Yarra City Council
Statutory and Strategic Planning
Services Review
June 2024
Final Report

1. Introduction

The City of Yarra (the Council) is committed to a program of continuous improvement and the facilitation of a modern service orientated organisation.

The Council has a strong commitment to continuously plan, review and improve its services. Ongoing review of our services in line with our commitment to embedding a culture of continuous improvement are vital to:

- ensuring community expectations and standards are met in a cost-effective manner
- service outcomes are aligned to Council's long-term strategic objectives and comply with relevant legislation and policy.

Towards this the Council commissioned an independent review, including benchmarking of Council's Statutory and Strategic Planning Departments. The review has developed a roadmap for ongoing improvements that aim to establish Yarra planning services as a contemporary sector leader that is inclusive and accessible to all participants.

Council Planning services work within a complex planning system with high workloads, due to the high rate and demand for development. Major development applications are also often received in Yarra. The community in Yarra have high demands and expectations of the planning service. Planning matters in this inner-city environment are very complex with many differing views that are regularly vocalised. Media monitoring and scrutiny is also high.

2. Executive Summary

Yarra City Council has a strong commitment to continuously plan, review and improve its services.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of the Yarra Statutory and Strategic Planning Services Planning Review.

In light of recent improvements made to the planning processes, the increase in delegation for Statutory Planning and the recent Monitor's reports, a holistic review of Statutory and Strategic Planning was commissioned.

This was a high-level review of both Statutory and Strategic Planning services focussing on:

Statutory Planning

- Efficient processes
- Transparency and accountability
- Decision making
- Engagement with community at key stages of an application process
- Should Council reinstate Information sessions and consultation meetings and if so, review the value and process these should follow
- Access to Information.

Strategic Planning

- Processes
- Timely decision making
- Quality of consultants' brief
- Quality of amendment documentation and Council reports
- Project management
- Engagement
- Access to information.

To complete this review the following methodology was used:

1. Prepare
2. Discover and Engage
3. Analyse and Assess (preliminary Findings and Recommendations)
4. Final Report and Roadmap.

Benchmarking against other like Councils was carried out to seek comparisons and new ideas.

Statutory Planning

Benchmarking results for Statutory Planning concluded that Yarra is well resourced for Statutory Planning purposes but because of the volume and complexity of the applications received in this Department, and the need to involve councillors in the process more frequently, they require the staffing and resourcing they have in order to retain staff and complete the applications they receive in a timely manner.

Yarra have a significantly higher budget due to VCAT and external referral advice spend, loss of Ministerial fees, and costs to process major applications (of which Yarra have more than the other benchmarked Councils) - both during the process and at VCAT.

Strategic Planning

There were no significant findings for Strategic Planning in the benchmarking information collected. Yarra is a leader in a number of aspects of their Strategic Planning service.

External Engagement

External engagement for the review was conducted using the following methods:

- Meetings held individually with Councillors
- Meetings held with Planning staff and other staff across the organisation
- Meetings held with the Business Advisory and Heritage Advisory groups
- A survey made available to the community (Including past planning applicants) and on Your Say Yarra website
- A workshop held for community representatives
- Meetings held with community representatives (on request) which resulted in separate submissions and/or responses to the survey
- Submissions received via email
- A targeted survey distributed to a selected group of consultants, lawyers and referrals agencies who regularly interact with Council's Statutory and Strategic Planning teams.

The following contributions were received in response:

- Online Survey- Community - 118 responses
- Survey for consultants, lawyers and referral agencies - 21 responses
- Direct email feedback - 17 Responses
- Workshop - 7 attendees.

Significant contributions were made which are reflected in a full consultation report. This has resulted in a table of recommendations for the Council for improvement over a 2-year implementation period.

Both the Statutory and Strategic functions of Yarra City Council are functioning well with an up to date and contemporary set of systems and processes. The investment into an Audit of Statutory Planning in 2015 has resulted in a number of years of improvements being implemented to digitise the system for efficiency, process mapping and capturing records

effectively. Whilst no audit of Strategic Planning has occurred in the past 10 years the processes are generally more simplified and are working well.

Council should be recognised for the commitment to engage the community in an internal service review. It is very unique to see this approach across Local Government.

From this work a series of clear and cost-effective recommendations and a roadmap for implementation has been prepared for the Council senior management implementation.

If more resources were to become available there are some high-level ideas provided for future consideration.

With the implementation of these cost-effective recommendations within a two year period minor improvements will be made to what is considered to be an existing sound and high quality service for the Yarra community.

3. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of the Yarra Statutory and Strategic Planning Services Planning Review.

The objective of this review is to develop a roadmap for ongoing improvements to Council's planning services.

The review is underpinned by local government experience, feedback, and examining other like Councils across the sector in the form of benchmarking their services.

The Council specified that any improvement opportunities must be implemented, using in house resources, over two years and which is focussed on:

- Improved service outcomes, including exploration of best-practice service delivery models for both Statutory Planning services and Strategic Planning services

- Establishing Yarra planning services as a contemporary sector leader that is inclusive and accessible to all participants

- Reviewing the internal processes within the Statutory Planning and Strategic Planning services and recommending improvements including, identifying and engagement with internal and external users of the services and assess the degree to which the current services meet the needs of these groups

- Identifying options and opportunities for improved service outcomes, including exploration of best-practice service delivery models

- Identifying opportunities for strengthening and improving Council's community consultation and engagement practices so that customer experience can be improved

- Identifying opportunities for process improvements and system efficiencies for all statutory planning matters and planning scheme amendments in the context of the provisions of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the Yarra Planning Scheme.

4. Background

Ongoing service reviews are vital processes to ensure local government services are:

- Appropriate – that is, Council services meet current community needs and wants, and can be adapted to meet future needs and wants

- Effective – that is, Council delivers targeted, better quality services in new ways

- Efficient – that is, Council improves resource use (people, materials, plant and equipment, infrastructure, buildings) and redirects savings to finance new or improved services.

In June 2022, the Municipal Monitor for the City of Yarra released a report which observed *"over the past two decades, by virtue of its proximity to the CBD and as a result of State Government planning policies, it has undergone significant densification and other changes in its urban form and will continue to do so in the future."* [1]

The report made further observations in relation to the need for better engagement practices in planning noting "*this is not just because a more open approach to the councils processes is likely to reduce the level of criticism of the planning department. No less significant is the complexity and volume of planning issues Yarra has to deal with, reflecting its decades long transformation into a municipality when residential and commercial developments must co-exit cheek by jowl. In this context the planning department needs to spend much more time engaging with the community, explaining in no-technical language the Council's vision of how commercial and residential development can be integrated in ways that benefit all sectors of the municipality.*"

In March 2022, Council resolved to change (increase) the powers of delegation to Statutory Planning. Part of that resolution also sought to *"seek a review of Statutory Planning processes forming part of the broader continuous improvement program to include Councillor and targeted community consultation to review but not limited to:*

      (a) facilitating business applications;
      (b) facilitating efficient and transparent processing of applications; and
      (c) consultation/mediation"

Considering recent improvements made to the planning processes and the increase in delegation for Statutory Planning and the Monitor's report (both interim and final), a holistic review of Statutory and Strategic Planning was commissioned.

---

[1] Blacher. Y, June 2022 Municipal Monitor's report on the Governance of the City of Yarra

At the Council meeting on 9 April 2024 Council adopted a set of principles to guide service planning and review putting community at the heart of decision making.

The Council adopted the following Service Planning and Review Principles:

1. Actively include a range of First Nations' voices and values in all decision making and placemaking to ensure ongoing community resilience.
2. Be proactive in supporting communities and service providers to dramatically reduce waste and greenhouse emissions and prioritise regenerative systems to improve wellbeing and biodiversity and sustainable outcomes.
3. Ensure Yarra's artistic and cultural identity is valued and supported given their contribution to community resilience.
4. Select service providers that are in line with Council's sustainability policies and goals.
5. Be adaptable and proactive by identifying, planning for, and implementing solutions that respond to dynamic factors and the current and future community needs.
6. Deliver qualitative and quantitative evidence-based outcomes that include community input, which will be shared and communicated in an accessible way with the community.
7. Use a comparative benefit analysis to measure value for money and the positive impact of service reform for the community.
8. Actively engage the community, prioritising those most directly impacted and in line with Council's Community Engagement Policy, where appropriate.
9. Prioritise financial sustainability and appropriate resource allocation to enable us to respond to changing community needs, now and into the future.
10. Prioritise service delivery models where it can maintain control of quality and influence the community benefits and outcomes.
11. Prioritise social benefits, especially those that address the needs of vulnerable and diverse people, within financial means.
12. Seek creative and innovative ways to continually improve and address challenges, including collaborating and partnering with other councils, other levels of government, not-for-profits, businesses, and volunteers.
13. Ensure social impact and equity are accounted for when pricing a user-pays, market-comparable service.
14. When making decisions, be considerate and evaluate the impact a change to one service will have on all other services.
15. When considering a change to service that is also provided by an external market, evaluate the external market against Council's Social Justice Charter principles, of Access, Equity, Rights and Participation.
16. Assess and consider the accessibility of services within a user's ability and means, both geographically and digitally, when proposing changes to service locations.

These principles were created after a deliberative engagement process and after the brief for this service review was developed and substantially delivered. The Council however did engage with the Yarra community on this internal service review which has informed the outcomes of the report.

5. Scope and Methodology

5.1 Scope

The review focussed on both Statutory and Strategic Planning separately with the following scope specified by Council.

Statutory Planning

In scope:

- The review of internal processes within Statutory Planning to determine improvements in the way Community Consultation and Engagement is conducted.

- Benchmark against other "like" Councils including composition of teams and processes and workloads.

Statutory Planning has recently reviewed processes as part of the implementation of an online platform (Council's website) which now provides customers with online lodgement, tracking and payment. This review, and its findings and recommendations, builds on the work already undertaken but at a higher level to determine how effective Statutory Planning is in undertaking its role in the following:

- Efficient processes
- Transparency and accountability
- Decision making
    - Timeliness
    - Consistency
    - Quality (Inc. Council reports)
    - Appropriate and relevant decision making (Including assessment against Planning Scheme Provisions and VCAT case law)
- Engagement with community at key stages of an application process including Notice of an Application (advertising), assessment, referral and determination stage (post notification) determination (decision) and VCAT
- Should Council reinstate information sessions and consultation meetings and if so, review the value and process these should follow
- Access to information.

