



STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2028



WE THE UNDERSIGNED ...

Are pleased to have contributed to the development of the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028 and look forward to working in partnership to deliver the Strategy.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE PEOPLE AND CLANS OF THE YORTA YORTA NATION AS THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE AREA NOW CALLED GREATER SHEPPARTON.

We recognise the deep connections they have with water, land, air and sky, and value partnerships with them for the health of people and Country.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge the primacy of Traditional Owners' obligations, rights and responsibilities to use and care for their traditional lands and waters.

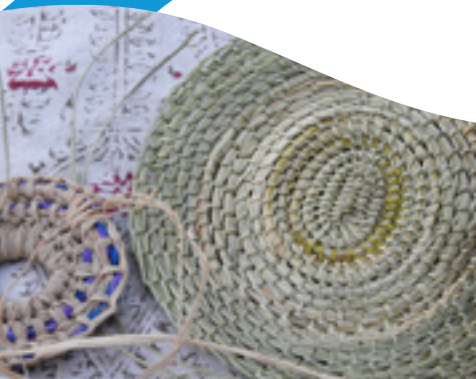


YORTA YORTA NATION

Yorta Yorta identity inherently stems from a belonging to Country. This connection to Country is bound up with a fundamental responsibility to Yorta Yorta ancestors who have been laid to rest in Yorta Yorta land.

As river people, water is the lifeblood of Yorta Yorta Country. Based upon oral history, ancestral management strategies have been passed down through generations to be used today.

Yorta Yorta Nation continues to be actively involved in cultural heritage and natural resource management and have aspirations to be involved in decisions and conservation operations, on equal footing, in order to sustain their connection and fulfil their inherited obligations to care for Country (Yorta Yorta Whole-of-Country Plan 2021-2030).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rivers and waterways are the arteries of our landscape. They bring life to our regions, nourishing ecosystems that in turn provide communities with everything they need to sustain themselves.

Between the twin cities of Shepparton and Mooroopna, Kaiela (the Goulburn River), infilled by the Broken River, flows downstream to meet Dhungalla (the Murray River).

This area is and has been cared for by the people and clans of the Yorta Yorta Nation for tens of thousands of years and today is **home to a culturally rich and diverse community.** Despite our widely differing backgrounds, a common element that unites us is that without the rivers, most of us would not live here.

In the past, the Shepparton - Mooroopna communities' appreciation of, and engagement with, the Goulburn and Broken Rivers have varied, famously *turning our backs to the river.* The river systems were largely managed by agencies in isolation, with little connection between these managers or with the community – until the formation of RiverConnect.

RiverConnect is a wide reaching community government partnership program under the auspice of Greater Shepparton City Council and jointly funded by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority. Since its inception in 2005, **RiverConnect has been pivotal in building appreciation for the significance of our river environment.**

By facilitating effective high-levels of collaboration and co-operation, the **partnership model** has enabled local government, land management agencies, Traditional Owners, educational organisations, stakeholders and community members to **come together to identify and action shared priorities.**

The success of the program is attributed wholeheartedly to the strength of its partnerships and their dedication to achieving its aspirations. We have a **shared fundamental responsibility to care for Country** as an ongoing commitment to conserving and enhancing our natural environment.

In the 5 years since the last strategy was prepared, a number of key changes occurred in relation to the RiverConnect area and its communities. Through discussions with the RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee and key stakeholders, these changes helped guide the formation of the new strategic plan and its actions.

The RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028 refreshes the focus of the program. This new plan has been developed to reflect the holistic nature of river systems, and the interconnected nature of the community's relationship with the waterways.

This strategic plan is not a typical organisational plan, reflecting the fact that RiverConnect is a network of organisations and individuals rather than being an organisation itself. **The plan is not a blueprint with every future action fully detailed,** however it offers direction and examples of actions.

From stakeholder feedback, partner strategic priorities and available funding opportunities, the RiverConnect IAC will develop annual action plans and corresponding targets.

RiverConnect **invites all groups and individuals with a stake in the river environment to be a part of RiverConnect.** We are proud to work in partnership to deliver the actions of the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028.

VISION

People, rivers and nature caring for each other.

PURPOSE

To foster the community's love, respect and connection to the river environment.

LONG-TERM GOALS

The vision and purpose of RiverConnect will be achieved by realising long-term goals that increase:

CARE OF

ACCESS TO







AWARENESS OF

PARTICIPATION IN

the river environment and our shared cultural heritage

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Actions are grouped under six priorities to provide an integrated strategy to guide RiverConnect for the next five years.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES	STRATEGIC ACTIONS	ANNUAL TARGETS
 ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Enhance opportunities for young people – Continue learnings about the river – Engage diverse community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engage 4,000 people in river environment activities – Support at least five Traditional Owner-led projects and events
 INSPIRE THE EDUCATION SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Enable educational participation – Strengthen connection with education sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 50% of Greater Shepparton schools have at least one class engaging in the river environment annually, involving 1,000 students – One tertiary education project in the RiverConnect area
 IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLBEING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Share health and wellbeing benefits – Link health and wellbeing to nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Deliver one health and wellbeing project that shares the benefits of nature – Monitor increased usage of shared pathways using trail counters
 ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nurture stewardship culture – Facilitate opportunities to care – Understand and realise flexible and inclusive water access – Enable sustainable on-going management – Connect the path network – Support Traditional Owner Connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Revegetate 1 Ha area and remove priority weeds in 0.7 Ha area – Create opportunities and spaces that people actively use – Continue to progress the RiverConnect Paths Master Plan
 SHOWCASE THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Creatively promote RiverConnect – Encourage eco-tourism – Communicate accessibility of the river environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Create three promotional materials or campaigns
 NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Leverage RiverConnect partner involvement – Explore a home for RiverConnect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Maintain and build relationships with 50 groups and organisations – Seek funding from government and 'non-traditional' sources consistent with RiverConnect aspirations

CONTEXT

RIVER SYSTEMS

Rivers and waterways are the arteries of our landscape. They bring life to our regions, nourishing ecosystems that in turn provide communities with everything they need to sustain themselves.

Rivers provide fresh water essential for community liveability, including supplying water for homes, irrigation, food processing, industry and gardens.

They are recognised for their cultural significance and interconnected social, recreational and educational values.

River ecosystems provide key corridors of habitat for wildlife and refuge for all species. In addition, the floodplains and wetlands flowing out from our rivers are powerful moderators of climate through their role in natural carbon sequestration.

All life relies on the health of these systems and there continues to be a wealth of untapped secrets and opportunities around the river.

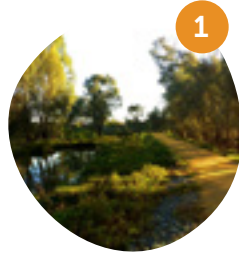




RIVERCONNECT AREA

The RiverConnect area has traditionally covered the river frontages of Kaiela (the Goulburn River) and the Broken River and the forest floodplain areas adjacent to the Shepparton-Mooroopna urban zones. The area includes the major wetlands of Gemmill’s and Reedy Swamps and a large number of reserves.

Providing access to the river environment is the Yanha Gurtji Shared Path network. Following the river from the Boulevard Bush Reserve in North Shepparton to Archer Street in Kialla, the network also extends over the Goulburn River to Chinaman’s Garden in Mooroopna and over the Broken River linking to the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton and residential areas of Sevens Creeks. In addition, there are two river access points, two vehicle bridges over the Goulburn River and a network of unsealed roads and paths through the forests.



1

In Mooroopna, **Gemmill’s Swamp Wildlife Reserve** covers approximately 170-hectares of Goulburn River floodplain forest including 84-hectares of wetland. Periodically receiving natural flood water from the Goulburn, the Mooroopna township stormwater enters a constructed bioremediation wetland for filtration.



5

The Flats is a culturally significant area on the floodplain in the Shepparton Regional Park between Shepparton and Mooroopna that was home to many Aboriginal families after the Cummeragunja Walk Off in 1939. Along The Flats Walk path, stories are shared through interpretive signage of historical events.



10

The **Boulevard Bush Reserve** is a unique River Red Gum woodland accessible via the Yanha Gurtji Shared Path network and close by to the Boulevard residential estate. The area is jointly managed in partnership through RiverConnect and with the Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group.



12

Reedy Swamp is a 130-hectare wetland that provides habitat and breeding sites for a large number of waterbirds including regionally, nationally and internationally significant species. The area is the southern-most point of the Lower Goulburn National Park and features an outdoor classroom with complementary interpretive signage.



13

In Shepparton, the built environment includes the **Victoria Park Lake** precinct comprised of the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM), Kaiela Arts Gallery, Aquamoves, S-Scape Skate Park, All Abilities Playground and recreational equipment.



15

Connected across the Broken River Bridge, the **Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton** has been regenerated from the former Kialla landfill site to a showcase of native plants that celebrate the history and diversity of the region. Recreational trails explore the area complemented by interpretive signage and rest areas.



- SEALED PATH
- - - UNSEALED PATH
- · · PROPOSED PATH
- - - VEHICLE TRACK
- PUBLIC PARKLANDS
- CAMPING AREA
- BOAT RAMP
- PUBLIC TOILETS
- INFORMATION CENTRE

- POINTS OF INTEREST
- 1. Gemmills Swamp Nature Conservation Reserve
- 2. J.A. Douglass Park
- 3. Kaieltheban Park
- 4. Chinamans Gardens
- 5. The Flats
- 6. KidsTown
- 7. Daintons Bridge
- 8. Stuarts Reserve
- 9. Jordans Bend
- 10. Boulevard Bush Reserve
- 11. Shepparton Weir/Fishway
- 12. Reedy Swamp
- 13. Victoria Park Lake Precinct
- 14. The Confluence
- 15. Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton
- 16. Raftery Bend



Note: All details correct at time of printing. Please visit riverconnect.com.au for the most recent Goulburn & Broken River Access Map.

↑ TO LOCH GARRY



1km

→ TO BENALLA

GREATER SHEPPARTON COMMUNITY

In terms of population, the Greater Shepparton municipality is the fifth largest city in regional Victoria.

Over 68,000 people live in the area with three-quarters of the population residing in Shepparton and Mooroopna.

With over 6,500 businesses, the local economy has an estimated Gross Regional Product of \$3.69 billion (Regional Development Victoria 2020). Known as Australia's Food Bowl, many businesses are built around agricultural industries including dairy, horticulture, livestock and broad acre cropping. Apart from agriculture, the economy is also heavily supported by the health industry, retail, manufacturing and education sectors.



Located on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta Nation, the area is home to the largest Aboriginal population in regional Victoria. Their extraordinary strong links with the river and land stretch back for tens of thousands of years, including recent history where Aboriginal people walked off the Cummergunja mission and established settlements on “The Flats”, in the red gum forest between Shepparton and Mooroopna.

