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FIRST NATIONS: DEVELOPING THE NEXT FIRST NATIONS PLAN

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PURPOSE

To support consideration of the next phase of Council's reconciliation journey by providing:

- Current strategic and policy context;
- Consultation findings from local First Nations communities and stakeholders; and
- Options for the development of Council's future First Nations Plan and approach.

ISSUES SUMMARY

- Since the early 1990s, Maribyrnong City Council has undertaken a range of initiatives, partnerships and policy commitments to support reconciliation and strengthen relationships with First Nations communities
- Council endorsed the Reconciliation Action Plan 2020–2022 in May 2021, building on the earlier Reconciliation Action Plan 2013–2018 and informed by community and internal consultation
- The RAP 2020–2022 included 19 actions across Council and established a coordinated organisational approach to reconciliation, cultural competency and strengthening relationships with First Nations communities
- While the formal RAP period has now concluded, Council has continued to progress reconciliation work and deliver actions aligned with the intent of the RAP across a range of organisational areas, including relationships with the traditional owners, cultural learning and awareness, acknowledgement and visibility initiatives, advocacy, and internal capacity building
- As Council considers the next phase of its reconciliation journey, work has been undertaken to inform future direction and planning
- This has included preparation of a strategic policy and context paper examining current reconciliation, self-determination and Treaty contexts, alongside options available to local government for future First Nations planning approaches
- This report recommends development of a new Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) based on consistent feedback, including from both Traditional Owner organisations, as the preferred and most appropriate next step for Council at this time

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ATTACHMENTS

1. First Nations Background Paper ⇩
2. First Nations Plan – Options Paper – April 2026 ⇩
3. First Nations Plan - Consultation Report - 2026 ⇩

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

1. **Note the findings of the:**
   a. **Background and Evidence Paper, shown at Attachment 1;**
   b. **First Nations Planning Options Paper, shown at Attachment 2; and**
   c. **First Nations Consultation Findings Report, shown at Attachment 3;**

2. **Endorse the development of a new Reconciliation Action Plan under the Reconciliation Australia framework, reflecting contemporary policy settings, including truth-telling, Treaty and self-determination, and informed by ongoing engagement with Traditional Owners and First Nations communities;**

3. **Note that the development of the new Reconciliation Action Plan will be informed through ongoing engagement with Traditional Owners, First Nations communities and key stakeholders; and**

4. **Note that a draft Reconciliation Action Plan will be presented to Council for consideration in 2027.**

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BACKGROUND

Since the early 1990s, Maribyrnong City Council has undertaken a range of initiatives, partnerships and policy commitments to support reconciliation and strengthen relationships with First Nations communities. This work has evolved over time in response to changing community expectations, emerging policy contexts, and Council's growing understanding of its role in reconciliation, cultural recognition and self-determination.

Key milestones in Council's reconciliation journey include:

- In 1992, Council supported establishment of the Koorie Gardening Team, creating employment opportunities for Koorie young people and delivering environmental projects including revegetation works at Pipemakers Park.
- In 1998, Council became one of the first local governments in Victoria to adopt a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities Policy.
- Since this time, Council has developed a range of Indigenous and reconciliation policies, action plans, advisory groups and partnership commitments to guide reconciliation work and strengthen relationships with First Nations communities.
- In 2017, Council resolved to develop its first formal Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) under the "Innovate RAP" framework developed by Reconciliation Australia.
- In May 2021, Council endorsed the Maribyrnong Reconciliation Action Plan 2020–2022, outlining organisational commitments across relationships, respect, opportunities and governance.

Council has continued to progress reconciliation work across the organisation, including cultural learning initiatives, relationship development and building, visibility initiatives, organisational policy development and strengthening internal cultural capability.

Maribyrnong RAP 2020-2022 has concluded, Council is now considering the next phase of its reconciliation journey and future approach to First Nations planning.

To support this work, an evidence-based background paper has been prepared, shown at Attachment 1. This details:

- Strategy and policy context
- Traditional Owner Organisations
- Demographic profile
- Social determinants of health and wellbeing
- Community context and service system.

An options paper which identifies and assesses a range of viable approaches to inform the development of the next plan has been prepared (attached). The options paper considers the following potential approaches:

- Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
- Hybrid and Transitional Model
- Self-Determination-Aligned Plan

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Finally, Council completed consultation with Traditional Owners and First Nations communities, ensuring cultural authority and community voices were centred. These consultations were vital in understanding community perspectives, aspirations and priorities for Council's future direction.

This report provides Council with the findings of this work and presents options for consideration regarding the development of Council's next First Nations Plan and broader reconciliation approach.

DISCUSSION/KEY ISSUES

1. Key Issues

Broad Strategic Context
Council is considering its next First Nations Plan within a rapidly evolving national and Victorian policy environment relating to reconciliation, self-determination, Treaty, truth-telling and Aboriginal rights and recognition.

Over recent decades, governments and institutions across Australia have increasingly recognised the ongoing impacts of colonisation, dispossession and systemic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, alongside the importance of supporting Aboriginal self-determination and community-led decision making.

Key national and state frameworks shaping this environment include:

- the national reconciliation movement and growth of Reconciliation Action Plans across sectors;
- the Victorian Treaty process and establishment of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and Treaty Authority;
- the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its focus on shared decision-making, accountability and structural reform;
- increasing recognition of Aboriginal cultural authority, truth-telling and Indigenous Data Sovereignty; and
- legislative and policy frameworks relating to cultural heritage, land rights and Native Title.

These developments are contributing to changing expectations of local government, including:

- working in partnership with First Nations communities and Traditional Owners;
- embedding cultural safety and accountability into organisational practice;
- supporting community-led priorities and decision making;
- strengthening evidence-based and place-based responses; and
- ensuring reconciliation commitments are meaningful, achievable and responsive to local context.

This broader environment presents both opportunities and challenges for Council in determining the most appropriate framework and approach for its next phase of First Nations planning.

