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Master Environment Strategy

Yarriambiack Shire Council

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Mayor's Message

On behalf of Yarriambiack Shire Council, I am pleased to present this Master Environment Strategy. This Strategy sets a clear direction that we will use to guide our planning and decision-making to ensure we meet community expectations regarding environmental sustainability.

As identified in the Council Plan 2021-2025, Yarriambiack Shire's Community Vision is "a connected rural community who values its land and wellbeing". Being environmentally responsible is key to achieving this vision. The Council Plan identifies "a robust and thriving environment" as one of its four core strategic directions. This is based on feedback from our community that environmental sustainability is important.

Yarriambiack is a highly productive agricultural region and is also home to some unique and special natural features. We are dependent on the natural environment in so many ways and it is therefore critical that we protect our environment and resources to ensure the long-term viability of the region.

Council has designed this Strategy to be practical and actionable. Yarriambiack Shire is a small council with limited resources and, therefore, must work effectively within these constraints to progress its vision and goals. This means we must be strategic about how and where we focus our efforts to maximise the impact we can have.

I am proud of our community and the Shire for their commitment to pursuing long-term and meaningful environmental sustainability. This Strategy harnesses that commitment and directs it in a way that will create real impact. The task of environmental sustainability is a big one and we cannot do it alone. We look forward to working with our community and other groups and organisations to pursue these goals together.

Introduction

Key Themes

This Strategy focuses on three key themes:

Waste, Recycling and Resource Recovery

Our goal is to increase diversion of waste from landfill and improve resource recovery rates. This goal aims to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill, reduce resource use and maximise the value of resources that are used through reuse and recycling. We will do this through providing effective waste services, education and responsible procurement.

Environment – Water, Land and Biodiversity

Council will seek to protect and enhance the natural environment, including habitats, water resources and associated cultural values. This goal aims to preserve and improve our unique natural ecosystems and ensure the way we manage water and land is sustainable in the long-term. We will achieve this by minimising environmental impacts and supporting healthy ecosystems.

Climate Action – Adaptation, Mitigation and Renewable Energy

Council is eager to work towards net zero emissions and enhance community resilience in the face of a changing climate. We will reduce greenhouse gas emissions from Council's own activities and operations, whilst also supporting and enabling others to do the same. Council will also support the community to adapt to the realities of a changing climate.

Our Environment

The Yarriambiack Shire stretches from the Wimmera River to the centre of the Mallee, covering 7,158km². The Shire is comprised of the lands of the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk people. Home to about 6,556 people, the Shire is comprised of many small and diverse towns. The Shire hosts 640,655 ha of agricultural land and 574 agricultural businesses.

Yarriambiack Creek and its terminal lakes system traverse the Shire and supported the Wotjobaluk and Wergaia people, who are now represented by the Barengi Gadjin Land Council. There are many culturally significant sites within the Shire, including scar trees and middens.

The Yarriambiack area sits within the southern section of the Murray Darling Basin and is part of the Wimmera, Murray, Mallee and Lowan bioregions. The Shire's landscape is generally low-lying, includes areas of floodplain, and its climate is semi-arid.

The Shire is dominated by the Yarriambiack Creek and the Black Box woodlands that follow its flood lines. Much of the Shire's landscape has been cleared for agriculture and is home to some of the most productive grain growing in Victoria. Remnant natural vegetation exists throughout the Shire; however, it is highly fragmented and lacks connectivity with larger natural areas.

Challenges

Key environmental challenges facing the Shire include:

- The high and increasing costs of waste management.
- Limited end product markets for recycled products.
- Restricted ability to utilise renewable energy resources due to poor grid integration.
- The impacts of a drying and warming climate for community, biodiversity, tourism and agricultural businesses.

Policy Context

The *Local Government Act 2020* (Vic) (LGA) requires local Councils in the state to provide good governance for the benefit and wellbeing of their community. The overarching governance principles contained in the LGA include promoting “the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks”. The LGA also requires Councils to prioritise achieving the best outcomes for the community, including future generations.

There is a wide range of evolving State and Commonwealth policy and legislation that affects Yarriambiack in relation to water, waste, biodiversity and climate change.

The Yarriambiack Shire’s 2021-2025 Council Plan sets the overarching, long-term vision for the Shire. The Council Plan identifies the Yarriambiack Community Vision as “a connected rural community who values its land and wellbeing.” This vision guides Council decision-making across all areas, including environmental sustainability. The Council Plan sets out some key environmental objectives under its “robust and thriving environment” theme.