Over time the region has become home to people from all over the world – bringing with them a wealth of different languages, cultures and faiths. Today our culturally rich and diverse community is comprised of over 30 nationalities, who together speak over 50 languages. Whilst our community is culturally diverse and drawn from widely differing backgrounds, a common element that unites us is that without the rivers, most of us would not live here.



THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Between the twin cities of Shepparton and Mooroopna, Kaiela (the Goulburn River), infilled by the Broken River, flows downstream to meet Dhungalla (the Murray River).

The Goulburn and Broken River systems are key assets of the Greater Shepparton region, and Shepparton is fortunate to be sited near the confluence of these two important rivers. These rivers flow into the Murray River, forming part of the Murray Darling Basin.

In particular, the river environment within the RiverConnect area is seen as unique in terms of its natural state. As the longest river in Victoria, Kaiela (the Goulburn River) is one of 18 declared as a heritage river under the *Heritage River Act in 1992*. This declaration aims to protect its significant values for conservation, recreation, scenic and cultural heritage.

Prior to European settlement, our landscape contained a richly diverse and complex mosaic of vegetation communities, from dry granite hills to wet riparian environments, with around 80 per cent of the Greater Shepparton landscape known as plains woodland.

While there has been a decline in biodiversity and vegetation extent and quality surrounding the river, it has been less significant than other urban centres situated on rivers. This is largely due to the nature of the floodplain and regularity of flooding, and its protection by reservation of the area as State Forest and areas under National Park declarations (Lower Goulburn National Park and Shepparton Regional Park). That being said, our indigenous flora and fauna are now largely restricted to refuge areas along roadsides and riparian bushland with less than 2.5 per cent of native vegetation remaining.



The Goulburn and Broken River systems support an array of flora and fauna including state and nationally threatened species. Vegetation along the rivers is predominately River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) with understories comprising grasses, wattles and native peas. Wildlife such as Squirrel, Sugar and Feather-tailed Gliders, Ringtail and Brushtail Possums, native fish including Murray Cod, Murray Perch and Silver Perch, Platypus, Rakali, Echidnas, Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Black Wallabies, Yellow-footed Antechinus, turtles, frogs, birds and bats all inhabit our river environs.

Within the region there are a number of natural and constructed wetlands that provide habitat for wildlife including many migratory bird species that pass through our region. In addition to the habitat they provide, our wetlands play an important role in flood mitigation, absorb pollutants and improve water quality.

Conserving and enhancing our natural environment is a fundamental responsibility that we all hold. As the population of Greater Shepparton grows, the pressure placed upon our systems and threats could lead to a decline in the river environment unless active efforts are made to sustain its future.

Ongoing threats to the health of river environment include:



Loss of biodiversity and habitat connectivity (e.g. riparian erosion, loss of instream habitat, vegetation removal and loss, illegal removal of firewood)



Reduction in water quality (e.g. pollution, black water events)



Modification of natural systems and cycles (e.g. unseasonal high flows, intervalley transfers, flow deviation, channel modification, interruptions to wetland connectivity)



Disregard for the river environment through inappropriate behaviours (e.g. rubbish dumping, 4WD)



Competition with native species from pest plants and animals (e.g. invasive weeds, stock access, introduced animals)



Climate change (e.g. extremes of weather, increase in average temperature, reduction in average rainfall)



INTERACTION WITH THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT

Over the last 20-30 years, understanding and appreciation of the river environment, its beauty, and its importance for health, wellbeing, recreation, and cultural connection has increased.

We choose to spend time outside, recreating on the path network, fishing and canoeing on our waterways, connecting with our cultures and traditions, and building our understanding and shared appreciation for nature and its connected systems. Especially in recent times, we found solace in the outdoors and saw improvements for health and wellbeing through reconnection with nature.

Our public lands within the RiverConnect area are managed by land managers including Parks Victoria and Greater Shepparton City Council who are responsible for approvals and ongoing management, maintenance and safety of areas and assets. Through the signing of the 2004 Yorta Yorta Co-Operative Management Agreement with the State Government, Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation have a formal role in management of Woka (land) and Walla (water). In addition, the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority has overarching responsibilities as a caretaker of river health across the region.

We have a multitude of passionate and committed volunteers who selflessly devote their time, knowledge, skills and efforts to enhancing and protecting our natural environment.

These volunteers include:

- **Landcare groups**, such as the Goulburn Murray Landcare Network and Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group who deliver a range of land-based environmental activities;
- **'Friends of' groups** that tend to focus on a particular area of interest and include groups such as the Friends of the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton (Council supported volunteers) and Friends of Gemmill's Swamp (Parks Victoria supported volunteers);
- **Environmental groups** who advocate for environmental issues, such as the Goulburn Valley Environment Group;
- **Angler groups**, including Burnanga Indigenous Fishing Club who provide opportunities and share knowledge of how to Care for Country and Culture through fishing;

Beyond these groups there are also a large number of individuals and groups who use the area for recreation and passively collect rubbish, report issues and remove invasive weeds.

Children and young people are provided with opportunities to participate in place-based learning and implement projects that care for the natural values of our river systems. Such activities include revegetation, weed removal, rubbish removal, wildlife surveys and citizen science, advocacy projects, and habitat assessment and improvement (such as building nest boxes).

Attitudes are shifting as community are inspired to increase their appreciation and custodianship of the river environment as a social, environmental, educational, economic, and cultural asset. We value these spaces for the enrichment they add to our lives and there is huge potential in sharing the benefits for tourism, amenity, recreation, and health and wellbeing for locals and visitors alike.



RIVERCONNECT

RiverConnect is a partnership program between the land management agencies, stakeholders and community who use, value, manage, or are responsible for, the river environment in some way.

RIVERCONNECT MODEL

Since its inception in 2005, RiverConnect has been pivotal in building the appreciation for the significance of our river environment.

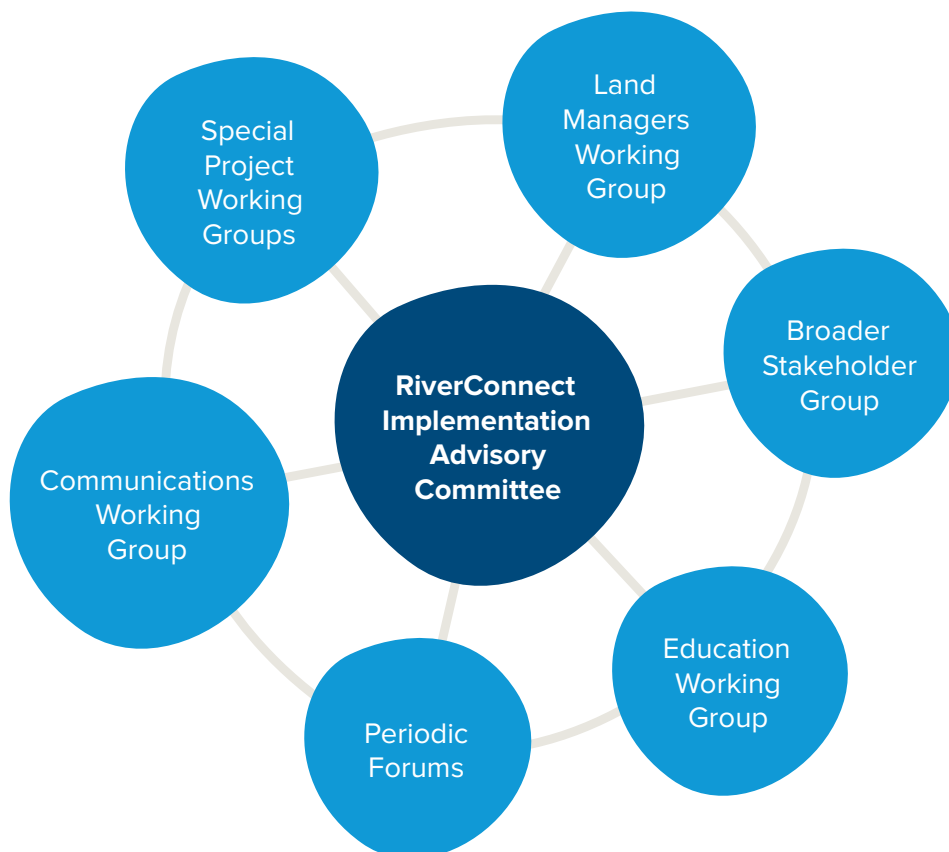
The success of the program is attributed wholeheartedly to the strength of its partnerships and their dedication to achieving its aspirations.

This partnership model has enabled local government, land management agencies, Traditional Owners, educational organisations, stakeholders and community members to come together to identify and action shared priorities.

By facilitating effective, high levels of collaboration and co-operation, RiverConnect has positively contributed to notable environmental, economic and social outcomes for the river and our communities (Appendix 1).

RiverConnect has come a long way to addressing barriers in an environment with evolving complexities, and together, its partners have an ongoing commitment to further enhancing the value of our rivers.

Figure 1: The implementation governance structure of RiverConnect



To ensure all key stakeholders are represented and have access and opportunities to bring their ideas and issues forward for consideration, the implementation of the RiverConnect program follows a clear governance structure (Appendix 2).

RiverConnect partners believe:

- by increasing knowledge and positive interaction with the river environment, individuals develop an appreciation and understand the value of conservation;
- the resilience of the river environment is challenged by increasing population, increased usage and occasional poor behaviour and deliberate damage;
- there are great opportunities to use the river environment in promoting community's connectedness with the natural environment, personal wellness, and community wellbeing;
- there are many people and organisations who have an interest in the RiverConnect area, and there are many benefits from collaboration;
- collaborated efforts require trust and goodwill, and partners understand it takes time and perseverance to build;
- risk and opportunities can arise unexpectedly, especially in a multi-stakeholder operating environment, and plans therefore need to be flexible and adaptive; and
- given the above, working together to achieve our vision is worthwhile.



Agenda - CM20221220 - Council Meeting - 20 December 2022 Attachments

RIVERCONNECT IN ACTION

Achievements from 2017-2022

Wins for Connectivity and Accessibility

Awarded \$500,000 in State and \$610,740 in Federal Government funding for shared path network linkages enabling the completion of two stages of the RiverConnect Paths Master Plan.

The Flats (Route 3) included upgrades to the track and installation of seating, improving the accessibility for Flats Walk Tours by Yorta Yorta Elders.

Across the Broken River, construction of a pedestrian bridge and associated path (Route 5) have provided the connecting link between Shepparton and Kialla and to the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton.



Protecting Turtles a Team Effort

Collaborated with the Cussen Park Advisory Committee and Turtles Australia to survey Cussen Park for turtle nests using La Trobe University nest-detection dogs. Held an education and training event about use of next protection kits (kindly funded by the Hugh Williamson Foundation) for community and Greater Shepparton City Council staff.