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Local First Nations Context

The City of Maribyrnong is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and the Bunurong peoples, both of whom hold recognised cultural and historical connections to areas within the municipality. The Maribyrnong River corridor and surrounding landscapes hold ongoing cultural significance as places of movement, gathering, connection and care for Country.

Maribyrnong is home to a small but growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, broadly consistent with growth trends across metropolitan Melbourne. The local community has a relatively young age profile and includes people connected to many Nations and language groups from across Victoria and Australia.

While the municipality sits on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents living within Maribyrnong are not Traditional Owners of this Country. This distinction is important in shaping Council's future approach, requiring engagement with both:

- Traditional Owner groups with cultural authority and custodial responsibilities; and
- the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community with diverse identities, experiences and aspirations.

Maribyrnong also forms part of Melbourne's western region, which has a significant and growing Aboriginal population and longstanding community networks. The municipality continues to play an important role as a place of community connection, service access, advocacy and cultural activity within the western region.

Social Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

The background paper outlines an evidence base demonstrating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Maribyrnong continue to experience inequitable outcomes across a range of social determinants of health and wellbeing, consistent with broader national and state trends identified through Closing the Gap reporting.

Key demographic insights from the background paper highlight:

- the local First Nations community is relatively young and growing
- more than 639 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander live in the municipality (2021)
- alongside a broader connected population estimated to exceed 1,000 people when accounting for workers, students and people accessing community connections within Maribyrnong.

The findings in regard to the social determinants of health and wellbeing demonstrates disparities across several key areas including:

- health and disability outcomes;
- educational attainment and school completion;
- employment participation and youth unemployment;
- income and housing security;
- reliance on social housing and rental housing;
- experiences of crime victimisation and justice system contact; and
- broader experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage.

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The data also highlights the significant strengths and contributions of the local First Nations community:

- strong participation in volunteering and caring responsibilities,
- public sector employment
- community leadership
- cultural connection.

Importantly, these outcomes should be understood within the context of the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and structural inequity, rather than deficit-based understandings of First Nations communities.

The background paper also identifies important community infrastructure and service system considerations impacting First Nations communities within Maribyrnong.

While a number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal-led programs support residents across Melbourne's west, there are limited Aboriginal-led services physically located within the municipality itself. Many residents are required to travel outside Maribyrnong to access culturally safe health, housing, legal, family violence and community services.

The evidence also highlights broader challenges relating to cultural safety, accessibility and coordination across mainstream service systems, alongside limited visibility of Aboriginal-specific supports within the municipality.

Importantly, consultation and background research identified the significance of culturally safe gathering places, informal community networks, waterways and community spaces in supporting connection to culture, community and wellbeing. At the same time, a lack of dedicated Aboriginal community spaces and culturally safe gathering places within Maribyrnong was identified as an ongoing gap within the local community infrastructure landscape.

These findings reinforce the importance of strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, improving cultural safety across mainstream services, and considering the role Council can play in supporting culturally safe spaces, connection and community infrastructure into the future.

Council's Current Position

Council has undertaken reconciliation and First Nations focused work over a number of decades through policies, partnerships, advocacy, programs, community initiatives and organisational commitments.

This has included implementation reconciliation action plans, cultural learning initiatives, strengthening relationships with First Nations organisations and communities, and embedding reconciliation actions across Council operations.

While the formal period of Council's Reconciliation Action Plan 2020–2022 has concluded, Council has continued progressing reconciliation work across the organisation. Significant progress has been made across a number of action areas, while recognising that reconciliation and relationship building are ongoing and long-term commitments rather than finite projects.

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Whilst Council has demonstrated a strong foundation and demonstrated commitment to reconciliation work, there are areas of organisational capability that need to be in place before moving directly to an independent non-externally monitored model. Areas of capability gaps include:

- Strengthening and sustaining consistent relationship building with Traditional Owners and First Nations communities.
- Improving direct engagement pathways and communication with local First Nations representatives.
- Increasing whole-of-organisation consistency, accountability and coordination.
- Ensure future commitments are achievable, sustainable and aligned with organisational capacity and community priorities.

These considerations are important in determining the most appropriate framework and approach for Council's next First Nations Plan.

Options for Council's Future Approach

Council considered a range of potential approaches for the development of its next First Nations Plan, informed by policy analysis, benchmarking, evidence review and emerging reform directions.

The options considered included:

- Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
- Hybrid and Transitional Model
- Self-Determination-Aligned Plan

Analysis identified that First Nations planning approaches within local government operate along a continuum of organisational maturity, governance complexity and alignment with emerging Treaty and self-determination reforms.

The analysis also identified increasing movement across the sector toward broader partnership, governance and self-determination approaches, including strengthened advisory structures, Aboriginal Action Plans, truth-telling initiatives and more integrated planning models.

More advanced self-determination and integrated models were identified as requiring stronger governance arrangements, organisational capability, established relationships and sustained resourcing to support implementation and shared decision-making approaches.

The options analysis highlighted that organisational readiness, governance structures, cultural capability, resourcing and relationship maturity are key considerations in determining the most appropriate future planning approach.

Voice of First Nations Communities

Council undertook targeted consultation with Traditional Owners, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, place-based organisations, government stakeholders and community representatives to inform consideration of Council's next First Nations planning framework.

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Consultation for this phase of work intentionally centred the voices of the two Traditional Owner organisations; the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation and the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, recognising their cultural authority and custodial responsibilities in relation to Country within the municipality.

While engagement also included a range of other stakeholders, organisations and community voices, the perspectives of Traditional Owners were considered the primary and most critical input in informing Council's consideration of the appropriate framework for its next First Nations Plan. Other consultation and evidence gathered through this process has been used to provide supporting context, insight and broader system perspectives.

It is acknowledged that this phase of engagement does not represent the full diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community voices within Maribyrnong. Subject to Council's decision regarding the future planning approach, broader community engagement and co-design processes will be undertaken as part of the development of the plan itself.

