

SPACE TO BREATHE

Insights to guide a new Yarra Ranges Open Space Strategy

2026



Acknowledgment of Country



Yarra Ranges Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nation peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands and waterways. We pay our respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging, who have been, and always will be, integral to the story of our region. We proudly share custodianship to care for Country together.

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Introduction

Everyone loves a walk through a beautiful park, to lay out a picnic rug and laze the afternoon with friends or family, to kick around a ball or to play with your favourite team, or to quietly sit and watch the birdlife fly amongst the branches of a natural treed landscape setting.

However we rarely stop and consider the planning and care taken to make sure there is enough open space to do these activities, whether the space is the right size for its location, that there is a variety in the types of open space so we can choose what we want to do, or whether these open spaces are close enough to be accessible and part of our daily lives.

An Open Space Strategy provides the evidence and basis for planning and delivering these open space needs for community in an equitable way.

Yarra Ranges Council is in the process of preparing a new Open Space Strategy that will reflect the current and future community needs, and this Insights Paper has been prepared to provide the background, community insights and emerging research findings to inform the drafting of this updated Strategy.

What is public open space?

Public open space is land that is dedicated for community use as public parklands, recreation and leisure. It is typically land held in public ownership by either a Council or State Government for public use.

This may be land set aside but not yet developed, land that is zoned Public Park and Recreation Zone (PPRZ) or Public Conservation and Resource Zone (PCRZ) in the Yarra Ranges Planning Scheme, or land that has a specific reservation on its Certificate of Title. It could also be land that is being used and developed as open space but is yet to be zoned appropriately. It typically includes land that has a primary purpose for public open space, but may have other uses or activities within its footprint.

Open space can have a range of functions, including:

- Social recreation (such as playspaces and picnic areas)
- Conservation and protection of natural environments
- Walking and cycling
- Sports fields and reserves.

In Yarra Ranges, public open space includes:

- Land owned or managed by Council, including some State or Commonwealth land under Council's care.
- Land managed by other government bodies, such as Parks Victoria (examples include state and national parks).
- Land owned by agencies for service and utility purposes.

What is ‘encumbered space’?

Open space is ideally, but not always, free from restrictions to enable community to make the most of the space. However sometimes there are encumbrances, or things that limit its use.

These can be things like easements for utilities like gas, water, sewer, drainage, powerlines or other services. These can include wide buffer zones if they present a hazard, and may limit the types of activity that can be carried out or the level of planting and development possible.

Sometimes the open space may include land that serves another main purpose – such as drainage, water storage or flood retarding. These will prevent the whole footprint from being walked on but still offer attractive spaces that can be walked around or used for recreation.

These open spaces that can’t be fully used are referred to as ‘encumbered’ public open space.

Councils may decide in their Open Space Strategy and planning scheme to define what counts as encumbered open space. This may also include land with flooding risks, landslips, steep slopes (greater than 1:3), waterways, sensitive areas or land for conservation of plants and heritage, contaminated land, rooftops, basements, or shared property managed by an owners’ corporation.

Even if the land is not primarily designed for open space, it may still offer value to the community.

While there is a role for, and value in, encumbered or restricted open space, it remains of greater importance to protect, optimise and grow the network of accessible unencumbered open space¹.

Why do we need public open space?

Public open space is vital to liveability – for people, animals, plants and other beings and systems such as waterways, soils and skies. For Yarra Ranges, it has a wide range of value.

Physical activity

In 2023, 61 per cent of adults in Yarra Ranges did not get enough exercise each week². The community has consistently told us that open space is important for staying active and healthy. Public open space gives people places to walk, run, ride, play, and be outside. Of those that do participate in activity, informal and non-sport activities remain the dominant type (over 70%)³.

¹ [Open Space for Everyone, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Accessed September 2025](#)

² [Health and Wellbeing Profile, Yarra Ranges Council, Accessed September 2025](#)

³ [AusPlay A new picture of how Australians get active, Australian Sports Commission, Accessed September 2025](#)

There is also an overlooked aspect of open space – a child's right to play. The "right to play" is a child's fundamental right to engage in play, recreation and rest, as recognized in [Article 31](#) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁴. This right is crucial for a child's holistic development, fostering cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and promoting overall well-being.

Through careful design and provision, the whole Yarra Ranges community can participate and experience the full range of benefits through their preferred mode of activity.

Biodiversity and environment

Open space plays a vital role in supporting plants and animals. It protects and grows ecosystems, provides habitat corridors, and can help pollinators and insects thrive. These spaces also improve air and water quality. In urban areas, open space that has the right size, shape, and tree canopy can lower ambient temperatures and reduce the urban heat island effect while purifying stormwater runoff and enriching soils. The plantings and trees act as carbon storage and well managed spaces improve protection of ecologically sensitive areas from pest species.