Community Engagement

When developing this Strategy, Council carried out community engagement through an online and paper survey. The survey sought to determine the levels of community support for various actions proposed across the three key themes in the Strategy. The survey validated that the community priorities generally align with the actions proposed. Council has carefully reviewed the outputs of this engagement and has used it to refine the actions within this Strategy.

For more details and a breakdown of community engagement results, see Appendix 1.

Theme 1: Waste, Recycling and Resource Recovery

Waste generation and landfilling is environmentally harmful in numerous ways. Waste management is also a significant, ongoing cost for Council to provide. Council has a vision for itself and the Yarriambiack community to lead in providing cost-effective waste reduction services and recovering resources that can be used to benefit the local environment and contribute to a circular economy. This vision is supported by the Victorian Government's Recycling Victoria policy which sets out the state's path towards a more circular economy.

Waste diversion

Yarriambiack has low waste diversion rates – this means a lot of the Shire's waste ends up in landfill, even when there are other ways to deal with it. Historically, only about 20% of waste is diverted from landfill.

Resource recovery

The Victorian government is implementing various measures to improve resource recovery. This includes a requirement for all local councils to provide food organics and garden organics (FOGO) collection by 2030. For a small, rural shire like Yarriambiack which has a small population spread over large distances, the implementation of a FOGO collection service involves considerable costs. There is no local or regional FOGO facility in or near Yarriambiack Shire to receive and process FOGO, increasing the financial and emissions costs of transporting FOGO from the Shire. For these reasons, Council is considering viable alternatives that would better suit the Shire's context.

Other avenues of resource recovery being implemented include glass waste collection and the State's container deposit scheme. More work also needs to be done on tackling the challenge of agricultural waste that is particularly difficult to collect and dispose of appropriately. Council will review the service considering how to best balance resource recovery, convenience for residents and costs to residents through their rates.

Transfer stations

Council operates nine transfer stations within its area, which act as collection points for various waste streams. Each transfer station incurs costs to run, some transfer stations collect relatively small amounts of waste and resources for recovery, and a range of factors make them challenging to run.

Contractors are engaged to responsibly process various wastes such as tyres, e-waste, batteries, chemical drums, mattresses and scrap metal. Glass collected in the kerbside recycling service is processed at a local glass crusher. Mixed recycling is sent to Melbourne for processing.

The Council believes there may be alternative ways to provide effective waste and resource recovery services to its smaller towns. Council will review its transfer stations considering how to best balance resource recovery, convenience for residents and costs to residents through their rates.

Goal

Increase diversion from landfill and improve resource recovery rates.

Action Areas

Action area	Action	Priority
Landfill	• Reduce what goes to landfill e.g. recycle or reuse where possible.	High
	• Reduce total waste to landfill per household	High
Kerbside services	• Advocate to State Government for consideration of alternatives to mandatory FOGO fourth bin service for Council.	High
	• Investigate alternative glass collection methods other than bin collection, such as utilising the container deposit scheme.	Medium
Rural	• Focus on alternative options for rural waste collection e.g. community recycling hubs, hard rubbish and garden waste collections.	High
	• Work with the agricultural industry to address difficult wastes. This includes helping them access existing solutions e.g. drumMuster, and exploring opportunities to deal with wastes for which solutions do not currently exist e.g. grain bags.	Medium
Resource recovery	• Avoid FOGO going to landfill and work with neighbouring councils on options to process FOGO waste locally.	High
	• Increase capacity for local resource recovery and reuse.	High
	• Review operation of transfer stations to maximise efficiency and service value.	High
	• Increase household recycling.	Medium
	• Support the collection and recycling of difficult wastes such as tyres, hard rubbish, and electronic waste.	Medium
Education	• Increase awareness of different recycling streams and recovery programs and provide resources to aid households separate at home.	High
	• Encourage community behaviour change to reduce waste generation and increase resource recovery, including through school programs.	Medium
	• Consider alternative communications to reach more residents, especially those with limited or no internet usage.	Medium

Litter and illegal dumping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roll-out mobile transfer station collection for difficult to recycle or problematic waste streams. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate feasibility of free transfer station drop offs. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with EPA and land management organisations to coordinate action on illegal dumping. 	Medium
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively engage with state government through Recycling Victoria to support the delivery of the Strategy's waste actions. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore and encourage local initiatives with businesses and industries that seek to increase recycling and repurposing of materials that would otherwise end up in landfill 	Medium
Council's waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid waste and use good waste management practices within Council's operations. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include requirements to address reparability and waste avoidance and management approaches in service and infrastructure contracts. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include requirements for reparability and to avoid, recycle and reuse waste in service and infrastructure project designs. 	Medium

Theme 2: Environment – Water, Land and Biodiversity

Yarriambiack has a unique natural environment with prominent features including Yarriambiack Creek. The region is primarily agricultural land with interspersed fragments of vegetation. These fragments, alongside the waterways and wetlands within the Shire, are valuable natural assets.