Consultation identified strong and consistent themes regarding Council's current position, future direction and approach to reconciliation and partnership with First Nations communities.

There was broad support and clear recommendation for Council continuing its reconciliation journey through development of a renewed Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), with many stakeholders viewing the RAP framework as the most appropriate and achievable next step given Council's current stage of organisational maturity, relationship development and cultural capability.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of:

- genuine partnership and early engagement with First Nations communities and Traditional Owners;
- stronger governance, accountability and visible leadership from Council;
- embedding reconciliation and cultural responsiveness across all areas of Council operations;
- increasing visibility of First Nations culture, history and presence within the municipality; and
- strengthening First Nations employment, participation and community connection opportunities.

Traditional Owners and other stakeholders also highlighted the importance of building trust, establishing culturally informed governance structures and strengthening organisational capability over time before progressing toward more advanced self-determination or locally led governance approaches.

While there was interest in future locally designed or self-determined approaches, consultation findings suggested Council is still in the early stages of this work and should prioritise strengthening relationships, governance foundations and accountability mechanisms as part of the next phase of reconciliation planning.

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Overall, consultation findings demonstrated clear and consistent support across all consultation groups, including both Traditional Owner organisations, for Council to progress a renewed Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) as the next phase of its reconciliation journey.

Consultation identified the RAP framework as a recognised, practical and accountable mechanism to support Council in strengthening reconciliation across governance, employment, engagement, procurement, service delivery and organisational culture, while continuing to build stronger partnerships and organisational capability over time.

Preferred Approach
The evidence review identified that Reconciliation Action Plans remain the most commonly adopted framework across Victorian local government, providing a structured and externally recognised approach to relationship-building, cultural capability and organisational accountability.

As such the preferred approach at this stage given the identified issues above is the development of a new Reconciliation Action Plan under the Reconciliation Australia framework.

2. Council Policy/Legislation

Council Plan 2025-2029

This report contributes to Council's strategic objectives contained in the Council Plan 2025-2029 by considering:

- Ethical Governance
  - Council will govern ethically, with consultation, integrity and transparency.
- Wellbeing and Safety
  - Council will create actively engaged, socially connected, and healthy communities.
- Connected Community
  - Council will build a connected, vibrant city where neighbourhoods thrive.

Legislation

- *Local Government Act 2020*
- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*
- *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*
- *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*
- *Native Title Act 1993*

Risk Consideration

- Enterprise Risk 3 - People and Organisational Capability
  - Failure to provide an organisational culture that attracts and retain engaged and high performing employees.

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Conflicts of Interest

No officer responsible for, or contributing to, this report has declared a direct or indirect interest in relation to this report.

Human Rights Consideration

This report complies with the rights listed in the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

3. Engagement

This report has been significantly informed by consultation undertaken with Traditional Owners, local First Nations community members, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, place-based organisations and key stakeholders. As detailed throughout this report and the attached Consultation Findings Report, engagement focused on understanding community perspectives regarding Council's future First Nations planning approach, governance, relationships and priorities for reconciliation moving forward.

4. Resources

Nil

5. Environment

Nil

CONCLUSION

Council has undertaken significant work to inform the next phase of its reconciliation journey, including development of an evidence base, review of policy and reform contexts, assessment of planning options, and consultation with Traditional Owners and First Nations stakeholders.

This work has identified both the strong foundations already established by Council, alongside areas requiring further strengthening to support future progression toward more advanced partnership and self-determination approaches.

Consultation feedback, including from both Traditional Owner organisations, consistently identified a renewed Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) as the preferred and most appropriate next step for Council at this time.

Accordingly, the preferred option identified through the options analysis is development of a new RAP, and Council endorsement is sought to proceed with this approach.

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Brief: First Nations Background Evidence Base & Data Paper

March 2026

Background

Maribyrnong City Council's 2020-2022 Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan outlines Council's statement of commitment to First Nations Australians, which was developed and adopted in 2003.

Maribyrnong City Council:

- Acknowledges and respects Cultural Practices, its values and the stature of Elders in First Nations communities.
- Recognises the richness and diversity of First Nations communities and Elders who have settled in the City from across Australia.
- Acknowledges that First Nations Australians have a special and unique intrinsic relationship to the land and waters both within the City of Maribyrnong, and throughout Australia.
- Respects the significance of family, customs and cultural practices of First Nations Australians and their right to express them and live accordingly (subject to Australian law).
- Believes in the ongoing reconciliation process and healing between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians.
- Supports empowering and self-determination of First Nations Australians.
- Is committed to redressing disadvantages still experienced by First Nations Australians with the aim of eliminating racism and discrimination.
- Is devoted to promoting, positive and genuine relationships with local First Nations communities essential to effective representation and provision of services.
- Will execute its legislative requirement of protecting local sites of cultural sensitivity, equal opportunity, human rights, decision making in consideration of the community's diverse needs and working to Close the Gap targets.
- Advocates with First Nations Australians to State and Federal Government and other peak bodies

Council is due to develop a new First Nations Plan, which will provide the framework to action its commitments to First Nations Australians and support the interests and aspirations of our local First Nations community.

In developing this Plan, Council will consider a range of options, including the adoption of a Self-Determination Plan, the renewal of a Reconciliation Action Plan, and approaches that reflect the emerging context of the Victorian Treaty.

The Plan will be informed by meaningful consultation with Traditional Owners and First Nations communities, ensuring cultural authority and community voices are central to its design. It will also take into account best practice approaches and Council's own organisational readiness, so that commitments made are practical, impactful, and sustainable.

Inclusive Communities will be presenting to Council in May 2026, *First Nations: Developing the next First Nations Plan: Consultation findings and options for consideration*.

This report seeks to prepare Council to determine the preferred approach for its next First Nations plan, which will set the organisation's strategic direction. The report is supported by three attachments to inform decision-making:

1. Background Paper
2. Evidenced-based Options Paper
3. Community Consultation Paper

This document details the requirements for attachments one (1) and two (2).