Social connection

Open space helps people connect with others and build community. It provides places to meet, celebrate, and participate in civic life. Whether in urban or rural and peri-urban areas, open space is often the main place where residents gather and form connections, helping reduce social isolation, fostering improved mental health and increasing social cohesion. In Yarra Ranges, open space also supports community during emergencies by offering a place of safety, shelter and support, including for animals. It becomes a central hub to access services and essentials, while also connecting with others who have a shared experience. Feeling connected to local places and each other helps resilience and recovery from shocks⁵.

Health and wellbeing

Mental health is a priority issue in Yarra Ranges and open space can play a key role in supporting and improving mental health. The physical and mental health benefits of open space and connection to nature are now well documented, offering physical and mental restoration, stress reduction and improved mental health. Parks offer space to relax, safe options for exercise and healthy microclimate – which all increase overall wellbeing. There are strong benefits from preserving or restoring aspects of Country that connect community to the broader Indigenous story of the municipality while fostering local Indigenous community to nurture and participate in cultural practices.

Culture and history

Public open space provides living and enduring examples of our history. It provides opportunities to practice culture, connect more deeply to Country, and showcase history through storytelling, education and artefacts. It also provides a living history of landscapes as

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

⁵ [2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan, Australian Government. Accessed September 2025](#)

they appeared decades, centuries and even millennia ago.

Open space in Yarra Ranges is on Wurundjeri, Taungurung and Bunurong Country, and their long history of care for Country offers unique knowledge for a continuing caring for open space by all community. The Indigenous ways of Knowing, Being and Doing transform our relationship to open space from being one of utility and control, to becoming one of harmony and belonging.

Our parks can also tell local histories of our towns. They tell the story of immigrant European settlement and other nationalities, and the activities and industries that supported the new societies that were establishing, including the use of open space in the running of events, festivals and gatherings. Many elements of these activities, including gardens, structures and markers, can still be found throughout Council's open space network.

Neighbourhood character

Public open space and landscapes shape the look and feel of our townships. They influence and enhance neighbourhood character, public realm and community pride. Some open spaces are renowned for their unique character and offer immersive experiences that community are willing to travel for. From the rich biodiversity and forests of Sherbrooke and Badger Creek to the ornate gardens of Mount Dandenong and majestic views in Warburton and Kalorama. There are quiet creek-side spaces in Lilydale and bustling sporting precincts in Kilsyth. Each open space is set within a unique landscape setting with differing plants, trees and wildlife, and often create opportunities for scenic and distinct views not available in other areas.

Economy

Open space supports the Yarra Ranges economy by attracting visitors. Many destination spaces introduce opportunities for secondary spends, and complementary activities through local business and multi-experience visits. Construction and maintenance activities also bring economic benefits, through creation of jobs and buying materials. Open space also supports a wellbeing economy, by improving health and the environment.

What happens if there isn't enough?

To realise these benefits, open space in Yarra Ranges must be sufficient in quantity and quality. Without this, it can lead to long-term social, environmental, and financial challenges.

Inadequate open space means our community have less places to be active, may suffer reduced mental health and experience fewer opportunities for social connection. Insufficient access to open space also risks widening inequities, especially in areas with population growth and housing development.

Without timely investment, the cost of buying and improving open space can escalate as land values increase, placing greater pressure on Council budgets. Inadequate space provision can lead to overcrowding in the spaces that are available, and result in wear and tear of surfaces such as paths and grassed areas as well as structures and equipment. This becomes more of a risk as population continues to grow, especially around major activity centres.

Historically many sporting fields were dominated by male-focused sports. As our community embraces gender equity and inclusion, the demand for sporting fields and change facilities has significantly increased. Female participation in Yarra Ranges has increased by 10 per cent across all sports and clubs in the past five years alone and we have the highest female participation rates for Australian Rules Football in the outer east.

Adapting our open space and increasing these service provisions is fundamental to an inclusive community, including improved change rooms and support infrastructure as well as training space, however this also has higher spatial demands and comes at a financial cost that is challenging for Council to fund.

Yarra Ranges is also vulnerable to the decisions of other tiers of government given its reliance on public lands not owned or controlled by Council – such as state-managed parks and waterways. Additionally, a lack of open space will limit Council's efforts to protect and improve biodiversity, which is vital for environmental health and climate resilience.

The Open Space Strategy will provide a roadmap to ensure open space meets the needs of Yarra Ranges, now and into the future.

What is Council's role in public open space?

One of the many services that Council provides is recreation and open space. In 2020, Council owned or managed around 755 hectares of open space – equal to about 47 square metres per person. Local government authorities have legislative and statutory powers to collect contributions from private development that can be used towards creating and improving public open space (refer to *Issues and Opportunities* for further discussion).

As a public land manager, Council is responsible for ensuring that public open space is planned, developed and maintained in a way that meets the municipality's needs. A contemporary open space strategy is a critical instrument to understand and meet this need.

What is an Open Space Strategy?

