



Regional priorities

Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021–2051

# Central Highlands Summary

August 2021





## Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021–2051

In 2016, Infrastructure Victoria developed Victoria's first ever 30-year infrastructure strategy. The 2016 strategy was evidence-based, covered all types of infrastructure, and we consulted widely with stakeholders and the community. To stay relevant and reflect Victoria's evolving infrastructure needs, we update the strategy every three to five years.

Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051 builds on the 2016 strategy, revising many of our original recommendations and adding others in response to Victoria's changing circumstances. But we retain a long-term view of Victoria's infrastructure needs over the next 30 years, remembering that infrastructure lasts many decades, and must meet both immediate needs and those in the future. The strategy can be downloaded from our website at [infrastructurevictoria.com.au](http://infrastructurevictoria.com.au)

### Aboriginal acknowledgment

Infrastructure Victoria acknowledges the traditional owners of country in Victoria and pays respect to their elders past and present, as well as elders of other Aboriginal communities. We acknowledge the Wadawurrung and the Djab Wurrung peoples people, whose traditional lands are in the Central Highlands region. We recognise that the state's infrastructure is built on land that has been managed by Aboriginal people for millennia.



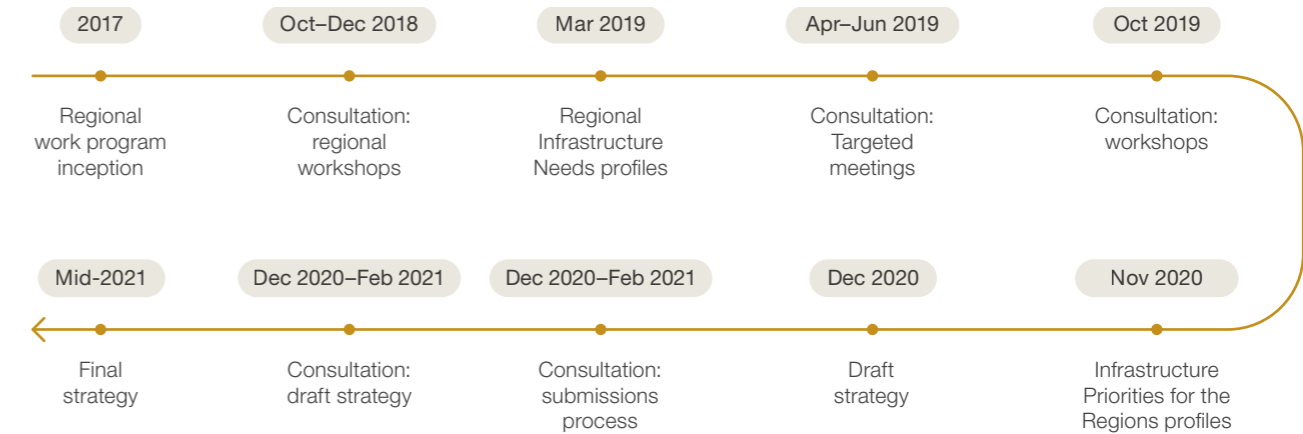
## Infrastructure Victoria listened to regional Victorians

Over the last four years, we built a deeper understanding of the Central Highlands region's infrastructure needs, industry composition, and social disadvantage, in our *Regional infrastructure needs* and *Infrastructure priorities for the regions* projects. We have consulted widely with Central Highlands communities, industries and local government to build our regional knowledge, and examined the unique opportunities and challenges that face each of Victoria's regions.

This work produced a *Central Highlands regional profile*, a *Central Highlands regional industry profile* and a *Factsheet on Central Highlands regional disadvantage*, all available on our [website](#). We used this evidence to develop strategy recommendations that can apply to the Central Highlands region.



### Engagement timeline



During the consultation period for the draft strategy, we provided more opportunities for Central Highlands communities and stakeholders to offer feedback on our draft recommendations, including through surveys, submissions, and hosting a Central Highlands regional roundtable discussion.

