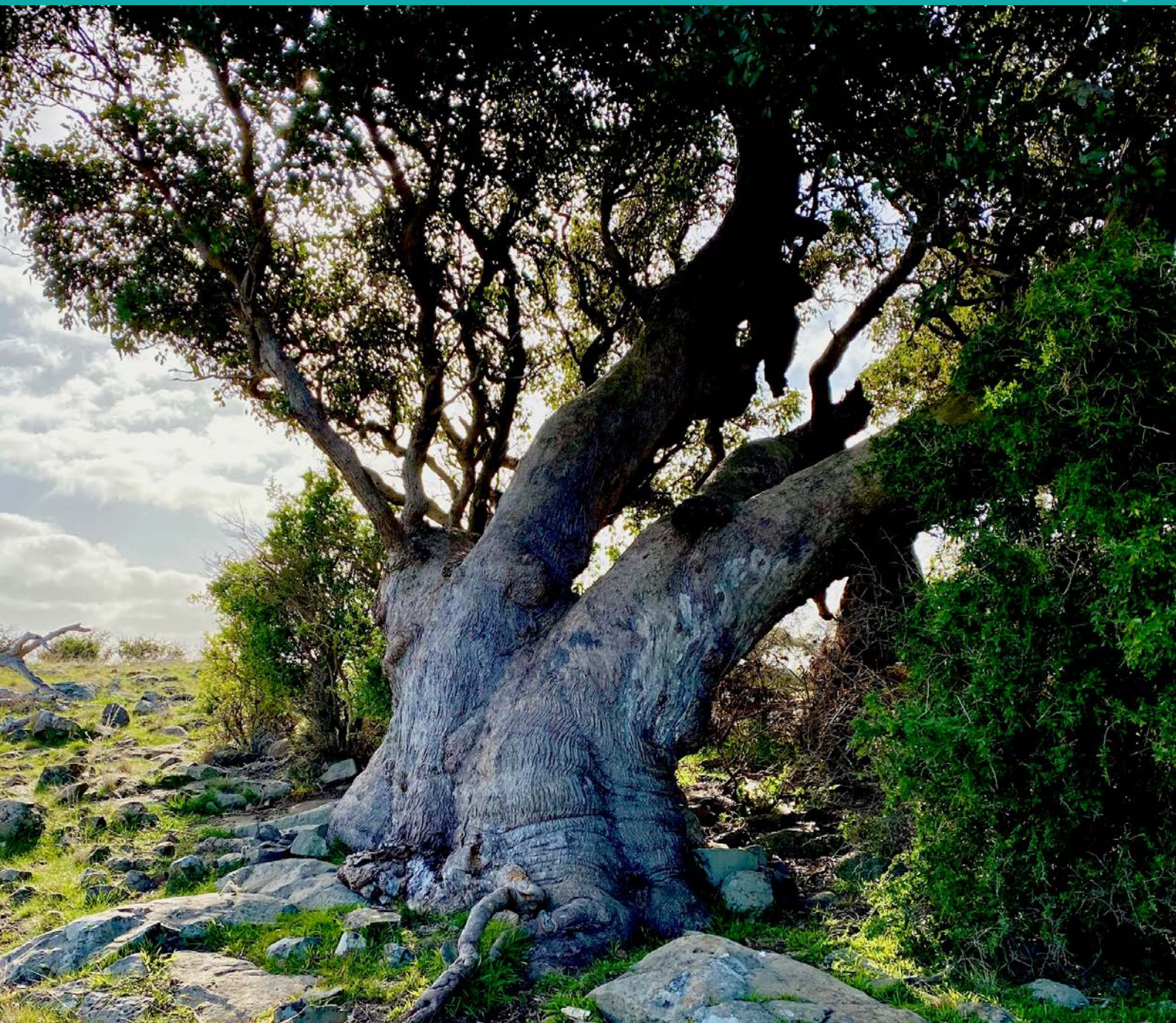


CITY FOREST AND HABITAT STRATEGY

ANNUAL MONITORING, EVALUATION
AND LEARNING REPORT 2019/20

7 AUGUST 2020



AUTHORS

This document has been prepared by Clear Horizon Consulting. It is based on monitoring information supplied by Wyndham City Council and through an annual review workshop, facilitated by Clear Horizon Consulting.

