



**Yarra
Ranges
Council**



**RECONCILIATION
ACTION PLAN**

INNOVATE

Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan

August 2024 – August 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

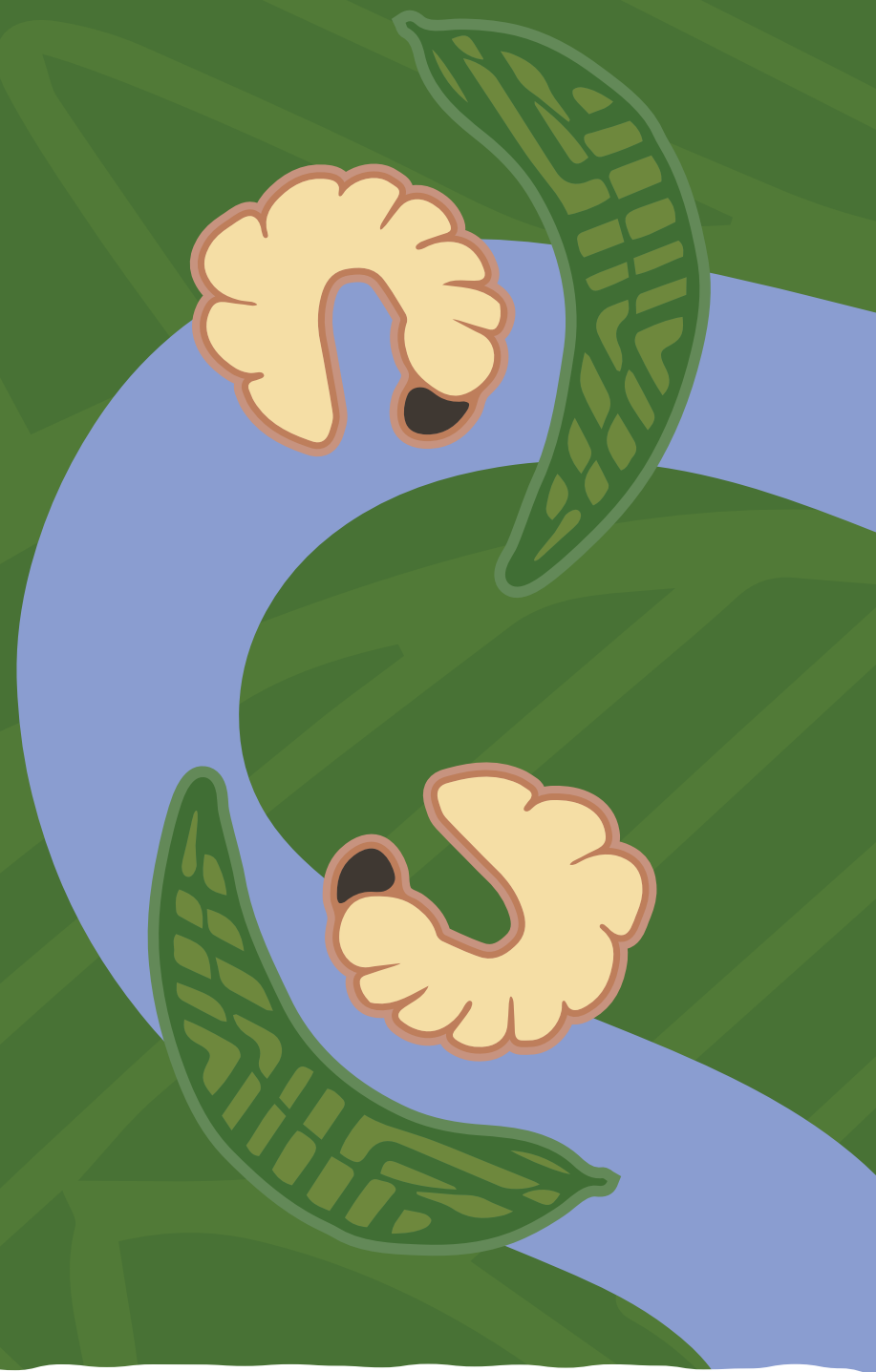
Yarra Ranges Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nation peoples and as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Yarra Ranges and pay tribute to their unbroken connection and stewardship to the lands and waterways of the Municipality. We wish to acknowledge their resilience, courage, grace and generosity in the face of extreme adversity.

It's a privilege for us to be placing our footprints on top of those made by thousands of generations of Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations peoples and to understand the deep love they have for Country and deep love Country has for them.

It is this relationship with Country that we need to get back to if we're going to meet the challenges that lay in front of us regarding changing climate and its impact on the natural world. Aboriginal knowledge systems, Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, have much to offer in this space.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and heritage are the cultures, histories and heritage of all Australians, of all of us, it informs our identity, personally, regionally and nationally as we all live on Traditional lands. This realisation is critical for us to move forward as one Country; walking side by side together as one story, the story of who we all are.

We pay respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging, who have been, and always will be, integral to the story of these lands. We thank the Wurundjeri, other Kulin Nations people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from across Australia for the legacy of love and care for this land. We hope we can do them justice, that we do our best to also love and care for this land that we've been blessed with. We believe this is the great gift Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples offer to all Australians.



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Message from the Mayor

It is with great pleasure that I present this Yarra Ranges Council's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). This is our third RAP and builds on the work achieved through our previous RAP's, while recognising there is more to do on the path to reconciliation.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan reinforces Council's on-going commitment in acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and its 60,000 plus year history is part of the story of all Australians. Our aspiration for our community is one where we all embrace a shared responsibility, one that captures the principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing.

This Reconciliation Action Plan strengthens the acknowledgment of these rich cultures and histories and reflects how together, we all have a role to play in Reconciliation.

As a Council, Yarra Ranges was the first in Australia to formally apologise to the Stolen Generations in 1997 and we remain deeply committed to continuing to grow the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, embrace the rich cultures and strengthen reconciliation amongst all in our community. In this document you'll see the ways that we as Council hope to lead in this space, to role model these principles, use truth-telling and accountability, collaborate and guide our staff and community towards Reconciliation.

You'll read the story of Waa, the history of what's happened on Yarra Ranges soil going back more than 100 years, and the path we've followed for decades as a Council.

I hope that reading the case studies and successes of how this work is already happening, and seeing our goals for 2025 inspires you to learn more, to ask questions and to get involved so we can get there as a community.

I acknowledge and thank all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have walked, cared for and loved this Country for thousands of generations for the generosity and the privilege that we all have - to care and love this Country, together, for the thousands of generations that are yet to come.

We understand that history shapes our identities, engages us, creates inclusive communities and ultimately is the foundation of our future generations.

To Elders who have come before us, to the Elders present and emerging; to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee, and everyone who has compiled this action plan – thank you.

Cr Sophie Todorov
Mayor of Yarra Ranges



Message from our CEO

Hello, and welcome to our Reconciliation Action Plan.

At Yarra Ranges Council, we are the largest employer in our municipality and help govern an area with a spectacular natural environment and diverse communities across 55 towns and 2500 square kilometres.

This area has an immense history and cultures woven through thousands of years – a story that continues to this day, as we all grow and change, as our communities shift and as we pass the baton to new generations who will one day do the same.

The story of our region is built on the foundations of countless generations of custodianship and care of First Nations people, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

This Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) continues to pave the way and help us to recognise and address the gaps that still exist – in attitudes, in policies and systems that overtly or inadvertently disadvantage First Nations people.

It is intentional in bringing the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into the decision making and considers their voices and lived experiences, to ensure we are a culturally safe organisation that helps people to flourish.

It does this by outlining specific, measurable actions based on key pillars – Relationships, Respect, Opportunities and Governance.

Our entire organisation will have parts to play – in observing, listening, learning and putting into practice actions that will make our community, and our workplace, the best place it can be for everyone.

The foundations of this action plan are the concepts of Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, and truth-telling. Simply put, integrating and balancing notions of Country, spirituality, language, ceremony and protocol in our day-to-day lives, so it becomes a natural way of being.

Truth telling, meanwhile, is simply acknowledging the history of colonisation, which had significant impact on this region, particularly at Coranderrk. By recognising the past, including its injustices and wrongs, it helps us to genuinely commit to Reconciliation for our communities.

Of course, this document simply couldn't exist if not for the advice, insight and guidance of our Indigenous Advisory Committee. I'd like to thank them for their crucial work in developing this plan, helping us commit to Reconciliation in a way that will be meaningful, effective and measurable.

I strongly encourage you to read on through this document. To read the story of Waa, the history of our region, what work has been done and what we still hope to achieve in the next two years.

The short timeframe means we'll be able to report on our progress, prioritise our next steps and never lose sight of our goal – a Yarra Ranges that utilises Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing to be the best it can be.

We'll be asking all of our staff – and the wider community – to help us get there, and I hope you'll lend a hand.

Tammi Rose,
Yarra Ranges CEO



Message from Reconciliation Australia

First Innovate RAP

Reconciliation Australia commends Yarra Ranges Shire Council on the formal endorsement of its inaugural Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

Commencing an Innovate RAP is a crucial and rewarding period in an organisation's reconciliation journey. It is a time to build strong foundations and relationships, ensuring sustainable, thoughtful, and impactful RAP outcomes into the future.

