Community Engagement Summary

Mount Alexander Shire Council

Development of the Biodiversity Strategy





Acknowledgement of Country

Mount Alexander Shire Council acknowledges that the traditional custodians of this land, the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung peoples, proudly survive. We acknowledge their continued practice of custom and their close cultural, spiritual, physical, social, historical and economic relationship with the land and waters that make up their Country, which includes Mount Alexander Shire.

Council recognises the Victorian Government's Recognition and Settlement Agreements with both the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and the Taungurung Land and Waters Council.

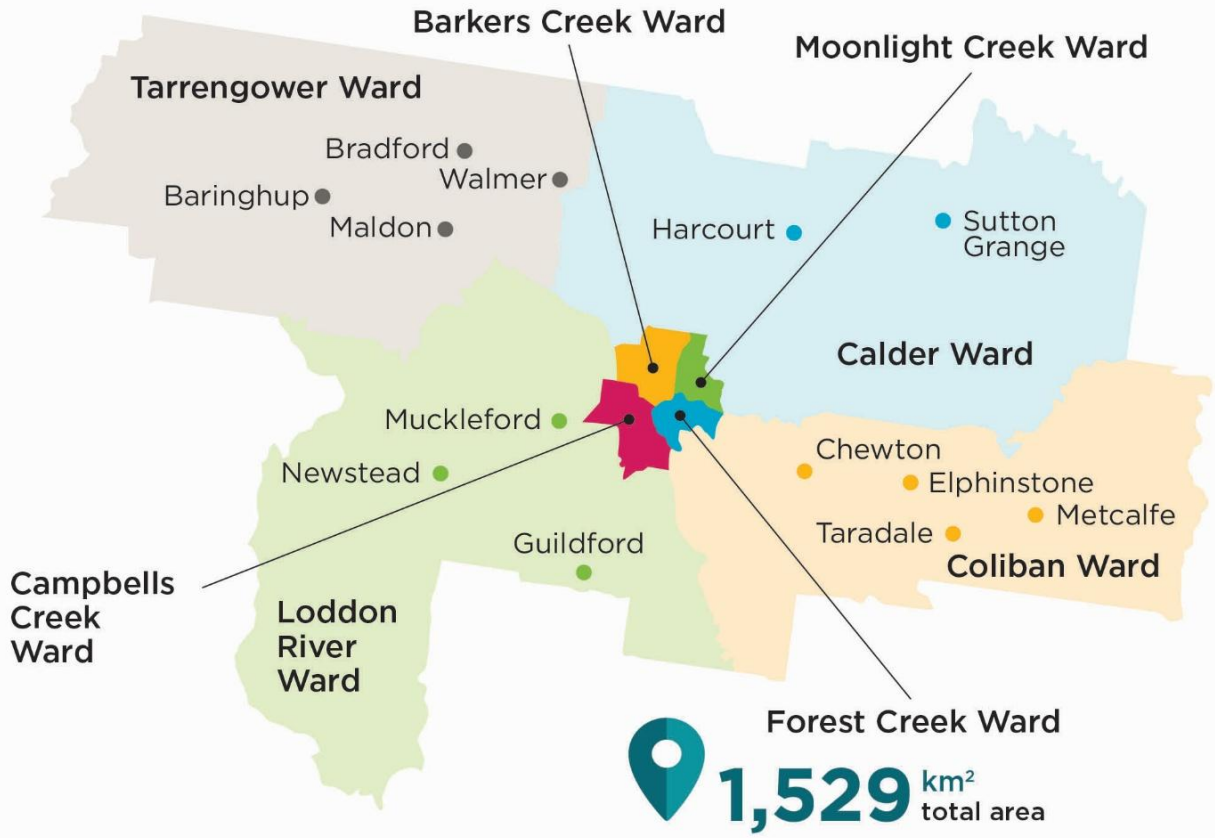
Our shire

Mount Alexander Shire – a snapshot

Mount Alexander Shire is diverse, with urban and rural communities. It has much to offer: beautiful heritage streetscapes and picturesque towns, stunning natural surroundings, a thriving local economy and a vibrant cultural life.

Our community comprises more than 20,000 people with most living in and around the townships of Castlemaine, Harcourt, Maldon, Campbells Creek, Newstead, Elphinstone, Guildford, Chewton and Taradale.

Located within commuting distance of Melbourne and Bendigo, the popularity of the shire continues to grow as new residents move to the area to make the most of the lifestyle and all the shire offers.