Opportunities to learn and make a difference

Engaged 23,792 people across 507 collaborative events focused on education, art and culture, recreation and wellbeing, as well as hands-on planting, rubbish removal, weeding and nest-box building.

Unbound by the Walls of Traditional Learning

Inspired 8,034 students by providing opportunities to understand the environment, culture, and importance of the area, and participate in river environment improvements and projects spending over 570 hours learning.



Relationships for the long run

Built and maintained partnerships with over 40 organisations, agencies and groups, and with an additional 45 individual early learning, primary, secondary, tertiary and alternative education institutions.



RIVERCONNECT IN ACTION

Achievements from 2017-2022



Wetlands the focus of Citizen Science

Assisted Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab to collect data for the TeaComposition H2O Wetland Carbon Storage Project alongside Parks Victoria and volunteers from the Goulburn Valley Environment Group and Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group.

Environmental Leaders of the Future

Celebrated young leaders of our region, including Jacob Dedman, the author of the 'Birds of Cussen Park' Edition 1 and 2.



Significant Sites to Learn and Protect

Installed the Reedy Swamp Ngaikun Woka Walla (Outdoor Classroom) space alongside the existing complementary interpretive signage highlighting the significance of the wetland for Yorta Yorta people.

Well Received by Community

Featured in 118 media items and attracted a following of 1,214 people on the RiverConnect Facebook Group and 436 people on the RiverConnect Instagram Page.



A Purposeful Path for Wellbeing

Facilitated maintenance agreement between Parks Victoria and community group to enable the Stuart's Reserve Labyrinth for community meditation and use.

Botanic Gardens Collaboration

Supported relationships between the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne and the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton to run a Biomimicry educational day for 90 primary-aged students.



Rivers No Home for Rubbish

Delivered joint messaging on illegal dumping campaigns alongside ongoing clean-up activities and events.

RIVERCONNECT STRATEGY

Vision and purpose statements are important beacons that provide direction for a program. The RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) has freshened these statements to reflect the interconnectedness and holistic nature of river systems.

Values form the operating philosophies or principles that guide an organisation’s internal behaviour as well as its relationship with its partners. The values agreed upon by the IAC underpin the way RiverConnect operates and directs how partners work together.

The vision and purpose align to a set of long-term goals for RiverConnect and interconnected strategic priorities. Delivering these goals and actions in a way that meets our shared values is the reason we are all part of RiverConnect; our purpose. Progression, and ultimately achievement, of these goals will see us meet our vision.



CHANGES SINCE THE 2017-2022 STRATEGY

Between the first (2011-2016) and second (2017-2022) RiverConnect Strategic Plans, the IAC dedicated countless hours to developing and proposing a new framework to guide the future directions of RiverConnect.

When considering development of this new strategic plan, the IAC felt much of the previous framework of the plan was still relevant, and alongside some minor changes and an update of actions, the third strategic plan should build on the existing priorities for action whilst reflecting the new issues that have emerged and the lessons learnt over the previous 10 years.

In the 5 years since the last strategy was prepared, a number of key changes have occurred in relation to the RiverConnect area and its communities. These changes were identified through IAC and stakeholder discussions and have guided the development of the specific focus areas for the next 5 years (see page 25).



Traditional Owners

Increasing recognition of the importance, benefit and legislated roles of Traditional Owner's knowledge, decision making and role in Caring for Country.



COVID-19

An increased awareness and appreciation of the natural environment for recreational, health and wellbeing benefits.



Climate Change

Acceptance of a changing climate and the need to prepare for a hotter climate with greater weather extremes.



Facility upgrades

Improvement in the facilities available across the RiverConnect area, including expansion to the Yanha Gurtji Shared Path Network and development of the Shepparton Art Museum building.



Outdoor socialisation

Growing proportion of the population who choose to meet and socialise with extended family and friends outside of their homes.



Understanding of water flow variability

Increased variability of water flows down the Goulburn River to enhance the environment but also to transfer water to agricultural developments downstream.



Population growth

Residential expansion to the South and North of Shepparton and to the West of Mooroopna.



Secondary school merger

Combination of the Shepparton and Mooroopna government schools into one campus in Shepparton.

VISION

People, rivers and nature caring for each other.

PURPOSE

To foster the community's love, respect and connection to the river environment.

VALUES

As a network of partners collaborating to achieve outcomes in a complex and dynamic setting, the success of RiverConnect depends on an agreed set of operating principles or values.

RiverConnect:

- Promotes enhancement of the **ENVIRONMENT** in the use, design and delivery of all projects;
- Encourages **COLLABORATION** by supporting and complementing partners, encouraging joint project ownership via strong partnerships and a shared understanding of responsibilities;
- Is **INCLUSIVE**, welcoming all groups and individuals with a stake in the river environment to be a part of RiverConnect;
- Enables **TRADITIONAL OWNERS** **ONGOING CONNECTION** with the RiverConnect area; and
- Celebrates the **SHARED EXPERIENCE** of the diverse cultural groups who have come to the region.

LONG-TERM GOALS

The vision and purpose of RiverConnect will be achieved by realising long-term goals that increase:



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Actions are grouped under six priorities to provide an integrated strategy to guide RiverConnect for the next five years.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES	STRATEGIC ACTIONS	ANNUAL TARGETS
ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Enhance opportunities for young people – Continue learnings about the river – Engage diverse community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engage 4,000 people in river environment activities – Support at least five Traditional Owner-led projects and events
INSPIRE THE EDUCATION SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Enable educational participation – Strengthen connection with education sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 50% of Greater Shepparton schools have at least one class engaging in the river environment annually, involving 1,000 students – One tertiary education project in the RiverConnect area
IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLBEING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Share health and wellbeing benefits – Link health and wellbeing to nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Deliver one health and wellbeing project that shares the benefits of nature – Monitor increased usage of shared pathways using trail counters
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LONG-TERM GOALS

The vision and purpose of RiverConnect will be achieved by realising long-term goals that increase:

CARE OF

ACCESS TO

AWARENESS OF

PARTICIPATION IN

the river environment and our shared cultural heritage

Aligned with each long-term goal are particular strategic action areas for focus during the next 5 years. Envisaged below and related to both the long-term goals and strategic priorities, these actions originated from feedback from the Implementation Advisory Committee and various stakeholder discussions.

Care

The quality, diversity and sustainability of the river environment underpin its value to the community. Our environment has been heavily modified over time and hence needs to be protected and enhanced through a co-ordinated program of dedicated planning and action.

Our region has a growing proportion of community members who enjoy offering their time, knowledge, skills and efforts to make a difference. These **volunteers** have a huge impact on what can be a colossal effort for land managers and their allocated resources. **Facilitating opportunities**, and developing and implementing projects with interested groups and volunteers is of great benefit to our environment and also for social, economic, and physical and mental health outcomes.

Building an appreciation for what the river and nature have to offer directly links to encouraging **stewardship culture** by promoting responsible use, protection and management of the environment through conservation and sustainable best practices. Bringing our partners together to visualise this concept and create a **shared plan of action** will secure commitment to longer-term management.

Access

To connect with our river environment, our community must be able to access the river in ways that are compatible with their lifestyle, cultural background, abilities and interests. Acknowledging that there is more than physical access, **understanding the communities' needs** and the impact of varying water flow will be central to any investigations into increasing accessibility.

Expansion of the **shared path network** through the river environment will continue to be implemented through the RiverConnect Paths Master Plan, enabling greater possibilities for recreation, active transport and correlated health and wellbeing benefits.

The use of directional **signage** from urban centres and key tourism areas will encourage people to visit the river, and interpretive signage will ground them in the rich cultural heritage and environmental values of these spaces. Alongside this, RiverConnect can provide a supportive backdrop for emerging **eco-tourism businesses** to develop that promote our beautiful river environment for locals and visitors to enjoy.

Awareness

The Greater Shepparton community has a strong desire to learn and understand more about all aspects of the RiverConnect area. Increasing this understanding will improve our shared appreciation of the area, thus allowing us to build a stronger connection to the river environment.

The building blocks of this awareness is the strong RiverConnect **educational program**. Over the years, RiverConnect has enabled the river environment to be utilised as an outdoor classroom, inspiring many students to think hands-on, unbound by the walls of traditional learning.

Noticeably after Covid-19, our individual connectedness with nature grew as we understood the value of the environment for **health and wellbeing**. In conjunction with this, we began to feel more protective of these natural spaces and our willingness to get involved flourished. Together we can explore ways to incorporate, share and promote these benefits.

Through various events, RiverConnect will continue to engage our increasingly **diverse local community**, including newly migrated residents, and the many visitors we welcome for short-term study or work arrangements. Moreover, sharing the successes and **promoting the RiverConnect program** through various methods of communication will leverage awareness, attracting partner collaboration and potential funding opportunities.

Participation

In conjunction with improving physical access to the river environment, **co-ordinated efforts** are needed to encourage our community to visit these areas and connect in a way that is meaningful to them. Many studies show that both physical and mental health and well-being can be strengthened through interaction with the natural environment. How this interaction occurs varies but is broader than physical activities and includes social, cultural, artistic and educational endeavours.

Through **collaborative events and projects**, RiverConnect will continue to create active ways to participate in the river environment that are creative, adaptive and engaging. Alongside this, Greater Shepparton hosts a wide range of events and festivals and there are many opportunities to utilise the **RiverConnect area** or incorporate RiverConnect aspects into these events.

Building on existing **relationships** and expanding with groups of interest including multi-cultural communities, young people, and newly arrived migrants are of particular focus. More-over, empowering and **supporting self-determination of Traditional Owners** is of great benefit to all, including Country, and opens opportunities both within the Aboriginal community and with the wider community.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY (ETC)

Provide broad ways for the community to enjoy, understand and care for the river environment and its cultural heritage.



INSPIRE THE EDUCATION SECTOR (IES)

Facilitate opportunities for teachers and students to learn from, and about the river environment and culture.



IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLBEING (IHW)

Improve the mental and physical state of the community through the enjoyment and connection with the river environment.



ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT (ACRE)

Ensure the river environment can be accessed and enjoyed by us now and by future generations.



SHOWCASE THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT (SRE)

Creatively share the potential of our river environment.



NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE (NPGG)

Support partner efforts and relationships to collectively care for the river environment.

ACTION PLAN

The RiverConnect Strategic Plan is not a typical organisational plan, reflecting the fact that RiverConnect is a network of organisations and individuals rather than being an organisation itself.

The Strategic Plan therefore:

- has a large degree of in-built flexibility (through an annual review process);
- lists actions that support or contribute to the achievement of partner organisational strategies;
- acknowledges that while the listed aspirations and actions listed in the Plan are expected to align with partners, they will not all be relevant to every partner;
- has aspirations and actions that are expected to guide progress rather than be prescriptive.

In this section the structure of the action plan is visualised and notably, as with both previous strategies, the plan is not a blueprint with every future action fully detailed. Many of the actions will involve further investigation to determine their detailed design and feasibility, and the implementation process will bring in relevant stakeholders at the beginning and throughout project development as an ongoing commitment to relationships.