Since 2006, RAPs have provided a framework for organisations to leverage their structures and diverse spheres of influence to support the national reconciliation movement.

This Innovate RAP is both an opportunity and an invitation for Yarra Ranges Shire Council to expand its understanding of its core strengths and deepen its relationship with its community, staff, and stakeholders.

By investigating and understanding the integral role it plays across its sphere of influence, Yarra Ranges Shire Council will create dynamic reconciliation outcomes, supported by and aligned with its business objectives.

An Innovate RAP is the time to strengthen and develop the connections that form the lifeblood of all RAP commitments. The RAP program's framework of relationships, respect, and opportunities emphasises not only the importance of fostering consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, but also empowering and enabling staff to contribute to this process, as well.

With close to 3 million people now either working or studying in an organisation with a RAP, the program's potential for impact is greater than ever. Yarra Ranges Shire Council is part of a strong network of more than 3,000 corporate, government, and not-for-profit organisations that have taken goodwill and intention, and transformed it into action.

Implementing an Innovate RAP signals Yarra Ranges Shire Council readiness to develop and strengthen relationships, engage staff and stakeholders in reconciliation, and pilot innovative strategies to ensure effective outcomes.

Getting these steps right will ensure the sustainability of future RAPs and reconciliation initiatives, and provide meaningful impact toward Australia's reconciliation journey.

Congratulations Yarra Ranges Shire Council on your Innovate RAP and I look forward to following your ongoing reconciliation journey.

Karen Mundine
Chief Executive Officer
Reconciliation Australia





The Story of Waa – The Crow

The Yarra Ranges Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan draws heavily on the story of Waa and frames our commitment to Reconciliation through local Cultural Lore. The story of Waa, whose feathers were burnt black to remind him of his responsibility and accountability to Country, enables us to reflect on our own accountability and responsibility to the communities of Yarra Ranges.

It reminds us of our commitment to understanding cultures deeply, and to ensure the actions outlined in this plan achieve meaningful long-term outcomes. The story of Waa also speaks to the origin of Cultural Burning or Firesticks that achieved a natural equilibrium unmatched as a model of environmental sustainability as Aboriginal people meticulously cared for Country over thousands of generations.

Appearing as a crow, Waa protected Wurundjeri. He was also cunning, intelligent, and a cheeky trickster.

He had smelt the lovely cooking smells coming from the camp of the seven Karatgurk sisters and decided to investigate. He was fascinated to see their use of fire to cook food and bring warmth and light after the sun had gone down. When he asked the sisters, they pretended to not know what he was talking about. So, Waa worked out a plan, so he could get some hot coals, which were on the tops of the sisters digging sticks.

Snakes were carefully placed by Waa inside a hollowed-out ant mound. He offered the mound to the sisters, telling them it contained delicious ant larvae. When the women happily started to break the mound apart with their digging sticks, they disturbed the snakes, and a big commotion broke out. In the mayhem, they threw their digging sticks down and Waa quickly scooped up some glowing coals. The sisters recovered but were later swept up into the sky to form the constellation most know as Pleiades in the sky.

Being new to the ways of Wiiiñ or fire, Waa didn't understand it and its ability to transform what it touched. It wasn't long before Waa became blackened. Bundjil saw this happening and stepped in to stop the fire getting out of control. Bundjil knew that fire could be devastating but also a useful tool for humans. So, he carefully taught Wurundjeri to be skilful fire stick practitioners.

Wurundjeri learnt the ways of nurturing Biik (country) with fire, reading the signs within the soil, the plants, the winds, the seasonal signs, to bring right Biik and right fire together. Wurundjeri learnt the right way to work with fire and it became an important way of creating the conditions where Biik was healthy and vibrant, regenerating with new life with each cycle of wisely applied fire. With this stewardship of cool, cultural burning, Wurundjeri gained another important way of upholding the lore's of Bundjil. Biik flourished under this care, and it enabled all parts of the Circle of Life to also flourish.

Fire is a tool of Wurundjeri that allows growth, health, balance, and life to ripple and echo through our many understandings of all that exists.

With its origins from the Dreamtime, Cultural Burning is underpinned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and concepts of Country that evolved over thousands of generations. The sophisticated and elegant application of cultural fire on the landscape is based on a deep, intimate understanding of the oneness of the natural world that enables all things to survive and thrive.

This ancient wisdom regarding man's inherent role in maintaining the health and balance of the natural world is providing an elegant and effective pathway for our natural environment to heal and improve community health and safety based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing and is a key Yarra Ranges project in partnership with Wurundjeri Traditional Owners and the Firesticks Alliance Aboriginal Corporation.

(Story of Waa courtesy of Senior Wurundjeri Elder, Auntie Doreen Garvey Wandin)



The Artwork



Diamond symbology

– a Wurundjeri signifier or trademark. Not a lot occurs with this diamond shape in nature, except for our beautiful southern cross in the night sky. It is a symbol that represents our ancestors as the oldest astronomers who dared to dream for a better future, just as we do through our work on the RAP.



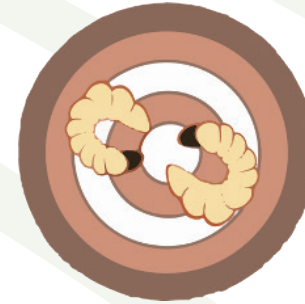
Footprints

– our next steps, a literal representation of the journeys that we are all on through this process.



Wurun leaf

– connection to Wurundjeri Country



The grubs

– representative of food and feast which brings togetherness, any culture can come together over food, the circle represents meeting places.



Birrarung (Yarra River)

– our main body of water giving life to Country, ever flowing, ever present, a reminder that we are country and country is us.

The Artist

Ash Firebrace is an Aboriginal artist who lives and works on Wurundjeri Country. Ash has captured the great Wurundjeri totem spirit Waa the Crow in this stunning artwork whose feathers were burnt black to remind him of his responsibility and accountability to Country



Introduction

Welcome the Yarra Ranges Reconciliation Innovate Action Plan (RAP). Yarra Ranges has a long-standing commitment to reconciliation, our hope is that this plan reaffirms our commitment and narrates the story of the land and the incredible people who have contributed to the Yarra Ranges Reconciliation journey.

The foundation of the RAP is based on the advice and guidance of the Yarra Ranges Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC), who strongly encouraged this plan to:

- Fall under the umbrella of Reconciliation Australia's RAP requirements,
- Integrate the concept of Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing and;
- Include a strong truth-telling theme.

By positioning the RAP under the umbrella of Reconciliation Australia, it ensures the RAP sits alongside a national standard of development and accountability. The Innovate RAP ensures there are tangible initiatives under four areas of focus, relationships, respect, opportunities, and governance.

The concept of Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing is a framework recommended by the Yarra Ranges ATSIAC to promote culture and Reconciliation for a number of years. Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing acknowledges how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary society integrate cultures with an urban way of life and lens through which the world is perceived. This includes the essential notion of Country. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways demonstrates our commitment to work together, using a strong cultural lens to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Truth-telling's primary purpose is for the healing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It also provides an opportunity to share the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, heritage, cultures and reconciliation in the Yarra Ranges over time. It also provides an opportunity to share our story and reflect on the deep relationships, commitment and the incredible contribution by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal peoples to Council's reconciliation journey.

The actions outlined in the Action Plan are a mixture of mandatory actions as required by Reconciliation Australia and actions that have arisen through workshops, audits and discussions across the organisation providing a roadmap in the Yarra Ranges and moves us closer to achieving our vision for reconciliation.



Yarra Ranges - Wurundjeri, Taungurung and Bunnerong Country

The Yarra Ranges is located on the eastern fringe of metropolitan Melbourne and is predominantly the ancestral lands of the Wurundjeri peoples, where the Creator spirit Bunjil (the Wedge Tailed Eagle) watches over and guides the local community.

For at least 60,000 years, the Wurundjeri have inhabited the lands that lie within the inner city of Melbourne, extending north to the Great Dividing Ranges, east to Mt Baw Baw, and south to Lysterfield and Belgrave South.

Following a Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council decision on 1 July 2021, a small area of Bunnerong Country was also included in the far south of the municipality. This joins two areas of Taungurung Country in the remote, inaccessible and heavily forested north-eastern region of the municipality.