Strategic Planning

In scope:

- The review of internal processes within Strategic Planning to determine improvements in the way community Consultation and Engagement is conducted.

- Benchmark against other "like" Councils including composition of teams and processes and workloads.

A formal review of the existing processes within Strategic Planning has not occurred. The unit has been reviewing its record keeping, project management and engagement processes with each project.

At a high level, this review determines how effectively the unit is undertaking its role in the following:
- Processes
- Timely decision making
- Quality of Consultants brief
- Quality of amendment Documentation and Council reports
- Project Management
- Engagement
- Access to information.

Note: This was a high-level review and not a detailed audit. The review also excludes any recommendations for improvements that would require more than 2 years to implement and costs over and above what can be delivered within existing budgets. (Specified as per the brief for the Review).

5.2 Methodology

To complete this review the following Methodology was used:

1. **Prepare**
   Included a briefing on the background and expectations for outcomes of the project with the Management team.
2. **Discover and Engage**
   Involved the collection and consideration of key strategies, policies, procedures, processes.
   This stage also involved the engagement both internally and externally with key stakeholders and the community. This stage included the collection of benchmarking information from like metropolitan Councils.
3. **Analyse and Assess (preliminary Findings and Recommendations)**
   Involved analysing all of the stakeholder and community feedback and assessing what requires further attention and improvement. It also involved assessment and analysis of the benchmarked data.
4. **Final Report and Roadmap**
   Following analysis, the report and roadmap were prepared.

Next Steps (beyond the scope of this report)

5. **Evaluate and Process**
6. **Implement and Monitor**

6. Engagement Methodology

6.1 Objectives of the engagement

1. Inform the community and key stakeholders about the review of planning services undertaken by Yarra City Council.
2. Obtain feedback from the general community and key stakeholders who have interacted with Statutory and Strategic Planning areas over the past two years.
3. Seek feedback on the following areas:
- access to information
- customer experience, communications, and consultations
- decision-making
- suggestions on improvements to statutory and strategic planning services.

6.2 Engagement Methodology

Engagement for the review was conducted using the following methods:

- Meetings held individually with Councillors
- Meetings held with Planning staff and other staff across the organisation
- Meetings held with the Business Advisory and Heritage Advisory Groups
- A survey made available to the community (Including past planning applicants) and on Your Say Yarra website
- A workshop held for community representatives
- Meetings held with community representatives (on request) which resulted in separate submissions and/or responses to the survey
- Submissions received via email
- A targeted survey distributed to a selected group of consultants, lawyers and referrals agencies who regularly interact with Council's Statutory and Strategic Planning teams.

The following contributions were received in response:

- Online Survey- Community - 118 responses
- Survey for consultants, lawyers and referral agencies - 21 responses
- Direct email feedback - 17 Responses
- Workshop - 7 attendees.

Attachment A is a full Engagement report outlining the:

- Engagement process
- Results of both surveys
- Community submissions
- Workshop findings
- Internal stakeholder findings (Councillors and Advisory Committees).

The key messages from the engagement process are discussed further in the **Key Findings** section below**.**

7. Benchmarking Methodology

The City of Yarra invited 8 Councils to participate in a Benchmarking exercise to collect relevant information to inform the Review.

A total of 5 Councils agreed to participate in the benchmarking exercise. These included the following Councils:

- City of Boroondara
- City of Darebin
- City of Maribyrnong
- City of Moonee Valley
- City of Port Phillip

These Councils were chosen for comparison based on consideration of a number of criteria including:

- Population
- Population projection
- Diversity
- Number of Planning Applications received
- Number of permits issued
- Organisational structure
- Budget 22/23 and FTE employees
- Council Plan and Public Participation.

For the Statutory Planning Service at each Council the following information was sought:

- Cost of Service, Resourcing and Planning applications
- Planning Systems
- Officers Reports
- VCAT
- Information or Forum Sessions held for the community.

For the Strategic Planning Service at each Council, the following information was sought:

- Record keeping
- Reports
- Engagement
- Access to information
- Cost of service and resources.

The Councils were asked to provide data for the 2022-2023 Financial Year or current status (whichever was relevant). In some instances, where noted, publicly available PPARs data has been used. The benchmarked councils results have been unidentified and will be referred to

in this report as Council A, B, C etc with the exception of that data provided via public sources eg. PPARS.

8. Summary of Benchmarking Outcomes

8.1 Statutory Planning

Budgets

Yarra has the highest budget for delivery of the Statutory Planning service. However, Yarra specify $260K for heritage consultants in their budget and it is not clear if other councils require or spend this from these budgets. Net spending (Budget minus Income) on Planning is also highest at Yarra being $3.32 million. One council appears to run their planning function at a profit with their income exceeding their budget by $400k. This appears to link to the amount they receive in fees to offset the service.
Overall, it is considered that Yarra costs more to run, and things can take longer, because Yarra have significantly more major/complex applications than other like Councils.

When you consider the PPARs statistics for Yarra, Maribyrnong, Darebin, Moonee Valley and Boroondara, the value of permits Yarra issued in the last financial year demonstrates a significant difference (almost 3x more) in the value of permits Yarra issued, which directly reflects the number of major/ complex applications Yarra processes. It is also reflected in the number of VCAT appeals Yarra receive.

The value of permits issued in 22-23 financial year from PPARs (Yarra's is more than double all benchmarked councils); number of appeals in 22-23 financial year from PPARs – apart from Borondara, Yarra is over double every benchmarked Council.
- Darebin - $424m, 34 appeals
- Port Philip $433m, 37 appeals
- **Yarra - $1,409m; 84 appeals**
- Boroondara - $503m; 80 appeals
- Moonee Valley - $538m; 29 appeals
- Maribynong - $471m; 21 appeals

In addition, the fees and charges available to Councils for Planning Applications provides only a proportion of the cost to deliver the full suite of planning services to the municipality. The subsidy provided by application fees was approximately 48% in 22-23 financial year.

Note below the comments regarding VCAT.

The Minister for Planning is the Responsible Authority for more applications at Yarra, compared to any other Council apart from the City of Melbourne - Yarra don't get the application fees however they do the work and spend on external advice.
Specifically:
- In 22-23 Yarra missed out on $262,575 worth of fees on 6 major applications that went to the Minister/DTP. Yarra still had to do the work on this – officer time – plus spent

$136,722 on external referral advice and legal representation and evidence for Ministerial matters
- This appears to be more Ministerial applications than any other Council apart from City of Melbourne which was not benchmarked.

Fees Income

Council E and Yarra have the highest income from fees due to higher numbers of applications received.

Number of Planners

Yarra has the second highest number of planners after Council E.

On raw planner numbers Council E have the highest numbers, with high numbers of Para Planners (10 in total plus a Para Planner Team Leader) that boosts their overall numbers. Yarra has the second largest number of planners however still quite a bit under the total Council E figure. No other Councils in the group are close to the Yarra and Council E numbers. Some of the other councils identify that they have heritage people and ESD consultants in other departments that they don't include in their planning staffing (so these have been excluded from the Yarra figures).

While Yarra does not have Para planners, they have band 5 business support officers (as opposed to band 4 at some Council's). Because they are band 5, they have a larger planning knowledge, can respond to most general enquiries and deal with somewhat complex matters without involving planners. This frees up the capacity of the planners and provides a higher level of customer service.

Planning vacancies

Almost all Councils have vacancies in skilled planning staff positions with the exception of Council E and Council C. Council C has low average numbers of applications for their planners which may be attractive from an employment perspective and could be a factor in retention of their planning staff as well.

Over the past couple of years Yarra has experienced a high staff turnover at the junior levels - particularly impacting timeliness and customer experience.
While high staff turnover isn't unusual in this industry and post-Covid period, it is still relevant to the Yarra Planning situation. In addition to this being relevant to high workloads at the junior levels. There are other implications as discussed below:

- Specifically, between March 2021 and May 2024 (just over 3 year period):
  - 42% turnover* of Statutory Planning Unit (SPU) team
  - 20% turnover of Planning Coordinators
  - 0% turnover of principal planners
  - 57% turnover of senior planners
  - 63% turnover of Statutory planners
  - 40% turnover of support team.
*Turnover includes where planners no longer work at Council, where officers have moved

roles within SPU (i.e. promoted) is not considered turnover.

Of the 42% turnover, the highest turnover is at the most junior level which speaks to:

a) The depth of experience within the team at Coordinator/Principal Planner level

b) The pressure high turnover at more junior level places on the team in terms of recruitment, onboarding, building capacity and capability

c) How this impacts timeliness of decision making

d) Many external community members will be dealing with less experienced planners at the counter or phone (as more junior planners do most of the phone/ counter duty) and as objectors on smaller applications; this may affect the community perception of the level of experience within the team/ consistency of advice (etc)

e) High turnover affects customer experience i.e. when you deal with multiple people, things can take longer, advice can start to become inconsistent and your confidence can be affected.

Planning Applications per Planner

When you compare the number of planning applications completed on average by the total number of planners Yarra comes third overall. Council A has the highest with an average of 58 applications per planner, Council D second, with 48 applications per planner and Yarra third with an average of 42 applications per planner. Council E is the lowest at an average of 27 applications per planner.

Planning applications per planner vary from 20 (Council C) to 55 (Council E) with Yarra sitting at second highest with 50 applications at Band 5. Other councils have much less for their Band 5s which would impact on recruitment and retention. Similarly at Band 6 the highest number of applications per planner is 55 at Council E and 50 at Yarra ranging down to 15 at Council C. At Band 7 the range is from 30 applications at Yarra to 25 at Council E down to just 5 at Council C. These results would have significant impacts on recruiting planners and retaining them at Yarra, and Council C, due to the heavier than normal workloads compared to other councils.

Since the collection of the original data for benchmarking purposes this has been updated by Yarra Management in early 2024 who confirm that:

• Planners on average have 34 applications (plus 4 other requests), Senior Planners have on average 32 applications (plus 5 other requests) and Principal Planners on average have 22 applications (plus 5 other requests)

• Applications include new permit applications, S72 amendment applications and Vic Smart applications. Other requests include general planning enquiries, extension of time requests and secondary consent applications.

It is therefore concluded at the time of benchmarking application numbers per planner were unusually high. This could have been due to some vacancies at the time. Importantly the complexity of applications at Yarra are higher than at these benchmarked Councils. This means that comparable application numbers do not equate to a comparable workload

because complex applications require more time to process. In this light, the workloads at Yarra are higher per Band 5 and 6 planner compared to all but Council E and higher per Band 7 planner compared to all other benchmarked Councils.