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DOCUMENT REVIEW AND AUTHORISATION

Version	Date distributed	Issued to	Comments
V1	3/08/20	Annette Salkeld, Wyndham City Council	Draft report shared with comments for review
V2	7/08/20	Annette Salkeld, Wyndham City Council	Final report addressing feedback provided to Annette

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EVALUATING PROGRESS TOWARDS THE STRATEGY

SUMMARY

The Strategy is progressing towards its intended outcomes despite significant external challenges.

Although canopy cover was not measured in 2019/20, the Strategy is supporting increased potential canopy cover through significant tree planting and driving a wider focus across Council on increasing canopy cover. However, progress in tree planting has been slowed by COVID-19 restrictions. Canopy cover was also negatively impacted by the removal of large trees by development and infrastructure projects in Wyndham.

COVID-19 and dry weather conditions brought major disruptions to conservation operations including the cancellation of controlled burns. Despite these challenges, Council continues to support existing biodiversity values across Wyndham. Notably, Council has undertaken significant revegetation and site protection work to improve habitat quality. Council has also focused on trialing new approaches to improve habitat management and monitoring.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the Strategy's ability to achieve community engagement outcomes. Prior to these restrictions, Council saw strong improvement in community interest. In response to

social distancing restrictions, Council has increased its online presence and created new online content to continue connecting Wyndham's community to local habitat and trees. Staff are also looking to pivot Council's approach to planning and delivering community engagement activities to better negotiate the uncertainty caused by COVID-19. Council continues to engage with local Indigenous communities.

Implementation of the Strategy thus far has also seen both positive and negative unintended outcomes. Council received three state awards relating to work done under the Strategy resulting in increased recognition for Council's work in this space. The Level Crossing Removal Project removed a significant number of large trees. However, Council advocated for a better outcome and was able to secure a higher rate of replacement planting. COVID-19 related staffing constraints have also impeded Council's ability to deliver the Strategy.

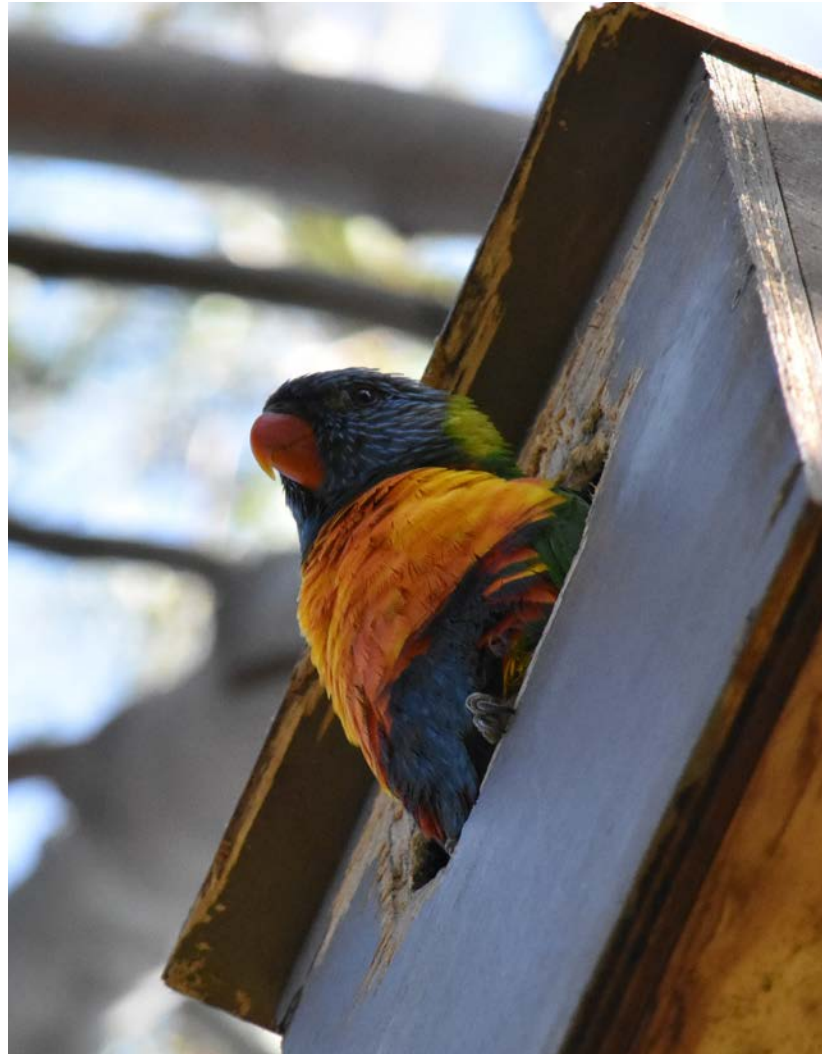
Council's approach to delivering the Strategy appears to be working well. Through the Strategy,