Combined, this comprehensive process of consultation and engagement guided the development of this Central Highlands regional summary and the relevant strategy recommendations. It focusses on infrastructure-related opportunities to build on Central Highlands' economic and industry advantages, and to strengthen local communities by improving health, education, and social inclusion outcomes, while reducing disadvantage.

This document provides a summary of selected recommendations from *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* which respond to the needs and opportunities we identified in Central Highlands.



## Overview

Central Highlands has a diverse economy based upon manufacturing, services and agriculture. Ballarat is the main hub for Central Highlands, comprising almost half of the region's population. It is a major employment and service centre for surrounding communities. Ballarat's economy is based on services, like health and education, and manufacturing. Ararat in the west and Bacchus Marsh in the east are also important service centres for the region, while residents in the east are within commuting distance of Geelong and Melbourne. The region's main economic strength lies in its productive agricultural land which produces quality lamb, wool, wheat, poultry and horticultural products.

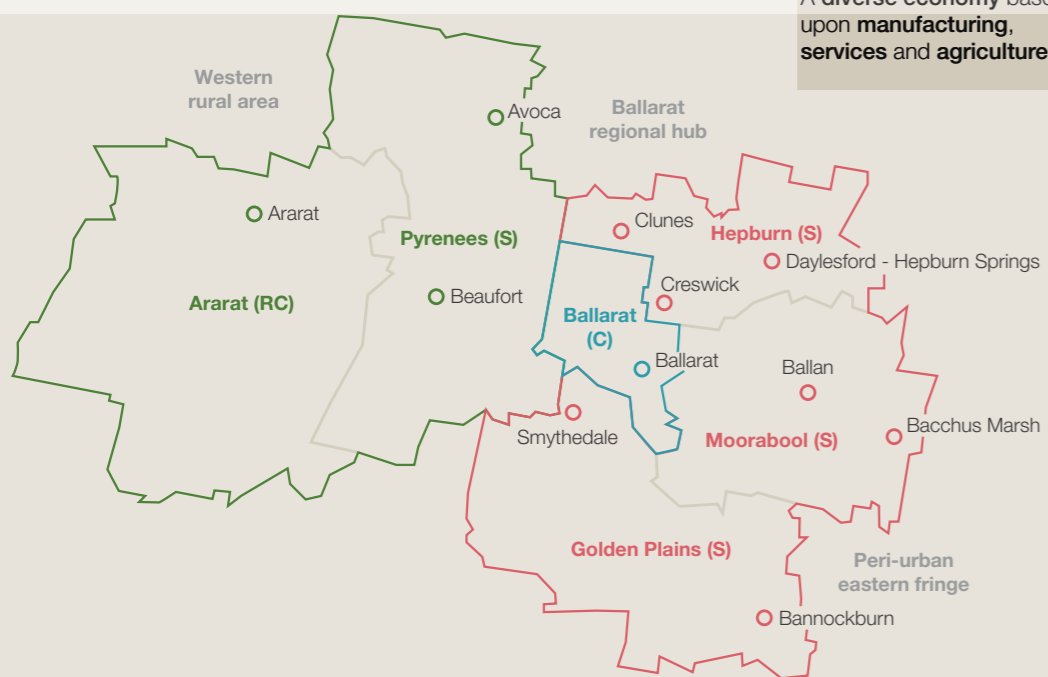
The Central Highlands region includes the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung in the east of the region (including Ballarat, Golden Plains, Moorabool and Beaufort) and the Djab Wurrung peoples. The land of the Djab Wurrung people stretches from the south eastern edge of the Grampians National Park in the west to the Pyrenees range in the east, and between Peshurst and Mortlake in the south to Landsborough in the north.

The land of the Djab Wurrung people includes the Wimmera River and the Hopkins River.

The region is growing, with families moving to the east of the region, often commuting to work in Melbourne, Ballarat and Geelong. Population growth is leading to associated development pressures in Ballarat and near the fringes of Melbourne. Population growth is occurring in the fast growing Shire of Moorabool and the township of Bacchus

Marsh and surrounds, as well as in the Shire of Golden Plains in Bannockburn and surrounding areas. The west of the region is typically more rural with smaller, established towns, and lower population growth. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many regional towns experienced increased demand for housing and growth in house prices. Some of these towns experienced a shortage of affordable housing for the first time.