Project Requirement

Background Paper

We are seeking the development of a concise background evidence paper to inform our First Nations planning and strategic work; specifically the development of a new First Nations Plan which will be endorsed by Council.

This paper will form part of a broader approach, alongside a separate community engagement process, and should provide a clear, evidence-based snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Maribyrnong (compared to broader West, and Metropolitan Melbourne).

The paper should include:

- **Demographics:**
  Who lives here, including population profile, age distribution and key population trends

  It will be critical that the data paper provides a clear overview of the three Traditional Owner groups connected to the municipality, alongside an evidence-based profile of the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This

should articulate that, while the municipality sits on the lands of these Traditional Owners, there is also a diverse population of Aboriginal people who live, work and connect here but are not from those Traditional Owner groups.

- **Social determinants of health and wellbeing:**
  Key indicators such as housing, income, education, employment, health and access to services
- **Community context:**
  - Aboriginal organisations and community-controlled services
  - Mainstream services engaging with First Nations communities
  - Gaps in services or supports (who is not present)
  - Community infrastructure and gathering spaces (formal and informal)
  - Role of land councils across our municipality
- **Strengths and challenges:**
  - Community assets, leadership and existing networks
  - Key issues and barriers impacting outcomes
  - Role of Maribyrnong Council
  - Truth telling and Treaty
  - Next steps
- **Closing the Gap alignment:**
  A high-level overview of how local data and context align to the Closing the Gap priority reforms and socio-economic outcomes

Output

- Report detailing above.

Evidenced-based Options Paper

Purpose

The paper should identify and assess a range of viable planning approaches (e.g. Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), Self-Determination Plan, hybrid or alternative models). Each option should be clearly articulated and assessed in a consistent format to support comparison.

For each option, provide:

- **Purpose and intent**
  What the approach is designed to achieve, including its underlying principles and typical outcomes.
- **Strengths and limitations**
  Key benefits, risks and trade-offs, including where the model is most and least effective.
- **Resource and governance implications**
  Indicative resourcing requirements (staffing, budget, capability) and governance considerations (e.g. internal ownership, community governance, advisory structures). This could be benchmarked with other Councils.
- **Alignment to local government role and context**
  Fit with Council's responsibilities, influence and capacity, including opportunities for leadership, partnership and advocacy.
- **Legislative and policy alignment**
  Alignment with relevant Victorian and Commonwealth frameworks, including Closing the Gap, local government obligations, and broader social policy settings.
- **Relationship to the Victorian Treaty process**
  How each option positions Council in relation to Treaty, including opportunities to support self-determination and risks of misalignment or duplication.

Comparative Insights

- Include a short comparative summary (e.g. table or matrix) highlighting key differences between options.
- Identify any emerging best practice or preferred approaches across the sector.

Case Studies and Examples

- Provide examples from other local governments or organisations that have implemented similar approaches.
- Highlight practical insights, lessons learned and outcomes achieved.

Implications for Council

- Outline key considerations for Council in selecting an approach, including strategic fit, readiness, risk and opportunity.

Output

- Report detailing above

Related Documents

Council Briefing – First Nations Plan – November 2025

Timelines

Community Consultation:	February – April 2026
Background Evidence based paper:	30 April 2026
Council Paper presenting consultation findings on options for the next first nations plan:	May 2026
Development of new First Nations Plan	May – October 2026
Council Report: Endorsement of new First Nations Plan	November 2026

City of Maribyrnong – First Nations Plan – Draft Options Paper

1. Intro and purpose

This paper identifies and assesses a range of viable approaches to inform the development of Maribyrnong City Council's next First Nations Plan.

The options reflect varying levels of organisational maturity, governance complexity, and alignment with emerging reform contexts, including Victoria's Treaty and truth-telling processes. Each option is assessed in a consistent format to support informed decision-making.

A review of metropolitan local government practice indicates that the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) remains the primary framework for First Nations planning. Most councils operate within the RAP model, typically at the 'Reflect' or 'Innovate' stages, with fewer progressing to 'Stretch' level RAPs where reconciliation is embedded across organisational systems. (Reconciliation Australia)

Benchmarking conversations reinforce this, with councils at a similar stage to Maribyrnong, such as Hobsons Bay City Council, continuing to prioritise RAP-based approaches while strengthening organisational foundations.

At the same time, both policy frameworks and benchmarking indicate that practice is evolving. Councils are increasingly:

- expanding their RAP to incorporate broader priorities (e.g. truth-telling)
- introducing complementary strategies and governance structures
- progressing toward more integrated and partnership-based and self-determination approaches.

2. Policy and Reform Context

Reconciliation Action Plan Framework

The RAP framework, developed by Reconciliation Australia, provides a structured approach to advancing reconciliation across four stages: Reflect, Innovate, Stretch and Elevate.

This approach supports organisations to build capability and relationships over time, progressing from foundational engagement through to embedding reconciliation as business-as-usual and, ultimately, enabling transformational change.

Importantly, the RAP framework is flexible. While it includes core pillars (relationships, respect, opportunities and governance), organisations can incorporate additional priorities and actions reflecting their local context and organisational readiness.

Self-Determination in Victoria

In Victoria, self-determination is the guiding principle for Aboriginal affairs, embedded in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and the Self-Determination Reform Framework.

These frameworks emphasise that improving outcomes requires:

- transformation of systems and structures

- transfer of decision-making, power, and resources
- strengthening of Aboriginal community control

The self-determination approach represents a shift from service delivery and consultation toward shared decision-making and structural reform.

Treaty and Truth-Telling

Victoria's Treaty process and the work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission signal a broader shift toward recognising Aboriginal authority and embedding truth-telling in institutional practice.

These processes align with the national reform agenda articulated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth as pathways to a more just and equitable relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community.