Planning Applications Received

Yarra received the most planning applications of the benchmarked councils. When comparing the Planning Department budget with the number of planning applications received by council the cost per application is high for Yarra being $4,922 per application (excluding income). The average gross cost of planning applications for the other five councils is $3,115 per application (excluding income). These costs range from the cheapest council being Council A at $966 per application through to the next most expensive council after Yarra being Council E at $4,064 per application.

However, looking at these raw figures can be deceptive as there are a number of reasons for high cost of service delivery at Yarra including:
• Complexity/scale of applications
• Minister gets fees on some applications
• High spend on VCAT representation (i.e. lawyers and planning consultants to represent Council and experts to support cases)
• Expert external referral advice (i.e. Yarra engage external urban design, heritage, wind, acoustic etc advice for all major applications, whereas it is understood, most Council's do not pay for any, or this much external advice).
The Yarra figure also includes services provided in the Department by employed staff (eg ESD consultant) whereas other councils have indicated that these services are provided by other Departments at council and not included in the overall costs.

Secondary Consents

Council E has the highest Secondary consents with Yarra second. Yarra has the highest number of S72 amendments with Council E second. This concurs with the services that have the highest number of planners and the highest costs per planning application.

Vic Smart Applications

Council E and Council A have the highest number of Vic Smart applications. Yarra is lower than these with the third highest number closely followed by Council D.

Planning Applications Determined

Council A has the highest number of permits determined with Yarra not far behind.

Council D has the highest number of applications go to Council (23) with Yarra and Council E not far behind in numbers at 19 and 18 respectively. The average for other councils is 9.3 which is less than half the number going to Council at Yarra. When you compare the number of applications going to council as a percentage with the number of applications delegated an interesting pattern emerges. Council D has the highest percentage of applications going to council at 2.5% followed by Council C and Yarra at 1.8% respectively. Council E is 1.7% and Council B is 0.8% with Council A the lowest at 0.7%. This again could

partially explain why their costs are so low at Council A, as so many of their decisions are delegated and not taken to Council for decisions. ie. Less workload, less objections from the community and potentially less complex applications.

Council A has the highest number of planning applications determined under delegation with Council E and Council B not far behind then Yarra. This figure indicates that for Council A they may not require as many planners as most of their work is carried out under delegation.

The number of planning objections tends to trigger the intervention of Council or the Urban Planning Delegated Committee in the case of Council A. Objections range from 16 to 10 as the trigger.

All the benchmarked councils have the capacity for the Council to call up applications to a Council Meeting or Planning Decisions Committee.

All Councils measure statutory planning days and median days for average processing days to Responsible Authority outcome. These are published in the PPARs reports.

These results show that Yarra has the second highest average processing times however this are almost on par with two other Councils in the group benchmarked. Council B has higher processing times with a lower number of applications received in comparison to Yarra.

Yarra receives generally more complex applications, and significant input from the community in planning matters, and therefore this is reflected in the longer timeframes for processing.

Extension of Time Requests

Yarra has significantly more time extension requests at 313 compared with the other benchmarked councils at an average of 198 ranging from 80 at Council C to 234 at Council D.

This is understood to be because Council has a standard practice of issuing Extension of Time requests for only one year, this is due to the rate of change occurring (in both a built form and policy sense).

Planning Enquiries

Council E has the greatest number of planning enquiries at 787 followed by Yarra at 514 enquiries. The other councils only average 174 enquiries per year ranging from 75 at Council A to 249 at Council B. This would significantly increase the workload for the business and planning team at Yarra.

Planning Systems

Yarra's planning systems were well behind those of the benchmarked councils prior to the introduction of their digitised system in 2021. Yarra are now on track and catching up with the backlog of digitising back files. Each of the other councils introduced electronic lodgement of files since 2015 (at Council B and Council C) and their files have been fully digitised back to those dates. They have been fully digitised at Council A since 2016 and

went fully electronic at Council D in 2017. Council A introduced electronic files in 2019 and they have commenced full digitisation of all files when a query is raised since 2022.

What Yarra have achieved through their system review is a reconstruction of their system to become a fully digitised system from end to end. This has brought efficiencies, more user friendly and expected to have reduced errors in processing.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement processes have been implemented at all the benchmarked councils. They appear to be all sophisticated in developing process improvements. Other councils have also implemented KPIs and customer facing improvements.

Yarra does not have a continuous improvement person in place. Other councils use a range of methods to implement process improvements which include: a dedicated para planner as a process improvement specialist, a call out to team members to lead specific processes when they become apparent and two councils have Coordinators who look after Business Support and have continuous improvement of processes in their portfolios.

Reports

Yarra has not attempted any major reviews of their delegation reports over the past two years until recently with the commitment made from Management to review this due to feedback from staff about the detail and length of the reports. This may have the effect of reducing workload and time for processing.

All other benchmarked councils have made some improvements. These included halving the length of the report template at Council A from 41 to 21 pages, reductions in repetition and a focus on areas of high risk. There is a tension perceived by planners between shortening reports, then being asked by Councillors, the community and VCAT for more information. The Yarra Planning Scheme complexity also impacts on the length of assessment required in some reports. Designated officers to update template reports on a regular basis were a good suggestion from Council E.

VCAT

Apart from one Council, Yarra has more than double the number of appeals of any other benchmarked Council. This impacts how much it costs to run the service as well as adding to overall workload.

Yarra and Council E had the most number of delegated decisions overturned at VCAT with 5 each. The other councils benchmarked ranged from 2-3 decisions overturned. This could be a factor of the larger number of applications received by both Yarra and Council E.

Most councils including Yarra had zero Council decisions overturned by VCAT but one council (Council B) had 6 applications overturned.

Councils had a variety of matters lodged at VCAT ranging from the least at Council D (31 matters) to the greatest at Yarra (86 matters). Of these, the failure to determine matters

ranged from 8 at Yarra down to 2 at Council D. When comparing the total numbers of matters lodged to the number of failures to determine, Yarra had a good result compared to some other councils who had less total matters lodged but still a high number of failures to determine eg 7 out of 44 matters at Council B and 6 out of 34 matters at Council E. Higher numbers of failure appeals is also linked to there being more complex applications with higher objection numbers (which Yarra has) as these are more likely to be subject of a failure appeal.

Yarra spends more on external referral advice & VCAT representation/experts.
This is a key reason why service costs are more to deliver at Yarra; it's directly linked to the number of complex/ major applications Yarra receives.

Specifically:

● In the 22/23 Financial Year, Yarra spent $1,368,467 on VCAT, legal advice and external referral advice = 23% of the total cost of service delivery. This excludes factoring in the value of officer time.

Planning Forums

Some of the councils run planning forums compared with Yarra who do not run forums at present. These range from 10+ objections triggering a consultation meeting at Council D and Council C to 13+ objections at Council E to trigger a planning consultation meeting to ad hoc arrangements at Council B and Council A.

Planning Information sessions are not as a rule run as a standard process by benchmarked councils. They are run where there may be major objections but in some councils the applicants may run these sessions themselves e.g. major developments at private schools. However, there are some sessions run at these benchmarked councils compared with none at Yarra.

Innovative Engagement Ideas

Use of QR codes to get straight to the relevant details on Council's websites (at Yarra and Council B) and social media (Council C) for major applications are seen as modern techniques to engage with the community. Council E offers a 'talk to a planner' service and also holds pre-application meetings on how to prepare your planning application. It is noted that Yarra also offers pre-application meetings.

Benchmarking Statutory Planning Conclusions

A review of the benchmarking data of the five benchmarking partner councils and Yarra show that the Yarra Statutory Planning team are well resourced in comparison to other councils with the exception of Council E – but they also pay for external referral advice on their major applications and have significant costs associated with VCAT.

Yarra has the highest number of planning applications and ranks second for secondary consents when compared with the other councils and keeps good statistics about their

performance which is lacking in most other councils. They also have the highest number of extensions of time requests and the second highest number of enquiries indicating that they are a very busy planning department.

In terms of staffing, Yarra is well resourced in overall numbers of staff, but their planners are some of the most heavily engaged with planning applications when compared to other councils, particularly Council C which has much lower numbers of applications at each banding level. This will impact on the capacity of Yarra to recruit and retain staff particularly if salaries are not competitive with other councils.

Yarra has the second highest number of planning applications go to council (19) after Council D (23). This is nearly double the number of applications going to other benchmarked councils which averaged 9.3 applications.

Yarra has previously been slow to modernise their planning systems having only recently started to digitise applications (2021) while some of the benchmarked councils have been doing this since 2015. They do have some innovative practices such as the use of QR codes on applications for further information but they do not have continuous improvement staff or practices in place. Some of the other councils indicated that while they have improved their delegation reports to make them significantly shorter and more simplified there is a tension between having enough information in these reports for decisions and the requirement to provide more information to councillors (when the applications are called in by council), the community and VCAT. This may not be the most efficient way of using planning staff resources.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from this part of the review is that Yarra is well resourced for Statutory Planning purposes but because of the volume and complexity of the applications received in this Department, they require the staffing and resourcing they have to complete the applications they receive in a timely manner. Yarra have a significantly higher budget due to VCAT and external referral advice spend, loss of Ministerial fees, and it costs to process major applications (of which Yarra have more than the other benchmarked Council's) - both during the process and at VCAT.

ATTACHMENT B is a table summarising the Statutory Planning statistics collected from the benchmarked Councils and Planning Permit Activity Reports (PPARS).

8.2 Strategic Planning

Record Keeping

All councils (including Yarra) have electronic storage systems for planning files - primarily Content Manager (formerly TRIM) or Objective. InfoCouncil is used to prepare reports for Council and specific drives on the corporate IT system or Sharepoint are also used. This appears to be consistent across the councils and no innovative ideas in this space were shared.

Reports

Each Council provided example reports on Planning Scheme Amendments or Strategies that had been presented to Council. There is a general consistency of reports and the contents due to the understanding by all Planning teams, the details required to submit to the Minister for Planning for any approvals.

The Yarra reports presented are very comprehensive and whilst lengthy in nature and using planning jargon is standard across Local Government and necessary to demonstrate justification for any approval by the Minister for Planning to amend the Planning Scheme. The Planning requirements and expectations of the Department of Transport and Planning continue to be very high.