Weeds

Weeds threaten the natural values in the Shire, and landowners are noticing an increasing prevalence of new weeds. Council carries out roadside weed management, and works with landowners, CMAs and AgVic to ensure weeds on private land are controlled in the Shire. Because weeds spread amongst properties, collaboration between landholders and the Shire is necessary for weed treatment to be effective.

Biodiversity

In the Shire, remnant native vegetation has not been well preserved. This causes salinity issues and reduces wildlife habitat. Climate variability is further impacting native vegetation. Native vegetation clearance has slowed significantly but still occurs. Council works with Landcare to improve conservation outcomes. Landcare networks have typically led land restoration activities, but these have been scaled back in recent years due to challenges such as maintaining a sufficient volunteer base.

Recreation

The natural environment creates many opportunities for recreation and community connection to nature. High value recreational water supply access is important to the community and tourism, but this is vulnerable in variable climate conditions. Public open spaces are also important to residents in Yarriambiack and are attractive destinations for visitors to the Shire, particularly along Yarriambiack Creek. Council manages some of this land, and other land is managed by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Cultural values

Council is committed to building stronger relationships with the local Traditional Owners and Barengi Gadjin Land Council (BGLC). The BGLC has a Reconciliation and Settlement Agreement with the state government which includes a local government engagement strategy. Council works closely with BGLC across a range of projects that the Council undertakes.

Sustainable urban and rural design

As the climate warms, shaded areas in Council's towns become increasingly important for the comfort and safety of the Shire's residents and visitors. Trees in the Shire's urban spaces make an important contribution to the attractiveness of towns in the Shire, as well as providing welcome cooling and shading in the heat. To date, there has not been a clear strategic direction for planting and managing urban trees.

Goal

Protect and enhance the natural environment including habitats, water resources and associated cultural values, by minimising environmental impacts and supporting healthy ecosystems.

Action Areas

Action area	Action	Priority
Pest plants and animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate more with landowners on pest and weed management. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to collaborate with CMAs for projects that address the environmental impacts of weeds and pests. 	High
Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase involvement with Yarrilinks to ensure both organisations are aligned and supporting each other to achieve common goals. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate the community on the importance of biodiversity and how to protect and enhance it. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure recreational water entitlements are provided as high-security water shares, including under various climate futures. 	High
Sustainable land management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage land sustainably and encourage other agencies to do the same. 	Medium
Traditional Owner heritage values and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to deepen the level of engagement and understanding with BGLC to preserve and protect Traditional Owner heritage values and culture through sensitive land management practices, community education and appreciation. 	High
Sustainable urban and rural design - recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance waterways and surrounding areas to create more opportunities for the community to connect with the natural environment. 	High
Sustainable urban and rural design - infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out streetscape works targeted at reducing heat impacts in main street districts e.g. create more shaded areas and green spaces. 	Medium
Sustainable urban and rural design - urban trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a tree strategy for the Shire's towns to guide future plantings which considers species selection and tree placement to maximise the value of plantings and avoid adverse effects. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plant more public trees for amenity and to enhance biodiversity. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect and enhance existing public trees through best practice tree management and update Tree Management Policy. 	Medium

Theme 3: Climate Action – Adaptation, Mitigation and Renewable Energy

Yarriambiack Shire is already feeling the effects of climate change, and these effects will continue to intensify. As the climate changes, the Shire faces increasing threats from emergencies such as fire, extreme heat and flood. The Grampians Regional Climate Adaptation Strategy describes how the maximum and minimum daily temperatures will continue to increase in the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region. Over the long term, rainfall is expected to decline while extreme rainfall events become more intense.

Adaptation

Climate adaptation is critical to ensure Yarriambiack prepares for and adjusts to the effects of climate change. The Victorian government has set a clear direction that the state needs to take a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to adaptation planning. Council has a role in emergency management and a well organised process to do so, codified in its Municipal Emergency Management Plan.

One of the key climate threats facing the Shire is heatwaves, which are likely to become more intense and frequent. Some measures are already in place to help people address this risk in their own homes or find cool places during a heatwave. Council has a Heatwave Plan which aims to reduce illness and death caused by heatwaves and provide support and recovery assistance during heatwaves.

In relation to flooding, the planning scheme identifies land subject to inundation. Council is doing other work to reduce the risks posed by flooding such as improving stormwater management and drainage in Rupanyup.