A municipal Open Space Strategy sets out a clear vision and principles for open space. It outlines what open space Council will provide, the different types of open space needed for community, its size and where it should be located, and to what standard it will be developed. It identifies how much open space Council has, how much it needs, and tools and actions to close any gaps.

An open space strategy can be included in the Planning Scheme as an Incorporated or Reference Document. As an adopted position of Council it may also be considered by Council in planning capital improvements and service levels, as well as by Planning Panels and Tribunals in their deliberations and decision making.

Background

Yarra Ranges Council is developing an Open Space Strategy for the next decade to guide how we can provide and manage open space in an accessible and equitable way. This will replace Council's existing Recreation and Open Space Strategy (ROSS) which expired in

2023. In anticipation of the end of the ROSS, work commenced prior to the pandemic to develop a new Open Space Strategy, and then work resumed again in 2024.

This report provides a summary and analysis of what the community has said so far, and commentary on emerging themes.

Issues and Opportunities

Key issues and opportunities have emerged that reflect community priorities and research and will shape the draft Open Space Strategy.

Growing communities, shrinking backyards: planning open space for a higher density future

As of 2025, the population of Yarra Ranges is estimated at 162,271 and is projected to grow by 13 per cent to reach 184,223 by 2046. In early 2025 the Victorian Government set a target for 2.24 million new homes across Melbourne and regional cities over the next 30 years, with Yarra Ranges expected to accommodate 25,000 new homes by 2051.

To meet this target, more apartments and townhouses will need to be built in key areas like Lilydale, Chirnside Park, and Mooroolbark. This may be accompanied by an increase in Small Second Dwellings across other parts of the municipality, especially the urban areas.

This level of residential growth will require corresponding community infrastructure. Higher density results in smaller backyards or balconies for private open space, meaning community will rely more on public parks, paths, and trails. This requires enhancement of the quantity and quality of open space.

The Open Space Strategy will be drafted to align with these housing objectives of State targets and Council's Housing Strategy.

Council is already being proactive in responding to this increased need, having purchased parcels of land for new public open space at 13 Green Street in Healesville and 150 Cambridge Road in Kilsyth.

Green Street is located in the core of the Healesville activity centre where higher density shop top housing is already being delivered, offering an important civic space for this changing population.

The old school site at 150 Cambridge Road responds to increased housing and population in Kilsyth – it will provide a District-level space with a variety of social recreation offerings and natural landscape outcomes. This has been a timely purchase with Victorian Government's recent easing of planning for Small Second Dwellings within these suburban settings, likely to result in a dispersed increase in population across Kilsyth.

Yarra Ranges has a diverse and evolving population across a mix of contexts including the Hills, Valley, Upper Yarra and Urban areas. The demographic trend is towards a higher number of older people with about 17.2 per cent of residents now aged 65 and over. There is also an emerging youth with 30.6 per cent of community aged from 0 to 24² who will progress to young adult and families over the coming decade. In addition, families are becoming smaller requiring a different housing model and lifestyle needs. Most people live in family households (76.7%), and many give back to the community – 15.5 per cent volunteer, a hallmark of sporting groups and open space events, and 14.7 per cent provide unpaid care to someone with a disability or health issue².

While historically Yarra Ranges has had low cultural diversity there has been a gradual increase in cultural groups forming such as the Chin community around Kilsyth and transient migrant seasonal worker populations in Green Wedge areas.

Importantly for open space, Yarra Ranges has the largest concentration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne, accounting for around 35 per cent of the region's total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The hub of the region's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is in Badger Creek, Healesville, which represents 2.1 per cent of the population within the catchment area. This is higher than the proportion of the Greater Melbourne area population of 1.0 per cent, according to the 2021 Census.⁶ The value of open space and protected landscapes has a critical function in fostering and promoting Indigenous culture.

These above demographics patterns affect a change in how people use, value and rely on parks. This requires a more contemporary approach to how we plan for open space. It is important to plan open spaces that are easy to get to, easy to use, and easy to stay at. For example, an older person using a mobility scooter may enjoy travelling to visit different parks, however they need safe paths to travel, manageable distances and supporting infrastructure such as shelter and charging facilities along the way.

As well as direct demand for open space from population growth and change, demand is also rising from other sources. This includes increased use of open space by sporting clubs and schools, requesting access to sporting reserves.

A more complex emerging pressure is from community groups simply seeking developable land to place their activities. These typically include 'maker spaces', workshops or halls, who don't use the actual open space as part of their operations. While these uses could be located in a wide range of contexts, such as industrial areas, publicly owned open space can be incorrectly perceived as simply vacant developable land instead of valuing it for its open space characteristics. This presents risks of unrelated infrastructure encroaching into and eroding available open space and introduces potential conflicts arising from amenity impacts and limited access to the wider community.

Our community has a broad array of needs for open space which requires variety and flexible options. This means having space for active sport and recreation as well as for relaxing, socialising, informal and community activities.