Source: REMPLAN data

20,799 Population

25,783 Projected Population by 2046

51 years median age

Where we live

763 Chewton
633 Elphinstone
7,506 Castlemaine
1,665 Maldon
820 Newstead
2,071 Campbells Creek
1,038 Harcourt
524 Taradale

Project overview

Mount Alexander Shire contains a diverse range of native plants, animals and ecosystems. These natural assets contribute to the character of the shire and support the health and wellbeing of the community. Many of these biodiversity values are under pressure. Climate change, habitat loss, weeds, pest animals and development continue to affect the condition of the natural environment.

Council is developing a Biodiversity Strategy to guide the protection and enhancement of biodiversity across the shire. The Strategy will set priorities for biodiversity conservation, identify where effort should be focused, and outline how Council can work with others to improve biodiversity outcomes. It will guide Council's actions on Council-managed land and through its operations, while supporting Council's role in influencing and advocating for broader landscape-scale biodiversity outcomes.

The Strategy has been informed by input from Traditional Owners, community members, environmental groups, government agencies, Councillors and Council staff. Participants shared what they value, the challenges they see, and the opportunities for protecting and enhancing biodiversity across the shire.

Impact and integration

This summary presents the key themes raised through the community engagement. It highlights community values, key issues and place-based opportunities to inform development of the Biodiversity Strategy. It also provides a transparent record of the feedback received and how community input is shaping Council's decision-making.

Community values and perspectives + Community identified issues, challenges and opportunities + Community ideas for consideration in the Strategy

Community informed outcomes

Engagement overview

Engagement to inform the Biodiversity Strategy was undertaken between April and June 2026 and included a mix of workshops, meetings, drop-in sessions and an online survey.



139 Survey responses
~150 people attended a session

How we engaged

	Workshops, meetings and drop-in sessions	*Survey*
April	• Councillor and Executive team workshop	
May	• Council staff workshop 1 • Government agencies and authorities workshop • Nalderun online meeting • DJAARA and DJANDAK on Country meeting • Community event (open to the public) • Castlemaine drop-in session – Market Building • Castlemaine Secondary School (Outdoor Environmental Studies class) workshop • Maldon drop-in session – Bank Corner	Online survey available to the public from May to June
June	• Environmental volunteering group presidents meeting • Council Youth Advisory Group meeting • Community workshop online • Council staff workshop 2	

Engagement approach

We undertook extensive engagement to inform the development of this Strategy and to better understand the aspirations, knowledge and priorities of our stakeholders.

Community members and agencies were engaged at the Consult level of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum. We committed to listening to feedback, considering it in the development of the Strategy and communicating how it influenced the final document.

Council staff were engaged at the Collaborate level of the IAP2 Spectrum, recognising their important role in shaping practical actions and implementing the Strategy. The following high-level questions guided our engagement with each stakeholder group.

What we asked our Traditional Owners

- What opportunities are there for us to work better together?
- How can we deliver on aspirations for Country?



What we asked our community

- What parts of nature are most important to you?
- What are you concerned about?
- Have you been undertaking any on-ground works?
- How can we work better together?



What we asked our fellow agencies

- What are your up-and-coming priorities in our Shire?
- What are the key challenges and opportunities you are facing?
- What opportunities are there for us to work better together to achieve landscape scale outcomes?



What we asked our councillors and staff

- What are we trying to achieve?
- What are our key challenges and opportunities?