cross-departmental relationships continue to improve and are becoming embedded. Many improvements have been made including stronger relationships between the Environment Team and Planning Enforcement on environmental enforcement and closer collaboration with the Major Projects Team to achieve better outcomes from infrastructure projects. However, staff were concerned that the restructure within the Climate Futures Office, coupled with the impact of COVID-19, had led to a less coordinated approach to community engagement under the Strategy.

Council has also strengthened external relationships to better deliver the Strategy. Council is becoming a valued partner to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and others because of its ability to respond to local environmental issues. Council is leveraging these existing relationships to build new networks. For instance, new relationships with universities have provided critical support to the trial of new management approaches.

Council has done well at implementing improvements from last year's evaluation including a more deliberate approach to forward planning resourcing, an informal review of Strategy actions and targets, and work to strengthen compliance. Based on progress to date, Strategy implementers recommended a continued focus on internal (cross-department) collaboration and building external partnerships. Staff agreed that further forward planning of resourcing requirements was needed. Going forward, staff also want to focus more on aligning the Strategy with climate outcomes and with the goals of key external stakeholders. The Strategy team are looking to take a more strategic approach to planning and delivering community engagement in the context of COVID-19.





INTRODUCTION

Adopted by Wyndham City Council (Council) in 2018, Wyndham's City Forest and Habitat Strategy 2017-2040 (the Strategy), sets out a range of targets and actions to improve Wyndham's canopy cover, biodiversity, and community engagement. The Strategy is being led by the Environment Team and implemented by several teams across Council. As part of the implementation of the Strategy's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plan, Council staff met to review and reflect on Strategy progress over the 2019/20 financial year, using existing monitoring data and their own knowledge of what is and is not working well. This report provides a summary of the conclusions drawn from that reflection exercise, followed by more detailed descriptions of progress against the individual key evaluation questions (KEQs) from the MEL Plan. This document concludes with a reflection on progress towards recommendations from last year's review and agreed areas for future focus.



THE STRATEGY'S PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING ITS INTENDED OUTCOMES

KEQ1a. To what extent has the Strategy increased canopy cover in Wyndham and created an urban forest?

Council continues to make progress towards increasing potential canopy cover in Wyndham through tree planting despite COVID-19 slowing progress. In 2019/20, Council planned to plant approximately 8,000 street trees (although subsequently reduced by approximately 3000 due to COVID-19 restrictions), approximately 12,000 trees planted by developers were handed over to Council and more than 20,000 Indigenous tube stock were planted in conservation reserves. This progress would have been consistent with tree planting numbers from 2018/19. However, Council was not able to plant the planned additional 10,000 tube stock due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Council has not determined the exact change in canopy cover this year. Although Council tree planting has contributed to potential canopy cover, large trees have also been removed due to development and major infrastructure projects (including the Level Crossing Removal Project) within

Wyndham. Furthermore, because tree canopy cover is slow to change, it is only measured every 3-5 years, and was not assessed in 2019/20, therefore Council cannot determine the extent to which canopy cover changed this year.