Engagement

Most councils are using 'YourSay' systems to convey information about strategic planning issues and engage the community. Council E has an 'Engage Council E' platform that they use successfully for all amendments. Most councils also use letters written in plain English or in some cases translated into community languages (Yarra) that are either emailed, posted or letterbox drops. Face to face popups are also popular along with specific interest group panels at Yarra. Drop ins and newspaper notices are still used in Council C.

Yarra appears to have the most comprehensive and inclusive engagement methods.

Access to information

Yarra provides the most comprehensive methods of sharing information but other councils also use council websites for information, engagement platforms such as 'YourSay' together with dropin sessions, council newsletters or the engagement of Council's Advisory Committees to access a range of representative community input. Focus group workshops with different stakeholder groups are held at Council A and traders associations are also consulted. Translation of materials into different languages is also used at several councils. Materials are also provided in hard copy at council's buildings such as libraries and town halls and there is an interactive map on the website that outlines the proposals (Yarra).

Cost of service and resources

The cost of the Yarra service is currently slightly below the average for the 5 Councils (Yarra $1.017m). The average expenditure for Strategic Planning Units is $1.26 million ranging from $2.118 million at Council B to $950,000 at Council D.

In terms of staff levels, Yarra has numbers of Planners that equates to the average of the 5 Councils. (Yarra has 10 positions, excluding the Manager). The average number of staff for each Strategic Planning Unit is 10.73 staff ranging from 15 at Council A to 7.6 approximately at Council D.

Vacancies at Yarra were shown to be slightly higher than the average, however below two other Councils. Since the time of collection, the turnover of the staff has settled and vacancies filled.

Benchmarking Strategic Planning Conclusion

In conclusion, there were no significant findings for Strategic Planning in the benchmarking information collected. Yarra is a leader in a number of aspects of their Strategic Planning service.

9. Strategic Context

9.1 The Legislative Context

The Local Government Act 2020

Service Reviews are a mechanism for ensuring Service Performance requirements are met under the new Local Government 2020 Act. The shift to a principles-based act requires our services to be:

1.   Equitable and responsive
2.   Accessible to those for who they are intended
3.   Good value
4.   Continuously improve in response to performance monitoring
5.   Fair complaints responses.

There are five key principles contained in the Local Government Act 2020 (the Act) that guide the way that Local Government must operate in Victoria. These include:

• Community Engagement
• Strategic Planning
• Financial Management
• Public Transparency
• Service Performance.

In particular, Section 56 of the Act outlines the community engagement principles:

(a)   A community engagement process must have a clearly defined objective and scope
(b)   Participants in community engagement must have access to objective, relevant and timely information to inform their participation
(c)   Participants in community engagement must be representative of the persons and groups affected by the matter that is the subject of the community engagement
(d)   Participants in community engagement are entitled to reasonable support to enable meaningful and informed engagement
(e)   Participants in community engagement are informed of the ways in which the community engagement process will influence Council decision making.

In response to these principles Council has an adopted and maintains a Community Engagement Policy in accordance with Section 55 of the Act.

This Community Engagement policy provides a direction to staff regarding expectations of community engagement. This is discussed below**.**

The Planning and Environment Act 1987

The Planning and Environment Act 1987 sets the legal framework for the planning system with each municipality in Victoria covered by a planning scheme that regulates the use, development and protection of the land. Planning schemes set out the planning rules - the state and local policies, zones, overlays and provisions about specific land uses. State-level policies are set by the state government to address social, economic and environmental needs of our communities at a higher level in documents such as Plan Melbourne. Local government policy contained in the Yarra Planning Scheme needs to be in line with State-level policies. The state government has outlined this process on their website.[2]

9.2 The Government Policy Context

State Government Policy and Changes to the Planning System

The State Government has announced changes to the current Planning System in Victoria. [3]

The focus of this reform is on "*a clearer, faster and fairer planning system ensures Victoria remains a great place to live, work and visit*".

A report on the Planning and Housing reform was prepared by Council's General Manager City Sustainability and Strategy presented to the 10 October 2023 Council Meeting. This report outlined the implications going forward for the Council.

This planning reform does not impact on the outcomes of this review.

Operation Sandon Report- IBAC

On 27 July 2023, IBAC tabled a special investigation report to the Victorian Parliament.

This report was an investigation into allegations of corrupt conduct involving councillors and property developers in Melbourne's south-east. (Casey City Council). This report examined the effectiveness of Victoria's systems and controls for safeguarding the integrity of the state's planning processes.

Operation Sandon found that in relation to planning matters, Casey City Council processes were insufficient to:
• Prevent improper conduct
• Manage conflicts of interest
• Maintain integrity.
IBAC found that robust planning processes are required to guard against improperly influenced proposals and amendments.

IBAC identified 11 recommendations in its report regarding planning relating to:

---

[2] Guide to Victoria's Planning System.

[3] Planning reform - Planning reform.

(Rec 2) The premier setting up a taskforce to address corruption risks in planning. (Government support in principle)

(Rec 3) Suggested amendments to the Planning & Environment Act 1987-authorising of planning schemes. (Government support in principle)

(Rec 4) Criteria to be specified for the adoption and approval of a planning scheme amendment. (Government support)

(Rec 5) The Department of Transport and Planning to review and clarify guidance when assessing merits of a planning scheme amendment. (Government support)

(Rec 6) Amending the Planning & Environment Act 1987 to require the decision maker to record the reasons for decisions in a planning scheme amendment. (Government support)

(Rec 7) Amending the Planning & Environment Act 1987 to require every applicant and person making submissions to disclose reportable donations and other financial arrangements. (Government support)

(Rec 8) Ministerial directions for Planning Panels Victoria- presumption in favour of the existing planning scheme and state policy. (Government support in principle)

(Rec 9) Amending the Planning & Environment Act 1987 to deter submitters from attempting to improperly influence a council, Minister or Planning Panels in a planning scheme amendment process. (Government support)

(Rec 10) Develop a model structure for independent determinative planning panels for statutory planning matters. (Government support in principle)

(Rec 11) Minister for Planning to develop and introduce amendments to the Planning & Environment Act 1987 to Parliament. (Government support in principle)

(Rec 12) Premier ensures that the Taskforce engages subject matter experts and consults with key stakeholders to assess the operation of Part 4AA of the Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic) and recommends whether further amendments are required to give full effect to independent panels as the decision-makers for all statutory planning matters. (Government support in principle).

In response to the IBAC recommendations the State Government responded to these recommendations.[4] An indication of support or otherwise by the Government is provided at the end of each recommendation summary above. Overall, the planning recommendations were either supported or supported in principle.

Any changes as a result of this IBAC report are yet to be implemented therefore do not impact on the outcomes of this service review. This information is for noting for the Council and community.

---

[4] https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/Government-IBAC-Operation-Sandon-response-.pdf

9.3 The Strategic Organisational Context

The Community Vision[5]

The Yarra Community Vision states:

"Yarra is a vibrant, safe and inclusive environment. We celebrate and embrace our diversity and connection to each other and the land. Our community is empowered to work together and support one another with respect and trust."

The Council Plan[6]

The Council Plan 2021-2025 sets out six strategic objectives that describes Council's strategic direction over the four-year period:

- Climate and environment
- Social equity and health
- Local economy
- Place and nature
- Transport and movement
- Democracy and governance.

These were developed following extensive engagement with the community including a deliberative panel.

This service review is particularly in alignment with the Place and Nature objective and the Democracy and Governance objective.

Community Engagement Policy 2020[7]

This policy commits Council to community engagement that is:

Representative: We identify people and groups likely to be affected by our decision, and ensure they have the chance to participate.

---

[5] Yarra 2036 Community Vision | Yarra City Council

[6] Council plan | Yarra City Council

[7] bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=9ec99d7089fb0b6bJmltdHM9MTcwNDU4NTYwMCZpZ3VpZD0zY2EzMzM2Yy1kN2Y1LTY4NTEtMDg0NS0yMmZmZDYxZjY5ZmMmaW5zaWQ9NTE5Mw&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=3ca3336c-d7f5-6851-0845-22ffd61f69fc&psq=yarra+Community+Engagement+Policy&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cueWFycmFjaXR5LnZpYy5nb3YuYXUvLS9tZWRpYS9maWxlcy95Y3MvYWJvdXQtdXMvc3RyYXRlZ2llcy90b2duN5MDMzX2NveS1jb21tdW5pdHktZW5nYWdlbWVudC1wb2xpY3lfZGlnaXRhbC5wZGY_bGE9ZW4&ntb=1

Accessible: We use methods that empower underrepresented groups to get involved. We use a variety of online, print and face-to-face methods to maximise our reach and remove potential barriers and ensure culturally safe spaces for engagement.

Meaningful: We empower stakeholders with relevant, objective and plain English information and resources to allow informed participation.

Transparent: We explain which elements the community can influence, to what level and how we will use our community's input.

Accountable: We report back to the community, explaining what we asked, what we heard, and what we did.

Respectful: We value and respect our community's time, engaging closely when their influence is high and scaling back when it is more limited.

Flexible: We adapt to evolving circumstances, including allowing for newly identified stakeholders to engage as necessary throughout the process.

Supportive: We advocate on behalf of the Yarra community where the work of external agencies (including other tiers of government) impacts our community.

Prepared: We ensure our engagement practitioners and decision makers have the appropriate training, guidance and resources.

Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey 2022- Planning & Placemaking (September 2022)

The purpose of the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey (ACSS) is to:

- Explore resident satisfaction with Council service areas and facilities
- Understand community perception of Council's governance and other performance measures.

The study approach:

- Meets the requirement of the Victorian Local Government Performance Reporting Framework.
- Facilitates comparison by aligning on key measures of the Local Government Victoria's Annual Community Satisfaction Survey.

The survey collected data in response to Planning and Development including:

- Design of public space
- Protection of heritage
- New developments
- Planning decisions
- Timeliness of decisions
- Opportunity to participate
- Effective consultation.

Some of the key conclusions drawn from the survey were as follows:

- Regarding consultation and engagement - 70% of respondents rated the Council either Average or good/very good
- Regarding satisfaction with decision making in the best interests of the community - 70% of respondents rated the Council either average or good/very good
- Regarding Town Planning Policy - 70% of respondents rated Council either average/good/very good. Looking at the results by precinct the greatest dissatisfaction with Planning policy was identified in Collingwood and Fitzroy
- Regarding Planning and Building Permits - 53% of respondents rated the Council average/good/very good. Looking at the results by precinct the greatest dissatisfaction with Planning and Building permits was identified in Clifton Hill, Collingwood, Fitzroy North and Fitzroy.