### The regions of Central Highlands



A **diverse economy** based upon **manufacturing, services and agriculture.**



The region's main strength lies in its **productive agricultural land.**



The region includes the **traditional lands of the Wadawurrung and the Djab Wurrung peoples.**



Ballarat's **economy** is based on **services (health and education) and manufacturing.**



## Enhance market access and regional economic growth

### Unlock industry growth opportunities

Renewable energy is an emerging opportunity for the region, with growth potential dominated by the energy industry. However, Central Highlands Regional Partnership and other stakeholders have identified inadequacies in the region's current transmission infrastructure, which is limiting energy innovation. Transmission network connections are essential if Central Highlands is to realise the potential benefits associated with wind energy power generation. While current proposals such as the Victoria-NSW Interconnector VNI West will assist, some communities are opposed to overhead transmission lines through agricultural areas and townships. The community would prefer locating the transmission lines underground, at least in sensitive areas.

Stakeholders identify access to reliable, modern utilities services, including energy, as a potential development constraint for the region's meat, grain and horticulture processing sectors. These sectors are highly energy intensive, and without access to reliable and cost-effective services, businesses cannot develop or expand.

### Recommendations to remove energy barriers to business investment

Removing constraints to future industry development and leveraging potential renewable energy opportunities can help grow the Central Highlands economy. Infrastructure Victoria supports the Australian Energy Market Operator's proposed transmission extension VNI West, which will better connect Victoria with New South Wales and unlock the potential of significant renewable energy resources – including wind resources in the Western Victoria Renewable Energy Zone, partly within the Central Highlands region.

Co-funding power supply upgrades helps remove constraints associated with outdated infrastructure and allows new investment opportunities for regional businesses. Where upgrades are shown to deliver benefits to existing users and unlock potential future investment, upgrade costs can be shared between the Victorian Government, power distribution companies and local businesses.

#### Recommendation 3

### Augment electricity transmission for renewable energy and resilience

Support augmentation of critical electricity transmission infrastructure by 2027-28 to accommodate new renewable energy generation and improve network resilience and reliability through interconnection with other states.

#### Recommendation 4

### Identify and coordinate Renewable Energy Zones

In the next year, identify Renewable Energy Zones, especially in the state's north-west, and continue to coordinate their development over the next 10 years.

#### Recommendation 80

### Upgrade power supply for agriculture and regional industry

In the next five years, contribute toward strategic power supply infrastructure upgrades for agriculture and regional industry, where an independent assessment demonstrates significant potential for increased productivity, competitiveness and growth.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 1.1) for additional recommendations on navigating the energy transition.



### Improve water security and industry resilience

Central Highlands has a significant, and growing agriculture industry which contributes almost \$1 billion to the regional economy each year. Central Highlands farms produce around one third of Victoria's chicken meat. A strong meat and grains food processing sector supports the industry.

Climate change poses numerous risks to Central Highlands, given the importance of agriculture and related industries to the region's economy. Regional climate projections indicate declining rainfall and increasing temperatures. By the 2030s, Central Highlands' average maximum temperatures could increase by up to 1.7°C, while average annual rainfall is projected to decrease by 10%. By the 2050s, Central Highlands could have twice as many days over 35°C and up to 68% more very high fire danger days, increasing the already high bushfire risk in many parts of the region.

Stakeholders identified reliable irrigation water availability as a constraint for intensive agriculture in Central Highlands. They told us water projects, such as the East Grampians Rural Pipeline, can help continue to optimise the region's water infrastructure, and support production of more high-value crops and develop intensive farming such as poultry. These can have significant flow-on benefits for local food processors, agricultural service providers and agritourism opportunities.