This context creates increasing responsibilities and accountabilities for local government to:

- strengthen partnerships with Traditional Owners
- embed First Nations perspectives in planning
- align with self-determination principles over time

What does a "treaty-ready" organisation look like?

A treaty-ready organisation is one that has established the relationships, governance structures, and organisational capability required to work in genuine partnership with First Nations peoples.

In practice, this includes:

- *Strong and trusted relationships with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities*
- *Aboriginal governance structures, such as advisory groups or partnership forums, that inform decision-making*
- *Culturally capable systems and services across the organisation*
- *Clear accountability for First Nations outcomes across leadership and business units*
- *Partnership-based approaches to planning, design, and delivery*
- *A willingness to progress toward shared decision-making over time*

Treaty readiness is not a fixed state, but an ongoing process of building trust, capability, and systems to support self-determination.

This provides a useful reference point for assessing Council's current position and future direction.

3. Options Analysis

Option 1: Renewed Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP Model)

Purpose and intent

This approach builds on the foundations of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) while introducing additional strategic, governance, and partnership elements aligned with self-determination principles.

In practice, this may include retaining a RAP and expanding its scope or transitioning beyond RAP frameworks into a broader Aboriginal Action Plan or First Nations strategy.

Strengths

- Established and widely adopted across local government
- Provides a structured, externally recognised framework
- Supports foundational relationship-building and organisational capability
- Scalable according to organisational maturity

Benchmarking confirms RAPs play a critical role in establishing the foundations necessary for more advanced approaches.

Limitations

- Primarily action-focused rather than governance-focused
- Limited capacity for shared decision-making
- May not fully address broader structural reform expectations

Benchmarking suggests that at higher levels of maturity, there is a risk RAPs can become overextended when councils seek additional strategies to address broader First Nations priorities. However, evidence indicates that RAPs can be adapted to align with emerging priorities.

For example, the City of Melbourne incorporated an additional “truth-telling” pillar within its RAP, demonstrating how councils can embed Treaty and truth-telling priorities within the framework.

This highlights that the effectiveness of a RAP depends on how it is implemented, rather than the framework itself.

Resource and governance implications

- Moderate resourcing
- Typically led by internal working groups
- Limited formal shared governance.

Alignment

- Partial alignment with Closing the Gap
- Limited structural alignment with Treaty

Option 2: Hybrid and Transitional Model

(RAP + Broader Strategy / Governance Approaches)

Purpose and intent

This approach builds on the foundations of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), or transitions from RAP into a broader Aboriginal Action Plan, while introducing stronger governance, partnership, and coordination mechanisms.

The intent is to extend beyond a purely action-based model by strengthening how Council works with Aboriginal communities, while remaining a targeted and coordinated approach rather than a fully integrated, whole-of-organisation model.

Strengths

- Builds on established RAP foundations
- Reflects common emerging practice across the sector
- Enables staged progression toward more advanced approaches
- Improved alignment with Closing the Gap and emerging Treaty context

Examples from councils such as the City of Whittlesea, City of Yarra and City of Darebin demonstrate transitional approaches, including broader Aboriginal Action Plans, partnership models, and strengthened governance structures.

Limitations

- Requires stronger coordination and capability
- Governance roles must be clearly defined
- May not fully achieve transformational change in governance or shared decision-making

RAPs are designed as action-oriented frameworks focused on relationships, respect, and opportunities. Expanding their scope to include broader governance or strategic elements may create overlap with core organisational strategy and policy.

Resource and governance implications

- Moderate to increased resourcing compared to a RAP-only approach
- Establishment or strengthening of governance structures (e.g. advisory groups, partnership forums)
- Increased coordination across relevant service areas

Alignment

- Strong alignment with Closing the Gap
- Supports Treaty readiness
- Supports embedding First Nations perspectives within key areas of planning and service delivery
- Provides a pathway toward more advanced, self-determination aligned approaches over time

Option 3: Self-Determination-Aligned Plan

Purpose and intent

A dedicated framework centred on self-determination, including shared decision-making, Aboriginal leadership, and governance reform.

Strengths

- Strong alignment with Victorian policy frameworks
- Supports structural and systemic change
- Aligns closely with Treaty

Limitations

- Limited consistent application in local government
- Requires significant organisational readiness
- Higher implementation risk
- Self-determination plans risk becoming procedural (consult, advise, co-design) rather than substantive (decide, control, own)

Evidence indicates that self-determination approaches are often broad and less standardised, requiring stronger foundations to be effective.

Resource and governance implications

- Sustained investment in governance capability, workforce capacity, policy and planning skills and data ownership and analysis is required
- Formal shared governance required

Alignment

- Strong alignment with Closing the Gap and Treaty

Option 4: Integrated First Nations Strategy

Purpose and intent

A whole-of-organisation model embedding First Nations priorities across all Council strategies and systems.

Strengths

- Highly integrated
- Aligns with system reform
- Supports organisation-wide accountability

Limitations

- Limited examples in practice
- Requires high organisational maturity

- Complex to implement

Alignment

- Strong alignment with Treaty, self-determination, and systemic reform

4. Comparative Insights

Evidence from policy frameworks, document review, and benchmarking indicates that First Nations planning approaches in Victorian local government operate along a continuum of organisational maturity, rather than as discrete or mutually exclusive models.