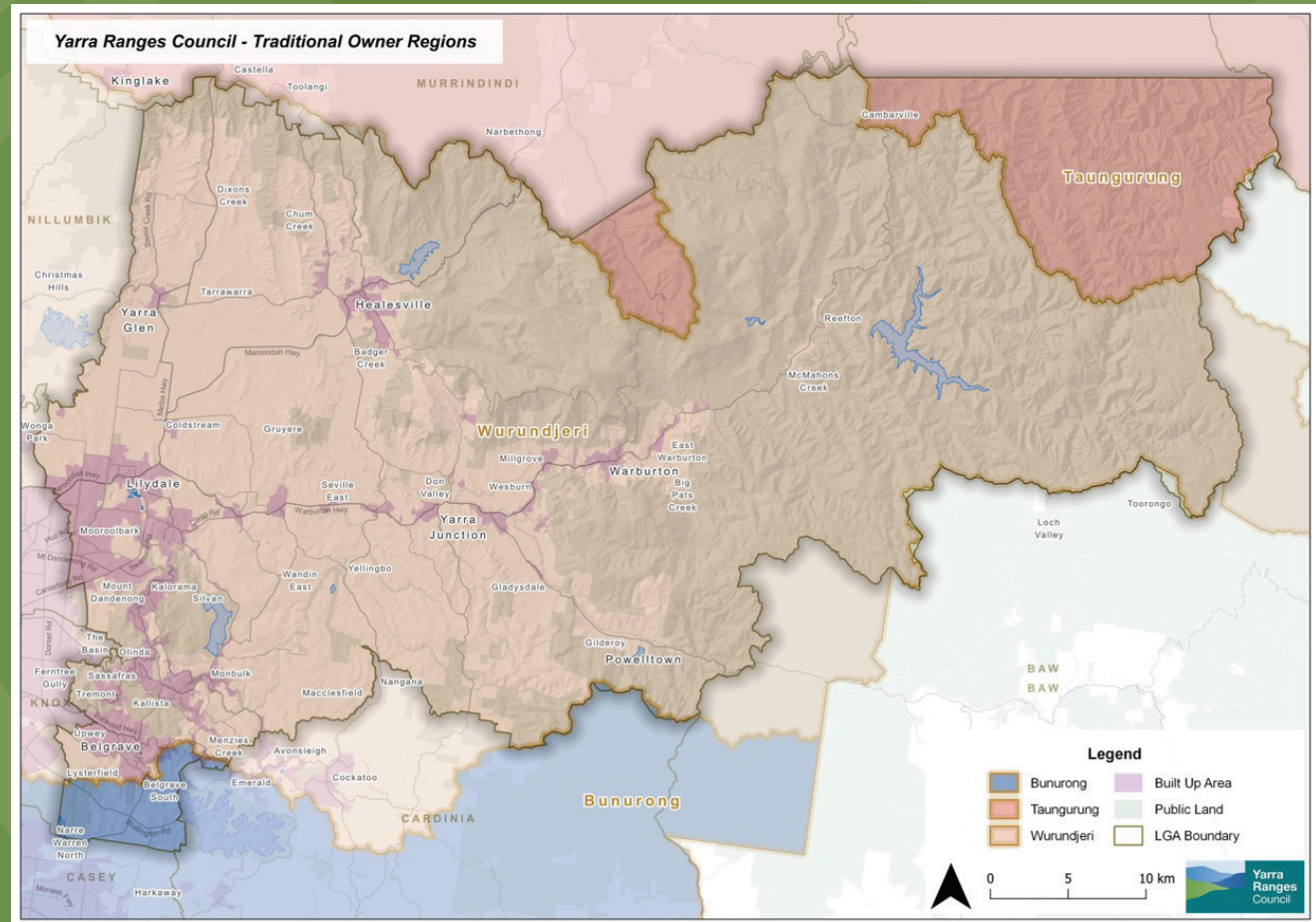


Figure 1

Figure 1

Around 70 per cent of our population lives in urban areas, representing approximately 3 per cent of the Yarra Ranges land mass. The local agricultural industry thrives on an area of 730 km² of rural land while approximately 55 per cent of Yarra Ranges is Crown land and National Parks.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2021, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was 1,713 or 1.1 per cent of our total population, however, the ABS acknowledges the true figure is likely higher.

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.

Today, the Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is diverse, comprising Traditional Owners and family groups whose traditional lands are located elsewhere. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the community are unaware of their traditional lands as a result of historical government policies.

Although not a definitive list, Indigenous peoples represented in Yarra Ranges include:

Taungurung, Goulburn River region, Victoria.
Gunai Kurnai, Gippsland, Victoria
Monero Yuin, far-east Gippsland/southern New South Wales
Yorta Yorta, central North Victoria
Kamilaroi, North Central New South Wales
Walpiri, Central Australia
Wuthathi, eastern Cape York, Queensland
Worimi, central New South Wales
Gunditj Mara, south-western Victoria
Bunnerong, of the bays and south coast
Nunga, South Australia
Nyoongah, south-western Australia
Wiradjuri, central New South Wales
Wotjabaluk, Wimmera region, Victoria
Pallawah, Tasmania
Dja Dja Wurrung, north-west Loddon River, Victoria
Mabuiag Island, Torres Straits
Yolngu, Top End, Northern Territory
Bardi, Cape Leveque, Western Australia
Dja Dja Wurrung, of the northwest Loddon River

Our Organisation

The Yarra Ranges municipality covers approximately 2,500km² from outer urban areas into the foothills, agricultural valleys and forested areas of the Great Dividing Range. We are committed to building and supporting our thriving local community of 160,000+ residents across 55 towns and rural areas.

We deliver over 120 different services to the community including public health, community safety, planning and building, business and economic development, waste and environmental management, recreation, arts and cultures, emergency management, community support services and more. Council is governed by nine elected Councillors, representing wards across urban, valley and hills sub-regions, and operates under the Local Government Act 1989 and Local Government Act 2020.

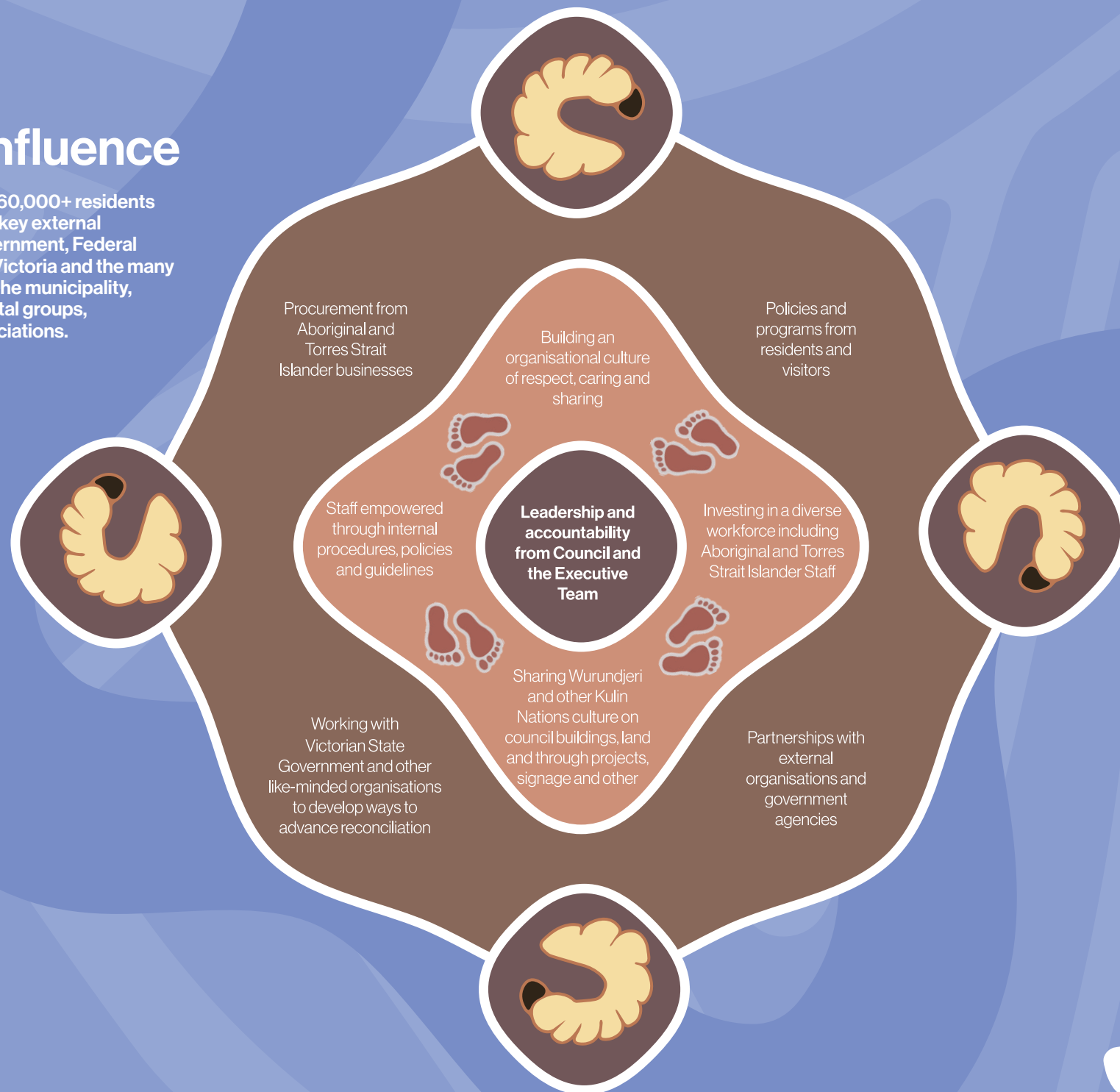
We are the largest employer within Yarra Ranges with a workforce of over 800 employees, many who live locally. At the time of publication, five employees identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development team consists of four people, three of whom identify as Aboriginal.

Our people work across a number of locations, while our primary office is the Civic Centre in Lilydale, our employees are based out of a further four Community Links across Healesville, Monbulk, Yarra Junction, Upwey, that include maternal child and health and community service teams. Our outdoor teams work from various depots across the municipality while early childhood educators are based at the Sherbrooke Family and Children's Centre in Upwey.