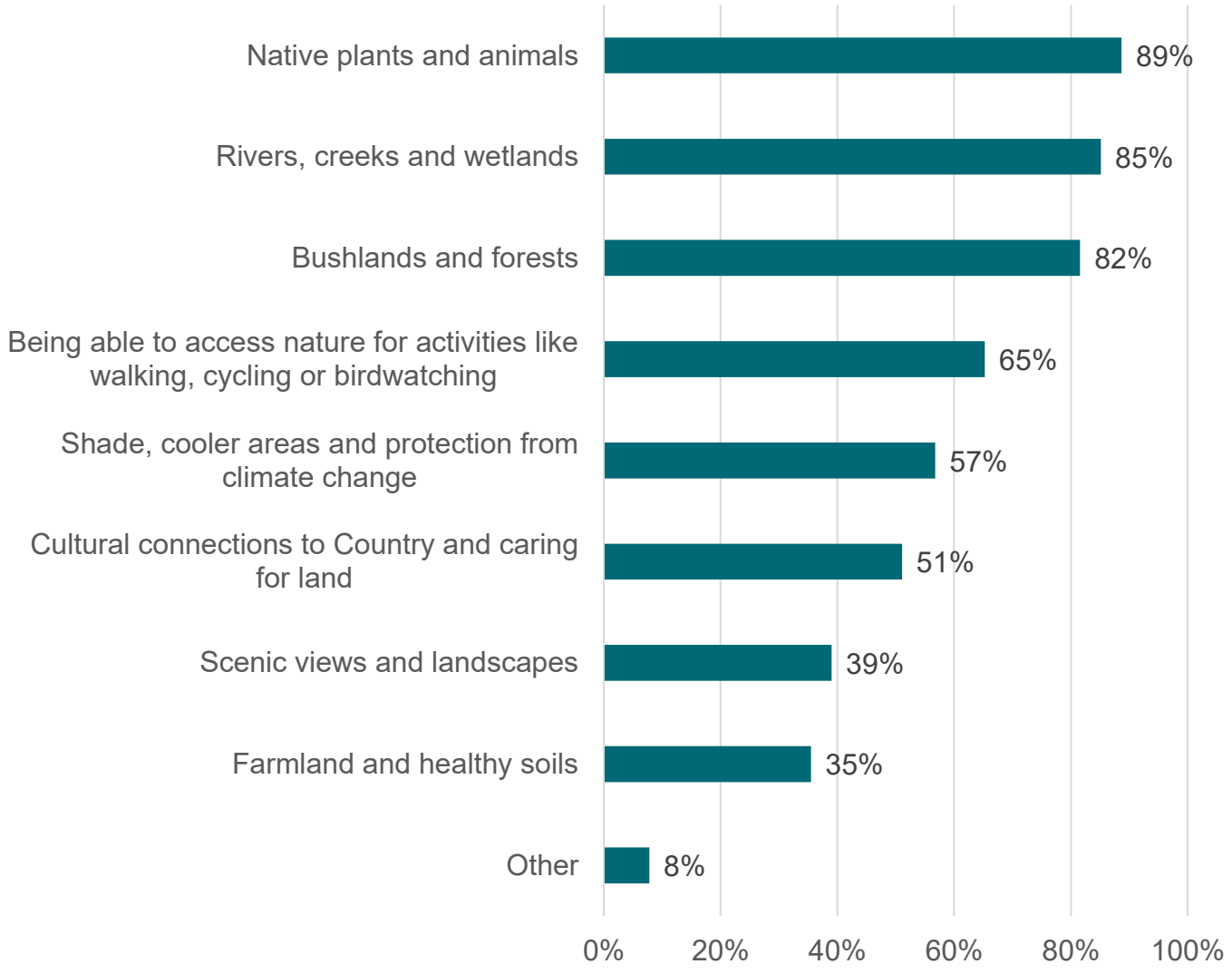
Community feedback

Our community expressed a strong connection to the Shire's natural environment and a clear desire to see biodiversity protected, restored and better considered in decision-making. Consistent themes emerged across workshops, conversations and survey responses.

The following summary outlines the key themes raised through consultation. Each theme includes a summary of what we heard and how the feedback has informed the Biodiversity Strategy and its Background Paper.