The Strategy continues to drive a focus across Council on increasing canopy cover. In 2019/20, Council adopted the Wyndham Landscape Development Levels of Service, both an internal and external facing document, which reinforces the Strategy's canopy cover targets for Council's open space work.

KEQ1b. In what ways has Council improved habitat quality and connectivity?

Despite significant external challenges to conservation operations, Council continues to make positive progress in its work to effectively manage Wyndham's habitat. Although Council's revegetation efforts were slowed due to COVID-19 restrictions, Council made significant progress towards improving habitat quality and connectivity by planting 21,759 indigenous plants in conservation reserves. Similarly,



the number of controlled burns undertaken was limited due to dry weather conditions and COVID-19. Nevertheless, Council has planned joint burns for Spring 2020 with the Country Fire Authority and Wathaurung. Council also undertook substantial site protection works in larger reserves including Tarneet Islands, Grahams Wetlands Reserve, and Cobbledicks Ford Reserve. Wider background works have also begun to protect large and significant trees on public and private land.

This year, Council has trialled new approaches to habitat management and monitoring. Council has begun several initial management trials and tested new methods to build a baseline for management. For large scale projects, Council has developed trials for aerial drone vegetation mapping, aerial weed control, revegetation as a form of weed control, and techniques for biomass management using both manual, machinery and burning. If these trials are successful, Council will explore the wider use of these approaches to improve the accuracy of monitoring and the general effectiveness of Council's land management.

Increased vandalism and dumping have negatively impacted conservation reserves, but Council is working to improve enforcement. This year, Wyndham saw increased vandalism within conservation reserves which has negatively affected habitat quality. In response, Council has moved to strengthen compliance with the first fines issued in 2019/20. Enforcement is an area that will require an ongoing focus.

KEQ1c. To what extent did the Strategy engage the Wyndham community in understanding and valuing trees and natural habitat?

COVID-19 significantly affected Council's progress on community engagement around trees and habitat. With the arrival of COVID-19 and subsequent social distancing restrictions, Council cancelled all face-to-face engagement activities from March 2020 onwards and all plans for on-ground activities are on hold. This is particularly disappointing because, prior to this, participation in Strategy engagement activities



increased significantly from the previous year including much stronger interest in community tree planting and a grassland bus tour. The cancellation of planned face to face community engagement events has reduced outcomes for engagement activities.

With the cancellation of face to face activities, Council is increasing its online engagement. Since COVID-19 restrictions have been in place, Council has engaged with the Wyndham community largely through Facebook and other online formats. In line with this shift, the Green Living Wyndham Facebook page saw a considerable increase in its following from last year (from 3,000 to 4,000 followers). Council has also developed new online content including wildlife gardening videos. This increased online presence and new content will be an asset to Council both during COVID-19 restrictions and into the future once social-distancing restrictions are lifted.

Council is responding to the uncertainty of COVID by pivoting its approach to engagement planning and delivery. In 2019/20 Council made significant progress in its preparations for engagement

activities including inter-departmental collaborative development of a suite of new face-to-face programs like grassland planting days. Although these new activities are now on hold due to COVID-19, Council is ready to roll them out as soon as it is safe to do so. Going forward, Council is looking at new ways to plan and deliver community engagement that will allow staff to respond more effectively to the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of the current context. Council also commissioned a baseline study on community attitudes/awareness of trees and the local environment which will inform future community engagement.

In 2018/19, Council maintained similar levels of engagement with local Indigenous groups. More specifically, the Conservation team has continued linkages with Indigenous groups on site-specific work like heritage management. One staff member commented that although these relationships were progressing well, they had lost some momentum due to personnel changes in partner organisations.