Our sphere of influence

Our key sphere of influence is with the 160,000+ residents who call the Yarra Ranges home. Other key external stakeholders include the Victorian Government, Federal Government, Municipal Association of Victoria and the many community groups who operate within the municipality, including township groups, environmental groups, recreational clubs and community associations.



OUR RAP

Reconciliation



Our Vision for Reconciliation

“A pathway to healing the past and moving forward toward a future of respect, caring and sharing with all cultures living in harmony for a united community that recognises the special place and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, values their participation and provides equal life chances for all. Respect, caring and sharing with all in harmony for a united community that recognises the special place and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, values their participation and provides equal life chances for all.”

As the level of government closest to the people, our role is to support and contribute to the health and wellbeing of the communities we serve. We have a responsibility to work towards equal access to civil society and provide opportunities for positive social participation across social, environmental, cultural, and economic domains.

As all our activity takes place on the lands of Victoria's First Peoples, reconciliation is integral to community health and wellbeing, and fundamental to healing past injustices towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are committed to working in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to achieve this aim.

Our Reconciliation journey traces back to 1863, when many of the residents living at Coranderk station were connected to the local community. More than 130 years later, we were proclaimed as a Council and in 1994, our Reconciliation story as a Council began.

Our first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development Officer, Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, oversaw the drafting of our Statement of Apology and Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in 1997. Thanks to Aunty Joy's advocacy and a committed Councillor group, Yarra Ranges Council became the first tier of Australian government to recognise and apologise for the past injustices and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, laying the groundwork for our cultural journey to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and everyone who lives in and visits our municipality. Yarra Ranges Council is developing this RAP to continue the essential journey that was initiated in 1997, and to remain accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our RAP aims to work towards our vision for Reconciliation as listed above.

Aunty Dot Peters – Former ATSIAC Member and Elder

Aunty Dot's 'values of cultures' are a pathway to healing the past and moving forward toward a future of respect, caring and sharing with all cultures living in harmony. Aunty Dot has graciously shared her culture and wisdom with our organisation, leaving a legacy that is fundamental to our own journey of reconciliation. As a powerful and inspiring voice for reconciliation and recognition in the Yarra Ranges, Aunty Dot provided a connection to the story of Country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their place in the world. This enabled us to learn from the past and move forward together towards reconciliation.

As Yarra Ranges' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee (ATSIAC) Chair Lea Jones says: *"We're all on a cultural journey as we seek to increase our cultural literacy, connect our story to the Land and join thousands of generations of other stories to become the one story, the story of our Country, the story of who we all are."*



Our People

The Yarra Ranges Indigenous Advisory Committee

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee (ATSIAC) has played an integral role in our reconciliation journey. It was established in 2005 to guide us through the reconciliation process and has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from government, academia, Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations and community. Operating within its designated role as advocate on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, the ATSIAC provides an effective platform for ongoing consultation with members of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across a broad range of social, health and wellbeing topics back into Council.

Together, we have a strong commitment to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing in Yarra Ranges. Based on ATSIAC advice, any strategies designed to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must align with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing and work towards strengthening cultures. Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee include:

- Lea Jones – Chairperson
- Dr Andrew Peters
- Alana Marsh
- Aunty Janet Turpie-Johnstone
- Cathy Austin
- Amanda Hand
- Miranda Madgwick
- Merilyn Duff
- Joyce Dodge
- Graham Custance
- Cr Johanna Skelton
- Cr Fiona McAllister

Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group

Our internal RAP Working Group is comprised of leaders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff from across the organisation. They are led by our Reconciliation Champion, Corinne Bowen, Manager of Community and Wellbeing. The RAP Working Group participated in a series of On-Country walks and shared workshops with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee members to identify and understand the key themes of Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing and the importance of Truth-telling as part of the RAP development. These shared experiences contributed to the cultural journey of the Working Group members and built sound bonds between all participating. RAP Working membership includes the:

- Manager Assets and Capital
- Manager Customer and Communications
- Manager Communities and Wellbeing
- Coordinator Biodiversity Conservation
- Manager Customer and Communications
- Coordinator Firesticks
- Indigenous Cultural Safety Officer
- Coordinator Indigenous Development
- Manager Design and Place
- Indigenous Participation Officer
- Manager People and Culture
- Manager Strategy and Transformation
- Manager Built and Natural Environment
- Executive Officer Middle Years Youth Development and Strategy Integration
- Executive Officer Family and Children's Services

Direct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the Internal RAP Working Group includes The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Firesticks Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Officer, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Recovery Coordinator.

Throughout the RAP process, the Working Group embraced the opportunity to connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and heritage through cultural emersion experiences led by local Traditional Owners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the ATSIAC and through councils Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development team. The Working Group expressed an overwhelming sense of understanding, compassion, pride, connection, and gratitude for the knowledge shared, stories told and intimate thoughts feelings and emotions that revealed the true character of identity, cultures, and Country.

A key reflection of the group was sitting out at the Coranderrk Cemetery listening to the stories and knowledge shared by Uncle Dave Wandin and gaining greater insight as to why Coranderrk is regarded as the spiritual home of Aboriginality in Victoria. Adding to this was the experience of Deep Listening practices with Aunty Kim Wandin and being transported to ancient times long ago from the haunting sounds of Ash Dargan's wind instruments alongside the Birrarung, experiencing firsthand a connection to place, land and all that inhabits Country.

Becoming one with Country as the concept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems became a reality walking alongside Firesticks Practitioners Victor Stephensen, Ralph Hume, Uncle Dave Wandin and his son Darren, cultural burning practices and opened new insights and understanding of the natural world.

A Working Group Reflection:

As we've developed this RAP we've been on a journey of discovery. We made a commitment to listen and deeply understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through the lens of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, and to better understand the history and story of this land, of Country, its moods and nuances. Through connection and cultural immersion experiences along the way, we gained an overwhelming sense of understanding, compassion, pride, connection and gratitude for the experiences and knowledge shared, and the stories told of identity, cultures and Country. This has provided insight and understanding of the natural world and made the concept of becoming one with Country a reality. For some of us, it was also life changing.

The internal RAP Working Group wishes to express its profound gratitude to the members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee and to Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development Team for their generosity in sharing their time and cultures with their sisters and brothers at Council.

Evaluating the Plan

The Yarra Ranges Council Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan will be reviewed and evaluated through:

Four meetings of the Internal Working Group	Bi-annual progress reports to the Indigenous Advisory Committee	Bi-annual progress reports to the Executive Leadership Team
Annual status reports for the community through the Annual Report	Annual review to reflect progress and changing circumstances, as agreed by the Internal Working Group and Indigenous Advisory Committee	
Tracking the delivery of individual action items against the progress of the plan	Community Perception Survey	

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing - case studies

Yarra Ranges Council has undertaken a number of initiatives over many years that include arts projects, advocacy, resource allocations, formal partnership agreements, events and raising awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, heritage and histories as part of our commitment to reconciliation. The case studies below were done in partnership with the appropriate members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community including Traditional Owners, community members and Aboriginal organisations.

Meeting Place Garden

In 2007, the Meeting Place Garden was launched to acknowledge Wurundjeri's ancient connection to place. Co-designed by Yarra Ranges Council and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, the Garden celebrates the diversity of the Healesville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Its six-meter Ceremonial Smoking Pit represents the way the rivers and creeks in Healesville come together in a stone mosaic, while beautifully carved leaves on wood represent the saltwater, desert, mountain and river peoples of Victoria. Artwork was undertaken by Glen Romanis and local Aboriginal artists Mandy Nicholson, Rodney Burke, and Graham Patterson.



Reconciliation Strategy and Action Plan 2008 – 2010

Our first Reconciliation Strategy and Action Plan was developed in close consultation with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee (ATSIAC), key community leaders and Shire staff. Over a six-month consultation process, input was sought from the ATSIAC with the assistance of project facilitators recommended by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Committee. The facilitators identified priority areas for local community across all areas of life, implemented strategies for improvement and identified key stakeholders for future action.

Sharing Our Stories

To explore the living history and cultures of the Healesville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community and tell the story of European colonisation, the Sharing Our Stories DVD and creative interpretive display were launched in 2013. The DVD delves into past history, from Bunjil the creator, Coranderrk and the ancestors, through to the vibrant cultural space created in Healesville to honour traditions and follow cultural values. The video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pjl2GIYHitY>



Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013 - 2023

In 2013, we launched our second Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013 – 2023, comprising three documents: Reconciliation Policy, Reconciliation Strategy and annual action plans.

The Framework can be found at <https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Council/Policies-strategies/Reconciliation-strategy>

While our 1997 Statement of Commitment fulfilled the function of a policy position, it was not formally endorsed until 2013. Our Reconciliation Strategy comprised four key themes – health, healing and spirit; participation; service access; cultural heritage – and sets the framework and parameters for the development of annual action plans. Themes were developed in consultation with the ATSIAC, with annual action plans disseminated to senior management and business units. The Reconciliation Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2023 featured the extraordinary artwork of Aboriginal artist Safina Fergie.

Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013 - 2023

In 2013, we launched our second Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013 – 2023, comprising three documents: Reconciliation Policy, Reconciliation Strategy and annual action plans. The Framework can be found at <https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Council/Policies-strategies/Reconciliation-strategy>

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Olinda Creek Walking Trail

Throughout the municipality, our Parks and Bushland team work collaboratively with the Wurundjeri community and local Friends and Landcare Groups to recognise sites of cultural significance.

During the development of the Olinda Creek Trail in 2009, a scarred tree was discovered along the Olinda Creek Reserve. Scarred trees result when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remove bark for various purposes and are an important link to cultures and the past. As scarred trees are also of great archaeological importance, a Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) was developed to protect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and cultural values of the site. This was the first of its kind at Yarra Ranges Council. As part of the CHMP process, a ceremony was held in November 2015 to rebury 28 stone tool artefacts recovered from the site of the scarred tree along the Olinda Creek in Lilydale.

Wurundjeri representatives from the three clans welcomed Council staff, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and the Mount Evelyn History Group in an event that connected land management to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history. Our land management discussions with the Wurundjeri representatives included changes to the land and ecology since European settlement and keeping the culture of the Wurundjeri people alive by, for example, planting trees suitable for scarring in the future, such as Manna and Red Gums, along the creek.

Meeting Place Garden

Learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language can enhance children's understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. In partnership with Healesville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Association (HICSA) and the Wurun Child and Family Place, we identified a need for a language resource to respond to the strong interest from early year's services and schools, producing a language teaching resource, Woivurrung Language Resource for Early Years.

As language is an essential part of any culture, this resource plays a role in strengthening community knowledge and use of the Woivurrung language. The project builds on the work of local Wurundjeri Elders in bringing the language of the Wurundjeri peoples to a broader regional audience through cards and an audio CD created by Mandy Nicholson, Aboriginal Artist and Woivurrung Language Specialist. The project enables children of all backgrounds to grow and develop with a strong sense of connection to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. These resources have recently been updated and distributed amongst early years services by Oonah through Best Start Partnership.



Oil, Paint and Ochre

In 2015, the Yarra Ranges Regional Museum presented a significant exhibition, Oil, Paint and Ochre, on the unique relationship between Wurundjeri leader, William Barak, and Swiss wine-makers, the de Pury family. The exhibition told a cross-cultural tale of life in the mid-1880s through art, the de Pury's diaries, letters, photographs, and other artefacts. Set against a backdrop of the rise and demise of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station and the establishment of the wine industry in the Yarra Valley, it explored the complexity of first-generation negotiation between Aboriginal and European peoples in Australia, and how it was inextricably tied to the country on which it took place. Descendants of both sides still live in the region today.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community: Connections, Cultures, Country, Identity and Health publication.

"Culture and identity is a big part of who we are. It's about place, it's about pride, it's about connections across the generations. You can put all the money you want into health, but unless you invest in culture and pride, you won't cut through. Culture encircles everything."
J Eades 'Life is Health is Life' Vichealth 2013

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community: Connections, Cultures, Country, Identity and Health publication was developed in partnership with Inspiro Community Health and Healesville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Association (now known as Oonah). Other key stakeholders included Swinburne University and Melbourne University's Centre for Cultural Partnerships. The publication sought to deepen the understanding around the role of Country, cultures and cultural identity within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander urban health and wellbeing context.

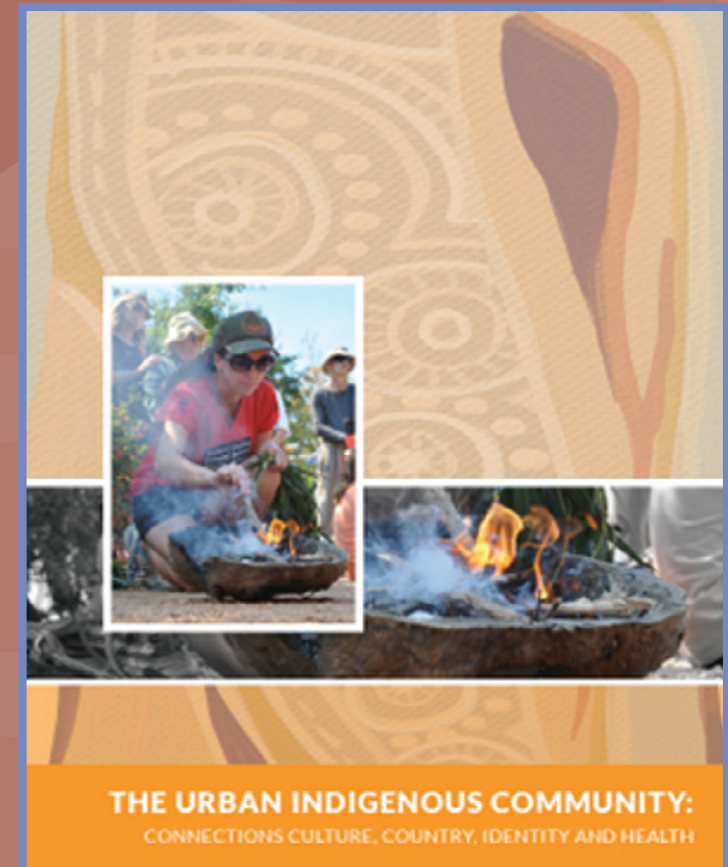
Specifically in the context of urban areas, the paper explored:

- the best ways to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through connection to Country
- effective ways of supporting cultures as a means of improving health and wellbeing
- effective interventions to build and link cultural identity to health outcomes.

The paper also examined the different experiences between remote and urban Aboriginal communities and the significance of those differences in relation to cultures, identity and connections. Findings included:

- connection to cultures is a deeply personal matter; individuals determine the nature of that connection.
- despite the challenges of living in a dominant Western society, the Aboriginality or cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in urban communities is no less authentic than those living in remote communities.
- the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in urban communities is determined by the connection to cultures; while all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are different, it is the nature or intricacies of the cultures of a particular place that varies, not the connection to it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community: Connections, Cultures, Country, Identity and Health can be found at: <https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Council/Policies-strategies/Reconciliation-strategy>



Galeena Beek

In 2018, we played a key role in transitioning the Galeena Beek Aboriginal community properties in Healesville from State Government control to the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation.

The Belonging Place feasibility study

In partnership with Healesville Indigenous Community Services Association (now Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation), we commissioned a feasibility study into the establishment of the Belonging Place, an integrated services hub controlled by the Aboriginal community and located in Healesville. The study outlined the business case, site identification and concept drawings, including quality surveyor cost report, to inform the construction of the Healesville Belonging Place – Integrated Service Hub.

The Belonging Place schematic design

In partnership with Oonah Health and Community Services Aboriginal Corporation, in 2020, architects were commissioned to undertake the schematic design for the Belonging Place.

Balit Bagurrk

The Balit Bagurrk (strong women) are a constant source of inspiration to the Yarra Ranges community. This project was inspired by the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community organisations in the Yarra Ranges from the 1970s, and women from the community (Healesville Aboriginal Cooperative, Swinburne's Oonah, and Healesville Indigenous Community Services Association). The result was a community-defined publication that celebrates the stories, strength, knowledge and courage of Balit Bagurrk.

Return of the Firesticks – the practice of Cultural Burning

To improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health and safety and enable reconciliation to grow and thrive, we partnered with the Firestick Alliance Aboriginal Corporation to share the ancient practice of Firestick.

The traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practice of cultural burning is based on a deep, intimate understanding of the natural world that enables all things to survive and thrive. It is a model of environmental sustainability based on the meticulous care for Country provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over thousands of generations. However, with the colonisation of south-eastern Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the knowledge of fire lore was broken and now, the Victorian landscape is one of the world's most bushfire prone areas.

The Firesticks Project is resourced by dedicated Firesticks Coordinators and seeks to share the wisdom and connection with the environment and cultures that cultural burning brings. By reframing our relationship with the natural world, it highlights the importance of applying practical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management practices to heal Country. The project also encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians to learn more about cultural burning while building the resilience of landscapes and communities.



Baggurk Bik Women Country

Bagurk Biik Women Country was a room-naming and inclusion initiative to act as a physical Acknowledgement of Country for the new Yarra Ranges Civic Centre, educate staff in Wurundjeri culture and promote cultural safety and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Led by Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Kim Wandin, seven meeting rooms were named after a cultural concept relating to Wurundjeri women, with photographic collages, interpretation, and objects adding to the experience in each room.

The naming and design of meeting rooms within the Civic Centre draw inspiration from Balit Bagurk: Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The presence and visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures has resulted in a deep sense of pride, cultural safety and connectedness. By using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language names at work, our people feel part of the story of this land and proudly share this with family, friends and the wider community.





Reflections from Council Staff

A reflection from the Biodiversity team

Exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing is new for a lot of us. Beyond the standardised Acknowledgment of Country, using personal narratives about connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and concepts had not been embedded or normalised in the workplace. Early on, it was important that people didn't feel obliged to share too early and understood that listening is an important way of participating. It wasn't long before the team meeting became a safe place, to explore Acknowledgment of Country and what it means to us as individuals, to be vulnerable and respected.