The COVID pandemic changed people's perceptions, valuing and relationship with open space. Constrained by lockdowns, people began discovering hidden gems in their own area and started to become more engaged with picnics, walks with friends and family outings. Nationally, neighbourhoods near green spaces thrived, however urban fringe areas did not fare as well⁴. Longer distances between parks and larger private blocks of land led to a different level of dependency on shared open space.

Open space can help people connect with others and spaces themselves, which is vital in a community-minded place like Yarra Ranges.

⁶ [Yarra Ranges Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2024-2026](#)

The new Open Space Strategy will look at whether there is enough open space to support population changes. It will also check whether the current standards support equitable and flexible use.

Is there enough, and is it good enough? Rethinking open space provision

There are three main considerations when assessing the adequacy of open space provision:

Area:

- Is there enough land allocated as open space in the municipality? This might be assessed as a square metre per person allocation, to determine if the total amount is adequate.
- Is the size of the individual park sufficient?

Catchment and hierarchy:

- Catchment is the distance one can be expected to travel to reach open space. This can be measured as an actual street and path analysis, or by radial mapping of distance from each open space. The catchment analysis assesses if there are gaps in accessibility.
- Hierarchy is a service level assessment, assessing whether there is sufficient variety of open spaces to meet the various needs of community (for example, local parks that have less equipment and are used for shorter stays, as well as larger parks that have more features and encourage longer stays). Hierarchy is linked to catchment – suburban communities can expect to access local-level parks within walking distance, whereas people may need to travel further to get to higher order parks.

Mix:

- Does the open space meet the requirements to accommodate different functions and activities (i.e. some for conservation, some for social gathering and others for sports).

Urban and Rural Provisions:

- A fourth consideration falls outside of current industry guidance, namely what is the service level within rural and peri-urban areas and how is it assessed when standard catchment analysis becomes redundant in the context of the long travel distances to rural areas and low population densities result in a uniform 'per capita' provision becoming inappropriate.

The above evaluation aspects are explored in more detail as follows:

1. Area

Based on current service levels Yarra Ranges is offering around 47m² per person. However, Council's Housing Strategy and recent State Government planning reforms have indicated there is forecast to be significant population growth, especially within the urban areas.

There is not currently a national or state-accepted target for how much open space should be provided. Meanwhile, there have been some contradictory findings in the experiences of other councils trying to establish how to calculate a contemporary allocation of open space per person, in lieu of a state-accepted target.

The State has published a Guide for Open Space Strategies, to replace the 2015 Practice Note for preparing Open Space Strategies. This complements the existing Open Space for Everyone metropolitan Melbourne open space strategy. However these documents do not offer any guidance on setting a target for open space provision. When other councils have attempted to apply open space targets in Planning Scheme Amendments, they have encountered difficulties stemming from the lack of guidance and accepted targets.

Plan for Victoria contains an action to develop minimum open space standards for established urban areas. Until the standards are developed and approved, this lack of consistency and absence of clear guidance from the State will be a risk for a future Open Space Strategy-related Planning Scheme Amendments in Yarra Ranges. Further discussion of this is outlined in the *Investing in open space* section of this report. Council officers will continue to seek guidance and support from the State as the Strategy is developed.

In terms of individual reserve size, there are some key criteria that must be met to be functional.

Local-level parks should typically be a minimum of one hectare, to provide adequate functionality. The ability of open space to provide cooling of urban heat island effects is also dependent on their size, shape, and distance from other open spaces⁷ – simply providing the open space does not guarantee its ability to provide cooling (such as a park that is too small, lacks landscaping or an irregularly-shaped park).

Not meeting key size criteria can also result in an open space being less fit-for-purpose. For example, the dimensions of the oval at Lilydale Recreation Reserve are below AFL Victoria's preferred facility standards. Its narrow size and dimensions mean it is unable to accommodate higher tiers of competition, with no scope to widen due to site constraints. Hence minimum dimensions are needed on specific types of open space to ensure they can accommodate the desired activities.

2. Catchment and hierarchy

In Yarra Ranges, the current standard set by the ROSS requires that each social recreation open space serves a specific catchment area as follows:

- Local: in urban areas, provide within 400-500m of every household, without having to cross a major barrier.
- District: provide one in each precinct (loosely based on Profile i.d. Small Areas, however the current ROSS differs in the mapping of these).
- Regional: provide in each activity centre.

Empirical analysis of Yarra Ranges that maps the catchment for each open space in the hierarchy has revealed there are gaps in the amount and quality of public open space in Yarra Ranges. This is seen in findings such as:

- Open spaces that are too small for their role in the hierarchy.
- Open spaces that are too far away and/or cannot be readily accessed by community (even in urban areas).

⁷ Utilising green and bluespace to mitigate urban heat island intensity, Gunawardena, Wells and Kershaw, 2017. Space to Breathe – Insights to Guide a new Yarra Ranges Open Space Strategy

- Open space that is not developed according to the appropriate level of service.
- Open space that is heavily constrained or encumbered limiting how community can use it.
- The size and overall available open space being insufficient to meet future population numbers.
- Legacy of built form in reserves that is unrelated to the land's primary purpose as open space or its functions, occupying valuable sections of park and limiting more appropriate functions.