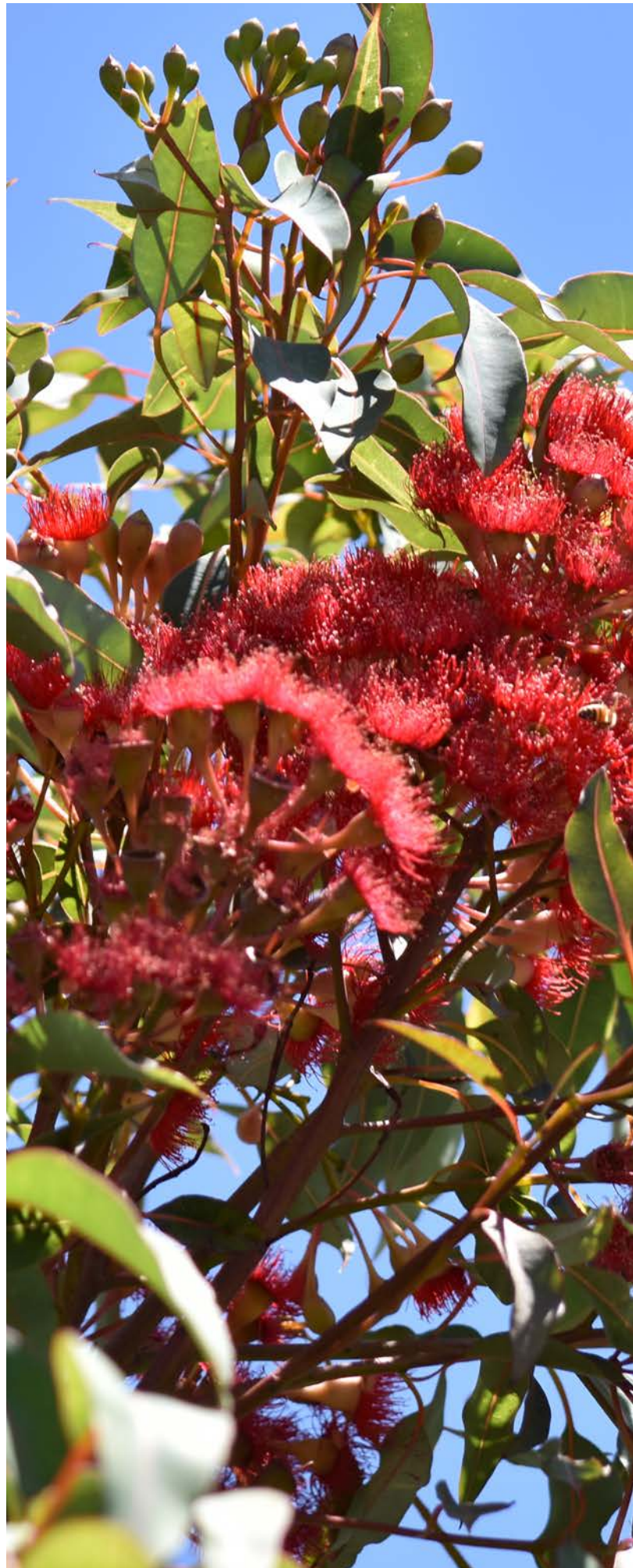
THE BROADER IMPACT OF THE STRATEGY

KEQ2a. What unexpected outcomes, positive and negative, resulted from the delivery of the Strategy?

Council is gaining increasing recognition for sustainability and environmental protection because of work done under the Strategy. In 2019/20, Council's sustainability achievements were recognised by three statewide awards: the 2019 Premier's Sustainability Award for Environmental Protection (for its work under the Greening the West initiative) and two 2019 Keep Victoria Beautiful awards – the Sustainable City Award and the Sustainable Council Award (for wider cross department collaboration on sustainability with a highly recommended note for habitat protection on private land).

The Level Crossing Removal Project (LXRP) has removed a significant number of trees adversely affecting canopy cover. The LXRP identified 2,000+ trees across Wyndham for removal and replacement with largely small tube stock. LXRP gave Council very little opportunity to identify how many trees could be retained. However, Council successfully advocated to increase replacement plantings from 1:1 to 2:1.