Staff Code of Conduct

The Yarra Staff Code of Conduct sets out expectations for all Council staff in relation to principles and obligations under the Local Government Act 2020, Values of the organisation, diversity and inclusion, Council policies, responsibilities, OHS, Child Safety and Wellbeing, Respectful behaviours, Equal Opportunity and Anti-Discrimination, Governance and Integrity, Socia Media, Information Management, workplace standards, personal conduct etc.

The overall values of the organisation are at the core of everything they do. The staff are expected to work and shape the organisation culture through 3 values including:

- **Accountability**- Owning what we do
- **Respect**: Including all
- **Courage**: Seeking the brave path

10.   Constraints and Opportunities

From knowledge of Local Government, the Planning System, the feedback and observations of the Council a number of high-level constraints and opportunities were identified.

Constraints

- The current Planning system (complexity and needing review)
- Financial
- IT Systems
- Time
- Staffing Resources not likely to increase.

Opportunities

- Service reviews across Council
- Delegations
- Planning changes
- Engaged community groups
- Strong commitment to community engagement.

11.   Key Findings and Recommendations

Overall findings

Like all Planning functions within Victorian Local Government staff and Councillors work within a complex Planning system, as Planning Authorities.

The planning system over time has become more complex and lengthier, with greater demands on local government to deliver good development outcomes.

From experience, when you ask for feedback on Planning it is rare from communities that you receive overwhelming positive feedback. Planning issues are very complex, emotional and difficult to manage for any Planning team, due to the impact that development can have on communities and people's personal property.

Generally Planning teams across Local Government will share learnings and they will reach out to ensure they are following best practice. That appears to be the case with Yarra City Council. Yarra has invested over a number of years, making improvements to their systems and processes, to work more efficiently.

There continues to be a high demand for growth and development in Yarra under challenging circumstances where there has been gaps in Planning policy and a Planning system that means that these gaps take significant time to close. Yarra is not alone in this space. Many inner-city Councils have been facing the same challenges.

Things take longer at Yarra because:

- Complexity as a result of densified/ inner city environment
- Number of major/ complex applications
- Watertight processes/ lower delegations/ longer reports to manage risks
- Time taken to manage Yarra stakeholders (including community and Councillors)
- There are very high community/ Councillor/ Media expectations and desire to be involved and to scrutinise decisions.

Pressures to resist change through further development are real for local residents and are reflected in the community responses received. The community often sees heritage under threat and has different views on what appropriately balancing change and heritage means.

When you engage the community in a discussion about Planning there are views that are divergent and often dissatisfaction. The question is are they dissatisfied with the service or the outcome? This became evident throughout this review.

Both the Statutory and Strategic functions of Yarra City Council are functioning well, with an up to date and contemporary set of systems and processes. The investment into an Audit of Statutory Planning in 2015 has resulted in a number of years of improvements being implemented to digitise the system for efficiency, process mapping and capturing records

effectively. Whilst no audit of Strategic Planning has occurred in the past 10 years the processes are generally more simplified and are working well.

Through consultation there is a stark contrast between how the community views the Planning functions at Yarra as opposed to professional counterparts in the legal, consulting and referral authority sectors who rate the Yarra Planning services highly. This suggests there are changes that should be introduced to address some of the concerns raised by the community in certain areas.

With limited resources and budget to make changes and address some of the concerns this will be a challenge. The implementation of cost-effective changes over time has been the approach taken to respond to the feedback.

If Council wanted to consider more costly or bigger picture ideas for improvement the four key ideas would include:

- Investment into an IT solution for Strategic planning project management, document management and process flows
- The engagement of a Continuous Improvement Officer (ongoing full time) to service the needs of both Statutory and Strategic Planning
- Implementation of a modern, electronic push notification system to alert residents of planning applications and decisions
- Increased resources to work more intensively (upfront) with the community on all strategic planning projects and planning scheme amendments.

What is seen through this work is a Planning service which is not unlike other Planning services across Local Government. There are some minor variations between Councils however fundamentally Yarra are aligned with common planning practice.

Workload can vary between Councils and it has been observed that workload is high at Yarra, in particular in Statutory Planning. The pressures of dealing with upwards of 35 applications at any one time for a planner is challenging.

Through observations of the systems, processes and feedback both internally and externally a number of opportunities have arisen to address some of the concerns raised over efficiency, timeliness and responsiveness. There are however constraints based on the Planning system in which the Council works within resulting in processes and assessments that are complex and naturally time consuming.

The Council should work towards, small, cost-effective improvements over the next two years to respond to some of the key feedback received.

11.2 Statutory Planning Findings

What is Statutory Planning?

The Statutory Planning department is a regulatory arm of the Council that assesses and determines planning applications within the City of Yarra against the provisions of the Yarra Planning Scheme and the *Planning and Environment Act 1987.* [8]

Council also offers the services of an Appeals Advocate who manages all matters relevant to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

What does Statutory Planning deliver?

- Process and determine all types of applications including planning permit, amendment, and subdivision

- Inform and consult with the community at various application stages

- Pre-application advice all types of application.

- Advice to Councillors, public, other branches of Council about planning policies, controls, procedures, and applications, as relevant

- Represent Council at VCAT

- Provide specialised Environmentally Sustainable Design and Heritage Advice on applications

- Collaborate with Strategic Planning on how current policy is interpreted (by customers and VCAT) and Planning Scheme Amendments

- Collaborate with a number of internal units of Council to improve application outcomes

- Report to Council each financial quarter on all matters determined at VCAT including summaries of all decisions

- Report to Director each month on application types, received and determined

- Provision of training and support to all staff within the department

- Have previously facilitated Public Information Sessions (for applications defined as 'major'), where appropriate

- Facilitation of consultation meetings for applications due to be determined by the Planning Decision Committee (PDC), where appropriate. It is noted, Consultation Meetings have not been activated during the COVID – 19 period.

---

[8] Planning applications | Yarra City Council & Planning and Development | Yarra City Council

Has the Statutory Planning function been previously reviewed?

In 2015 a service review of Statutory Planning was undertaken by Fyfe Consultants. [9]

In 2020, following Council resolution, $150k of funding was allocated to improve the functionality of Statutory Planning. This allowed the department to commence a review process. It also received State Government funding in 2021 that enabled online lodgement and tracking to be developed.

In early 2021, fact-finding with several Victorian councils and planning consultants occurred, and internal user groups were formed. Manual 'workflows' were mapped, re-designed and re-built within Technology One Property and Rates), and how documents are saved and presented in Content Manager (their electronic library) has been transformed. Technology One Property and Rates and Content Manager have also been integrated meaning that automation occurs where relevant and possible. Planning Notices R Us manage site notices for applications and BING is responsible for all postal and email services.

Statutory Planning has been fully digital now since November 2021 and since April 2022 customers have been able to lodge all applications, and make payments, online. The department is now focusing on ensuring that all staff are trained correctly and there is buy-in and commitment into the new ways of working, as well as making changes (where appropriate) inspired by customer (internal and external) feedback and digitising information that exists in hard copy files prior to 2021.

As part of this review an analysis was made of the recommendations from the Fyfe audit and the majority of the improvements recommended at the time have been implemented. For the few recommendations that have not been implemented the Council has provided adequate justification for non-implementation.

Processes

Observations

The Statutory Planning Department have a comprehensive set of systems and processes in place to manage the high workloads of planning applications, secondary consents, S72's, extensions of time, endorsement of plans and property enquiries that are received each year.

Since the digitisation of the Statutory Planning system in 2021 (The Property and Rates System) the staff have mostly embraced the new technology and have been working with the system well. Staff in other Departments which intersect with Planning and who use the digital system speak positively about the implementation of the system and the improvements it has brought.

---

[9] Fyfe Pty Ltd, 2015, Yarra City Council Audit of Planning Permit Application Process.

The next consideration by Council may be to ensure this system backed up in the Cloud as part of an integrated enterprise management system.

In the central filing system (Content Manager) the Department has an extensive induction folder of information and other key process resources such as:

- Conditions Manual
- Templates
- Referrals
- Library of information

The information provided is comprehensive and what would be expected from a Statutory Planning Department in Local Government.

Some challenges have been identified as being:

- Limited time for new staff to be inducted due to workloads (although a staff buddy is assigned)
- Ensuring staff assigned to the customer counter have been inducted before being allocated duty
- Ensuring the templates are regularly updated
- Need for more referral discussions and closing the loop between departments
- Regular review of how Better Approvals for small business are allocated
- Need for regular meetings between Statutory and Strategic planning to continue to share information, in a time constrained environment
- Need for handover procedures between planning staff
- Setting deadlines for applicants to provide further information to minimise delays in processing.

In response to these challenges recommendations have been provided in ATTACHMENT C for process improvements.

The Statutory Planners are supported by a Business Support Team that provide:

- Administration and mail outs for Notification/Advertising
- Incoming mail/emails
- Responses to most customer enquiries
- Data and information
- Reporting or correction of system issues
- VCAT Correspondence
- Assisting with pre-application meetings
- File management and file digitisation.

This team provide a valuable resource to support the Planners to be able to focus on the technical requirements of what is required in their roles.

It is considered that the processes in place for Statutory Planning are sound and only require some minor changes for continuous improvement. Council should be recognised for the significant investment in the Property and Rates System to create efficiencies in processes.

Engagement Feedback

Based on the feedback received a number of process recommendations have been made identified in the Engagement Report ATTACHMENT A and the Summary spreadsheet of Recommendations ATTACHMENT C.

These are considered minor changes that will require time to implement however no significant cost.

These relate to:

- A push notification system (only if technology opportunities arise)
- Notification signs
- Electronic document fees
- Review of the Heritage contract review
- Review process for simple planning applications to speed up timeliness
- Review delegations for Senior Planners
- Review handover procedures.

Benchmarking

Yarra does not have a continuous improvement person in place. Other councils use a range of methods to implement process improvements. These include a dedicated para planner as a process improvement specialist, a call out to team members to lead specific processes when they become apparent, and two councils have Coordinators who look after Business Support and have continuous improvement of processes in their portfolios. Some of these ideas could be considered.