A look at other councils and the State Government's draft Guide for Open Space Strategies shows that Council's current service levels differ from these industry standards and need review.

For example, the distance people are expected to travel to reach different kinds of open space may no longer meet current standards. Council's current standard is to only provide one District-level social recreation park for each precinct in urban areas (with Chirnside Park and Mooroolbark defined as a single precinct). This is compared to neighbouring councils that provide District-level parks every one to two kilometres for equivalent suburbs. These service levels were set in the previous ROSS and may need to be updated. However our open spaces, no matter their type or features, still provide value and important benefits.

These findings are being more rigorously tested through a detailed open space assessment, commissioned as part of the Strategy development. It will map our existing open space and explore if there is enough, and whether it offers variety, accessibility, and quality – for current and future communities. The draft Strategy will also set service levels for different types of open space.

3. Mix

As part of the mapping exercise currently underway, there will also be an assessment of the different types of open space that are available for community.

The range of spaces is categorised in the ROSS as follows:

- Conservation reserves
- Sport
- Social recreation
- Trails.

These spaces are provided in different sizes and catchments, forming the 'mix' of a municipality's open space offering.

The State recently consulted on updating their Guidelines for Open Space from State, with the draft indicating their intent to consider (but possibly not implement all of) the following as categories:

- Coastal foreshore
- Community gathering/assembly
- Conservation
- Cultural values
- Emergency management

- Linking
- Recreation/social
- Sports and structured recreation
- Waterways.

There are some variances between the above classifications and Council's previous categories, and this can lead to confusion as to whether Public Open Space Funds can be used on particular projects.

Council continue to partner with State Government to contribute to the development of open space guidance, and review the application of this guidance to the new Open Space Strategy.

4. Urban and Rural provisions

In Yarra Ranges there is an added complexity: the level of service within the urban areas – where the population is larger, growing and housing is denser – is higher than in areas outside the Melbourne Metropolitan Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). In the rural and peri-urban areas housing is generally dispersed across large distances, there are extensive State and National Parks nearby, and many residents typically have significant private open space within their own property.

The reliance on public open space for community is higher within the metro areas, while typical measures of walkability and allocation of footprint per person do not translate to rural areas where there is low population density. While there are some corridors of trails for active transport options these only service a narrow catchment, whereas outside of these corridors most roads are rural design without footpaths.

Large sections of the rural and peri-urban areas are set within steep topography, such as the hamlets of Mount Dandenong. While there are some well-developed open space reserves, others are heavily challenged by poor accessibility and limited usability. Creating additional open space, or improving existing reserves, is difficult and more expensive than in low lying flat areas.

Many open space reserves in the rural areas also serve a critical emergency function, either as Relief Centres or Neighbourhood Safer Places. These have spatial and functional needs that are different to urban areas, and require a more customised design approach.

Industry standards have typically been focused only on metropolitan Melbourne, and hence an extra set of measures is needed for communities outside the Urban Growth Boundary.

The Strategy will need to consider establishing a separate set of measures that suit the different needs of rural and peri-urban communities, while making sure open space is provided in a way that is fair and meets the needs of each area.

Open space without barriers

Everyone should be able to use and enjoy public open space. To achieve this, spaces must be accessible, safe, and fairly allocated. While anyone can face barriers, they are often greater for people based on their Aboriginality, age, gender identity, disability, ethnicity, race,

religion, sexual orientation, refugee or asylum seeker background, or socio-economic level.

Recent research, including work by Monash University's XYXLab, shows that many people – especially women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ communities – feel unsafe in public spaces⁸. Council's own surveys and community discussions support these findings.

In addition, local and State spending on recreation and open space in Yarra Ranges has mostly supported infrastructure for activities that have high participation by men and boys, particularly specific sports. While female participation is increasing rapidly in sports like soccer, AFL and cricket, other sports like mountain biking and BMX remain highly male dominated. This has been validated by Council's own consultations on key projects where high school girls identified they would be unlikely to use the new bike infrastructure that was in development. Council has also undertaken programming initiatives to encourage more women and girls into activities traditionally dominated by men and boys.

There is also an imbalance when expenditure on open space is separated into the gender participation of the projects being delivered. This analysis showed significantly greater expenditure on male-dominated activities. There is a need for reprioritising of funding allocation within open spaces to achieve a greater equity and gender balance. This shift also requires a much more innovative, considered and progressive approach to the design of open space to ensure it appeals across the genders.

The new Strategy will use contemporary standards to make open space safe, welcoming, and inclusive for everyone. It will aim to create spaces that maximise opportunities for all.