Key themes arising from the engagement

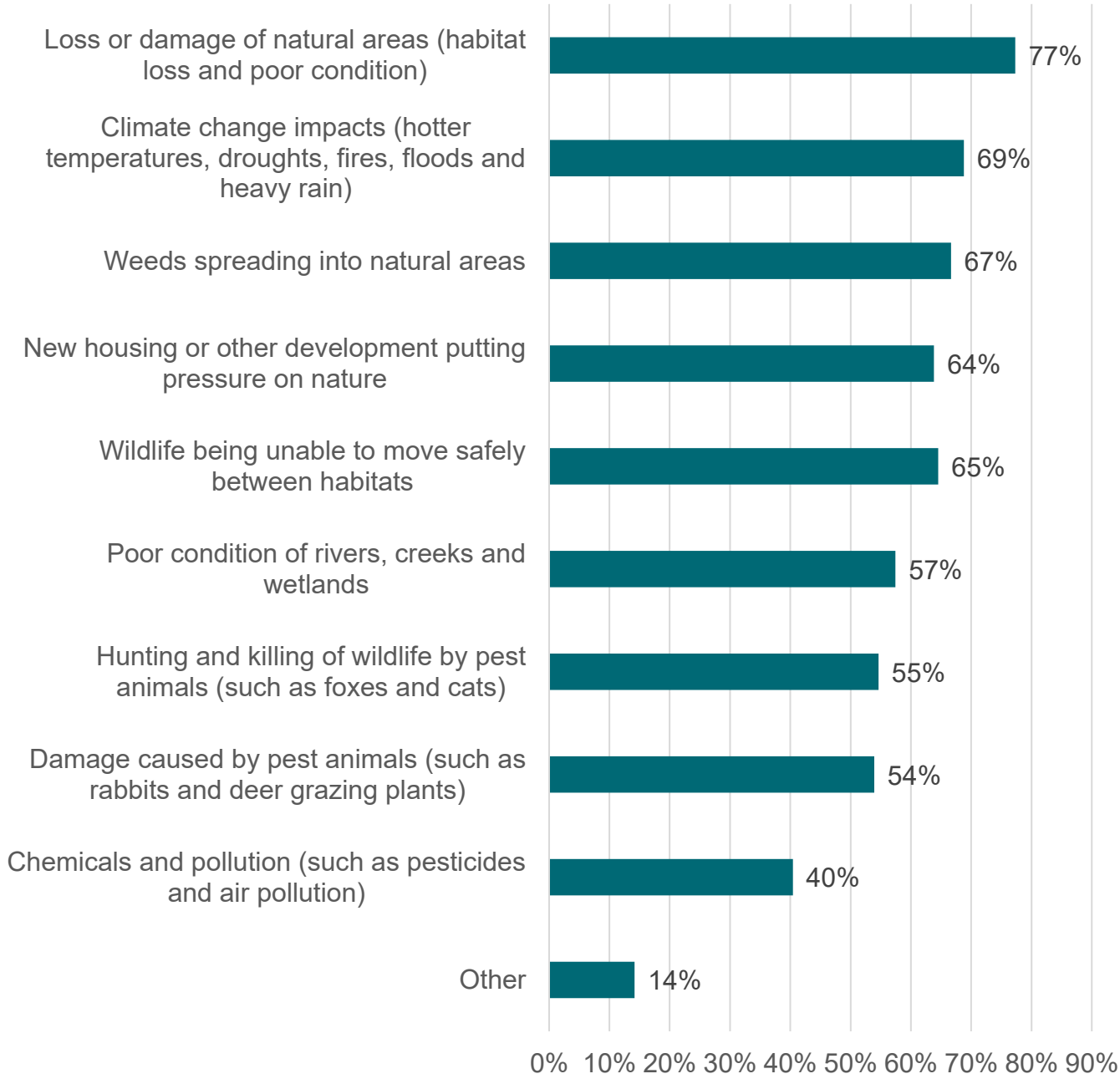
Q. What parts of nature matter most to you in Mount Alexander Shire?