Transparency & Accountability

Observations

Council is considered to be highly transparent and accountable to the community, as far as its planning obligations are concerned and meeting requirements under the Planning & Environment Act 1987.

Whilst it is often hard to measure, after interviewing staff, there was a strong sense of a positive work culture to do a professional job, support the community with information and be accountable for their decisions.

The challenges faced by the Planning staff lies in the consistently high workloads and being able to service applicants, objectors and property enquirers, with multiple demands at any one time.

Staff will openly provide their contact details to parties on planning applications, which is not always experienced at other Council's throughout Victoria. They are open and accessible, even though the turnaround times may at times be slow, due to workload.

Engagement Feedback

Matters raised by the community regarding transparency and accountability overlap somewhat with other key themes discussed under this section of the report.

Some key issues included:

- Needing a commitment to responses and meeting timeframes
- Impression applicants get better access than objectors to planners
- Lack of continuity of staff dealing with applications
- Question over heritage experts: consultants v staff
- Referrals for World Heritage areas.

Recommendations have been provided to substantially address these issues.

Benchmarking

No benchmarking data was collected specifically for this theme.

Decision Making

Observations

Council has very clear decision-making processes in place for decisions to be made at Planning Decisions Committee (Council) and under delegation at the Development Assessment Panel. Consistency and quality of decision making at Yarra is considered high. The Statutory Planning Department will need to focus on timeliness of decision making going forward to make improvements to the planning service.

Through observations and interviews very little concern was raised internally about consistency of decision making.

Consistency of decision making generally occurs and is considered to be high, due to some key resources and processes in place by the Department. These include:

- List of standard conditions.
- Senior officer checks of reports that go to the Planning Decisions Committee.
- A Decision Assessment Panel that checks reports at a delegation level and discusses reports with Planning staff
- Sharing between staff of interpretations of the current Planning Scheme controls.

Quality of decision making at Yarra is considered to be high. This is reflected in:

- Quality/detailed reports being presented to the Planning Decisions Committee
- Quality/detailed reports being presented to the Decision Assessment Panel
- Positive feedback from VCAT members on the comprehensive and professional reports provided
- High demands from the community to provide justification for Council's planning decisions
- A general concern in the culture of the team of the risk of providing enough information due to the high demands experienced by the community and objectors to planning applications.

Timeliness of decision making at Yarra is considered in need of improvement.

The State Government Planning Permit Activity Reporting (PPARs)[10] for the 2023 Financial Year (1 July 2022- 30 June 2023) identifies that the average processing days to Responsible Authority outcome (of all applications) was 130.9 days (88 median days) in the inner and middle metropolitan area Councils.

Yarra during this same period was reported to have achieved average processing days to Responsible Authority outcome (of all applications) as 166.7 days (131 median days). This is higher than the inner and middle metropolitan area figures. (It is noted however that in the 2024 financial year to date, these figures at Yarra have improved to 157.8 days (127 median days).

---

[10] Planning permit activity reporting

The percentage of planning applications which were delivered within the Statutory 60-day time period was 38.15% for Yarra and 61.53% for the inner and middle metropolitan area.

Yarra achieved 96.76% of Vic Smart applications within the 10-day permit process time period. The inner and middle metropolitan area councils were only able to achieve this in 86.92% of the time.

It is considered that due to the volume and complexity of applications, requests for further information and demand for detailed reports on each application, levels of objections being received from the community, turnover of staff and vacancies increasing planning officer workloads during this period, this slowed down the processing times for applications.

The processing of Vic Smart applications is tracking well.

To respond to these results, there are a number of changes that could be considered including:

- Ensuring that position papers on interpretation of the planning scheme are updated regularly
- Considering the use of hyperlinks in reports to reduce the size of reports and speed up the process
- Set timeframes for applicants for requests for further information to be received and be vigilant to follow up so as to minimise the delays in processing.

Engagement Feedback

Through the engagement process a number of comments and suggestions were made on decision making. This was focussed on consistency, quality and timeliness and any comments relating to the outcomes of the decisions were not considered within scope of this review.

Decision making consistency: Feedback questioned the skills and training of planning staff to manage the complexity of applications received. A recommendation has been identified to review the induction program for planning staff and training to ensure consistency of approach and advice.

Decision making quality: From feedback this area of concern over quality was raised which triggered the need for some recommended improvements. These would be relatively simple to implement including:

- Reviewing structure of reports to Planning Decisions Committee and under delegation with a focus on simplifying. Improving executive summaries, considering the use of technical language, use of more figures, easy to read plans
- Senior officers continuing to check reports to Planning Decisions Committee and Development Assessment Panel.

Decision making - Timeliness: Feedback collected resulted in some ideas being generated for the timeliness of decision making. Three key recommendations are made relating to:

- Streamlining the planning process for minor applications and reports to shorten timeframes
- Reviewing staff numbers and banding levels and considering a concierge service for major applications
- Agreeing and setting customer target timeframes for response to queries ensuring that issues are addressed and resolved in a timely way.

Refer to ATTACHMENT C.

Benchmarking

No new innovative ideas on decision making were shared through the benchmarking.

Engagement with Community

Observations

The Council has a strong commitment to engagement with the community which is evidenced through their strategic documents such as the Council Plan and the Community Engagement Policy.

The Council's Communications team provides strong support for the Planning function of Council and has tools such as 'Your Say' Yarra and knowledge of engagement techniques and effective collation of feedback, that is of great assistance.

In Statutory Planning, based on Section 52 of the Planning and Environment Act 1987 the notice of applications is prescribed. Council must meet these requirements under the Act. From observations, this process of notification is well established and satisfactory at Yarra.

Due to limited resources and time constraints for processing planning applications there is little opportunity to undertake engagement with the community on planning applications. Only notification and receipt/consideration of submissions is possible. This is consistent across all Councils.

With a highly engaged community and pressures of development in the inner-city context it is considered that what the community expects from the Statutory Planning function of Council, in terms of engagement, will not be fully addressed due to the planning system constraints.

Engagement Feedback

In receiving feedback on engagement in Statutory Planning the key issues which arose resulted in the generation of some ideas as follows:

- Annual training open to the community on Yarra planning controls and processes
- Consider reinstating Information Sessions on major applications
- Annual webinar for consultants and applicants on Yarra planning processes, emerging trends, planning policy and legislation
- Continuing to advocate to State Government for full cost recovery of planning fees and for State to engage communities on Planning matters

- Planners attending sites of applications (with exceptions)
- Using accessible venues
- Pre application meetings and a checklist.

Refer ATTACHMENT C.

Benchmarking

From the benchmarking it was clear that Yarra's use of QR codes to get access to planning application information is a leading initiative.

One Council offers a "Talk to a Planner" service however Yarra allows access to all Planners and a duty officer is available at the Richmond Town Hall on a daily basis.

No other innovative ideas emerged from the benchmarking.

Information and Consultation Sessions

Observations

Council previously held consultation sessions for planning applications where there were 6 or more objections. It was also the case when the item was going to a Planning Decisions Committee Meeting (unless the Manager determined that there was no benefit (i.e. too many objections mean there is no meaningful discussion) - or if the applicant didn't agree - or there was a safety issue). If the application was likely to be a refusal recommendation then no consultation session was held.

These sessions were chaired by planning officers and objectors/submitters to the planning application and the applicant were invited to attend with the aim of sharing information and trying to resolve matters that had been raised regarding the development. The aim would be to find some middle ground on issues and assist the community and developers to work together for positive outcomes.

For major applications the Council previously held information sessions where members of the community could "drop in" and seek information about the development. The Applicant was also invited to attend these sessions.

When the COVID-19 period commenced in Victoria Council staff decided to cease these sessions due to COVID-19 restrictions, occupational health and safety issues for staff and the community. Since the COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted the Council has not reinstated the sessions.

In interviewing staff on this matter, a number of concerns were raised about the potential re-introduction of these sessions. These concerns included:

- More often than not there were no changes or shifts by the applicant to address the needs of the community. There were little resolutions
- The environment was highly emotive and staff experienced verbal abuse, bullying and harassment. (Health and Safety issues)

- The sessions slowed down the overall process of dealing with applications in the prescribed time period, therefore never meeting the 60-day timeframe
- Junior staff were often relied upon to chair these meetings with little chairing and no mediation training
- Information Sessions as "drop in" style to collect information were more informative and less volatile
- These sessions go beyond what is required under the Planning & Environment Act 1987
- These sessions were after hours adding substantially to the workload of Planners who already have a high workload during the day
- They were rarely attended by Councillors.

Investment of time v outcomes was questioned. Consultation Forums are resource intensive to organise and have mostly not achieved any positive outcomes for objectors/submitters and applicants. This is the reason why Councils have an ad hoc approach to providing this as a service. With high levels of workload at Yarra and the current delays being experienced with planning applications, it may not be worth investing more time on a regular basis to reinstating these Forums. The Council could be flexible and take an ad-hoc approach to this and make a judgement call on where staff consider there could be parties both sides involved who consider a meeting would be beneficial in resolving identified issues. These could then be called and delivered through an online platform.

It has been recommended that Council consider reinstatement of information sessions on an ad-hoc basis, for the community for major applications, however these should be conducted online for improved accessibility and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff.

Engagement Feedback

The feedback received externally varied from the staff feedback in the response to information and consultation sessions.

There have been a few requests for the reinstatement of the consultation forums from members of the community.

Due to the issues raised regarding these forums the reinstatement of these Consultation forums has not been recommended. However, there is an opportunity for Council to consider reinstating the Information sessions as an ad hoc approach which has been recommended for consideration by Council.

Benchmarking

Most Councils who provided benchmarking information run planning forums of some sort compared with Yarra who do not run forums at present. These range from 10+ objections triggering a consultation meeting at Council D and Council C, to 13+ objections at Council E to trigger a planning consultation meeting, to ad hoc arrangements at Council B and Council A. Ad- hoc arrangements appear to result in very few sessions being delivered throughout

the year. Some of the Councils have Ward Councillors that chair the meetings and others the officers chair but give Councillors the option to chair. Two of the Councils now hold these sessions online since COVID-19 and state that they are unlikely to return to in person sessions.

Planning Information sessions for major applications are not as a general rule run as a standard process by benchmarked councils. They are run where there may be major objections but in some councils the applicants may run these sessions themselves e.g. major developments at private schools. There are some sessions run at these benchmarked councils compared with none currently at Yarra.

Access to Information

Observations

Access to information is considered to be good with some opportunities for improvement.