Water security will be increasingly uncertain. Stakeholders value projects like the Western Irrigation Network, a recycled water irrigation scheme. The scheme will guarantee a supply of recycled water for irrigation to dryland farmers in the Parwan-Balliang area, from 2022. They told us this project demonstrates that water security can be secured as population grows. A continued focus on irrigation infrastructure renewal and water efficiency can ensure water security into the future.

### Recommendations to improve water security for the agriculture industry

Further strengthening water security can help ensure farmers can get water as rainfall continues to decline. Considering all sources of water supply, continuing to modernise irrigation systems and upgrading Victoria's emergency water supply network can benefit Central Highlands' agriculture and related businesses, helping to support continued industry growth.

**Recommendation 13**

#### Consider all water supply sources

Consider all water sources for supply augmentation, including identifying and addressing barriers to purified recycled drinking water within the next 10 years. When planning for future water supply, investigate all options including, but not limited to recycled water, seawater desalination, stormwater harvesting and better use of the water grid.

**Recommendation 16**


#### Strengthen agricultural water security by modernising irrigation

In the next 30 years, contribute funding toward planning and delivery of water infrastructure and irrigation modernisation projects across Victoria.

**Recommendation 17**

#### Upgrade Victoria's emergency water network

In the next year, assess the condition, capacity and security of Victoria's emergency water supply point network, and upgrade or replace inadequate supply points. Clarify ongoing responsibility for monitoring, maintenance and funding to secure a resilient network.

 Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 1.2) for additional recommendations on responding to climate change.

**By the 2030s**



Average **maximum temperatures** could increase by up to 1.7°C



Average **annual rainfall** is projected to decrease by 10%

**By the 2050s**



Could have **twice as many days** over 35°C



Could have up to 68% more **very high fire danger** days

### Fostering tourism in Central Highlands

Central Highlands has diverse tourist attractions, including heritage attractions such as Sovereign Hill living museum, spa country resorts, food and wine experiences and nature-based tourism opportunities in the Grampians National Park. The region benefits from its proximity to Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat, and tourism contributed more than \$1 billion to the Central Highlands economy in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the region's visitor economy, with border closures and the cancellation of major events. As restrictions ease, tourism can help the region's economic recovery.

Stakeholders identified opportunities to further grow the region's tourism potential by capitalising on existing strengths, including nature-based tourism, agritourism, and Aboriginal culture and heritage. The Central Highlands Regional Partnership proposes maximising domestic tourism opportunities in the short to medium term, to attract repeat visitors and encourage longer-term stays. Central Highlands has important Aboriginal cultural heritage assets. The Grampians National Park, or Gariwerd, is an important site for several Aboriginal groups including the Djab Wurrung people. It contains Brambuk: The National Park and Cultural Centre near Halls Gap, or Budja Budja, which preserves and promotes Aboriginal community history. There are numerous important assets in the Grampians National Park, including rare Aboriginal rock art sites, and ancient sacred trees in the Ararat area.

### Recommendations to support a recovery in regional tourism

Our tourism recommendations, centred on Aboriginal and nature-based tourism opportunities, aim to support sustainable growth in the region's tourism industry. A Victorian Aboriginal tourism strategy, co-developed with Traditional Owners, can further drive sustainable economic activity in Central Highlands, helping to preserve and promote the region's Aboriginal cultural histories and heritage sites and create job opportunities for Aboriginal communities. It should align existing joint management plans, including the Dja Dja Wurrung joint management plan, and guide Victorian Government investment in Aboriginal tourism infrastructure to meet Aboriginal cultural and economic development needs.

A nature-based tourism strategy to guide future investment in the region's tourist infrastructure can improve tourism experiences, facilities and infrastructure, to meet visitor expectations and protect and enhance the region's natural assets. Removal of investment barriers in national parks would help encourage investment in tourist facilities and services, particularly in the east of the region close to the Grampians National Park, further adding to the diversity of Central Highlands' tourist offering. These recommendations can build on investments in Central Highlands' tourism infrastructure, including development of new bike trails in the Ararat Hills Regional Park.