Key insights include:

- RAP remains the primary entry point, providing a structured foundation for relationship-building, cultural capability, and organisational awareness
- The RAP framework is flexible and supports progression through stages including 'Stretch' and 'Elevate', while allowing organisations to incorporate additional priorities beyond the core pillars. For example, the City of Melbourne introduced a dedicated truth-telling pillar within its RAP.
- Hybrid approaches are becoming more common, with councils extending their RAP or transitioning beyond RAP frameworks through Aboriginal Action Plans, partnership models, or governance structures. This is evident in councils such as City of Whittlesea and City of Darebin.
- More advanced models aligned with self-determination are emerging but not yet widespread, and typically require higher levels of organisational capability, governance maturity, and established relationships
- Progression is generally staged, with councils building foundations through RAPs before moving toward more integrated and partnership-driven approaches
- Organisational readiness is the critical enabling factor, with capability, trust, governance, and resourcing consistently identified as prerequisites for more advanced models

Model	Maturity	Governance	Treaty Alignment
RAP	Foundational	Low	Limited
Hybrid	Transitional	Medium	Moderate
Self-Determination	Advanced (transformational in governance)	High	Strong
Integrated	Transformational (whole of organisation)	High	Strong

5. Case Studies and Examples

City of Melbourne

- Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (2024–2027)
- Incorporated a dedicated truth-telling pillar within its RAP
- Is progressing a First Nations Strategy and additional frameworks that support progression toward self-determination
- Demonstrates a transition from a RAP-only model toward a more integrated and progressive approach, combining RAP accountability with broader strategic and governance mechanisms
- Reflects increasing organisational maturity, with strengthened governance structures and expanded scope of First Nations work.

Brimbank City Council

- Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (2020–2024)
- Focused on strengthening organisational foundations, including:
    - cultural capability
    - systems and processes
    - relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Ongoing work to build internal capacity, including roles, governance, and service alignment
- Reflects a focus on establishing the organisational readiness required for more advanced approaches
- Demonstrates the importance of consolidating a strong baseline before progressing to more complex governance or strategic frameworks.

City of Whittlesea

- Aboriginal Action Plan 2024–2029
- Aligns with:
    - self-determination principles
    - Closing the Gap
    - Victorian policy frameworks.
- Embedded within broader Council planning and strategic frameworks, though not fully integrated across all organisational systems
- Demonstrates a hybrid model, combining elements of RAP-style action planning with broader strategic and policy alignment.

City of Yarra

- Maintains a Reconciliation Action Plan alongside a strong Aboriginal partnership approach
- Focus on:
    - sustained engagement with Traditional Owners
    - embedding First Nations priorities across Council work.
- Ongoing partnership and governance practices complement formal planning frameworks
- Demonstrates how RAP can be complemented by ongoing partnership-based and place-based approaches.

City of Darebin

- Transitioned from a Reconciliation Action Plan to a locally developed Aboriginal Action Plan (Balit Marra)
- The decision to move beyond RAP was informed by Aboriginal governance structures
- Strong emphasis on:
    - relationship-building as a foundation
    - Aboriginal community leadership in decision-making
    - truth-telling and cultural safety.
- Supported by partnership arrangements with Traditional Owners
- Demonstrates a community-led approach, where the planning model is shaped through Aboriginal governance structures rather than predefined frameworks

6. Implications for Maribyrnong Council

Evidence from policy frameworks and benchmarking indicates that:

- Organisational readiness is critical
- Relationship-building and trust are foundational
- Governance structures and resourcing are key enablers.

Organisational readiness in this context includes:

- strong relationships with Traditional Owners and First Nations community members
- internal cultural capability across Council
- governance and advisory structures to support engagement and decision-making
- resourcing, accountability, and coordination across the organisation.

Benchmarking also highlights the importance of establishing Aboriginal governance structures early, such as advisory groups. These structures can play a critical role in shaping the direction of First Nations planning, including informing the most appropriate model for the organisation.

This reinforces that the selection of a planning approach is not solely an organisational decision but can be informed through Aboriginal governance structures and community engagement.

In practice, councils that have invested in relationship-building and governance have been better positioned to:

- design approaches that reflect community priorities
- strengthen trust and participation
- progress toward more partnership-based and self-determination-aligned models.

Benchmarking consistently reinforced that foundational work must be established before progressing to more advanced models.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides an overview and analysis of First Nations planning approaches in Victorian local government. First Nation planning approaches are evolving, with most councils continuing to utilise Reconciliation Action Plans as a foundational framework, while increasingly extending these through additional strategies, governance models, and partnership approaches.

Evidence from policy frameworks and benchmarking indicates that the key differentiator between approaches is not the model itself, but the level of organisational readiness, including the strength of relationships, governance structures, cultural capability, and resourcing.

For Maribyrnong, this presents a clear opportunity. The organisation is well positioned to re-establish and strengthen its foundational approach, while deliberately aligning with emerging reform directions, including Treaty, truth-telling, and self-determination.

A staged approach enables Council to:

- build on existing work and relationships
- strengthen organisational capability and governance
- establish and work in partnership with Aboriginal governance structures to inform direction
- progressively embed partnership and self-determination principles.

This approach is consistent with both sector practice and policy expectations and provides a practical and achievable pathway toward more advanced, partnership-driven models over time. Importantly, this approach enables the direction of future planning to be informed through engagement with Aboriginal community members and governance structures.

Maribyrnong First Nations Plan

Phase 1: Consultation and Engagement

1 Purpose of Report

Maribyrnong City Council's 2020–2022 Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), endorsed and adopted by Council in 2022, has now concluded and requires renewal or replacement through a new strategic framework.

Council is preparing to develop a new First Nations Plan to guide and strengthen its commitments to First Nations peoples and support the aspirations, priorities, and interests of the local First Nations community.

The new First Nations Plan will establish the governance and accountability framework for Council's ongoing work with First Nations Australians and inform future partnership, engagement, and reconciliation initiatives. As part of this process, Council is considering options for the next plan framework, including:

- a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
- a Self-Determination Plan, or
- a Local First Nations Plan.

Inclusive Communities consulted with Traditional Owners and key place-based organisations to inform Council's consideration of these options and support evidence-based, culturally informed decision-making. This report outlines the perspectives, experiences, and priorities shared through consultation, ensuring the voices of Traditional Owners and the broader First Nations community are reflected in Council's deliberations on the direction and development of its next First Nations Plan.

2 Engagement Methodology

2.1 Purpose of Engagement

The purpose of this initial phase of engagement was to inform the development of an appropriate planning approach for Council's next First Nations Plan.