Mitigation

The Victorian government has emission reduction targets of 75-80% below 2005 levels by 2035, and net zero by 2045¹. Yarriambiack Shire is committed to playing its part in mitigating the effects of climate change by reducing its emissions and supporting others to do the same.

The first steps to managing greenhouse gas emissions are to understand where they come from, accurately measure them and identify how they can be reduced.

Energy

The Victorian Government has a target of 65% of the State's electricity coming from renewable energy sources by 2030, and 95% by 2035. There is one operating wind farm in the Shire and several more on the drawing board. There is clear potential for more wind farms in the Shire, however these depend on upgrades to grid infrastructure such as interconnectors. Council has a role to

¹ <https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/climate-action-targets>

play to identify how it can best capitalise on the energy transition for the benefit of its community.

Council can save money and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by installing rooftop solar, improving the energy efficiency of its facilities, and considering battery power at its sites. Council has already installed solar at some of the sites it manages and has been looking at community battery programs. Members of the community can reduce emissions and save on energy costs by pursuing renewable energy opportunities. Council has a role in helping the community to access support to use renewables.

Council will also need to replace its vehicle fleet over time with zero emission vehicles to reduce and eventually eliminate its transport emissions.

Goal

- Work towards net zero emissions.
- Enhance community resilience in the face of a changing climate.

Action Areas

Action area	Action	Priority
Adaptation – education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate the community about climate resilience, including to events such as fire, heat, floods especially in relation to their own homes. 	High
Adaptation – emergency management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update 2020-21 heatwave management plan. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with fire agencies and the community to minimise bushfire risk and minimise environmental damage. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support bushfire risk reduction practices on Council-owned and privately-owned land. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure all towns have cool places accessible during extreme heat. 	High
Adaptation – infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure Council-managed infrastructure and plant can be used to support staff and the community during emergency events. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain and further develop council’s drainage to ensure it remains effective during floods. 	High
Adaptation – risk identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with neighbouring Councils to undertake a climate risk assessment that identifies the key risks posed to the Shire by climate change. 	Medium
Mitigation – emissions reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start measuring, tracking and reporting Council emissions. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use emissions measurement as a basis for setting realistic emissions reduction targets, including a net zero by 2045 target in line with the Stage Government’s target. 	Medium
Mitigation - education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate the community to promote a better understanding of the why it is important that emissions are reduced and how individuals can practically take steps towards doing so. 	Medium

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support community to understand and access programs that will support climate change mitigation, including in relation to renewable energy. 	Medium
Renewable energy - advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate how Council can capitalise on the energy transition. 	Medium
Renewable energy – Council transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate cost-effective use of alternative, renewable energy across Council’s operations. 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue energy efficiency measures for council operations. 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate opportunities to transition Council’s fleet to low emissions vehicles. 	Medium

Implementation

Once this Master Environment Strategy is adopted by Council, Council will provide for its implementation within current resources for the 2024-25 year, and will provide for its implementation in future Council plans.