**Recommendation 81**

#### Plan for and facilitate regional nature-based tourism investments

In the next two years, develop a Victorian nature-based tourism strategy to guide industry development and prioritise further investments. During the next 15 years, support regional tourism investment by allowing more site-specific leases for up to 49 years for infrastructure proposals that meet strict criteria and complement environmental and cultural values.

**Recommendation 82**

#### Develop a Victorian Aboriginal tourism strategy with Aboriginal communities

Support and partner with Aboriginal communities in the next two years to guide future investments in Aboriginal tourism and cultural heritage, including through joint management plans.



Trentham Falls



## Facilitate regional recycling industries in Central Highlands

Victoria can transform its resource and recycling sector to recover up to 90% of our waste with \$1 billion of investment in infrastructure from both government and the private sector by 2039. There are currently dozens of resource recovery centres across Victoria, of varying capacity and capability, that collect materials from their local areas for transport and further recovery. A more strategically located and better resourced resource recovery centre network can reduce the costs of transporting materials and bring materials closer to their end users, such as compost for agriculture. The City of Ballarat is advocating for an all waste interchange and materials recovery facility to be built in the region.

Demand for recyclable materials has not matched their supply. More reliable markets for priority materials – recyclable glass, plastic, paper and card, organics, tyres and e-waste – can support economic development, help address the stockpiling of recovered materials, and reduce reliance on landfill. Markets for these materials vary greatly, presenting different challenges for each. Ongoing research and development can help to identify new potential uses for recycled materials, either as direct substitutes for virgin materials or new uses.

## Recommendations to facilitate regional recycling industries

Infrastructure Victoria's *Advice on recycling and resource recovery infrastructure* suggested upgrading or building new processing infrastructure for six priority materials – plastics, paper, cardboard, glass, organics, tyres and e-waste – can create over 5000 new jobs and high quality, recycled products for use in major infrastructure projects, manufacturing and agriculture. Regional Victoria stands to benefit most from significantly increased processing capacity, and we recommended 52 out of 87 new or upgraded facilities be located outside of metropolitan Melbourne.

The Central Highlands is likely to need more recycling and resource recovery infrastructure, including mixed materials recovery facilities, specialised paper recovery facilities, plastic processing plants, glass sand or aggregate plants and organic composting facilities. By processing materials from both Melbourne and local areas, Central Highlands can provide products, closer to end users, reducing transport costs and creating new jobs and services.

### Recommendation 28

#### Facilitate improved recycling infrastructure for priority materials

Immediately focus efforts to increase and upgrade waste processing infrastructure on six priority materials. Facilitate increased recovery and reprocessing capacity and capability for paper and card, plastics, and organics by 2025. Revisit funding mechanisms and align recycling infrastructure with land use settings.

### Recommendation 29

#### Strengthen end markets for recycled materials

Continue to deliver market development for recycled materials by updating standards and specifications to be performance-based rather than material-based, and explicitly require the Victorian public sector to use recycled products where feasible. In the next five years, support research, development and demonstrations to build confidence and demand for recycled products.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 1.5) for additional recommendations on recycling and building a circular economy.

## Improve freight networks

Central Highlands has good transport connections to Melbourne, Geelong and Portland, including the Western and Sunraysia Highways, and freight rail lines. Ballarat has strong transport links with Melbourne and ports in nearby regions, such as Avalon Airport and regional ports. The region's proximity to Melbourne and Geelong will allow access to domestic and international markets. The region's sheep, grain, horticulture and intensive farming industries will continue to benefit from quality transport routes to markets, storage, processors and customers. Other industries can also benefit from good transport connections, including tourism and renewable energy. For example, safe and reliable country roads can transport people and equipment to wind turbine developments, to national parks and other tourism locations.

Whilst there are good connections today, growth in Melbourne's western outer suburbs will place pressure on connections to Melbourne, Melbourne Airport and interstate corridors, such as the Hume Highway.

Central Highlands' stakeholders advocated for rail freight improvements, including standardising the rail gauge of freight lines, such as Maryborough to Ballarat, Ballarat to Geelong and the Ballarat to Ararat line.