Council has a public transparency policy [11]

This policy outlines that:

Council information may be accessed in a number of ways, depending on the type of information sought.

The information classifications are:

- Information that is freely and proactively published
- Information that is available on a public register or similar
- Information that is available under administrative release
- Information that is available under the Freedom of Information Act.

Council's Planning information is provided via the Yarra City Council Website, through enquiries at the Council customer service centres, written and in response to phone calls.

Information about the general number of Planning enquiries was not available due to the varying methods used by the community to seek information and the complexity to collect and collate this information.

Access to information about planning applications and development across Yarra was easy to find and navigate. Information was similar to that often seen at other Councils.

Planning and business support officers are open to providing information also to the community on request.

---

[11] Public Transparency | Yarra City Council

Engagement Feedback

From the engagement undertaken access to information appeared to be the number one most frequent concern by the community. A majority of the recommendations provided relate to access to information and many of them are linked to Council's website. It is acknowledged that Council is currently undertaking a review and revamp of their website and therefore opportunities are available to make improvements to content to assist the community.

Concerns and recommendations relate to the following:

• Website- Searching, links, layout, guidance, language, heritage advice, VCAT, post advertising status, fact sheets, glossary of terms, tone and information for objectors
• Technology- Enterprise management system, push notifications
• Training of Planning staff- Heritage, World Heritage Areas, Privacy, Urban Design, transport, economic land use, environmental and social impacts
• Training of Councillors in Planning and Heritage after the next election
• Guide to the Planning process/Understanding the Planning system- assisting the community
• Heritage: Undertaking a heritage contract review and making heritage information more accessible to the community.

Refer to ATTACHMENT C.

Benchmarking

During 1 July 2022-30 June 2023 Council received 514 property enquiries which is the second highest number across the benchmarked group of Councils. Council E has the greatest number of planning enquiries at 787. The other councils only average 174 enquiries per year ranging from 75 at Council A to 249 at Council B.

No innovative ideas about sharing information with the community were provided as part of the benchmarking. Most Councils will rely on a combination of website, written correspondence, counter enquiries, emails and phone calls to convey statutory planning information to the community and applicants.

11.3 Strategic Planning Findings[12]

What is Strategic Planning?

The Strategic Planning Department provides strategic planning policy advice and guidance on sustainable land use and development in the City of Yarra through policy development, strategic plans and the development of appropriate planning provisions through the Yarra Planning Scheme.

What does Strategic Planning deliver?

- Provision of strategic planning policy advice to stakeholders – both internal such as referrals on Statutory Planning applications and external such as rezoning enquiries
- Guidance on sustainable land use and development through policy development and city-wide strategic plans such as the Housing Strategy
- Development of place-based plans such as structure plans and local area plans
- The development of appropriate planning provisions through the Yarra Planning Scheme
- Processing of planning scheme amendments for Council and proponents, including informal engagement, subsequent public exhibition, review of submissions, management of Council's position at Panel and Standing Advisory Committee hearings and reporting to Council
- Provision of comments and feedback on strategic State Government and inter-Council planning initiatives and strategies
- Provision of data on affordable housing and office developments
- Maintenance of Incorporated Documents such as Areas of Heritage Significance (heritage gradings).

Has the Strategic Planning function been previously reviewed?

There has been no previous formal internal or external review of this unit on record. The unit is a low-end user of Technology One P&R and Content Manager, and their day-to-day functionality relies heavily on Outlook (email), S drive and TRIM/Content Manager.

In the past six months, officers have been undertaking ongoing internal reviews including:

- Record keeping practices, including file structure both in the local S drive and Content Manager
- Increasing consistency in project management practices
- Standardisation of Council resolutions

---

[12] Yarra Planning Scheme and amendments | Yarra City Council

- Improvement to planning referral processes and strengthening collaboration with other internal units
- On-going improvements to engagement approaches and drafting of communications material, including accessing hard to reach groups in the community and ensuring documents use 'plain English' language.

The Strategic Planning Department have in more recent months filled vacancies in key roles which has brought some further stability to the team and the ability to spread the allocation of work.

Processes

Observations

The Strategic Planning Department have good processes and procedures in place to undertake their work. There are however some improvements that could be made to create improved efficiency.

Much of what they deliver i.e. Planning Scheme Amendment processes are prescribed under the Planning & Environment Act 1987 and through ministerial guidance, advisory notes and templates provided by the Victorian Department of Transport and Planning.

The Strategic Planners work with very little administration support and appear to be very willing to work together as a team to support each other in getting tasks done.

The work of the strategic planning department relies heavily on the use of spreadsheets and therefore the integration into the main records system (Content Manager) is in need of improvement. This has been included as a recommendation for investigation.

The Geographic Information Systems (GIS) capability appears to need improvement and investment for greater use by the team. (This is major investment and would outside the scope of this review recommendation).

The function could also be improved through the provision of up to date Frequently asked questions (FAQs) for planning scheme amendment processes and the Planning Panel process to assist customer service staff and the community.

The Strategic planners have electronic access to a full induction program, How to Guides and file management documents.

Engagement Feedback

There was no external feedback on improvement to processes related to Strategic Planning.

Benchmarking

All councils have electronic storage systems for planning files - primarily Content Manager (formerly TRIM) or Objective. InfoCouncil is used to prepare reports for Council and specific drives on the corporate IT system or Sharepoint are also used.

There were no innovative ideas provided by benchmarked Councils in improvement of processes.

Decision Making (Timeliness)

Observations

> Decision making in Strategic Planning is generally slow, due to the nature of the work required to justify any planning scheme amendment under the current legislation and expectations of the Minister for Planning. Yarra works to minimise these delays during a time in which there is a large backlog of work to be undertaken.

Previously vacancies in the team slowed down the program of work and now that these are filled it is expected that the program of work will accelerate.

The Council experiences significant delays when work is submitted to the Department of Transport and Planning for feedback, consideration and decision. The Council has recognised now how important it is to continue to advocate to the State Government for reduced delays in responding to planning scheme amendment stages of the Yarra work. This is reflected in the recommendations.

Engagement Feedback

Only one recommendation in ATTACHMENT C relates to timeliness delays for Strategic Planning which states that "*Continue to advocate to State Government for faster turnaround times for planning scheme amendments sitting for consideration by the State Department.*"

The feedback from consultants, lawyers and referral authorities rated Yarra Strategic Planning timeliness of decision making to be very good.

Benchmarking

This type of information is very difficult to collect and benchmark across strategic planning functions of Council as it depends on the complexity of the planning scheme amendment or project. Therefore, no data is available.

Quality of Briefs/Reports

The quality of consultant briefs and Council reports on strategic planning matters is considered high.

As part of the review the following reports were considered:

1. Pre-amendment consultation for C271 – Fitzroy/Collingwood Planning controls.[13]
2. Consideration of submissions – C293 – Collingwood South Mixed-Use Precinct Built Form Provisions[14]
3. Adoption of the amendment – C291 – Bridge Road and Victoria Street Built form provisions[15]

The quality of these reports was considered high due to:

*   The considerable amount of detail contained in the report which is required as part of the justification for a planning scheme amendment
*   The use of figures, maps, tables and images to enhance the reports
*   Inclusion of key data
*   Explanation of provisions
*   Significant relevant attachments
*   Thorough outline and responses to community and stakeholder engagement
*   Clear and stand-alone recommendations.

Consultant briefs

Whilst strategic planners will refer to previous consultant briefs that have been prepared; the staff have identified the need for a template to be prepared to assist more junior planners in their role.

Consultants briefs for:

1. Fitzroy & Collingwood Stage 2- Built Form Analysis and Control Recommendations
2. Cremorne Urban Design Framework- Transport Review and Recommendations.

    were considered and were of a high standard.

---

[13] https://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/-/media/files/ycc/past-council-and-committee-meetings/council-meetings/2022-council-meetings-reupload/20221206-council-agenda.pdf?la=en

[14] https://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/-/media/files/ycc/past-council-and-committee-meetings/council-meetings/2022-council-meetings-reupload/20220623-council-agenda.pdf?la=en

[15] https://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/-/media/files/ycc/past-council-and-committee-meetings/council-meetings/2022-council-meetings-reupload/20220802-council-agenda.pdf?la=enbservations

Engagement Feedback

The engagement process sought feedback directly from consultants and lawyers on their views regarding the decision-making reports and consultant's briefs provided by Strategic Planning.

The respondents mostly rated the quality of the reports to be very good or excellent.

One respondent stated: *"The strategic works undertaken by Council are for most parts evidence-based and thorough".*

The respondents found the clarity of the briefs to be clear or very clear. They considered they were given enough time to respond to briefs and that they suggested some flexibility be provided on response times, in consultation with potential respondents. This would need to be a consistent approach.

Most respondents sometimes required further information from a brief however this not uncommon.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking Councils were asked to provide two example strategic planning reports considered to be their best practice within the last two years. There were no outstanding examples provided that would be considered over and above the standard, currently provided by Yarra.

Project Management

The quality of project management undertaken by the Strategic Planning department is considered to be good and only in need of some minor improvement.

Observations

The Strategic Planning department are currently using spreadsheets to project manage their allocated projects. There is considered to be more sophisticated software that may be introduced to better manage project work. This however would be costly for the Council to introduce and would require a sperate allocation of budget for consideration.

It also became apparent that very few of the staff have had training in project management which with these skills could work more efficiently and effectively especially in the supervision of contractors. This training is recommended.

The risk to projects can include matters such as turnover of staff, so adequate handovers are required in that circumstance.

Engagement Feedback

The engagement process sought feedback from consultants and lawyers on the strategic planning project management experience. The respondents mostly rated the project management processes to be very good or excellent. No issues

One respondent stated: *"Yarra CC is at the forefront, in our experience, of strategic planning exercises especially for activity centres. It commits to properly resourcing the exercises and there are rarely short cuts taken."*

Benchmarking

No benchmarking data was sought from participating Councils on project management.

Engagement with Community

Observations

> The Strategic Planning Department has made recent improvements to improve engaging with the community, with a commitment to undertake more upfront engagement on planning scheme amendment projects. The level of engagement is now considered to be high.

The strategic planners continue to work collaboratively with the Communications Team to develop engagement plans for their projects and seek specialist advice on reaching across the community.

Cremorne and Fitzroy /Collingwood projects were recently held up to be successful in their engagement approach with positive feedback from across the organisation and some of the community.[16] [17]

Staff across the organisation appreciate regular briefings on projects to keep them informed.