Annual action plans will be developed based upon community priorities, partner strategic priorities and legislative requirements, and funding availabilities, and implementation of the agreed actions will be managed directly by the nominated lead agency.





ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY (ETC)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Enhance opportunities for young people	Communications Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee Land Management Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore ways to support activities outside of the traditional curriculum (e.g. Environmental Leaders, On Country connection, Climate Change Leadership programs) Inspire and support youth committees and groups to develop events, activities and projects of their interest
Continue learnings about the river	Implementation Advisory Committee Communications Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate to integrate various cultural, environmental, social, recreational, historical, economic and intrinsic understandings of the river (e.g. collaborative messaging, joint events) Promote partner achievements and publications (e.g. citizen science apps, events)
Engage diverse community	Implementation Advisory Committee Communications Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target activities to groups such as young people, those with a disability, newly arrived migrants, and multi-cultural and/or bilingual communities Explore potential for tapping into short-term study or work residents (e.g. onboarding) Outreach to small towns and communities in Greater Shepparton (e.g. Cussen Park)



INSPIRE THE EDUCATION SECTOR (IES)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Enable educational participation	Land Management Working Group Education Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links between schools and RiverConnect partners and create opportunities for onsite river activities and projects (e.g. citizen science, tree planting) Support cultural awareness education activities (e.g. Flats Walk tours, curriculum-linked learning) Collaborate to develop curriculum materials that are relevant to primary, secondary and tertiary education needs (e.g. Shepparton Art Museum 'Educator Kits')
Strengthen connection with education sector	Education Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build local environmental educator network (e.g. community of practice meetings) Reconnect with Greater Shepparton schools and explore relationship with Greater Shepparton Secondary College Maintain networks with all levels of education: early years, primary, secondary and tertiary



IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLBEING (IHW)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Share health and wellbeing benefits	Communications Working Group Special Project Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with health sector to share benefit and importance of river environment (e.g. joint MOU, consistent messaging, joint activities and projects)
Link health and wellbeing to nature	Implementation Advisory Committee Special Project Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek representation from the health sector for representation on IAC and/or Health and Wellbeing Special Project Working Group Collaborate with health sector to deliver a project that shares the benefits of nature on health and wellbeing (e.g. 'Green Scripts')



ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT (ACRE)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Nurture stewardship culture	Land Management Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee Communications Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support environmental volunteer groups and enable capacity building Collaborate with land managers to streamline processes for environmental improvements Encourage increased reporting of inappropriate behaviour (e.g. rubbish dumping)
Facilitate opportunities to care	Land Management Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer ways for community, businesses, schools, organisations and groups to contribute to river environment improvements (e.g. reinvigorate or reimagine 'Adopt a Reach')
Understand and realise flexible and inclusive water access	Land Management Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand and conceptualise accessibility needs Establish priority areas of interest and investigate potential opportunities for improving access (e.g. safety improvements, signage, path upgrades, boat ramps)
Enable sustainable on-going management	Land Management Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore an initiative bringing together the stakeholders to identify shared plan for the long- term management of the river environment Provide expert input and advocacy for partners and community to strategies, plans and large-scale projects that impact on river environment
Connect the path network	Greater Shepparton City Council Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue implementation of the RiverConnect Paths Master Plan (e.g. incorporate paths into GSCC capital budget) Advocate for future path connection projects and inclusion of RiverConnect areas in path linking strategies (e.g. river trails, cycling strategies)
Support Traditional Owner Connection	Land Management Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee Yorta Yorta Nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build trust and relationships with Traditional Owners Explore role in supporting Traditional Owner Work on Country (e.g. Joint TO led projects in significant areas)



SHOWCASE THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT (SRE)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Creatively promote RiverConnect	Communications Working Group Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve communication of the program using creative methods (e.g. story-telling, social media engagement, QR code links to website) Use expertise of the RiverConnect network to proactively share information (e.g. media releases on national days of significance)
Encourage eco-tourism	Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with tourism groups to explore opportunities (e.g. forum) Support and promote development of eco-tourism opportunities and businesses (e.g. canoe/bike hire)
Communicate accessibility of the river environment	Communications Working Group Special Project Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximise use of existing paths and infrastructure through creative methods (e.g. self-guided tours, QR codes) Explore directional signage for the river (e.g. from key tourist locations and the CBD) Increase interpretive signage, seeking inclusion of Yorta Yorta language where appropriate



NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE (NPGG)

Strategic Action	Partners	Example Activities
Leverage RiverConnect partner involvement	Implementation Advisory Committee Communications Working Group Land Management Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide expert input and advocacy for partners and community to strategies, plans and large-scale projects that impact on the river environment Collaborate to deliver multi-agency multi activity days to add value to events or school excursions
Explore a home for RiverConnect	Implementation Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scope out potential for a home/hub/space for RiverConnect, partners, community and eco-tourism business start-ups to collaborate, share resources, and hold meetings, events, education. (e.g. office space with meeting and education spaces, hot desks and reasonable accessibility to the river environment)

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation structures and the expectations and obligations of partner organisations are clearly documented in a 5-year RiverConnect Memorandum of Understanding that follows the duration of each strategic plan.

Nomination processes, roles and responsibilities for partner representation on the IAC is detailed via a 3-year Terms of Reference document. Within this, community representation is welcomed through a public nomination and appointment process. This public process for partner organisations, and Committee and Working Group representatives to “sign-on” to these arrangements provides a strong legitimacy for the role and operation of the governance arrangements.

The key functions to be undertaken through the RiverConnect program implementation includes:

- Oversight of implementation activities including identifying strategic links within and between organisations and suggesting funding opportunities to deliver on shared priorities;
- Assessing progress against objectives and monitoring of actual performance against agreed measures;
- Program accountability through preparation of annual reports on achievements against the Plan;
- Review and adaptation of the Plan to modify priorities or strategies where objectives are not being achieved, or in light of changing circumstances or new information;

- Undertaking community consultation and seeking community feedback to ensure that the Plan and actions being implemented continue to meet community needs effectively;
- Co-ordination of implementation activities between various partners organisations, including communications and promotional activities, to maximise impact and avoid duplication.

Through the Draft Strategic Plan public consultation period, RiverConnect partners outreached to any potential stakeholders identified within actions of the plan, including communities, groups, committees, agencies and organisations, to seek their feedback and input through a survey. This process also involved seeking representatives for the Implementation Advisory Committee, the various working groups and engaging various potential partners for future actions identified in the plan. All feedback, along with partner strategic priorities and legislative requirements listed in Appendix 3, will be used to develop annual actions plans. Details of responses will be available in the Conversation Report on the RiverConnect website after the public consultation period.

FUNDING

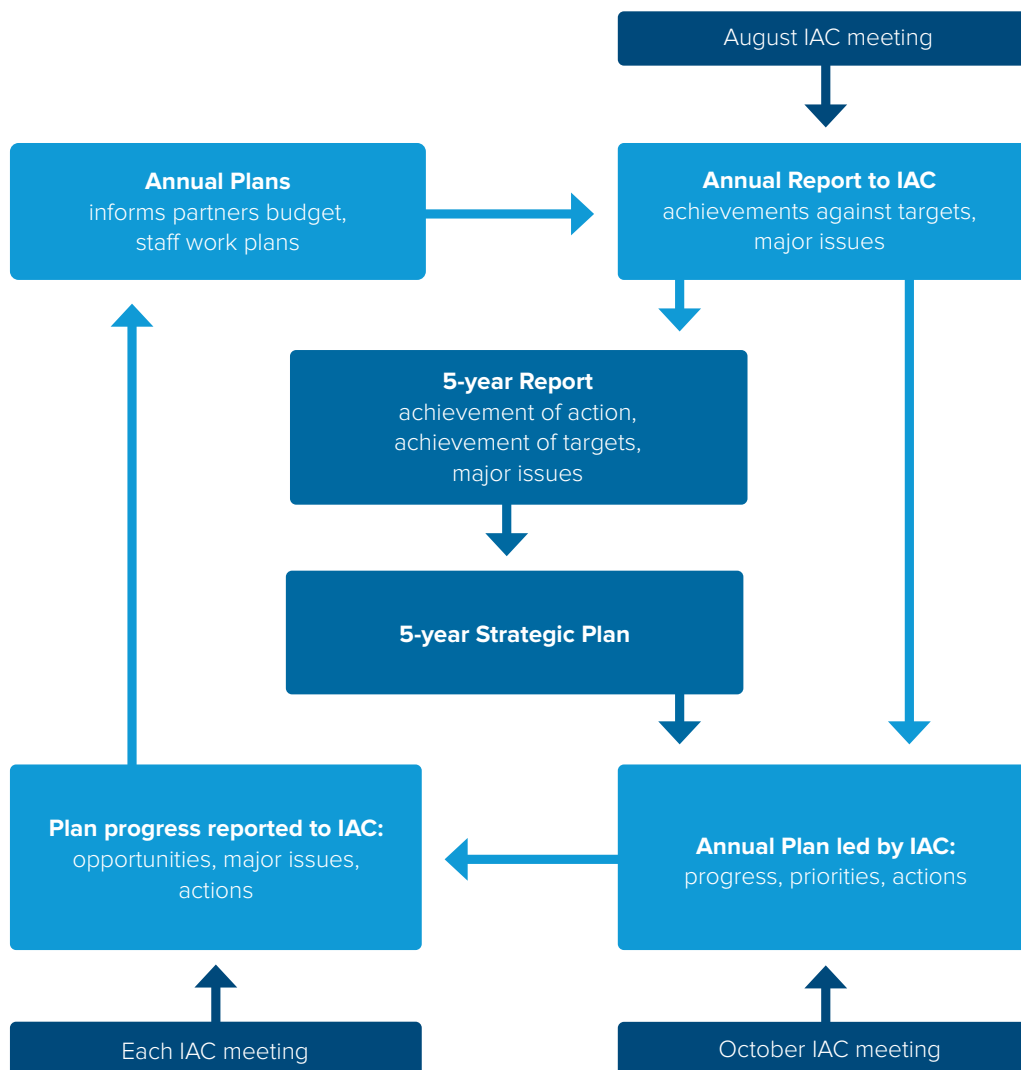
The Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority contributes \$106,300 annually towards funding project staff and other project costs, which is matched by Greater Shepparton City Council, who are also responsible for auspicing the program, providing day-to-day operation and support for project staff.

The Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority contribution will continue at the same level for a four-year period (as set by the Victorian Government funding guidelines) and Greater Shepparton City Council have committed

to matching this funding to provide staffing resources for implementation.

External funding is necessary for project implementation, including from various program partners, who have provided funding or in-kind contributions as aligned opportunities arise. Active promotion of the program through its previous successes, will open up alternate forms of funding and resourcing such as from philanthropic organisations or mutually beneficial collaborations to meet shared priorities.

