared user paths, bicycle paths and walking paths and key pedestrian routes in line with the Urban Heat Island Effect Action Plan and the Urban Forest Strategy.
2025 to 2029 Actions	
5.7	Identify opportunities to improve pedestrian and cycle links between the Moonee Ponds Creek corridor and nearby open spaces, to improve access to this regional open space corridor and determine their priority within the capital program for active transport.
5.8	Identify opportunities to improve pedestrian and cycle links between Merri Creek and nearby local, regional and district open spaces, to improve access to this regional open space corridor and determine their priority within the capital program for active transport.
5.9	Implement tree planting and other vegetation along priority through routes in open space.

Enabling Actions

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

- The development and maintenance of a long-term listing of capital projects for open space
- Actions to support securing and setting aside funding for open space projects
- Actions supporting the regulation of land use and development relevant to protecting and enhancing open space
- Actions leading to decision-making support with respect to open space management, allocation, prioritisation and investment

Action	Action and description
Ongoing Actions	
6.1	Maintain the 20 year Project List, modifying it as strategic context and constraints change, and ensure Council's 5-year Capital Works Program is updated annually to represent the most accurate possible listing of near term capital investments to be designed and delivered for open space and its use.
6.2	Constantly scan opportunities for land purchase that meet the objectives of the Open Space Strategy, where gaps have been identified in provision of open space and certain types of open space and open space experiences.
2024/25 Actions	
6.3	Ahead of reviewing the Public Open Space Contribution and the Planning Scheme Amendment process, review and update the population forecasts from the current projections (2021-2041). This will extend forecasts to 2044/2045 to provide a 20-year population forecast and ensure forecasts made before and during the COVID era are consistent with the latest information.
6.4	Pursue translation of the new Open Space Strategy into the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.
6.5	Pursue a review of the Private Open Space Contributions within the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.
6.6	Research the emerging Build to Rent market and the impact this will have on open space in Merri-bek, the Public Open Space Levy within the Merri-bek Planning Scheme (and PRRLF) and create recommendations for actions
6.7	Advocate for 'build to rent' development projects to make a Public Open Space contribution or equivalent open space land contribution.
6.8	Building on the principles in the Open Space Strategy, develop a decision-making framework to guide the steps for making decisions about open space priorities and practices.
6.9	Explore changes to open space maintenance (including need for future business cases) to ensure Council meets the requirements of the Merri-bek Community Vision and the Open Space Strategy Vision.
6.10	Prepare the 2025 to 2029 Action Plan
2025 to 2029 Actions	
6.11	Complete translation of the new Open Space Strategy into the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.

Action	Action and description
6.12	Complete the review of the Private Open Space Contributions within the Merri-bek Planning Scheme.
6.13	Develop and implement an open space asset management plan to guide the future maintenance, management and renewal of open space and open space assets.
6.14	Review population data that informs the Strategy when the 2026 Census data is released to identify any significant changes and adapt decisions about priorities accordingly.
6.15	Prepare the 2029 to 2033 Action Plan
2029 to 2033 and Beyond Actions	
6.16	Review population data that informs the Strategy when 2031 and 2036 Census data is released to identify any significant changes and adapt decisions about priorities accordingly.
6.17	Commence a review of the Open Space Strategy and develop future Action Plans