Engagement Feedback

Respondents provided some suggestions on improving community involvement in strategic planning consultation processes. This feedback resulted in two recommendations relating to:

- Ensuring all consultation on Strategic Planning matters that Council continues to offer a face-to-face method used to seek feedback in addition to electronic methods
- Engaging early with the community to inform issues along the way.

Refer to ATTACHMENT C.

Benchmarking

Most councils are using 'YourSay' systems to convey information about strategic planning issues. Council E has an 'Engage Council E' platform that they use successfully for all amendments now. Most councils also use letters written in plain English or in some cases translated into community languages (Yarra) that are either emailed, posted or letterbox drops. Face to face pop-ups are also popular along with specific interest group panels at

---

[16] Amendment C271 Fitzroy and Collingwood | Yarra City Council and Fitzroy and Collingwood planning controls - Your Say Yarra
[17] Amendment C318yara Cremorne Precinct Planning Provisions | Yarra City Council
 and engagement- Help design the future of Cremorne - Your Say Yarra

Yarra. Drop ins and newspaper notices are still used in Council C. No other innovative methods were identified. Yarra appears to have the most comprehensive and inclusive engagement methods.

Access to Information

Observation

Strategic planning provides access to a significant amount of information to the community via Council's website, social media, written material, correspondence, email and phone advice. The access to information is considered to be high with minor improvements recommended.

With all Councils reaching across the community to provide information in an accessible way is an ongoing challenge. Yarra however provide interpreter services and access to information in multiple languages. This is a continuous improvement space for all Councils.

The team regularly review the website for accessibility and compliance and look at templates used by others. This should continue as a regular practice.

The team need to ensure that the customer service officers are provided with regular updates on projects and consultation processes to enable them to provide the most up to date advice to the community.

Engagement Feedback

72% of respondents to the Your Say Yarra survey had been in contact with Strategic Planning to seek advice/ information.

Of these respondents:

29.2% Found it easy to obtain information
25% Said the team provided clear advice
25% Said the team explained decisions clearly.

The feedback suggests there is a need to improve responsiveness to queries, clarity in advice and explaining decisions clearly. There may need to be an investment in extra time to ensure that the customer is very clear by the end of the call/email trail.

It is suggested that Strategic Planning hold regular forums with the community on strategic planning matters at Yarra. This could be an annual event.

Other recommendations for access to information in response relate to:

- Website improvements- Step by step Planning Scheme Amendment process, simplify access and content, glossary of terms, property search, welcoming tone, direct links, project timelines, work program
- Training of staff to ensure they are knowledgeable in providing advice and consistent
- Regular meetings between Strategic and Statutory Planning to share information

- Heritage Advisory Committee minutes to be made available to staff and Councillors
- Heritage contract review for consider model for heritage advice. (Statutory Planning).
- Assist the community to understand the planning system
- Continue regular updates to Councillors on Strategic Planning Vision and Projects.
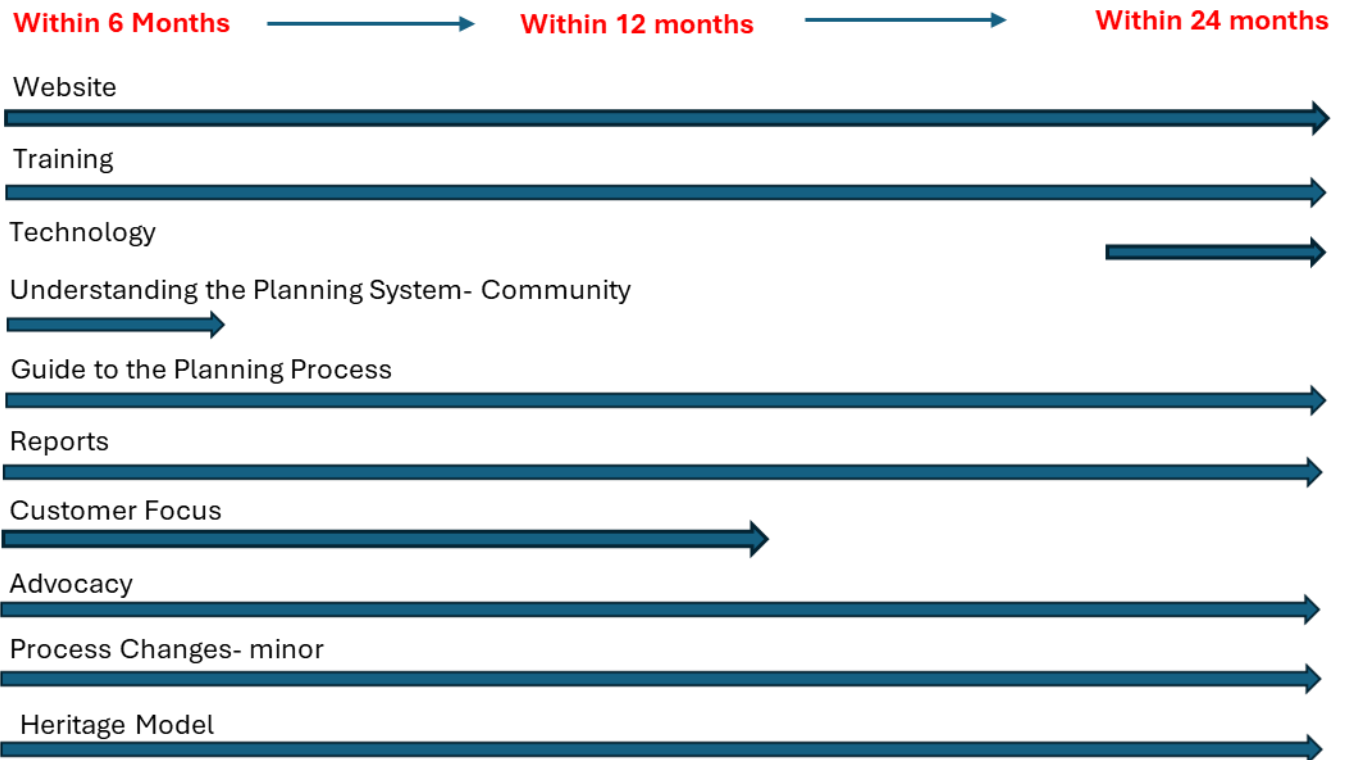
Refer to ATTACHMENT C.

Benchmarking

Yarra provides the most comprehensive methods of sharing information. Other councils also use council websites for information, engagement platforms such as 'YourSay' together with drop-in sessions, council newsletters or the engagement of Council's Advisory Committees to access a range of representative community input. Focus group workshops with different stakeholder groups are held at Council A and traders associations are also consulted. Translation of materials into different languages is also used at several councils. Materials are also provided in hard copy at council's buildings such as libraries and town halls and there is an interactive map on the website that outlines the proposals (Yarra).

12. Roadmap of Priorities

Refer to ATTACHMENT C which is a summary of all recommendations and expected timing for delivery based on Short (6 months), Medium (12 months) and Long (2 years).

Roadmap for Implementation 2024 (by grouped themes)

Within 6 Months → **Within 12 months** → **Within 24 months**

Website

Training

Technology

Understanding the Planning System- Community

Guide to the Planning Process

Reports

Customer Focus

Advocacy

Process Changes- minor

Heritage Model

13. Financial Considerations

The brief for this review specified that all recommendations should be able to be completed within the existing budgets and with a time horizon of no more than 2 years.

It is anticipated that all of the recommendations can be delivered within the current yearly budgets over the next two budget cycles.

14. Next Steps

The next steps for consideration by Council include:

- Senior Management to evaluate and process the review
- Senior Management to prepare a response to the review
- Briefing Councillors on the findings of the review
- Notification of all the participants of the engagement (where contact details are available) on the outcomes of the review
- Publishing of the findings on Council's website in response to the 'Your Say' Yarra engagement exercise
- Implement and monitor the review.

15. Conclusion

The Council has committed to a program of continuous improvement and the facilitation of a modern service orientated organisation.

This Statutory and Strategic Planning Services Review has been the results of:

- High level observations of the Department's functions and processes
- Consideration of key documentation
- Engagement internally with key staff in Council
- Engagement with key stakeholders and the community
- Benchmarking information across like Victorian Councils.

Council should be recognised for the commitment to engage the community in an internal service review. It is very unique to see this approach across Local Government.

From this work a series of clear and cost-effective recommendations and a roadmap for implementation has been prepared for the Council senior management implementation.

With the implementation of these recommendations within a two-year period minor improvements will be made to what is considered to be an existing sound and high quality service for the Yarra community.

The planning system in Victoria is complex and in need of improvement. Council is encouraged to continue its advocacy to the State Government to ensure this occurs on behalf of its community.

16. Key References

Yarra Council Plan

Yarra Community Vision

Community Engagement Policy

Annual Community Satisfaction Survey

COY Deed of Delegation

PCD Agendas

Development Services- Library, Templates and Referrals

Development Services Conditions Manual

Development Services Induction Manual

Planning for Yarra's Future- Planning Scheme and Amendments

Planning Scheme Amendment C269

Fitzroy and Collingwood Planning Controls

Help Design the Future of Cremorne- Your Say Yarra

Council Meeting Agendas

Fyfe Pty Ltd- Yarra City Council Audit of Planning Permit Application Process

Yehudi Blacher, Municipal Monitor to the City of Yarra; Municipal Monitors report on Governance of the City of Yarra. June 2022 and 28 September 2022.

Service Review Statutory and Strategic Planning Specification

VCAT Activity Reports

City of Yarra Geospatial Strategy

Subdivision Report Examples

VCAT How To Guides

System Reference Docs

City of Yarra Social Media Policy

PPARs Reports,Victorian Department of Transport and Planning

 https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/council-resources/planning-permit-activity-reporting

C271 Fitzroy-Collingwood permanent DDOs and early engagement Amendment C271 Fitzroy and Collingwood | Yarra City Council and Fitzroy and Collingwood planning controls - Your Say Yarra

C318 Cremorne Precinct [Amendment C318yara Cremorne Precinct Planning Provisions | Yarra City Council](#) and engagement [Help design the future of Cremorne - Your Say Yarra](#)

17. Appendices

ATTACHMENT A: Summary Community Engagement Report

ATTACHMENT B: Benchmarking Data - Statutory Planning

ATTACHMENT C: Summary Spreadsheet of Recommendations.