Each week, we hear a colleague reflect personally on what it means to work on Wurundjeri country. The Acknowledgment of Country is not rushed. A colleague could relate a story about the land, the wind, fungi, family or a site meeting – people are free to personalise it. Whether you are sharing the Acknowledgement of Country or hearing it, you will inevitably learn something new and it's a great incentive to research Wurundjeri culture and Country. Later in the meeting, a short staff reflection on a chapter of 'Sand Talk' inevitably challenges our ways of thinking and communicating. Symbols, images, stories and metaphors are entering our dialogue. The importance of talking to people on Country about work matters takes on a new importance. We might reflect on how a phrase like, 'we use fire to heal sick Country', says so much more than a paragraph on fire ecology. One team member wrote: "Since reading 'Sand Talk', I am taking additional moments to not just comply with the legislation, but to use it as an opportunity to connect. Looking deeper as to why the location requires scrutiny, possible uses of the land and what physical and non-physical artifacts could be present."

The Biodiversity team is working towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing into our work more broadly. As part of the development of the biodiversity plan, a Wurundjeri lens was cast over the plan's five themes early with the help of Council's Firesticks Coordinator. From this perspective, we can look at what the consequences of our actions might be 10 generations from now and ask how do we make decisions about the land before taking time to read Country first? We refer to the Yarra as a river, but it is the Birrarung, it is alive, has a spirit and is part of the dreaming of this land.

Our roles at Council sit in the context of the living Yarra Ranges landscape, within a framework of profound cultural and personal relationships with this place. Allowing time to explore Traditional Owner Acknowledgment gives us a greater appreciation for the cultures that have shaped and nurtured Yarra Ranges for more than 60,000 years. Incorporating these two agenda items in our team meetings has been a good thing. It can be challenging, but our history is challenging. By engaging more with concepts like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing in our work, our work is becoming more nuanced, holistic and beneficial to the land and all who live here.

Reflection from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development Team

The white smoke lifts into the canopy and the leaves of the parent trees begin to dance, they're happy to know we are back, the fire is back, Firesticks has returned to country. The crackling of the fire holds the rhythm section of this orchestra, while the sounds of people talking, laughing and sharing holds the melody. Cockatoos and kookaburras call out in joy to spread the word and sing for Country that the right fire is here!

For too long, the practice has laid dormant, knowledge hidden within the landscape, with Country begging to tell us how to bring it back if only we could listen. This place has seen more than 100 years without medicine, without guidance and too many years of silence. Leaf litter has choked this area for a long time since the terrible fires of Black Saturday 2009. The trees here have experienced so much trauma and they have lived with that for the last 15 years. With just 5 years of the right medicine, this place is alive again. Diversity in quality and quantity of ground layer species, and the songs of birds, frogs and insects are sung proudly once again. The spacing of plant communities is becoming obvious with parents, teenagers, children and even the occasional Grandparent trees that have survived.

This is what Firesticks is about, an understanding that this ecosystem is alive and breathing. We look at the landscape as we do our own communities; species interact with each other; they speak a different language to us. We use words in place of their ability to send messages through the fungus in the soils. Country appoints its totemic species that are crucial to certain Country types. As we care for Country, these totemic species are starting to let themselves be known again.

Each day we practice this element of our cultures, we are one step closer to understanding who our Country is, its identity and our relationship to it. We can all be a part of this, we all must be because we all live here. Putting the right fire back on Country and listening together, committing our patience, time, consideration and care to Country is the way we can do it.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Lore achieved a natural equilibrium unmatched as a model of environmental sustainability, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples meticulously cared for Country over thousands of generations. The sophisticated use of fire, based on an intimate understanding of the natural world, enables all things to survive and thrive.

We are learning to listen, not just us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and sharing information between mobs and doing what is best for Country. We walk alongside everyone who lives here and those who have shown patience and wish to see a healthier, happy Country. We seek to share the depth of wisdom and connection with the environment, Country and cultures that cultural burning brings by reframing our relationship with the natural world. It highlights the importance through practical application of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management practices and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems of healing Country, while supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal residents to sit with cultures and heritage while increasing the safety, resilience and health of flora, fauna and communities.

From this place of Knowing, Being and Doing, a successful partnership between Firesticks and Yarra Ranges Council has emerged. We will see more of this medicine spread across Council managed land but increase awareness and empower other people to act, and do so in a respectful way to Country, cultures and peoples.

The partnership represents a commitment, a promise and above all else, an accountability to Country, cultures, practice, and peoples. It respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing and shows that we are headed in the right direction. Despite everything that has happened in the past, actions like this give the most hope for our future because we know our children will walk safely among friends and care for Country the right way, together.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

The Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee advice supporting the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing into this RAP, seeks to ensure we understand the lens in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples see the world, and therefore provides guidance and a practice to achieve outcomes that are impactful and meaningful.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing reflects how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary society integrate their cultures with an urban way of life. Local Elders refer to this as 'living in two worlds'; it is a complex space where the notions of Country and spirituality, while living in an urban community, are brought into balance. By integrating and balancing notions of Country, spirituality, language, the Ancestors, ceremony, and protocol in our daily lives (including the cultural values of respect, caring, and sharing), it becomes a natural way of being.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples see themselves as immersed in the whole, in a fully connected landscape, a universe with an awareness of themselves and every element of the natural world around them as the same thing, the one thing with the presence of spirit in every element of the natural world. Ways of Knowing speaks of the separation of nature from Western societies. It talks of the Earth as the mother of life with its beauty and its voice that can be seen and heard through, earth, wind, water, and plants and animals. It speaks of a time across eons when man and nature were one and that nature is waiting for man to again walk on this land, at one with all that exists." – Statement developed by the ATSIAC Committee Workshop, February 2024.

"It is the people, land and culture connection, the way we represent ourselves in the world around us and the way we adapt to that environment that hasn't really changed for 60,000 plus years, and probably won't change. That's the message I'm hoping we can get non-Aboriginal people to recognise and embrace, because they're part of that culture." Dr Andrew Peters, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee member.

The people, land, and cultures connection provides us with a pathway to transform the way we function. With all our services and operations taking place on the land of the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations, our focus can shift towards the land and how our connection to land affects the health and wellbeing of all residents. Both individually and organisationally, we are all on a cultural journey as we seek to increase our cultural literacy and connect our story to the land. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and heritage are the cultures, histories and heritage of all Australians. It informs our identity personally, regionally and nationally, and is the gift Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples offer to all Australians. This is critical for us to move forward as one Country, with one story.

Some business units are directly involved in shaping and working on Country, including Biodiversity, Bushlands, Sustainability, Recreational and Active Living, Health and Wellbeing, Creative and Connected Communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development, Emergency Management, Strategic and Statutory Planning, Design and Place, and all have direct relationships with the land. However, the whole organisation has begun embracing and embedding the principles of Knowing, Being and Doing.



Truth-telling

“If we are to proceed in an open-hearted and responsible way to address the issues which will come before us in the future, we first need to acknowledge the past.”

(Yarra Ranges Council, 1997 Apology to the Stolen Generations)

In line with the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Yoorook Truth-telling process in Victoria, Truth-telling allows us to acknowledge the past, accept the devastating impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and genuinely commit to seeking reconciliation for Yarra Ranges communities. The ATSIAC were strong in their advice that Truth-Telling needed to be a key element in the Reconciliation Action Plan.

The impact of colonisation on Victorian Aboriginal people was immediate due primarily to the introduction of European diseases. It has been estimated that disease accounted for up to sixty percent of the Aboriginal deaths across the Port Phillip area, (Presland, First People, 90). Even before Europeans began arriving in the Melbourne area, up to a third of the population of the eastern Australian tribes had been killed by an epidemic of smallpox that spread down from Sydney. (Garden, Victoria, 5; Edmonds, Urbanizing Frontiers, 27)

Numerous historical accounts point to the first attempts to colonise the lands of the Birrarung occurring in 1835 when John Batman met with Wurundjeri leaders including Billibellary and Bebejan and their sons Wonga and Barak, near a small stream, believed to be Merri Creek in Northcote. It was these Wurundjeri Elders that negotiated the Batman Treaty; although later dismissed by the Governor as, “void and of no effect as against the rights of the Crown”. (https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/nsw7_doc_1835.pdf). This time is reported as a devastating period for local Aboriginal communities. The practicing of cultures and speaking in language was forbidden. Through Victorian Government policies, such as the Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 and the 1886 Half-Caste Act, many languages, song lines, stories, ceremonies and caring for Country practices (such as cultural burning) were lost, destroying the social and cultural fabrics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. There is an uncomfortable reality that post-contact Australia includes devastating massacres which cumulatively became genocide. These have been well documented in Australian and Victorian history, and the impacts of this have been felt within Yarra Ranges.



Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve

A local example of the impacts of colonisation can be found in the story of Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve on the banks of Birrarung, the Yarra River, in Healesville

Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve was established in 1863, comprising 2,300 acres of land south of Healesville. By 1865, the population of Coranderrk numbered 105, making it Victoria's largest reserve at the time. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents cleared much of the property over the next four years, developing a thriving farming community and establishing a bakery, butcher, numerous houses and a school. In 1866, Coranderrk was allocated an additional 2,500 acres and by 1872, residents had cleared the land and planted hops. Coranderrk became famous for its hops, winning first prize at Melbourne exhibitions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Victoria and Australia were attracted to Coranderrk as it became a self-sufficient community, growing fruit, vegetables and cereals to meet the needs of the Reserve.