Figure 2: RiverConnect Implementation planning and review process



MONITORING

Monitoring and evaluation are prone to becoming unwieldy and therefore ineffective if they are not rigorously focused. IAC partners highlighted the importance of distinguishing data that can be captured through the RiverConnect program and data that requires further development and collaboration.

The specific data listed for collection (Table 1) will be continuously gathered to monitor the progress of the plan over a long-term basis.

In addition, existing data and benchmarking set by several partners will also be used to complement the data captured. There is also merit in connecting to larger datasets, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, citizen science, liveability indexes and localised studies, to draw on broader information, building holistic understandings and opening up opportunities for funding.



Table 1: Data collection for ongoing monitoring of the RiverConnect program in relation to the Long-term goals

Long-term goals	Aspirations for 2030	Performance measures/indicators
Care	Increased extent and quality of native vegetation and water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water quality parameters (e.g. turbidity, salinity, dissolved oxygen, pH) Area mapping of revegetation works
	Reduced levels of rubbish in the river environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volume of rubbish removed from the river environment and Gross Pollutant Traps
	Decreased presence of weeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Area mapping of weed removal works
Access	Implementation of the RiverConnect Paths Master Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion of all five stages of the Master Plan Kilometres of path built and improved River crossings built
	Increased communication related to river environment access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of informational materials developed and shared Number of signs (real and virtual) developed and installed
	Increased river-access points and usage spaces upgraded or constructed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of access points and spaces built and improved
Awareness	Increased understanding of the river environment and its cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RiverConnect event evaluation survey data Event categorisation (i.e. wellbeing, art, physical activity)
	Increased RiverConnect program reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of media items Website and social media engagement metrics RiverConnect event evaluation survey data Number of presentations, publications and campaigns
Participation	Increased number of students learning in the river environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of students, classes and hours spent Activities and outputs achieved by students
	Increased use of river environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trail counter data Event participation and number of events Location list of events, activities and classes
	Continued partner engagement and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner list and relationship to RiverConnect Number of strategies, plans or large-scale projects contributed to

EVALUATION

Following the framework from the previous strategic plan, monitoring and evaluation will focus on three critical and connected levels.

Table 2: Logic to drive short and long-term performance and adaptation

Evaluation level	Key evaluation question	Evidence to inform evaluation	
		Parameter monitored	Data
1. Annual performance	How did we go this year against what we said we would do?	Activities completed against funds received, such as those from the GB CMA and GSCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relevant data listed in Table 1 as per funding requirements (e.g. weed and rubbish removal, revegetation works, event and student participation, media items, etc.)
2. 2023-2028 strategy implementation progress	What progress has been made in implementing what we said we would do when the Plan was written?	Activities completed by all partners regardless of fund source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of activities completed against the strategic actions Collated outputs from the data listed in Table 1
	How effective were the actions?	Progress towards the 5-year strategic actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above Evaluation of activities and actions at each IAC meeting
	Do the priorities for action need to change?	All of the above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All of the above
3. 2030 Vision realisation	What progress has been made towards vision?	Progress towards the four long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collated outputs from the data listed in Table 1 Comparison of data across numerous years
	Have circumstances changed sufficiently to warrant change in the strategic actions?	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional changes (especially for partners) Government and other funding priority changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anecdotal evidence, discussion papers, meeting papers, etc.

REPORTING

While data is expected to be gathered continually during Plan implementation, reporting timeframes vary for each evaluation level.

Table 3: Reporting schedule in relation to the evaluation level

Evaluation level	Report to RiverConnect IAC
Annual performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update every RiverConnect IAC meeting (anticipated to be every two months) Complete report (including quantitative data and stories) and present to IAC in August prior to major planning reset in October each year
Long-term strategy implementation progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report on progress annually, prior to major planning reset in November each year Complete report as part of strategy review at the end of this Plan update (in five years)
Vision realisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report on progress and other evaluation questions annually Complete report as part of strategy review at the end of this Plan update (in five years)



APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: RIVERCONNECT JOURNEY

Despite dependence on the rivers, the Shepparton-Mooroopna communities' appreciation of, and engagement with our river environment have varied due to past practices of "turning our back to the river".

Over the last 60 years, the Goulburn River was redirected away from the Shepparton town area, complementary buildings and infrastructure were removed and the focus of urban development turned away from the river. Simultaneously, as the focus on utilisation of the area for economic benefit increased and our urban centres grew, individual connection with the spaces and the health of our rivers declined.

In the early 2000s, many observed these changes and a groundswell of interest led to the development of the RiverConnect program. Collaboratively we were motivated to find solutions and understood the need for a whole-of-community approach to reconnect people to the river environment whilst protecting and enhancing these spaces. RiverConnect continues to evolve as it aims to foster the community's love, respect and connection to the river environment.

RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2011-2016

The RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) led the implementation of the first RiverConnect Strategic Plan. The actions of the plan yielded a range of significant benefits including:

- a vibrant educational program;
- land managers working more closely together to improve the health of the river environment
- activities that engaged more of the community with the river;
- identified further opportunities for the Aboriginal community to recognise, record and share their ancient relationship with the waterways;
- building of partnerships across stakeholders resulting in collaborative and integrated activities from planning through to implementation; and
- attraction of funding for a range of projects that increased the connection of many parts of the community to the river.



RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2017-2022

The second Strategic Plan built upon and continued to provide a high level, integrated strategy to guide the focus of RiverConnect. It was an adaptive plan and not a “blueprint” with every future action fully detailed and proved beneficial when priorities shifted during the global pandemic. The plan enabled a co-ordinated approach to enhancing the environmental, cultural, recreational and economic value of the rivers. Ensuring that the available funds achieved the greatest possible benefit.

Notable achievements included:

- Successful awarding of \$500,000 in State and \$610,740 in Federal Government funding for shared path network upgrades;
- Upgrades of community spaces including Stuart's Reserve Labyrinth and installation of the Reedy Swamp outdoor classroom;
- Continued support for Traditional Owner story-telling and knowledge sharing through Flats Walk tours;
- Increased awareness of and participation in the river environment through collaborative events focused on education, art and culture, recreation and wellbeing, as well as hands-on planting, rubbish removal, weeding and nest-box building;
- Swift adaptation to Covid-19 implications to create engaging online resources;
- Engagement with over 40 partners, not including an additional 45 individual early learning, primary, secondary, tertiary and alternative education institutions.



APPENDIX 2: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

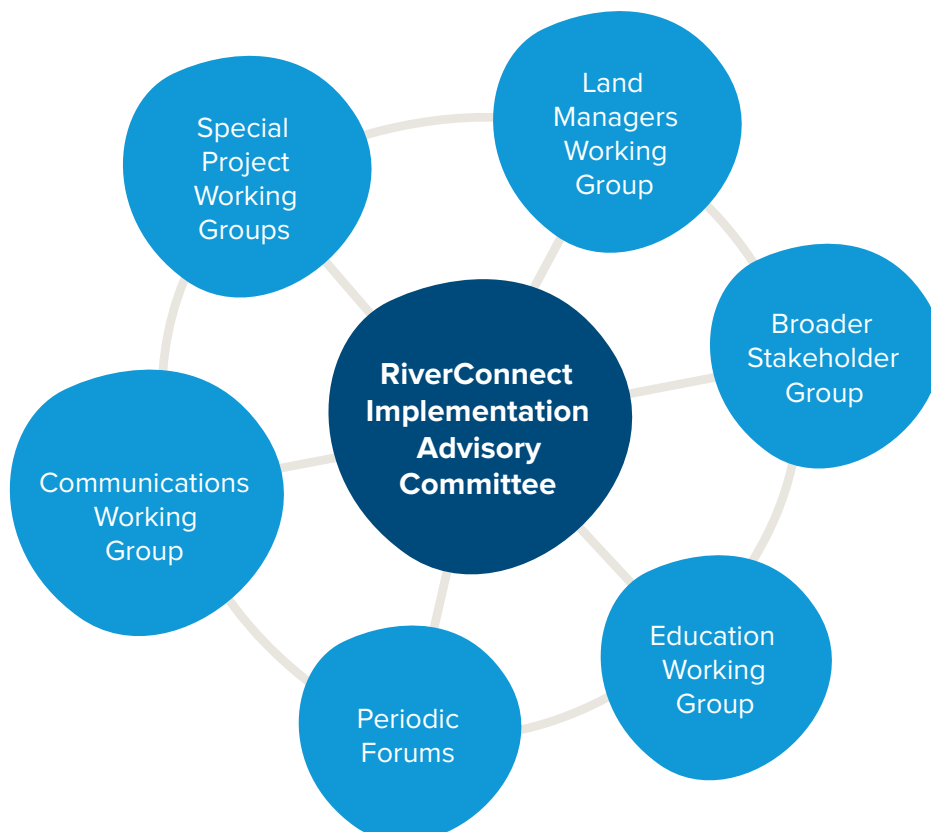
In order to bring all the parties together to work towards a co-ordinated plan for the revitalisation of our rivers, the RiverConnect program has clear governance arrangements. A modified implementation structure was proposed in the last strategic plan that enabled a more defined coordination of the RiverConnect program. This format has ensured that all key stakeholders are represented and have access and opportunities to bring their ideas and issues forward for consideration.

Some of the key strengths and benefits of this structure are:

- Over the years, members of the IAC from key stakeholders have been high level managers of their organisation. This has lifted the profile of the program within those key organisations and provided representatives who can commit their organisation to action;

- There has been strong attendance at IAC meetings, with community members continuing to nominate and contribute to the program;
- The working group structure has been highly effective as it provides a forum to co-ordinate actions on the ground and ensures consistent approaches from all stakeholders;
- Through sharing of information, skills and the alignment of actions between organisations, we have seen significant benefits due to collaborative action.

Figure 3: RiverConnect implementation governance structure



RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC)

The Implementation Advisory Committee brings together representatives from key agencies, including local government, land managers, Traditional Owners, education department, and community organisations including Landcare groups, environment groups and community representatives to ensure the development of the RiverConnect program continues to meet the community's needs whilst delivering on shared priorities.

The IAC will continue to be a high level, strategic forum responsible for providing advice, identifying strategic links within their organisation, obtaining project buy-in and co-ordinating major projects from their organisations' perspective. Membership to the IAC may change over time to include relevant stakeholders and is subject to the Terms of Reference.