In addition to its impacts on community engagement, COVID-19 has also led to staffing constraints for Council. Notably, for their safety, open space staff were taken off on-site duties for several months. More broadly, Strategy staff working from home have had to balance home schooling and other challenges. As a result, not all planned works have gone ahead as intended and the Strategy's progress in some areas has been slower than expected.





HOW WELL COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO DELIVERING THE STRATEGY IS WORKING

KEQ3a. How well did Council work together (across departments) to deliver the Strategy?

Under the delivery of the Strategy, internal relationships between Council departments continue to improve and are becoming embedded. In line with the finding from last year's evaluation report, staff agreed that Council was working effectively across departments to deliver the Strategy. At the workshop, Council staff reflected that in some areas these positive working relationships were becoming business as usual. One key example was the improved internal relationships with compliance which have enabled Council to better enforce protections against illegal native vegetation and tree removal. The Environment and Arboriculture teams have also engaged more closely with major projects staff and with road engineers to improve environmental outcomes from infrastructure projects. Council staff reflected that it was a very positive step to have their designers listening and taking on board comments, even when results did not support Strategy outcomes. The Environment team and Open Space teams continue to work well together on signage and other projects across the Strategy. Staff commented that there were many internal relationships that they expected to bear fruit in the next financial year.

Council staff were concerned that internal restructuring had led to less coordinated community engagement. Although Council's creation of the Climate Futures Office will offer opportunities to engage more widely across departments, this, in conjunction with the impacts of COVID-19, has contributed to departmental community engagement staff being less connected for ongoing collaborative projects. Staff noted that this area will be a focus moving forward.



KEQ3b. How well did Council work with partners to deliver the Strategy?

Council has made significant progress in strengthening its relationships with external partners. Council is becoming a “go to” for partners, including Agriculture Victoria, City West Water, and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), wanting to work on local environmental issues because of staff’s ability to physically respond to on-ground issues. Wherever possible, Council is using these relationships to advocate for greater grasslands conservation and better outcomes for urban trees. Council is also strengthening relationships with local community groups and looking for new ways to engage them. For example, in 2020 Council partnered with the Wyndham Wildlife Garden group to pilot the installation of a community designed habitat garden (Bits of Bush in the Suburbs) by the Landscape Delivery team on Council land.

Working well with existing external partners has also helped Council to access new networks. For example, Council’s previous work with DELWP led to a relationship with the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research. In turn, this relationship has provided a stronger network with local universities on various activities to improve the Strategy’s monitoring and management.