Community feedback

Key themes arising from the engagement

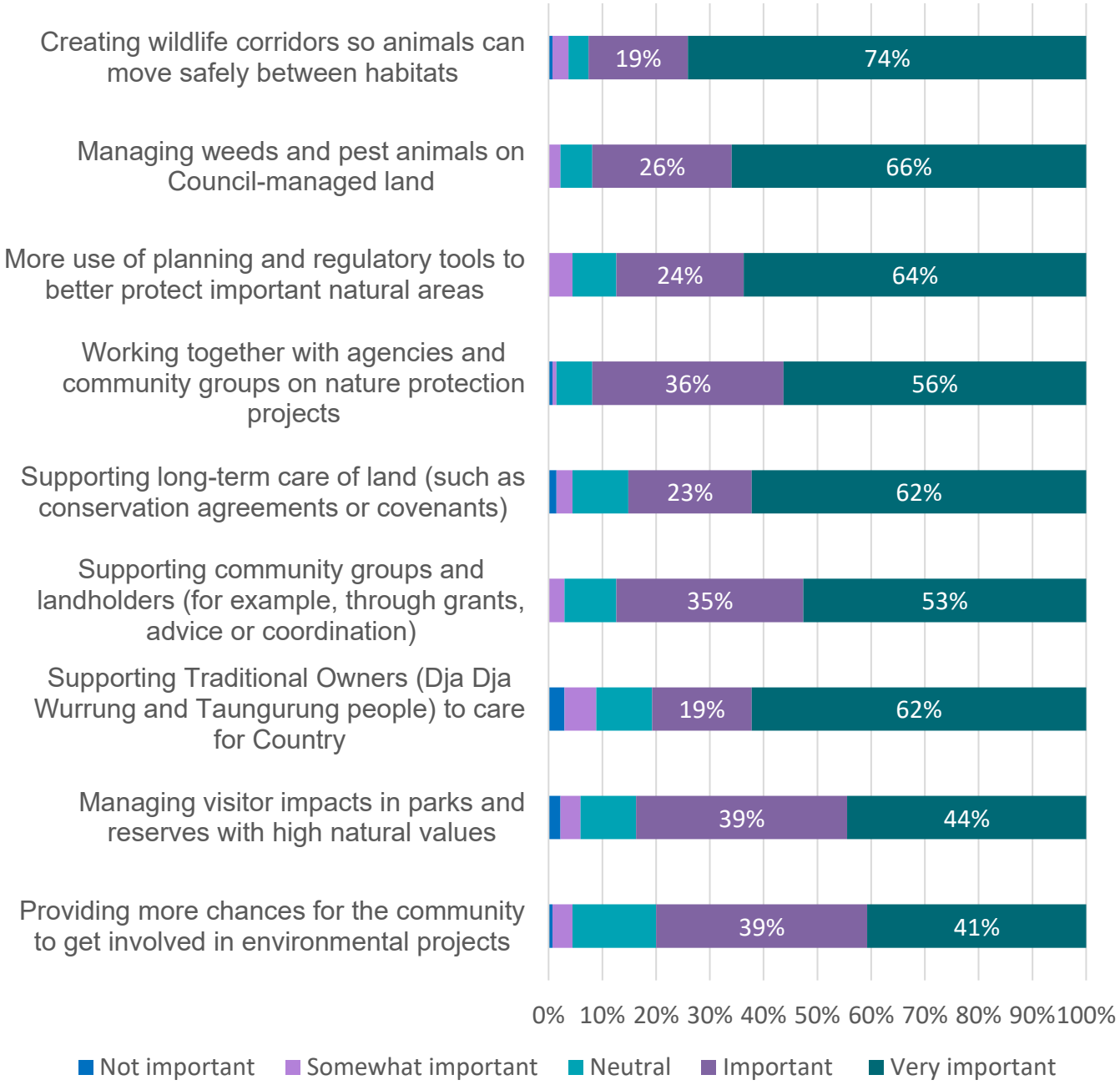
Q. What do you think are the biggest threats to nature in Mount Alexander?



Community feedback

Key themes arising from the engagement

Q. How important are these actions for helping nature in our shire?



What people value

Connection to place and identity
Many people described biodiversity as central to the identity and character of Mount Alexander Shire. The area's bushland, large trees, quiet places, clean air and natural beauty contribute to a strong sense of place and are part of what makes the shire distinctive and liveable.

Community stewardship and volunteering
Participants highly value the contribution of Landcare groups, Friends groups, citizen scientists and volunteers. Community stewardship is recognised as having played an important role in protecting and restoring biodiversity, and there is significant pride in local environmental leadership.

Traditional Owner knowledge and caring for Country
Traditional Owners emphasised that people are part of Country and that caring for biodiversity means caring for Country. They highlighted the importance of cultural knowledge and cultural burning, and encouraged approaches that begin by asking, "What is Country teaching us?"

Nature for future generations
People value opportunities for children and young people to connect with nature and learn about biodiversity. For First Nations people, this also included developing a sense of care for Country. There was a strong desire to ensure future generations inherit a healthy and biodiverse landscape.

Living close to nature
Participants consistently described the ability to access nature close to home as one of the shire's defining characteristics. People value being able to walk, ride, swim, birdwatch and spend time in natural places that are "right on our doorstep". The opportunity to experience nature daily contributes strongly to physical health, mental wellbeing and quality of life.

The shire's biodiversity and natural beauty
The community highly values the shire's biodiversity, including its Box-Ironbark forests, creeks, woodlands, grasslands, wildflowers, fungi and wildlife. Participants frequently described Mount Alexander Shire as "special", "unique" and "beautiful", recognising that despite historic disturbance the area retains significant biodiversity values.