Membership is drawn from:

- Greater Shepparton City Council
- Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority
- Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation
- Parks Victoria
- Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
- Department of Education and Training
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goulburn Valley Water
- Goulburn Murray Landcare Network
- Goulburn Valley Environment Group
- Greater Shepparton Young Champions
- Community representatives

Working Groups

The types of working groups are:

- **Communications Working Group (CWG)** – utilising the communication and engagement skills and expertise of the partner organisations and the community to effectively design, share and deliver key communication activities of RiverConnect.
- **Land Managers Working Group (LMWG)** – consisting of representatives from land management agencies and organisations, meeting quarterly to discuss on-ground land management works and progress projects as required. Examples include, weed control and anti-litter programs, revegetation and water quality improvements.
- **Education Working Group (EWG)** – reintroduction of an educators and interested stakeholders group focused on networking, building knowledge and collaborating to deliver best practice outcomes for students.
- **Special Project Working Groups (SPWG)** – working groups with a defined life period that will be responsible for developing detailed plans and implementing major projects involving multiple but variable stakeholder representatives, depending on need.

At least one member of the IAC will be on each of the working groups which will be supported by RiverConnect Officers as appropriate. These working groups are responsible for making appropriate recommendations to the IAC on the progress of major projects until they run independently, are completed or are auspiced directly under RiverConnect implementation. In addition, the working groups will operate to share information, skills and resources to ensure alignment and efficiency of actions between organisations.

Broader Stakeholder Group

This group is an electronic communication forum (e.g. email, website and social media) to keep stakeholders not involved in the IAC up to date about the progress of RiverConnect implementation and to seek interest and expertise when forming major project working group membership.

Periodic Community Input Forums

These forums will be arranged, on an as-needed basis, to seek community input on key projects as they are developed. Alongside RiverConnect community engagement events and activities, community will have opportunities to provide their feedback through the RiverConnect Evaluation Survey as an ongoing review of the program implementation.



APPENDIX 3: KEY RELATED STRATEGIES AND PLANS

Alignment with the strategies and plans of partners is critical to make sure RiverConnect:

- delivers actions that contribute to the implementation of these strategies
- negotiates roles and responsibilities of delivery agents (e.g. asset management in the Regional Park)
- increases the region’s ability to attract investment (and bring investment directly to RiverConnect to contribute to implementation)
- represents the views and needs of the community
- influences strategic priorities
- continues to build on a well-established successful partnership model.

There are a number of strategies and action plans (Figure 5) with which RiverConnect is aligned, however the four major current strategies sit with Greater Shepparton City Council, Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, Parks Victoria and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (Figure 4).

Figure 4: RiverConnect’s relationship with major strategic plans

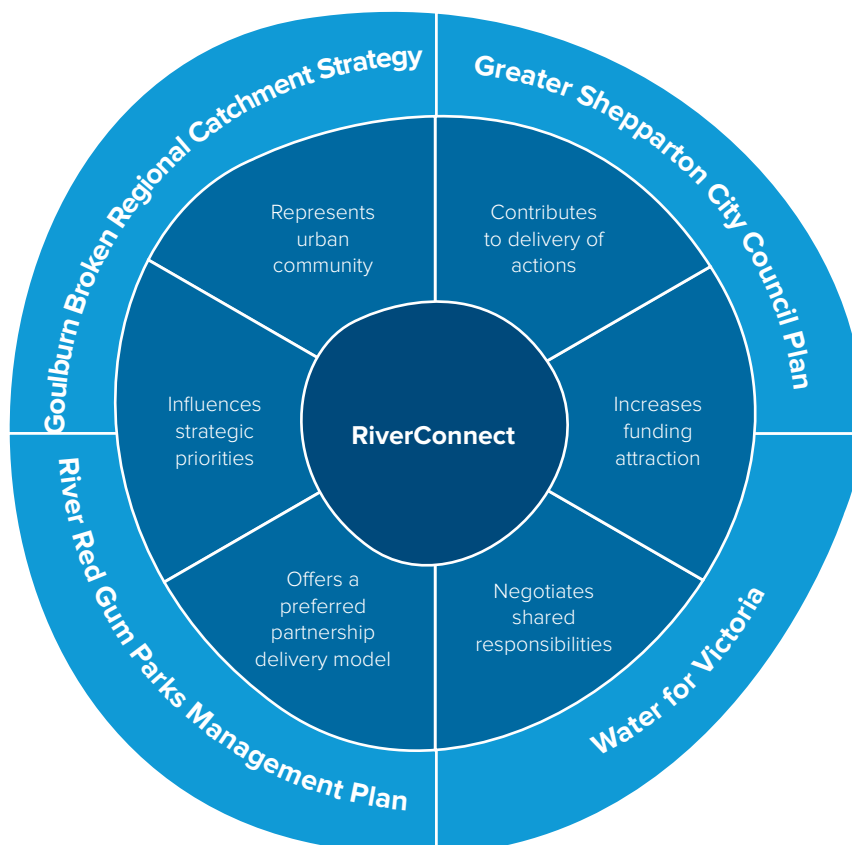


Figure 5: Relevant RiverConnect partner plans and legislation**Greater Shepparton City Council**

- Council Plan 2021-2025
- Shepparton and Mooroopna 2050 – Regional City Growth Plan
- Shepparton CBD Strategy 2008 and Addendum to the Shepparton CBD Strategy 2016
- Greater Shepparton Cycling Strategy 2013-2017 (review planned for 2023)
- Heritage Strategy 2019
- Urban Forest Strategy 2017-2027
- Waste and Resource Management Strategy 2013-2023
- Youth Strategy 2019-2023
- Greater Shepparton Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2014-2030
- Climate Emergency Action Plan 2030
- Volunteer Strategy and Action Plan 2019-2022 (review planned for 2023)
- Universal Access and Inclusion Plan 2022-2026
- Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025
- Greater Shepparton Public Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan 2018-2028
- Small town and neighbourhood Community Plans
- Creative City Strategy 2022-2027
- Greater Shepparton Economic Development, Tourism and Major Events Strategy 2002-2012 (to be reviewed)

Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Strategy

- Goulburn Broken Regional Catchment Strategy 2021-2027
- Goulburn Broken Waterway Strategy 2014-2022
- Goulburn Broken Regional Floodplain Management Strategy 2018-2028
- Sustainable Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan 2016-2020 (review underway)
- Goulburn Broken Catchment Biodiversity Strategy 2016-2021

Parks Victoria

- River Red Gum Park Management Plan 2018
- Healthy Parks, Healthy People Framework 2020
- Managing Country Together Framework 2019

Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Cooperation

- Yorta Yorta Co-operative Management Agreement 2004
- Yorta Yorta Whole-of-Country Plan 2021-2030

Goulburn Valley Water

- Goulburn Valley Water Price Plan 2023-2028

Department of Education and Training

- The Shepparton Education Plan
- Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026
- Framework for Improving Student Outcomes
- The Victorian Curriculum F-10

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

- Water for Victoria Plan
- Victorians Volunteering for Nature – Environmental Volunteering Plan
- Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037

Regional Development Victoria

- Goulburn Murray Resilience Strategy 2030

Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

- The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

- River Red Gum Forests Investigation Final Report 2008

Victorian State Government

- *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*
- *Victorian Heritage Act 1995*

RIVERCONNECT NETWORKS

We're all about collaborating – for more information visit riverconnect.com.au

Department of Education and Training Victoria
Department of Environment Land Water and Planning
Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority
Goulburn Murray Landcare Network
Goulburn Valley Water
Goulburn Valley Environment Group
Greater Shepparton City Council
Greater Shepp Young Champions
Parks Victoria
Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative
Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation
Community Representatives
45 Kinders, Schools, Tertiary and alternative education Institutions

Activities in the Park
Birdlife Murray Goulburn
Bohollow EnviroEd
Bohollow Wildlife Shelter
Burnanga Indigenous Fishing Club
Council Disability Advisory Committee
Cussen Park Advisory Committee
Ethnic Council
Fairley Leadership Program
FamilyCare disability support group
Friends of Gemmill's Swamp Mooroopna
Friends of the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton
GV Mountain Bike Club
Headspace
Into the Wild Education
Kaiela Arts
Lower Goulburn Wildlife Shelter
Native Fish Australia
Platypus Conservancy
Scouts Victoria
Shepparton Art Museum
Shepparton Camera Club
Shepparton Canoe Club
Shepparton Historical Society
Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group
The Haven
The Lighthouse Project
Things of Spirit
Turtles Australia
Veolia
Victorian Fisheries Authority
Victoria Walks
Word and Mouth

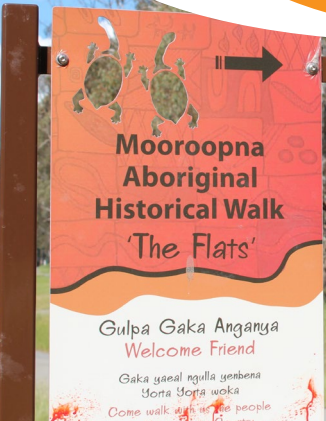




DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-28

CONVERSATION REPORT

OCTOBER 2022



RIVERCONNECT NETWORKS

We're all about
collaborating –
for more
information visit
riverconnect.com.au

**Department of Education
and Training Victoria**

**Department of
Environment Land Water
and Planning**

**Goulburn Broken
Catchment Management
Authority**

**Goulburn Murray
Landcare Network**

Goulburn Valley Water

**Goulburn Valley
Environment Group**

**Greater Shepparton City
Council**

**Greater Shepp Young
Champions**

Parks Victoria

**Rumbalara Aboriginal
Cooperative**

**Yorta Yorta Nation
Aboriginal Corporation**

**Community
Representatives**

**45 Kinders, Schools,
Tertiary and alternative
education Institutions**

Activities in the Park

Birdlife Murray Goulburn

Bohollow EnviroEd

Bohollow Wildlife Shelter

Burnanga Indigenous Fishing Club

Council Disability Advisory Committee

Cussen Park Advisory Committee

Ethnic Council

Fairley Leadership Program

FamilyCare disability support group

Friends of Gemmill's Swamp Mooroopna

Friends of the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton

GV Mountain Bike Club

Headspace

Into the Wild Education

Kaiela Arts

Lower Goulburn Wildlife Shelter

Native Fish Australia

Platypus Conservancy

Scouts Victoria

Shepparton Art Museum

Shepparton Camera Club

Shepparton Canoe Club

Shepparton Historical Society

Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group

The Haven

The Lighthouse Project

Things of Spirit

Turtles Australia

Veolia

Victorian Fisheries Authority

Victoria Walks

Word and Mouth

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ABOUT THE RIVERCONNECT DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2028

Rivers and waterways are the arteries of our landscape. They bring life to our regions, nourishing ecosystems that in turn provide communities with everything they need to sustain themselves.

This area is and has been cared for by the people and clans of the Yorta Yorta Nation for tens of thousands of years and today is **home to a culturally rich and diverse community.** Despite our widely differing backgrounds, a common element that unites us is that without the rivers, most of us would not live here.

In the past, the Shepparton-Mooroopna communities' appreciation of, and engagement with, the Goulburn and Broken Rivers have varied, famously *turning our back to the river*. The river systems were largely managed by agencies in isolation, with little connection between these managers or with the community – until the formation of RiverConnect.