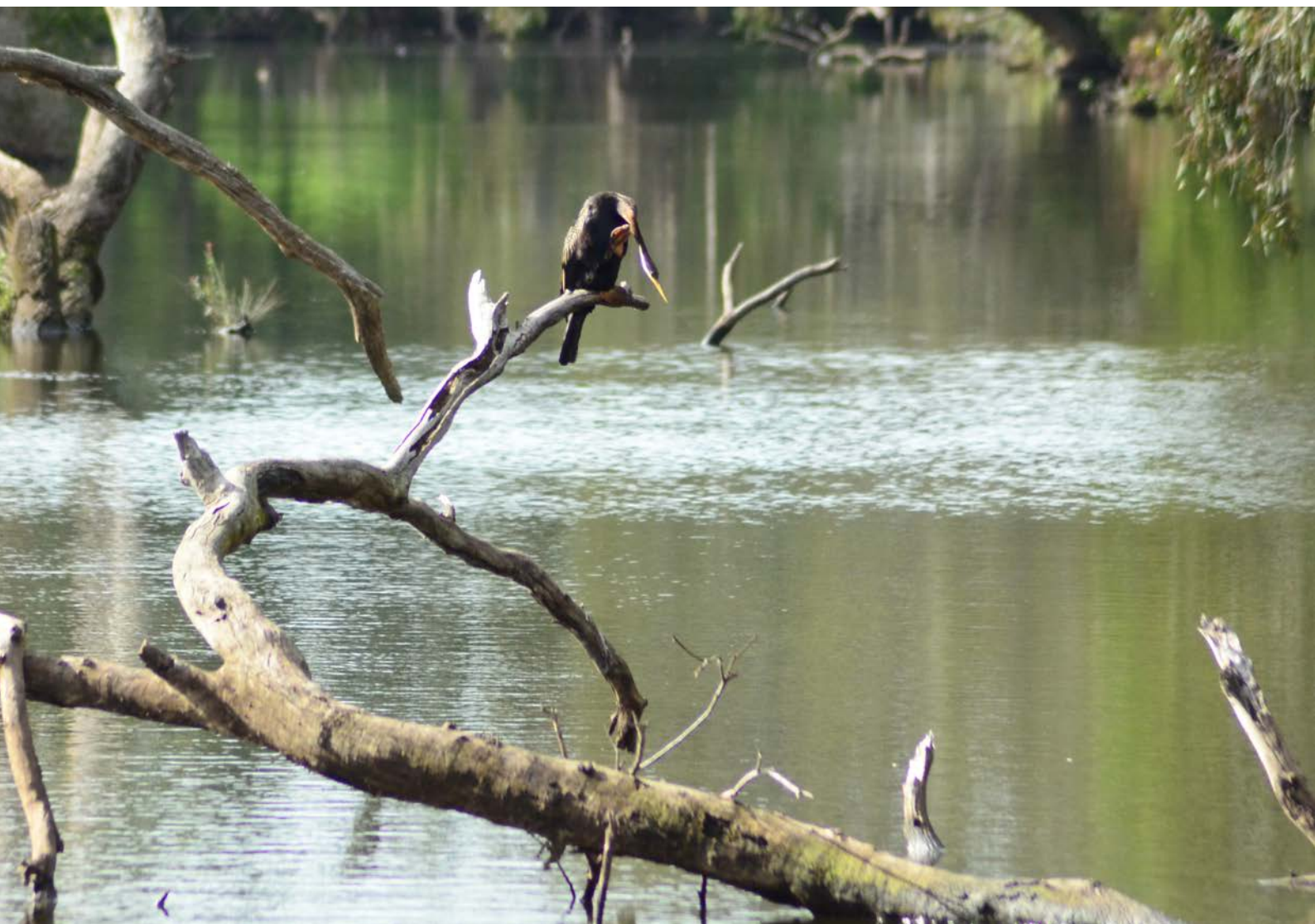
At the evaluation workshop, Council staff reflected that this relationship building is ongoing. They also reasoned that stability in staffing and retaining key contacts was paying dividends in Council’s external relationships. However, staff also noted instances where personnel changes in key partners had posed issues to the Strategy’s progress.



AREAS OF FOCUS GOING FORWARD

Staff reflected that Council had done relatively well at implementing recommended improvements from last year’s Strategy review. For example, Council are taking a more strategic approach to revegetation and refining site management planning to improve the forward planning of resourcing. However, staff recognised that resourcing was still an ongoing issue. Council have also focused on improving compliance and completed an informal review to refine Strategy actions and targets. More broadly, staff are adopting a continual improvement philosophy to deliver the Strategy.

As part of the review, staff reflected on areas of the Strategy to focus on. These included



maintaining the momentum for areas where things were going well, identifying areas where new activities or practices would strengthen delivery, and identifying areas where it was not as productive to focus resources. Based on these discussions, staff identified the following focus areas.

Council will continue to:

- Invest in building internal and external relationships because the Strategy is beginning to see the benefits of this work.
- Work on forward planning to ensure appropriate resourcing to manage outcomes of the Strategy.

Council will start to:

- Find creative solutions to community engagement that allow people to connect

with their local environment moving forward as part of a more considered strategic approach to Strategy engagement.

- Look at external stakeholders for opportunities for alignment with Strategy targets (e.g. DELWP, Melbourne Water).
- Look at how the Strategy can further improve climate outcomes and how the Strategy is already achieving climate readiness and mitigation outcomes.
- Consolidate data from across the Strategy (e.g. tree inventory, corporate geographic information system) and invest in using this information to shape tree and habitat management.



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