Native wildlife and habitat
People expressed a strong connection to native wildlife, particularly platypus, birds, kangaroos, echidnas, wallabies, frogs and butterflies. Large old trees, hollow-bearing trees, remnant vegetation and intact habitats are highly valued because they support native species and provide opportunities to observe wildlife close to home.

Waterways and connected landscapes
Campbells Creek and other waterways emerged as some of the most valued places in the shire. Participants value creek corridors for their biodiversity, recreational opportunities and role as wildlife habitat and movement corridors. Roadside vegetation, remnant woodland and connected landscapes were also recognised as critical biodiversity assets.

What concerns people

Feedback	How it was addressed in the Strategy
Loss of native vegetation and habitat – Ongoing vegetation clearing, habitat fragmentation, the decline of large old trees and cumulative biodiversity loss were the most frequently raised concerns.	Protecting and restoring native vegetation is a core focus of the Strategy. Goal 1 prioritises investment in habitat protection, restoration, connectivity, habitat trees and threatened species on Council-managed land, while Goal 3 strengthens partnerships with landholders, community groups and other agencies to improve biodiversity across the broader landscape. Goal 2 also includes actions to strengthen biodiversity considerations across Council operations and planning. The Rural Land Use Strategy will further consider how biodiversity can be integrated into the planning scheme.
Development pressure and planning decisions – Concerns that biodiversity is not adequately considered in planning decisions, leading to the loss of green space, wildlife corridors and biodiversity hotspots.	Goal 2 embeds biodiversity into Council's planning, project delivery and decision-making processes. Actions include improving biodiversity assessment in Council projects, investigating vegetation and environmental overlays where supported by evidence, and strengthening education, monitoring and compliance to better protect native vegetation.
Weeds and pest animals – Blackberry, gorse, Wheel Cactus, foxes, rabbits, deer and cats were identified as significant and ongoing threats.	Goal 1 prioritises on-ground works and threat abatement in high-value biodiversity areas, focusing investment where it will deliver the greatest benefit for biodiversity. Goal 3 also supports coordinated pest animal management programs with neighbouring landholders, community groups and partner agencies to improve outcomes across land tenures.
Climate change and landscape resilience – Concerns about hotter and drier conditions, severe bushfires, flooding and declining ecosystem resilience.	Climate change adaptation and resilience are embedded as guiding principles of the Strategy. These principles recognise the need to improve ecosystem resilience and consider future climate conditions when planning and delivering biodiversity actions.
Waterway health and loss of water from the landscape – Concerns about declining waterway health, altered hydrology and the impacts of flood mitigation infrastructure on biodiversity.	Goal 2 promotes better integration of biodiversity considerations into Council decision-making, and waterways are prioritised within the investment framework because of their important role as habitat corridors and climate refugia. Flood mitigation is outside the scope of this Strategy and is considered through Council's emergency management and infrastructure functions.

What concerns people

Feedback	How it was addressed in the Strategy
Biodiversity not being integrated into decision-making – Concerns that biodiversity is not consistently considered across Council operations, including vegetation management, tree removal and roadside works.	Goal 2 embeds biodiversity across Council operations by improving staff and contractor capability, strengthening biodiversity assessment in project planning and delivery, and improving access to ecological information to support more consistent decision-making.
Compliance and enforcement – Concerns about illegal vegetation clearing, limited enforcement and inadequate compliance responses.	Goal 2 includes actions to strengthen education, monitoring and compliance processes, supported by a review of Council policies, local laws and contractor management to better protect native vegetation and respond to unauthorised clearing.
Loss of connectivity – Concerns that habitat fragmentation is isolating wildlife populations and reducing ecosystem resilience.	Improving habitat connectivity is a key focus of Goal 1. The Strategy directs investment towards priority locations that strengthen landscape connections, restore habitat and improve outcomes for threatened species. Mapping identified important opportunities to strengthen connectivity, including links to the Wombat State Forest.
Limited education and awareness – A lack of understanding of biodiversity values, particularly among new residents and younger generations.	Goal 3 strengthens community stewardship through improved access to biodiversity information, landholder resources, demonstration sites, citizen science initiatives and opportunities to learn about local biodiversity.
Lack of meaningful collaboration – Concerns that local knowledge is not always considered and that community groups are not consistently informed or engaged before works occur.	Collaboration is a core principle of the Strategy. Goal 3 includes actions to strengthen partnerships with Traditional Owners, community groups, landholders and other agencies, improve information sharing, coordinate on-ground works and build on existing community stewardship efforts.