Climate change and open space: planning for risk, relief and resilience

There are a range of implications for the open space network arising from climate change, such as:

- Open space can help grow Yarra Ranges' tree canopy cover to meet the Victorian Government's goal of 30 per cent coverage across metropolitan Melbourne. This goal is outlined in Plan for Victoria 2025, and the Planning Policy Framework in planning schemes. It is also reinforced by higher targets set in Council's Tree Canopy Strategy.
- There is a growing reliance on open space to provide relief and cooling from urban heat.
- Consideration of suitable plant species, and any fire and storm risk to private properties from public land planting.
- Use of some open spaces as locations for emergency evacuation and relief.
- Natural and constructed strategies to support plants' longevity.
- How climate change is expected to alter future open spaces in terms of their use, planning, and maintenance.

Public open space is vulnerable to numerous climate risks, including but not limited to:

⁸ [Yourground, Monash University's XYX Lab and Crowdspot. Accessed September 2025](#)

CLIMATE RISK	OPEN SPACE EXAMPLE
Bushfire	- Increased risk and intensity of bushfires in open space. - Changing attitudes to natural assets due to increased threat of fire, flood and storms.
Storms, flooding and landslip	- Storm damage to trees and structures. - Inundation of open space through increased intensity of rainfall. - Landslip within open space arising from higher peak water events. - Reduced reliability of rainfall creating reduced flows and possible algal blooms.
Extreme temperatures	- Impacts on maintenance (i.e. shortened window for burn off; planting and returfing unsuccessful due to unseasonal temperatures). - Changing usage patterns (i.e. more usage at night due to heat; subsequent increased requests for lighting of parks). - Higher watering needs during warmer seasons
Drought	- Lack of rainfall and ensuing vegetation loss. - Water restrictions limiting Council's ability to irrigate open space. - Ground hardness preventing percolation of rainwater into soils and creating player safety issues for sports fields. - Existing trees not adapted to the changing weather conditions and failing/dying.
Interaction disruption	- Loss of biodiversity, resulting from exposure to conditions not previously encountered (i.e. prolonged heat). - Change to distribution of vegetation and wildlife species due to environmental conditions.

The draft Open Space Strategy will take a closer look at these risks and recommend strategies to help the open space network be resilient and adaptable to these risks.

Preserving what makes Yarra Ranges Unique

Open spaces in Yarra Ranges, including those owned by Council, feature biodiversity of State and National importance. Open space plays a key role in protecting and improving biodiversity. This is a critical task given identified climate risks, and is more complex due to Council's limited control of some of these spaces. Other challenges include habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, disease and biosecurity.

In the 2024 community check in, people highlighted the need to protect biodiversity and connect with nature. The Open Space Strategy can support increased Indigenous and native vegetation, restoring Country, and managing pests. It can also help Council to respond to community feedback, by working with partners and community groups to improve biodiversity in public open space.

Some open spaces have high conservation value but face pressure to support other uses. These uses may not align with the site's primary purpose of protecting biodiversity. By providing enough open space and the right mix for different activities, Council can protect sensitive areas from being overused or overdeveloped.

Restoring Country: embedding Traditional Knowledge and healing in open space

Open space is a focal point to heal and restore Country. This can be done through a range of activities – many of which have been successfully implemented by Council, such as the Firesticks program and Narrap Rangers. In line with Council's Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2024-2026, and as awareness of Indigenous ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing grows, our open space in Yarra Ranges can be enriched through embedding traditional ecological knowledge and cultural practices. This is reinforced by national policy, that recommends embedding traditional ecological knowledge when making decisions and managing natural resources⁴.

Open space in Yarra Ranges can apply First Nations knowledge in traditional and new ways. Inclusion of education around storytelling, songlines, language, naming, art, planting and cultural values will increase engagement and connection to Country by all open space users, and support a greater sense of belonging and inclusion for Indigenous and traditional owners. Careful plant selection and spatial layouts can offer local, accessible spaces to practice culture, avoiding the need to travel to places that are far away or where access is restricted. Indigenous participation in the early design stages can lay the foundations for applying Indigenous land management practices into the long-term maintenance of open space. This can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of maintenance activities and creates a unique employment avenue ongoing. The Open Space Strategy will explore a broad spectrum of Indigenous land management practices, and options to diversify and scale existing practices.

People and landscapes are deeply linked, and open spaces can help us experience this by engaging our senses and immersing ourselves within the broader context of Country through view lines, plantings and path networks. Through this we can better appreciate, care for, and be part of restoring Country.

The new Open Space Strategy will seek to strengthen our connection with Country, recognising that we are not separate from Country – we are all a part of it.

From runoff to resilience: how open space can support an integrated approach to water

Whilst climate change presents water management challenges, public open space can also support Council to apply an integrated approach to managing water. This includes but is not limited to:

- Protection of waterways.
- Reducing potable water use.
- Enhanced stormwater management measures (such as Water Sensitive Urban Design), to slow down and treat water.
- Use of alternative water sources, such as recycled water and treated stormwater.