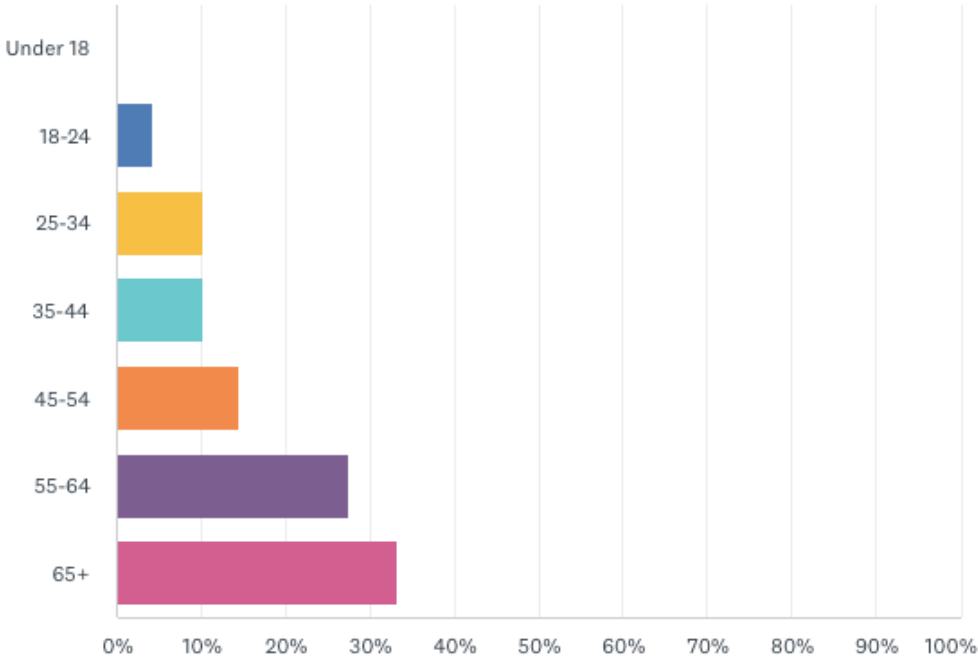
Appendix 1 – Community Engagement

Engagement method

To support the development of this MES, Council has engaged with the local community. The purpose of this engagement was to test the strategic direction of the MES and get community input on the proposed actions and their priority level. This ensures that the MES is responsive to community needs and values. The primary method of engagement was a survey that was open from early May to 17 June 2024. Respondents were encouraged to respond to the survey online, and paper copies were also made available. YSC advertised the survey through local newspapers, social media and at its service centres and transfer stations. YSC also conducted a series of in person engagement events to answer questions about the strategy development process and encourage responses to the community survey.

Respondents

The survey received 78 responses. About a third of the respondents live rurally, and the rest live in towns within the Shire. Most of the respondents were from older generations, with more than half of the respondents over the age of 55.



A large majority (84%) of respondents were homeowners, with the rest either renting or having other living situations.

Response to survey

The following scale was used to rate actions in the survey: 1 – no support; 2 – little support; 3 – not sure/neutral; 4 – some support; 5 – strong support.

Waste, recycling and resource recovery

There was a high level of support for most actions proposed in relation to waste, recycling and resource recovery. The average rating of support for actions in this category was 4.02. The actions receiving the most support included:

- Reduce what goes to landfill.
- Work with the agricultural industry to address difficult wastes.
- Investigate the feasibility of free transfer station drop offs.
- Avoid waste and use good waste management practices within Council's operations.
- Implement alternative options for rural waste collection.

The actions that received the lowest support levels included:

- Reviewing Council's glass collection service and consider if improvements and/or alternative options should be implemented.
- Promoting the EPA's Litter Report Line.
- Advocating to State government for consideration of alternatives to a mandatory FOGO fourth bin service for YSC.
- Support uptake of household and community practices that focus on reuse and recycling.
- Reduce contamination in recycling bins.

Many respondents provided additional feedback on the identified actions via comment boxes. Key points from these comments include:

- Some community members want a green waste bin introduced, whereas other don't have the need for such a service given they have their own existing methods to dispose of the waste stream such as home composting.
- The need to encourage and allow the reuse of valuable goods delivered to transfer stations.
- Glass collection should be reviewed in light of the container deposit scheme. Local collection could be considered instead.
- Council should support recycling for difficult wastes such as tyres, damaged clothing, commercial and electronic waste.
- Council should provide free hard waste collection.
- Council should focus on working with schools to educate students and parents.

Environment – water, land and biodiversity

Actions in the environment category received the highest level overall support. The average rating for the category was 4.14. The actions that received the highest level of support were:

- Ensuring recreational water is secured in the future.
- Continue to collaborate with catchment management authorities on projects addressing weeds and pests.
- Plant more public trees.

The actions that received the lowest level of support were:

- Enforcing biodiversity protection measures.
- Preserving and protecting Traditional Owner heritage values and culture.

Key themes that emerged in the written feedback from respondents included:

- The importance of selecting the right tree species for planting in the Shire, such as indigenous ones.
- The need to consider tree placement carefully to avoid adverse impacts.
- The need for more community education on biodiversity.

Climate Action – adaptation, mitigation and renewable energy

Although there was strong support for many of the climate actions, overall levels of support were lower for this category when compared to the others. The average support rating was 3.98. There was generally stronger support for adaptation-related actions, with the highest rated being:

- Ensure Council-managed infrastructure can be used to support staff and the community during emergency events.
- Maintain and further develop drainage to ensure it is effective during floods.
- Ensure all towns have cool places during extreme heat.
- Support bushfire risk reduction practices.

Mitigation-related actions generally received less support, and the lowest rated actions were:

- Investigate providing more charging stations for electric cars.
- Use emissions measurement as a basis for setting realistic emissions reduction targets.
- Start measuring, tracking and reporting Council emissions.
- Educate the community about opportunities to obtain renewable electricity.

Key themes from the community comments included:

- Concern about the cost of climate action.
- Varied levels of enthusiasm relating to technologies such as wind farms and electric vehicles – some community members are eager for Council to embrace this change while others are not.
- Support energy benefits in the community such as cheaper energy and more affordable batteries for home solar.