At this stage, engagement was intentionally focused on:

- Understanding what type of plan Council should develop
- Testing governance, engagement and structural approaches
- Building early relationships and trust

This phase did not seek to define detailed priorities or actions, which will be undertaken through a broader co-design process in the next phase.

2.2 Engagement Principles

Engagement was guided by the following principles:

- **Self-determination**
  Prioritising First Nations voices in shaping the approach, recognising Council's role as an enabler rather than decision-maker.
- **Relationship-based**
  Focusing on building trust and ongoing connection, rather than one-off consultation.
- **Cultural safety**
  Ensuring engagement was respectful, appropriate, and responsive to different preferences for participation.
- **Transparency and clarity of purpose**
  Clearly communicating the intent of this phase—seeking advice on the type of plan, not detailed content.
- **Fit-for-purpose engagement**
  Targeting key stakeholders to ensure depth and quality of input, rather than broad but shallow engagement.

2.3 Engagement Scope and Rationale

Recognising that Council is at an early stage in understanding its local First Nations community, a targeted engagement approach was adopted.

This approach prioritised stakeholders with:

- Cultural authority
- Established relationships with community
- Experience in First Nations governance, service delivery or engagement

This ensured engagement was credible, respectful, and proportionate to the stage of work.

2.4 Stakeholders Engaged

Council sought to engage a targeted group of key stakeholders, including identified organisations and individual representatives with expertise in First Nations engagement, service delivery and community connection. In total, Council identified approximately

14 organisations and 18 individual stakeholders for this phase of engagement and successfully completed 9 consultations.

This approach prioritised depth of engagement over breadth, ensuring that conversations were meaningful, informed and appropriate to the early stage of planning. Stakeholders were selected based on their cultural authority, community connections, and ability to provide strategic advice on the most appropriate planning approach.

Traditional owners Wurundjeri and Bunurong provided culturally authoritative consultation, with views on how Council should develop trust and improve relationships with local First Nations communities and embed cultural advice and consultation into its governance and decision-making processes moving forward.

2.5 A detailed record of stakeholders approached, and consultations completed is provided in Appendix 1.

2.5.1 Traditional Owner Organisations (Priority Engagement)

Engagement was undertaken with:

- Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation

These discussions were critical to:

- Understanding expectations for engagement and partnership
- Recognising distinct governance and engagement approaches
- Ensuring Council's approach reflects respect for Traditional Owner authority and diversity

2.5.2 Key Place-Based Organisations

Targeted engagement was undertaken with organisations that:

- Employ First Nations staff or have dedicated Aboriginal roles
- Deliver services to local Aboriginal communities
- Hold strong community relationships

This included:

- CoHealth
- Footscray Community Arts
- Western Bulldogs Community Foundation

- Western Health (invited but were unavailable)
- Victoria University (invited but were unavailable)

These stakeholders provided insight into:

- Local community dynamics and access barriers
- Effective engagement approaches
- Practical considerations for implementation

2.5.3 Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations

Recognising the limited number of locally based Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), engagement invitations were extended to organisations operating across the broader metropolitan catchment, including:

- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (invited but were unavailable)
- First People's Assembly of Victoria (invited but were unavailable).

This ensured the approach was informed by:

- Sector expertise in self-determination and governance
- Established models of culturally appropriate service delivery and engagement

2.5.4 Regional and State Government Agencies

Selective engagement was undertaken with key system connectors, including:

- Department of Education, Koorie Education Support Officers (KESOs)
- Victoria Police, Aboriginal Community Liason Officer (ACLO)
- Greater Western Water

2.5.5 Local Community-Led Cultural Services

While there are a limited number of formal Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations based within Maribyrnong, engagement identified the presence of local, community-led cultural services and informal networks, including:

- Cultural programs and services
- Artists

2.6 Approach to Engagement

Engagement was undertaken through:

- One-on-one conversations
- Small group discussions

- Existing relationship channels where appropriate
- Email where consultees preferred

This approach enabled:

- Open and honest dialogue
- Flexibility in how people participated
- A focus on depth of insight rather than volume of responses

2.7 Key Considerations and Limitations

- Council is at an early stage in understanding its local First Nations community, with relationships in their infancy. This was acknowledged throughout the process.
- Engagement was intentionally targeted and does not represent the full diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community voices in Maribyrnong.
- This phase is designed to inform the approach only, with broader community engagement to occur in the next phase.

3 Consultation Findings

Clear themes emerged across consultations, with broad support for developing a new RAP as the next practical step for Council, while building toward a more locally owned and community directed approach over time. This reflects broad trust in the RAP model, as well as community views on council's readiness to progress to Self Determination or Local First Nations planning.

3.1 Preference for continuing a RAP with future evolution

Most stakeholders (including traditional owners) recommended that Council should continue with a Reconciliation Action Plan in the short term. Many viewed the RAP as a recognised and useful framework that should continue while Council strengthens relationships and delivers practical outcomes.

The view from traditional owner groups is that RAP provides a clear governance and accountability framework for organisations in early stages of relationship development, trust building and cultural competence with First Nations communities.

Feedback was clear that council's RAP should be treated as a living document, with live and ongoing commitment from all levels of the organisation and external visibility and accountability within the community.

Some participants also raised interest in a future locally designed action plan or self-determination framework once stronger foundations and relationships are in place.

3.2 Genuine partnership from the beginning

There was strong support for Council acting as an enabler and advocate for community led priorities rather than directing outcomes.

Consultees emphasised that consultation should occur early in decision making, not at the final stage. Participants wanted to see co design approaches where First Nations voices help shape priorities from the outset.

Traditional owner groups provided advice on how this should be achieved, which included regular, standing consultation with Wurundjeri, and the development of a paid First Nations advisory group to ensure council's initiatives and decisions are culturally informed from early stages.