By 1874, the Aboriginal Protection Board pushed to close the Reserve. In response to the threat of being dispossessed of their lands yet again, the men and women of Coranderrk embarked on a sophisticated and sustained campaign to impede the break-up of the station with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples walking 40 miles to Melbourne to protest to Parliament. A Parliamentary Coranderrk Inquiry was established in 1881, marking the only occasion in the history of 19th century Victoria, when an official commission was appointed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' calls for land and self-determination. It was also one of the few times that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander witnesses were called to give evidence on matters concerning their own lives and interests. This was a rare and historically significant moment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' claims to justice were addressed by the colonial government in an official forum. The Inquiry report was published in 1882 and following its recommendations, Coranderrk was made a permanent reserve.

The Aboriginal Protection Board responded to the 1882 Coranderrk Inquiry Report with the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act, commonly called the 'Half-caste Act', was enacted. This Act banned children of mixed parentage and over 13 years of age from living on stations and reserves and imposed stricter controls on those allowed to remain. With many families split and the workforce of Coranderrk decimated, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines continued its push to close Coranderrk. They finally succeeded in 1924 with most residents moved on to Lake Tyers, although some families remained.

Portions of the property were sold and used for farms, including the Army School of Health and the Healesville Sanctuary, until all that remained was the half-acre cemetery. The Coranderrk community fought for their land and successfully secured control of Coranderrk's cemetery. In 1998, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Corporation funds were accessed to buy some of the land back, including the manager's house.

The Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve is regarded by many as the spiritual home of Aboriginality in Victoria. Its stories of sadness, betrayal, generosity, anguish, resilience and courage have shaped local identity, cultures and Country in the Yarra Ranges, and given the number of ancestors buried there, it exists in the hearts of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians.

Coranderrk Today

Despite its official closure in 1924, Coranderrk today represents a physical place for community to anchor connections to Country and remains a centre of cultural gravity where the land, people and cultural connection continues to grow and offer healing and wellbeing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While inconsistent government commitments have the capacity to revive the trauma of the past, the local Wurundjeri community remain hopeful, resilient and optimistic. Opportunities are being developed there for non-Indigenous visitors to enjoy an authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience through immersion in the concept of connection between land, peoples and cultures. The story of Coranderrk is far from over.

1997 Statement of Apology to the Stolen Generations

“Yarra Ranges Shire Council recognises the past injustices and treatment of Aboriginal Peoples. If we are to proceed in an open-hearted and responsible way to address the issues which will come before us in the future, we first need to acknowledge the past.

Council recognises the need to confront the policies and practices which caused the forced removal and separation of Aboriginal children from their parents and families, the effects of which continue today. Accordingly, we wish to express our deep sorrow and sincerely apologise for the pain, the grief and the suffering experienced by Aboriginal peoples as a result of past laws, government policy and actions.”

1997 Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Australians by the Shire of Yarra Ranges

The Yarra Ranges Shire Council recognise:

- *the habitation of this land by local Indigenous people*
- *the customs and traditions of Indigenous Australians and their spiritual relationship with the land*
- *the valuable contribution made by Aboriginal people and their culture to the history of the region*
- *the value of the diversity and strength of indigenous cultures to the heritage of all Australians*
- *the principles of equity and access for all members of the Indigenous community to culturally appropriate services and programs.*

Council supports:

- *the rights of all indigenous people as outlined in the Draft United Nations Declaration On The Rights Of Indigenous People*
- *the vision as expressed by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation of a “united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equality for us all”.*

Council is committed to:

- *promoting and facilitating the presentation of Aboriginal cultural heritage in a way that is sensitive to, and respects the dignity and protocols of the local Indigenous community*
- *participating in education processes which enhance the understanding and awareness of indigenous heritage and the needs of our Indigenous communities*
- *undertaking and participating in programs and activities which display our ongoing commitment to Indigenous issues*
- *advocacy on behalf of the Indigenous members of our community to ensure the principles and commitments of this statement are upheld.*

In 2005, we appointed an Indigenous Advisory Committee to oversee the development of our Reconciliation Strategy and Action Plan 2008 – 2010 and Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013 – 2023. A full time Indigenous Development Officer was appointed in 2006.

2007

Meeting Place
Garden

2013

Sharing Our
Stories

2013 – 2023

Reconciliation
Framework for Action

2015

Oil, Paint
and Ochre

2008 – 20210

Reconciliation Strategy
and Action Plan

2015

Olinda Creek
Walking Trail

2015

The Woiwurrung
Language Resource
for Early Years

2016

The Indigenous Community:
Connections, Culture,
Country, Identity and Health
publication

2020

The Belonging Place
feasibility study

2022

Baggurk Bik
Women Country

2018

The Belonging Place
schematic design

2018

Galeena Beek

2021

Balit Bagurrk

Our Reconciliation Action Plan

August 2024 – July 2026



Pillar one Relationships:

We actively support Reconciliation by building strong organisational and community relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples, community groups, businesses, and organisations. Relationships are core to reconciliation, determining how we relate to each other as family, community and society and defining the nature of our collective lived experiences. While we don't always get this right and acknowledge past mistakes, we're committed to the process. This is the foundation on which we build a pathway to healing the past and move forward toward a future of respect, caring and sharing with all cultures living in harmony.



Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
1. Establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.	Meet with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations to develop guiding principles for future engagement.	August 2025	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Officer
	Develop and implement an engagement plan to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.	October 2025	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Officer
	Work towards formalising partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations	July 2026	Manager, Community Wellbeing
2. Build relationships through celebrating National Reconciliation Week (NRW).	Circulate Reconciliation Australia's NRW resources and reconciliation materials to our staff and community.	May 2025 May 2026	Manager, Customer & Communication
	RAP Working Group members to participate in an external NRW event.	May 2025 May 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Encourage and support staff to participate in at least one external event to recognise and celebrate NRW.	May 2025 May 2026	Chief Executive Officer
	Organise at least one community focused NRW event each year.	May 2025 May 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Register all our NRW events on Reconciliation Australia's NRW website.	May 2025 May 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
3. Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence.	Develop and implement a staff engagement strategy to raise awareness of reconciliation across our workforce.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Ensure that the aims and objectives of the Uluru Statement of the Heart are included in awareness raising reconciliation initiatives currently offered by the organisation.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Communicate our commitment to reconciliation publicly in published materials and on our website.	July 2026	Manager Communications
	Explore opportunities to positively influence our external stakeholders to drive reconciliation outcomes within our Advocacy activities.	October 2025	Senior Advocacy & Government Relationship Advisor
	Collaborate with RAP and other like-minded organisations to develop ways to advance reconciliation.	July 2025	Manager, Community Wellbeing
4. Promote positive race relations through anti-discrimination strategies.	Conduct a review of Human Resource policies and procedures to identify existing anti-discrimination provisions, and future needs.	July 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Develop, implement and communicate an anti-discrimination policy for our organisation.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisors to consult on our anti-discrimination policy.	July 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to the Workplace Consultative Committee to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Educate senior leaders on the effects of racism.	October 2025	Executive Officer, Health and Wellbeing



Pillar two Respect:

We strive to understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, rights and experiences and acknowledge that this underpins progress towards reconciliation. Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and doing is fundamental to authentic and ongoing relationships. Shared pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage is also fundamental to engendering a shared local and national identity. Respect is a key pillar of Aunty Dot's definition of Aboriginal cultures of Respect, Caring and Sharing.



Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
5. Increase understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights through cultural learning.	Conduct a review of cultural learning needs within our organisation.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Consult local Traditional Owners and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisors on the development and implementation of a cultural learning strategy.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Develop, implement and communicate a cultural learning strategy for our staff.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Provide opportunities for RAP Working Group members, HR managers and other key leadership staff to participate in formal and structured cultural learning.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Provide an induction program and other opportunities for councillors to access the reconciliation focused training, on-Country experiences and cultural immersion opportunities currently offered by the organisation.	February 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Increase the number of cultural safety and cultural awareness training sessions currently delivered to all staff to include key external partnerships and advisory groups.	December 2024	Manager, People & Culture
	Include cultural awareness on the list of mandatory training schedule for all staff.	December 2024	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Facilitate Truth-telling by embedding it as a core principle in the histories and heritage interpretation and cultural projects throughout the municipality, through Yarra Ranges Regional Museum programming and exhibitions.	April 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	In consultation with First Nations stakeholders, ensure the full suite of the organisation's cultural learning sessions include a Truth-telling component.	December 2025	Regional Museum Program Director
	Develop a Yarra Ranges Council Cultural Safety Framework to establish a high level of organisational cultural safety.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
6. Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by observing cultural protocols.	Increase staff understanding of the purpose and significance behind cultural protocols, including Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country protocols.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Develop, implement, and communicate a cultural protocol document, including protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Invite a local Traditional Owner or Custodian to provide a Welcome to Country or other appropriate cultural protocol at significant events each year.	July 2026	Event coordinator
	Include an Acknowledgement of Country or other appropriate protocols at the commencement of important meetings.	July 2026	Manager, Customer & Communications
	Add Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and Acknowledgement of Country to all employee email signatures.	August 2024	Manager, Customer & Communications
	Ensure the process around engaging Traditional Custodians to perform a Welcome to Country is made available to all staff by inclusion on the staff intranet.	October 2024	Manager, Customer & Communications
	Ensure the process around engaging Traditional Custodians to perform a Welcome to Country is made available to all staff by inclusion on the staff intranet.	June 2026	Manager, Customer & Communications
	Include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags on all YRC brochures.	June 2026	Manager, Customer & Communications
	Through the ongoing development and delivery of Cultural Literacy Training Program, ensure all staff and Councillors are proficient in performing an Acknowledgement of Country, understand why this is important and are encouraged to go off script to increase relevancy and is personalised.	July 2026	Manager, Customer & Communications