The new Open Space Strategy will explore how open space can help manage water better and support a healthier, more climate-resilient environment.

Shared land, shared challenges, shared opportunities

Yarra Ranges is home to many state and nationally-significant parks. These are typically owned and controlled by other public land managers, such as Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water. They contribute substantially to the biodiversity and character of the region. Council also has agreements with other public land managers to access public space, such as the Department of Energy, Environment, and Climate Action, and the Department of Education, while some sections of land are managed through a local Committee of Management.

Given limitations in the amount of open space owned or managed by Council, other public lands will continue to provide open space benefits. However, this is also associated with several challenges:

- State Government cost shifting, both formally (by agreement) and informally (Council maintaining unkept lands to preserve public safety and amenity).
- Restricted access.
- Insufficient funding and resourcing.
- State Government policy and direction changes.
- Additional layer of decision making and delays.
- Tension between different functions of public land, such as biodiversity, cultural heritage, and recreation.

One of the biggest shifts in community views between the 2019 and 2024 consultations was the increased value placed on creeks and waterways by the community. In 2024, they were ranked the third most valued open space feature. They are relied upon heavily by the community for their open space and leisure needs (for example, recreational trails).

However, these spaces also come with challenges. Council often does not own or control riparian areas. There is also confusion about who is responsible for maintenance and upgrades – whether its State agencies, Council, or volunteer groups. In some cases, regulations imposed by authorities limit what can be done.

Similar challenges apply to other types of public land not managed by Council. These areas offer many benefits – however, the Strategy must consider Council's ability to manage and fund land and assets it does not own or control.

Public open space is core infrastructure, and its importance is recognised by all levels of government. However changes in government funding and policies can also affect planning, improvement and maintenance of open space, including in Yarra Ranges. To date, State planning for open space has been focused on metropolitan Melbourne. However, national and state governments are working with local councils to consider clearer and more consistent guidance for open space⁹.

Resourcing of planning and management of open space at a State level is anticipated to be reduced in line with broader cuts to the sector. This may mean fewer services to support open space initiatives and partnership opportunities. Planning and funding for open space

⁹ [National Urban Policy 2024, Australian Government. Accessed September 2025](#)

needs to be shared across all levels of government, with clear roles and collaboration⁸. Recognition is needed from all levels of government that green and blue spaces – like parks, wetlands and waterways – are valuable assets⁴. A clear method is also needed to measure the performance and benefits of these spaces⁴, including the costs of providing and looking after these spaces, so they can be adequately planned and funded⁴.

Investing in open space: fair and future-ready funding (Public Open Space Fund)

Yarra Ranges Council funds open space projects through several sources, including Council rates, external grants and Public Open Space Contributions.

The Public Open Space Contributions levy (POSC) is a critical mechanism that helps land managers (such as councils) ensure a sufficient quantity and quality of open space for the communities they serve.

The *Subdivision Act 1988* gives councils the power to collect contributions towards open space from developers when land is subdivided. Under the *Subdivision Act 1988*, Councils can levy POSC up to five per cent (5%) of the land value, or incorporate specific contribution rates in their planning scheme. Council currently uses both processes. Contributions may be in the form of land and/or cash.

Public Open Space Contributions, and any proceeds from the disposal of public open space, are held in Council's Public Open Space Fund. Historically these funds have been partitioned and distributed by Ward. These funds have limitations on their use. Council can use POSC to:

- Buy new land for parks or recreation
- Improve existing open space
- Add facilities, like playgrounds or seating (but not use it for regular maintenance)
- In some instances, support planning and design work when it relates directly to open space.

Whilst POSC is Council's biggest opportunity to generate income towards the expansion and improvement of public open space, it has limits. It may assist with increasing supply and quality of open space, however the long term maintenance of the space cannot be funded by POSC and hence can lead to an accumulating cost burden on Council operational budgets. The new Open Space Strategy will consider how Council can achieve sustainable improvement of the network.

There is also some ambiguity around whether the use of the POSF can extend to buildings such as pavilions or for trails that are linear corridors of movement but have a recreation function. Historically neither of these elements have been considered appropriate use of POSF and would significantly deplete or even exhaust fund reserves if they were included in the fund allocations.

The POSC levy only applies when land is subdivided, so it does not cover increased demand from other types of development (such as 'build-to-rent' development or Small Second Dwellings) or natural population growth. POSC income is directly correlated with the pace of

housing development, which can vary and is dependent on market conditions.

Prior to the *Subdivision Act 1988*, public open space contributions in Victoria were governed by older legislation, such as the *Local Government Act 1958* and the *Building Control Act 1981*. These laws allowed councils to require contributions, either through land dedication or cash payment, but they were replaced by the current framework under the *Subdivision Act 1988* and the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. The current POSC provisions were established in 1988 in the Subdivision Act, with the levy being applied on the next subdivision after the introduction of the Act. However, it can only be applied to a parcel once. There is now a new wave of intensification of housing development occurring, which in some circumstances is unable to attract a commensurate levy to support the higher population needs. This is anticipated to eventually lead to inadequate funds to meet the new population needs.