3.3 Embedding Formal Partnerships and Shared Governance

Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for more formalised and embedded approaches to consultation, partnership, and shared decision-making with First Nations communities. This included support for initiatives such as a dedicated advisory committee and the establishment of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with Traditional Owners to strengthen ongoing collaboration and embed a self-determination-focused approach across Council processes

3.4 Stronger Visible Leadership and Accountability

Participants consistently identified the need for visible leadership around reconciliation and First Nations relationships from Council. There was a view that commitment to reconciliation must come from the top of the organisation and be clearly demonstrated through action.

Stakeholders noted leaders and managers should be empowered to make culturally informed decisions, be accountable for outcomes and maintain momentum when commitments are made.

3.5 Move Beyond Symbolic Support to Everyday Action

Several participants acknowledged goodwill within Council but felt this was not yet visible enough in public spaces, community settings or Council's external presence.

There was strong support for making First Nations culture, history and contemporary presence more visible across the municipality through signage, artwork, events, communications and public acknowledgement.

Consultees identified the need for consistent engagement and visible presence from Council in its relationships with First Nations communities. Participants emphasised that partnerships should be genuine and sustained throughout the year, rather than limited to acknowledgement or celebration during days of significance alone.

3.6 Employment and Economic Opportunities

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of increasing First Nations employment, placements, internships and career pathways within Council.

Participants also stressed that Council should increase cultural safety as an employer, with workplace policies and processes that actively attract and retain First Nations staff.

3.7 Community Connection and Family Focus

There was support for more family friendly and community led activities including:

- Events during significant dates such as NAIDOC Week
- Aboriginal playgroups and children's programs
- Free and inclusive gatherings
- Opportunities that create safety, inclusion, belonging and connection

4 Analysis and Considerations

Consultees provided insight into the perception of Council's cultural competency and maturity, with suggestions of how to become a more culturally responsive organisation and advance local reconciliation. While consultation feedback showed goodwill toward Council and recognition that positive work has begun, participants want to see more visible action, stronger accountability and deeper partnerships with First Nations communities.

Importantly, participants acknowledged that while there is goodwill and commitment within areas of Council, further capability, trust and relationship building is required before transitioning to more advanced self-determination or locally led governance models. The RAP framework was therefore viewed as a practical and structured foundation that can support Council to strengthen internal systems, accountability and partnerships over time.

The overarching view is that Council is not yet in a position to adopt a Self-Determination Plan or Local First Nations Plan, as it remains in the early stages of building relationships, trust, and consistent, meaningful engagement with First Nations communities and Traditional Owners. Consultees emphasised that genuine self-determination must be grounded in strong, respectful partnerships that are developed over time and supported by clear governance structures and accountability mechanisms.

There was broad agreement among consultees, including Traditional Owners, that Council should continue to focus on strengthening relationships, establishing robust governance arrangements, and building organisational capability before progressing to self-determination or local First Nations planning.

The RAP framework provides an established and nationally recognised structure that supports organisations to build cultural competency, strengthen relationships and embed practical actions across governance, employment, procurement, community engagement and service delivery. Consultation findings demonstrated broad stakeholder confidence in the RAP model as a credible and achievable mechanism for progressing reconciliation outcomes in the short to medium term.

The RAP model aligns with consultation feedback calling for clearer leadership, stronger accountability and more visible action from council. A RAP provides defined deliverables, external reporting mechanisms and organisational commitments that help translate intent into measurable outcomes. This supports Council to demonstrate sustained progress through practical initiatives and ongoing engagement with First Nations communities.

Some feedback highlighted concerns that Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) can at times become overly prescriptive, limiting Council's flexibility to respond to local priorities, emerging opportunities, and community-led initiatives in real time. Adopting a RAP at this stage does not preclude future evolution toward locally designed frameworks. Rather, consultation feedback suggested the RAP should be viewed as an enabling step that helps Council build the relationships, governance capability and cultural responsiveness required to support future self-determination initiatives in partnership with community.

The consultation process identified that traditional owners and stakeholders value the RAP framework because it is widely understood across government, community and organisational sectors. Continuing within this model provides continuity, clarity and alignment with broader reconciliation practice while allowing flexibility for Council to tailor actions to local community priorities and aspirations.

Participants also reflected on the risk that strategic planning in the First Nations space can become performative or compliance-driven, without leading to meaningful action, stronger relationships, or greater trust with First Nations communities. Feedback consistently emphasised that any plan should function as a living document that supports ongoing relational engagement, builds cultural capability across Council, and delivers outcomes that are tangible and genuinely experienced by First Nations communities.

Overall, consultation findings suggest that a RAP represents the most appropriate and achievable approach for Council currently, balancing practical action with long term progression toward deeper partnership and locally informed reconciliation outcomes.

5 Conclusion

Consultation undertaken with Traditional Owners, place-based organisations, government stakeholders and community representatives identified clear and consistent themes regarding Council's next First Nations planning framework.

Stakeholders broadly supported Council continuing its reconciliation journey through the development of a new Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), recognising it as the most appropriate and practical framework at Council's current stage of organisational and relationship maturity. Consultees acknowledged positive intent and emerging work within Council, while also identifying the need for stronger relationships, greater cultural capability, clearer accountability and more visible leadership before progressing toward more advanced self-determination or locally led governance models.

Traditional Owners and other stakeholders emphasised that genuine partnership requires established trust, culturally informed governance structures and meaningful shared decision-making processes developed and embedded over time. Consultation findings indicated that Council is still in the early stages of this work and should prioritise strengthening relationships and governance foundations before considering a Self-Determination Plan or Local First Nations Plan.

The RAP framework was viewed as providing a recognised and credible structure to support Council in embedding reconciliation across governance, employment, procurement, engagement and service delivery while continuing to build trust and organisational capability. Stakeholders also noted that adopting a RAP at this stage does not prevent future progression toward more locally designed or self-determined approaches but instead provides an important foundation to support that future evolution.

Overall, the consultation findings indicate that a renewed RAP represents the most appropriate next step for Council, balancing practical and achievable action with a

long-term commitment to deeper partnership, accountability and locally informed reconciliation outcomes