Community priorities

Established volunteer effort

Existing community activity	Main groups involved	What this means for Council investment
Weed management	Landcare groups, Friends of Campbells Creek, Friends of Maldon Historic Reserve, Tarrangower Cactus Control Group, private landholders	There is significant volunteer capacity and willingness to undertake weed control. Council investment could focus on supporting and coordinating these efforts, particularly in high-value biodiversity areas.
Revegetation and habitat restoration	Friends of Campbells Creek, Barkers Creek Landcare, Castlemaine Landcare, Chewton Bushlands Landcare, Metcalfe Landcare	Revegetation is already a major focus of community action. Projects that provide plants, materials, technical advice and coordination are likely to attract strong community participation.
Waterway restoration	Friends of Campbells Creek, Forest Creek groups, Platypus Project participants	Waterways appear to be one of the strongest areas of community stewardship. This supports prioritising waterways as investment areas because they are biodiversity hotspots, movement corridors and important climate refugia.
Monitoring and citizen science	Connecting Country, Birdlife Castlemaine, FOBIF, local naturalists	There is considerable local ecological knowledge that can inform monitoring and adaptive management. Council has an opportunity to better utilise community-collected data.
Threatened species and habitat enhancement	Connecting Country, Metcalfe Landcare, Post Office Hill Action Group, Wildlife Victoria	There is community interest in nest boxes, frog habitat, butterfly projects and woodland bird habitat, suggesting support for targeted species recovery actions.
Private land stewardship	Numerous individual landholders and Landcare groups	Many residents are already undertaking biodiversity works on private land, presenting opportunities for information provision, incentives and partnership programs.

Community priorities

Feedback on potential actions

Feedback	How it was addressed in the Strategy
Protect and restore biodiversity – Stronger protection of remnant vegetation, threatened species and important habitats, alongside active restoration and improved habitat connectivity.	Goal 1 prioritises on-ground works in areas of high habitat value and threatened species habitat under greatest threat. The Strategy also supports continued landholder programs, including the Trust for Nature rebate, information provision and partnerships with other agencies. Existing conservation management plans set out the detailed actions required at each reserve. Where there is not a conservation management plan in place, Council will make evidence-based decisions on what is required at that site to deliver on the outcomes set out in the Strategy.
Stronger protection through planning – Improved planning controls and protection of important vegetation and habitats.	The Strategy recommends investigating opportunities for vegetation and environmental overlays using the Strategy's mapping. Biodiversity considerations will also inform the development of the Rural Land Use Strategy (Goal 2).
Greater investment in weed and pest management – More coordinated weed and pest animal management and support for landholders.	Goal 3 focuses on cross-tenure collaboration with landholders, community groups and agencies. Coordinated action is prioritised, recognising that pest management is most effective when undertaken across the broader landscape.

Community priorities

Feedback on potential actions

Feedback	How it was addressed in the Strategy
Greater community ownership and participation – More opportunities for citizen science, restoration activities and community-led projects, including engaging people who are not traditionally involved in biodiversity.	Goal 3 promotes citizen science and community participation through improved information sharing and partnerships. Goal 1 also supports Council-led environmental volunteering opportunities for people who wish to participate outside of established Landcare groups.
Education and learning opportunities – More biodiversity education, school programs, workshops, nature walks and resources.	The Strategy supports environmental volunteering, community education and improved information provision, including interpretive signage and resources to build understanding of local biodiversity (Goal 3).
Better information and data sharing – Improved biodiversity mapping, data sharing and use of local knowledge and citizen science data.	The background report draws on the best available biodiversity data. The Strategy commits to improving Council's biodiversity information over time and sharing data and knowledge with the community where possible (Goal 3).
Support for biodiversity on private land – Greater support for backyard biodiversity, farm restoration and practical stewardship actions.	Council will continue to support landholder engagement programs, including Healthy Landscapes and the existing Trust for Nature rebate (Goal 3). Biodiversity considerations on private land will also be explored through the Rural Land Use Strategy.
A connected and resilient landscape – A landscape where habitats are connected, biodiversity is thriving, Traditional Owners play a leading role in caring for Country and communities are empowered to participate.	The Strategy supports ongoing Traditional Owner partnerships and prioritises biodiversity investment in areas that improve habitat connectivity. Roadsides and other linear reserves are recognised as important opportunities to strengthen landscape connectivity (Goal 1 and 2).



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