RiverConnect is a wide reaching community government partnership program operating under the auspice of Greater Shepparton City Council and jointly funded by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority. Since its inception in 2005, **RiverConnect has been pivotal in building appreciation for the significance of our river environment.**

By facilitating effective high-levels of collaboration and co-operation, the **partnership model** has enabled local government, land management agencies, Traditional Owners, educational organisations, stakeholders and community members to **come together to identify and action shared priorities.**

In the 5 years since the last strategy was prepared, a number of key changes occurred in relation to the RiverConnect area and its communities. Through initial discussions with the RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) and key stakeholders, these changes helped guide the formation of the new strategic plan and its actions.

The RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028 refreshes the focus of the program. This new plan has been developed to reflect the holistic nature of river systems, and the interconnected nature of the community's relationship with the waterways.

This strategic plan is not a typical organisational plan, reflecting the fact that RiverConnect is a network of organisations and individuals rather than being an organisation itself. The plan is not a blueprint with every future action fully detailed, however it offers direction and examples of actions.

RiverConnect undertook community consultation between 22 August and 30 September 2022 with Greater Shepparton residents. A total of 41 submissions were received. This was comprised of 34 individual, 6 group, and 1 youth art submission.

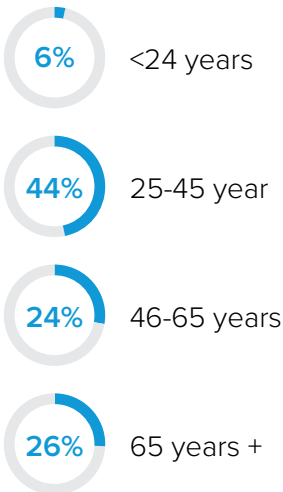
From public consultation feedback, partner strategic priorities and available funding opportunities, the RiverConnect IAC will develop **annual action plans** and corresponding targets.

We thank all those who have collectively contributed to the formation of the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023- 2028 and look forward to making the necessary changes before seeking endorsement by Council in December 2022.

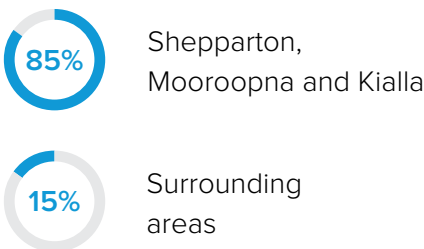
CONSULTATION SUMMARY

WHO WE HEARD FROM

Age



Towns



WHAT WE HEARD

Top 3 Projects

Large-scale

1. Implement RiverConnect Paths Master Plan
2. Create a river management plan
3. Support Traditional Owner Projects

Medium-scale

1. Expand and strengthen relationships with target groups (including Traditional Owners, young people, those with a disability, newly arrived migrants, and multi-cultural/bilingual communities)
2. Provide advocacy to plans that relate to the river environment
3. Develop curriculum-linked resources

Small-scale

1. Deliver engaging events for the community
2. Support environmental volunteers
3. Enable participation in river environment improvement activities

The 6-week public consultation findings found that RiverConnect’s future plans reflected the community’s priorities strongly:



RiverConnect is ‘by the people, for the people’

‘The aim to develop people’s knowledge and love of nature fits well with what the community wants’

The strategy ‘incorporates action and values for all ages, cultures and interest groups’

‘RiverConnect provides exposure and knowledge which empowers the community to enjoy, explore and embrace the wonderful nature, and environmental assets we have here in Greater Shepparton’

CONSULTATION

RiverConnect has achieved positive results since its inception, with considerable outcomes achieved from the 2017-22 Strategic Plan. However, as a government and community partnership program, it is important to ensure the RiverConnect Strategic Plan represents the broader community aspirations for the RiverConnect program. To do this, RiverConnect undertook extensive consultation with the community between 22 August and 30 September 2022. The methods of engagement included:

- a media release, which attracted media attention from the Shepparton News and a radio interview with OneFM;
- a promotional billboard at the corner of Knight Street and Wyndham Street;
- a consultation webpage on Council's Shaping Greater Shepparton website with four options for online submissions;
- a PowerPoint presentation to provide information on the plan;
- one-on-one discussions at RiverConnect events;
- notification of public consultation in relevant newsletters;
- promotions on social media including both images and videos.

As part of the consultation, RiverConnect asked the community about the activities they enjoy in the river environment, and the spaces they often frequent. The online survey asked individuals and groups to prioritise each strategic priority as well as example activities and projects that had been identified. There was also an opportunity for the community to provide ideas and suggestions for actions beyond what the survey listed.

Submissions were invited via an online form. This could be completed as an individual, on behalf of a group, agency or organisation, or as an associate of a school. There was also an option to submit for consultation in the form of an art activity for young people.

TIMELINE



January to mid-March 2022

Review of RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2017-22

Determine extent of strategic plan review process.



Mid-March to April 2022

Initial stakeholder discussions

Catchups with program funders and agency, organisation and community partners to determine key themes and potential actions.



May to June 2022

Draft Strategic Plan 2023-28 development

Guided by feedback from initial stakeholder discussions and driven by the RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee.



July to mid-August 2022

Draft Strategic Plan 2023-28 presentation to Council

Presentation to Council and recommendation to release plan for public consultation.



22 August to 30 September 2022

6-week community consultation period to test the approach applied to date, and identify any gaps and actions the community would like to include.



October 2022

Final Strategic Plan 2023-28 development

Integration of feedback from public consultation period and creation of Conversation Report document.



November to December 2022

Council review and endorsement of the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-28

WHO DID WE HEAR FROM?

A total of 41 submissions were completed. This was comprised of:

- 34 individual responses
- 6 group submissions:
 - Undera Angling Club
 - Shepparton Art Museum
 - Goulburn Valley Mountain Bike Club
 - Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project
 - Greater Shepparton Disability Advisory Committee
 - Greater Shepparton Positive Ageing Committee
- One art submission from attendees at the GOTAFE YouthFest.
- Two community group endorsements from Goulburn Valley Environment Group and Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group were also received.

Of those individuals who submitted through the Shaping Greater Shepparton online submission form, 85% resided in Shepparton, Mooroopna and Kialla, and the remaining from Greater Shepparton townships including Tatura and Katandra.

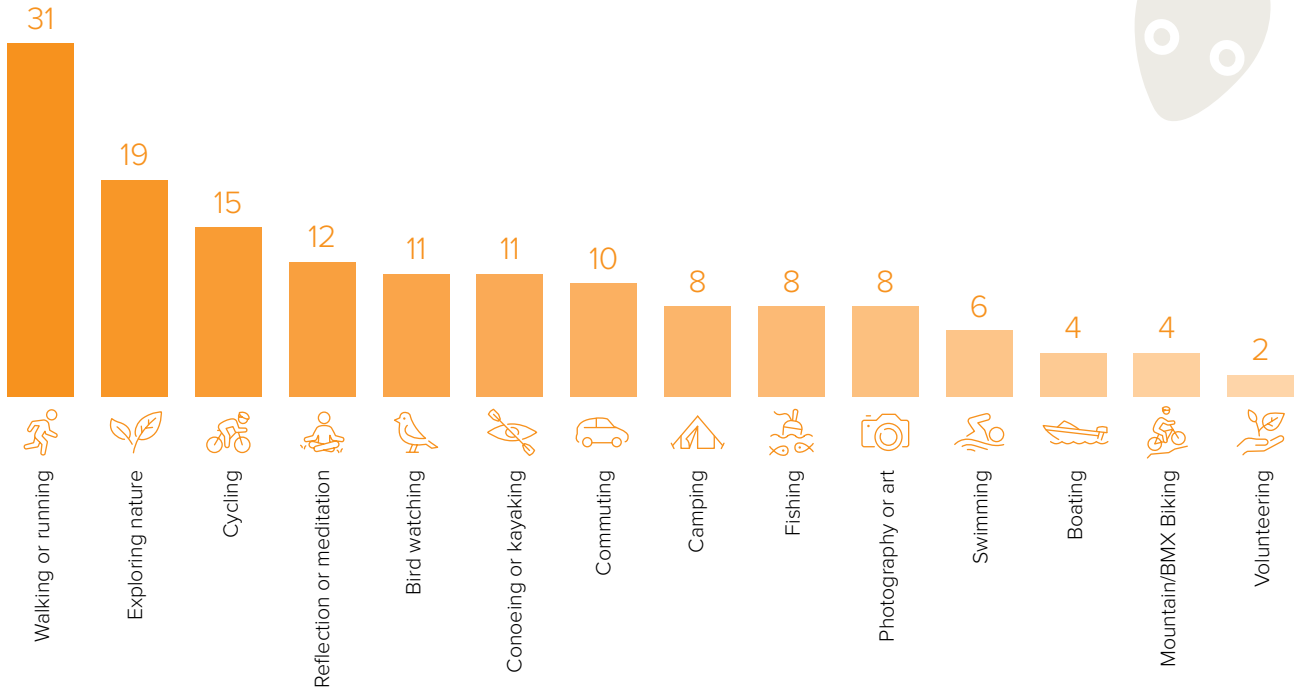
Almost half (44%) of the individual responses were between the ages of 25-45 years of age, followed by 26% who responded as 65 years and older, 24% 46-65 years, and 6% who reported as under the age of 24 years.



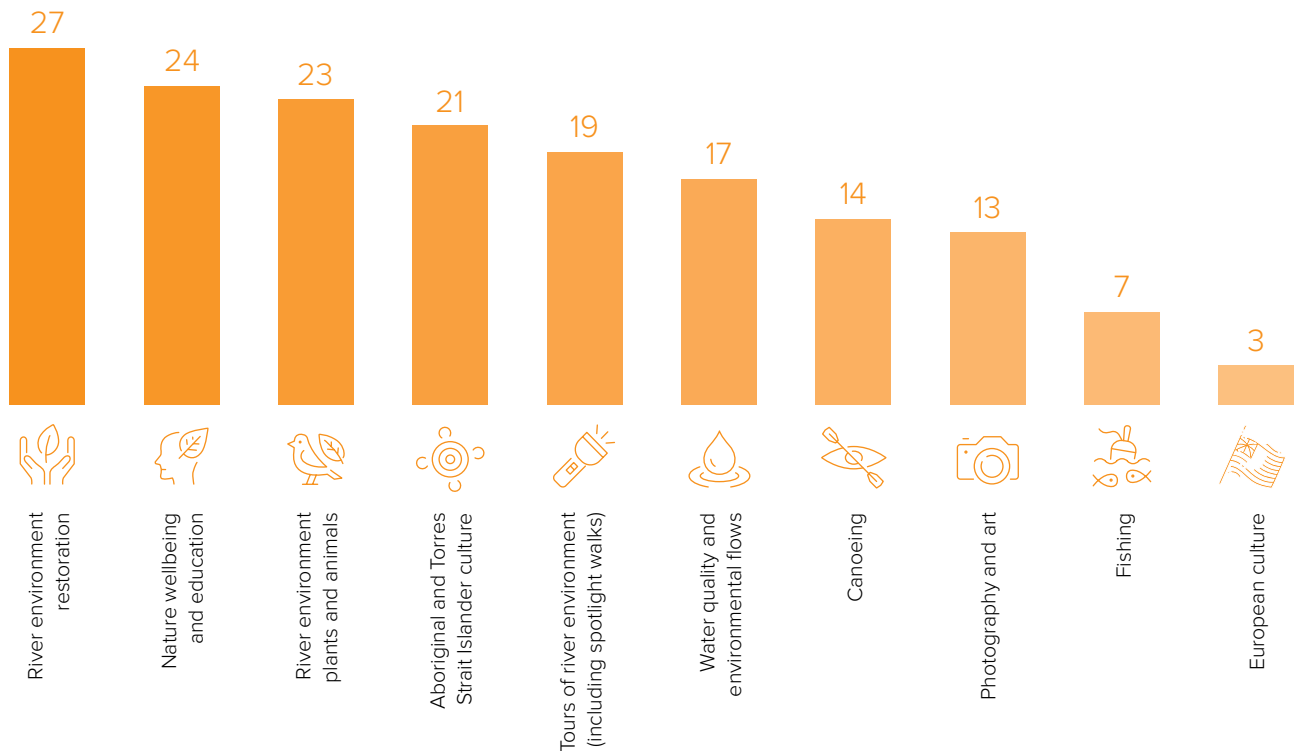
WHAT WE HEARD



What activities do you enjoy in the local river environment?