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
7. Build respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories by celebrating NAIDOC Week.	RAP Working Group to participate in an external NAIDOC Week event.	June 2025 June 2026	Manager, Community Wellbeing
	Review HR policies and procedures to remove barriers to staff participating in NAIDOC Week.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Promote and encourage participation in external NAIDOC events to all staff.	July 2025 July 2026	Chief Executive Officer
8. Increase awareness, understanding and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories across the Yarra Ranges	Through consultation with Traditional Owners, ensure the appropriate use of images and artworks by staff, partners and community, to protect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artists' legal and moral rights in line with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Code.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Include a cultural safety component/policy/procedures in all of Council's partnering agreements to increase the visibility and respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories.	July 2026	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Officer
	Identify opportunities to collaborate with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and cultural practitioners in the development and presentation of cultural programs, exhibitions, public art and creative learning opportunities.	June 2025	Executive Officer, Partnerships & Community Building
	Strengthen First Nations engagement with Council's cultural collections, aligning management of these collections with the National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries 2.0 and AMaGA's First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement in Museums and Galleries.	August 2024	Regional Museum Program Director
	Through consultation with Traditional Custodians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the Yarra Ranges ATSIAC, identify the appropriate actions to make our cultural facilities culturally safe places for First Peoples visitors and collaborators.	July 2026	Regional Museum Program Director

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
	Introduce the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander design charter in to Design and Place project work.	July 2026	Manager, Design and Place
	Connect the organisation's On-Country walks program to health and wellbeing Strategy outcomes to leverage greater health benefits from this proven health and wellbeing practice.	October 2025	Executive Officer, Health & Wellbeing
	Through the partnership with local Traditional Owner groups and the Firesticks Alliance Aboriginal Corporation, advance the Yarra Ranges Return of the Firestick Project to provide cultural practice opportunities regarding cultural burning.	July 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
9. Establish culturally safe environments in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are respected and valued throughout the Yarra Ranges.	Align Council's commitment to the Victorian Child Safe Standards (2022) and deliver actions outlined in the Child Safe Standards Implementation Plan (22-25) with a particular focus action under Standard 1.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Develop and deliver recommendations to improve cultural safety through auditing one team in the Community Support Department, in relation to activities that recognise, respect, and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety.	July 2026	Manager, Community Support
	Work with early years partners through the State Government funded Best Start initiative to undertake improvement ideas that support children's engagement and participation in early childhood education and Maternal Child Health services.	June 2025	Manager, Community Support



Pillar three Opportunities:

Yarra Ranges Council aims to provide equal participation and access to opportunities and recognises that this is crucial for the well-being of all peoples, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As a Local Government, Yarra Ranges Council has a responsibility to ensure a quality of access to civil society and opportunities for positive social participation for all residents. Council has a strong policy platform for reconciliation and cultural diversity that seeks to reduce the impacts of racism and generational trauma.



Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
10. Improve employment outcomes by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development.	Build understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing to inform future employment and professional development opportunities.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to consult on our recruitment, retention and professional development strategy.	June 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Develop and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development strategy.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Advertise job vacancies to effectively reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.	April 2025	Manager, People & Culture
	Review HR and recruitment procedures and policies to remove barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in our workplace.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
	Increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed in our workforce.	July 2026	Manager, People & Culture
11. Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supplier diversity to support improved economic and social outcomes.	Develop and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander procurement strategy.	July 2026	Executive Officer, Strategic Procurement
	Investigate Supply Nation membership.	December 2024	Executive Officer, Strategic Procurement
	Develop and communicate opportunities for procurement of goods and services from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses to staff.	July 2026	Executive Officer, Strategic Procurement
	Review and update procurement practices to remove barriers to procuring goods and services from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.	July 2026	Executive Officer, Strategic Procurement
	Undertake research to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses within the Municipality.	March 2025	Manager, Economy, Tourism & Culture
	Through engagement and consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business sector, develop commercial relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander businesses.	June 2026	Manager, Economy, Tourism & Culture



Pillar four Governance:

We aim to establish structured, transparent, and supportive governance, that provides accountability for delivery of the actions contained in this Plan.



Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
12. Establish and maintain an effective RAP Working group (RWG) to drive governance of the RAP.	Maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the RWG.	December 2024 December 2025	Manager, Community Wellbeing
	Establish and apply a Terms of Reference for the RWG.	August 2024	Manager, Community Wellbeing
	Meet at least four times per year to drive and monitor RAP implementation.	July 2025	Manager, Community Wellbeing
	Ensure the RAP Working Group undertake a review of Council's Reconciliation Policy to ensure its' effectiveness.	June 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
13. Provide appropriate support for effective implementation of RAP commitments.	Define resource needs for RAP implementation.	July 2024	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Engage our senior leaders and other staff in the delivery of RAP commitments.	July 2025	Manager, Community Wellbeing
	Define and maintain appropriate systems to track, measure and report on RAP commitments.	June 2025	Manager, Organisation Performance & Integrity
	Appoint and maintain an internal RAP Champion from senior management.	July 2024	Chief Executive Officer
	Develop and implement an evaluation plan to capture reconciliation initiatives across all council strategic plans.	June 2025	Manager, Organisation Performance & Integrity

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
14. Build accountability and transparency through reporting RAP achievements, challenges and learnings both internally and externally.	Complete and submit the annual RAP Impact Survey to Reconciliation Australia.	July 2025	Manager, Strategy & Transformation
	Contact Reconciliation Australia to verify that our primary and secondary contact details are up to date, to ensure we do not miss out on important RAP correspondence.	July 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Report RAP progress to all staff and senior leaders quarterly.	June 2026	Manager, Strategy & Transformation
	Publicly report our RAP achievements, challenges and learnings, annually.	June 2026	Manager, Strategy & Transformation
	Investigate participating in Reconciliation Australia's biennial Workplace RAP Barometer.	February 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Report on RAP annually to all staff, Councillors and stakeholders around National Reconciliation Week.	July 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Contact Reconciliation Australia to request their unique link to access online RAP impact survey.	July 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Submit a traffic light report to Reconciliation Australia at the conclusion of this RAP.	July 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development

Action	Deliverables	Timeline	Responsibility
15. Offer a variety of support services to the Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee to facilitate continued effectiveness and functionality.	To ensure the currency, efficacy, and appropriate membership of the Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee, undertake a review of the committee's Terms of Reference in partnership with the Committee's Chairperson	August 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Ensure effective secretariat support is provided to the Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee	October 2024 October 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
	Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to Council with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee presentation to a Council Forum meeting held annually.	July 2025	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development
16. Continue our reconciliation journey by developing our next RAP.	Register via Reconciliation Australia's website to begin developing our next RAP.	January 2026	Coordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development

Acknowledgements

To the Yarra Ranges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee and Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Development Team, we express our profound gratitude for your generosity in sharing your time, stories and cultures with your sisters and brothers at Council.

To Aunty Dot Peters, Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy and Aunty Doreen Garvey Wandin, Brooke Wandin and Dave Wandin, thank you for giving so much of yourself in the name of reconciliation.



Glossary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing	<p>Described as bringing into balance and integrating the notions of Country, Lore, the Ancestors, spirituality, language, ceremony and protocol including the cultural values of Respect, Caring and Sharing into our daily lives.</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee workshop Feb 6 2024</p>
Lore	<p>The term 'lore' refers to the customs and stories the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples learned from the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore was passed on through the generations through songs, stories and dance and it governed all aspects of traditional life. It is common to see the terms 'law' and 'lore' being used interchangeably.</p> <p>Reference: https://www.workingwithindigenoustraiians.info/content/Self_Study_D3_The_Lore.html</p>
Country	<p>An awareness of ourselves and every element of the natural world around us as a oneness, as the same thing and the role of stewardship we all have in caring for every element of the natural world around us.</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee workshop Feb 6 2024</p>
Biik	Land or Country
Spirituality	<p>The awareness of the divine nature or the presence of spirit in every element of the natural world around us.</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee workshop Feb 6 2024</p>
Ceremony	A ritual or event of cultural significance, such as a Welcome, Smoking or Acknowledgement to/of Country. Ceremony can take various forms. It is important to note that some ceremony are not for non-Aboriginal participation.
Protocol	A procedure or system of rules or expected behaviours such as adhering to local customs and practices in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural spaces



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