Setting or changing POSC rates in the Planning Scheme requires approval from a Planning Panel and the Minister for Planning. Recent Planning Panel decisions have accepted different ways to calculate and justify these rates. This creates some uncertainty for councils when deciding how to set their own rates.

For example, Monash City Council's Planning Scheme Amendment C148 sought to vary their POSC rate. Their proposed rate was based on, amongst other things, an open space target to provide 30 square metres of open space per person. However the Amendment was not supported by the Planning Panel. At the time, the Panel identified issues with the justification for the 30 square metre per person requirement, the application of a blanket rate to the whole municipality, and a lack of information regarding Monash City Council's implementation plan.

However Baw Baw Shire Council, in seeking the same service level of 30 square metres per person, were recently supported by the Planning Panel hearing C151 who considered this approach had been strategically justified. Baw Baw Shire Council, in its Planning Scheme Amendment, proposed different rates for main towns versus the rest of the municipality. They also considered the quantity, proximity and quality of open space across the municipality, and supplied an implementation plan.

The timing of the new Yarra Ranges Open Space Strategy gives Council a chance to learn from others that have successfully changed their POSC rates. This may increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. It may also help Council meet the rising cost of providing suitable open space for our community.

The State Government has also announced a review of the developer contributions system, including POSC. This may address some of the issues, however details of timelines for the review are unclear. It is also uncertain whether updated guidance will apply to peri-urban and rural councils. It is vital that Council supports advocacy efforts – such as those led by the Municipal Association of Victoria – for fair and effective reform.

Council's current practice of allocating POSC by Ward has led to funding gaps in some areas and can result in an uneven distribution of improvement projects. The draft Open Space Strategy provides a chance to review this approach and seek contemporary advice regarding legislative and statutory requirements governing POSC. It will also assess Council's public open space network, provide a costed implementation plan, and determine whether the

current rate of POSC will meet this implementation cost.

The cost of buying land and improving public open space is rapidly increasing. This makes it harder to provide the open space our changing communities need with the funding available.

The outcomes of the new Strategy will ensure Council is receiving the best possible contribution rate, that meets the growing demand for open space and considers equity across the municipality.

Other funding avenues outside of the Public Open Space Fund and discretionary capital should also continue to be considered, including:

- Rolling programs
- Partnerships with government or private sector
- Grants
- Borrowings
- Sponsors
- Philanthropy
- Appropriate fees, charges and rental income
- Asset-based community development initiatives.

There is a clear need for reform to infrastructure funding, with projects often unaffordable for local government⁴. Advocacy to State and Federal Government is needed to ensure support for councils to meet the rising costs of land acquisition and construction for necessary community infrastructure, including public open space.

What have we heard so far?

Council asked the community about open space in 2019, and again in 2024, to help plan the new Open Space Strategy.

Community Consultation 2019

In late 2019, Council began gathering early feedback on how open space is used and how it could be improved. We received feedback from the local community, industry leaders, and recreation, sport, health and environmental groups. Council advisory groups, Councillors, and Council staff were also engaged. Methods included surveys, listening posts, community meetings, and interviews.

This feedback was added to earlier research, to provide an understanding of open space issues and needs.

Community Consultation 2024

In 2024, Council re-engaged with the community to understand if their views and use of open space had changed since the 2019 consultation and pandemic, where open space took on a greater significance for community. We used pop up events, surveys and advisory group meetings to ask for feedback.

Findings

A summary of the community survey findings is below. For a more detailed overview, refer to the Preliminary Community Engagement Report on the [Shaping Yarra Ranges](#) website.

- The most popular ways people used open space stayed mostly the same between 2019 and 2024. The top activities were
 - ‘going for a walk or run’,
 - ‘sitting and relaxing’,
 - ‘meeting up with friends’, and
 - ‘walking/exercising dogs’.
- In both consultations, going for a walk or run was the highest-ranked answer.
- The use of open space for social and informal recreation was roughly twice as common than organised sport and training. This may signal a stronger recognition of the health and wellbeing benefits that open space can provide.
- In the 2024 check-in, creeks and waterways, and biodiversity increased in their priority and were seen as highly valuable. They ranked third and fifth among the top values for open space, demonstrating an increased value that community is placing on environmental outcomes in open space.

- The community also indicated in 2024 that open spaces were too small, or too far away for them to access. This may reflect an increased appreciation and use since the pandemic's reliance on open space for leisure and connection to nature. It signals that community will look to Council to ensure the ongoing provision of convenient, accessible and walkable public open space.
- In 2024, there was a strong focus on improving facilities, and making open space fair and easy for everyone to access and use. This highlights an increasing community expectation regarding the quality, presentation and safety of open space, as well as equity in open space provision and development. The community also wanted to see more Traditional Owner artwork, stories and language included in parks and open space.