What topics of events and activities are you most interested in participating in or learning more about?



PLACES AND SPACES

A number of questions were asked about the communities use of the river environment, and how frequently they access these spaces. From these responses, the top six uses of these spaces are walking or running (21%), exploring nature (13%), cycling (10%), reflection or meditation (8%), birdwatching (7%), and canoeing or kayaking (7%).

Individuals were asked what river areas they access and how frequently they visit.

From these responses, the top three most visited places are:

Everyday:

- 1 18%
Victoria Park Lake, Shepparton
- 2 9%
Boulevard Bush Reserve, North Shepparton
- 3 9%
Shared path network along beside the Goulburn and Broken Rivers

Once a month:

- 1 62%
The Flats, Mooroopna
- 2 62%
Boulevard Bush Reserve, North Shepparton
- 3 59%
The confluence (meeting) of the Goulburn and Broken Rivers

3-4 times per year:

- 1 21%
Shared path network along beside the Goulburn and Broken Rivers
- 2 12%
Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton
- 3 12%
Jordan's Bend, North Shepparton

Once a year:

- 1 47%
Victoria Park Lake, Shepparton
- 2 35%
Shared path network along beside the Goulburn and Broken Rivers
- 3 18%
Reedy Swamp, North Shepparton

Never visited or unaware of location:

- 1 68%
Kaieltheban Park, Mooroopna
- 2 65%
J.A. Douglas Park, Mooroopna
- 3 50%
Stuart's Reserve, North Shepparton

Most aware of or had visited before:

- 1 94%
Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton
- 2 94%
Shared path network along beside the Goulburn and Broken Rivers
- 3 76%
Boulevard Bush Reserve, North Shepparton

EVENT AND ACTIVITIES OF INTEREST

To help RiverConnect plan their events and other opportunities for the community to participate in, individuals were asked to select five topics they are most interested in participating in or learning more about.

The results showed that the top five topics were:

1. River environment restoration activities such as tree planting, rubbish clean-ups, weeding and habitat building,
2. Nature wellbeing and education
3. River environment plants and animals
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
5. Tours of the river environment.



VISION, PURPOSE AND VALUES

Groups and agencies were directly asked whether the current Vision, Purpose and Values represent RiverConnect. All responses were strongly agree or agree. Additionally, one comment noted that strong partnerships are a powerful aspect of RiverConnect's vision.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

All responses received through this public consultation period assisted in evaluating the significance of each of RiverConnect's Strategic Priorities.

Ranked in order of importance

-  **ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY**
-  **ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER**
-  **SHOWCASE THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT**
-  **INSPIRE THE EDUCATION SECTOR**
-  **IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLBEING**
-  **NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE**

EXAMPLE ACTIONS

In the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028, a number of example actions and projects were identified and categorised depending on the scale of resourcing required to implement (i.e. time, funding, staffing, etc.). Respondents were asked to prioritise these depending on what they thought was most important for RiverConnect to focus on and the results are shown below.

Large-scale projects

- Ranked in order of importance
1. Implement RiverConnect Paths Master Plan
 2. Create a river management plan
 3. Support Traditional Owner projects
 4. Increase access in river environment
 5. Develop and install signage (virtual and physical)
 6. Partner with health sector to deliver a project linking health and wellbeing with nature
 7. Create a home for RiverConnect

Medium-scale projects

- Ranked in order of importance
1. Expand and strengthen relationships with target groups (including Traditional Owners, young people, those with a disability, newly arrived migrants, and multi-cultural/bilingual communities)
 2. Provide advocacy to plans that relate to the river environment
 3. Develop curriculum-linked resources
 4. Build educator network
 5. Compile access needs and priorities
 6. Facilitate outside curriculum opportunities for young people
 7. Link to eco-tourism opportunities

Small-scale projects

- Ranked in order of importance
1. Deliver engaging events for the community
 2. Support environmental volunteers
 3. Enable participation in river environment improvement activities
 4. Outreach to small towns and communities
 5. Creatively promote the RiverConnect program
 6. Tap into short-term study or work residents via onboarding process

RIVER ENVIRONMENT ACCESSIBILITY

Within the RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-28 there is a Strategic Priority 'Enhance Accessibility and Care of the River Environment' alongside a Strategic Action 'understand and realise flexible and inclusive water access'. In order to increase access in the river environment, the first step involves establishing priority areas of interest and investigating potential opportunities.

Both individuals and group respondents, as well as the Council Disability Advisory Committee and Positive Ageing Committee, were asked if they had any suggestions for increasing accessibility in the river environment (i.e. safety improvements, signage, path upgrades, boat ramps, etc.) and the results are summarised below. Notably signage was mentioned in almost 50% of submissions either in relation to directional wayfinding signage or informative interpretive signage. There was also one comment opposing easy accessibility to the river environment due to the environmental damage that it can facilitate.

Signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directional • Interpretive/informational • Use of QR codes • Auditory
Recreational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sitting/rest/multi-use spaces • Boat ramps • All abilities fishing jetties/platforms • Small jetties/landings/drop-in points for canoes/kayaks
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakdown stigma • Lighting • Training sessions (snakes, swooping birds, not feeding wild animals)
Paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider paths • Ramps for wheelchair access • Upgrades to remove steep inclines on pedestrian bridges • Seating • Path/track maintenance • Linkages
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tours (guided and self-guided) • Brochures • Take rubbish with you campaigns • Sensory areas away from high traffic areas • Weed and rubbish removal • On water activities • Toilets at camping sites (bush toilets) • Infrastructure that takes in scenery (i.e. café) • Activate spaces (i.e. Welsford/Marungi river access point)

COLLABORATION SUGGESTIONS

RiverConnect invites any and all groups with a stake in the river environment to be a part of RiverConnect, and many had suggestions for network opportunities and collaboration ideas including with:

- Shepparton Adventure Clubs
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Bike Trail proponents
- Community services
- Victoria Police
- Slap Tomorrow
- Rotary Clubs
- Shepparton Canoe Club
- Chamber of Commerce
- Connect GV
- Shepparton Access
- Mountain Bike Clubs
- Shepparton Art Museum
- Local theatre groups
- Scouts/Guides
- Goulburn Valley Association of Angling Clubs
- Agricultural Industry
- River Care groups (including overseas)

THOUGHTS FROM OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

Using our imagination and visualising our thoughts and ideas can be a fun and creative way to express ourselves and communicate what we think and feel. Young people were given the opportunity to 'Share the River Love' via an art activity and RiverConnect received one art submission from attendees at GOTAFE's YouthFest.

Aligned with a number of RiverConnect's Strategic Priorities, we heard from young people a want and need for:

- Care for land, water and animals
- Opportunities for land management and river environment improvements
- Ensuring Traditional Owners are a part of decision making on equal footing
- Wheelchair access
- More bush kinder programs to develop an early appreciation for nature

COMMUNITY GROUP ENDORSEMENTS






RiverConnect received two endorsements from community groups Goulburn Valley Environment Group (GVEG) and Shepparton Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group (SMULG).

GVEG noted the strategy had been carefully thought out and implemented, building on the existing foundations with strengths particularly in the areas of partnerships and education. They support the success of the program as it leads greater advocacy and increased positive environmental outcomes for the Goulburn River.

SMULG has been a proud partner of RiverConnect since the group's inception and offers their support and commitment to the strategy. They note their invested interest in the Boulevard Bush Reserve and relationship to RiverConnect via the RiverConnect Land Management Working Group as well as a volunteer partner at education and community events.

MISSING COMPONENTS FROM THE PLAN

The RiverConnect Strategic Plan is not a blueprint with every future action fully detailed, however it offers direction and examples of actions. Given the nature of this structure, it has inbuilt flexibility to enable ideas to slot within the strategic priorities and strategic actions. A number of suggestions were offered during the online submission period and have been captured below.

Alignment with RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-28		
Submission suggestion	Strategic Priority	Strategic Action
Promote path network	 SHOWCASE THE RIVER ENVIRONMENT	Communicate accessibility of the river environment
Investigate increasing the frequency of RiverConnect Land Management meetings	 ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER	Enable sustainable on-going management
Education on cat and dog control and illegal dumping in the river environment	 ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY AND CARE OF THE RIVER	Nurture stewardship culture
Investigate other opportunities for knowledge sharing such as bush medicine and foods	 ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY	Continue learnings about the river
Investigate home for RiverConnect at the Australian Botanic Gardens Shepparton	 NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE	Explore a home for RiverConnect

COMMUNITY REFLECTION

The vast majority of submissions thought that RiverConnect's future plans reflected the community's wants strongly (4.2/5). Many felt the strategy had been well considered and continued the collaborative model that RiverConnect is well-known for. One comment suggested that further investigation is needed to see how Traditional Owners would like to be more involved in RiverConnect programs that are working on Country and how best to support them. Overall, the feedback indicates that community are supportive of the way RiverConnect works with community and the way the strategy 'incorporates action and values for all ages, cultures and interest groups'.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The results of feedback received from the community will inform any changes made to the final RiverConnect Strategic Plan 2023-2028. From the priorities identified, partner strategic priorities and available funding opportunities, the RiverConnect Implementation Advisory Committee will develop annual action plans and corresponding targets. In November the plan will be reviewed by Council leadership and in December RiverConnect will seek endorsement by Council.

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