## Recommendations to better connect Central Highlands' businesses with processors and markets

Growth in Melbourne's outer western suburbs will increase pressure on links between the Central Highlands and Melbourne. Developing the outer metropolitan road will provide options to Central Highlands' businesses to access Melbourne Airport and interstate corridors, along with the future Bay West Port. We also recommend upgrading outer suburban roads, including the Western Freeway, to accommodate growth and keep good connections with the Central Highlands region.

The original Murray Basin Rail project aimed to improve freight routes through the Central Highlands region to Melbourne and regional ports. Many stakeholders expressed major concerns with its reduced scope. Providing funding certainty for road and rail maintenance and upgrade programs, and further developing the rail freight network, can leverage Central Highlands' road and rail freight networks to better support the needs of the region's businesses. This process can consider future rail gauge standardisation projects in the Central Highlands region. It can help improve access, connectivity, and safety while also reducing supply chain costs, allowing businesses to remain competitive. Ongoing maintenance and upgrades not only improve efficiency, but also work to keep all road users safe.

Funding and planning for ongoing rail freight network development and maintenance will maximise efficient investment and support rail freight's competitiveness in the region. Ongoing freight rail development should consider incorporating the excluded elements of the revised Murray Basin Project. A long-term maintenance program would provide further confidence to investors and producers in Central Highlands region.

### Recommendation 66

#### Construct an outer metropolitan road and rail corridor

Within two years, determine staging for the outer metropolitan rail and road corridor. Subject to detailed business cases, start construction of priority sections, starting with the E6 motorway by the end of this decade. Progressively stage corridor development for completion in the next 30 years. Provide a freight rail link to coincide with the opening of the Western Intermodal Freight Terminal.

### Recommendation 76

#### Expand and upgrade Melbourne's outer suburban road and bus networks

In the next 15 years, deliver a program of upgrades to Melbourne's arterial road, freeway and bus networks beyond what is currently funded, focusing on congested roads and corridors in outer metropolitan and growth suburbs council areas.

### Recommendation 78

#### Deliver long-term funding certainty for regional road maintenance and upgrades

Within two years, specify clear levels of service for each type of regional road and bridge. Following this, dedicate a 10-year funding program to sustainably fund Victorian Government regional road and bridge maintenance and upgrades to meet these service levels. Funding should be prioritised based on improving safety, decreasing vehicle emissions, and lifting productivity.

### Recommendation 79

#### Fund and plan for ongoing regional rail freight network development and maintenance

In the next year, fund a 30-year periodic regional freight rail maintenance program, informed by a publicly available network development and asset management plan. Using the plan, thoroughly determine the feasibility of the next major regional freight upgrade within five years.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 3.2) for additional recommendations on improving freight efficiency and competitiveness.







Ballarat Station

## Better connect the regions

### Improving public transport

At 21%, the Central Highlands has the state's highest proportion of workers who travel outside the region for work. Most of these workers live on Melbourne's fringes, in Moorabool and Golden Plains shires. Central Highlands residents are highly dependent on cars to get around. Less than half of the region's residents live within ready access of public transport. This falls to 8% in Pyrenees Shire and just 2% in Golden Plains Shire. While 67% of Ballarat residents have access to public transport, it is lower than the Victorian average of 74%. Less than 4% of the region's commuters travel to work by public transport, and the majority of these commute to and from Melbourne.

Regional stakeholders tell us that poor public transport is a barrier to participation and to essential services for those who do not have their own transport – for example, young people wanting to travel to work or study.

Central Highlands stakeholders told us that better connecting the Ballarat transport network can improve access to larger towns and regional cities. Alternative transport solutions, such as on-demand services or active transport are one way to meet current and future demand and improve transport connectivity within the region. Those commuting out of the region for work would also benefit from increased capacity on commuter corridors into Melbourne and services to Geelong.

Growth in Ballarat and Melbourne's western suburbs is placing pressure on regional rail services. This demand will increase levels of overcrowding and will affect the reliability of all services operating on this corridor.

Community transport provides an alternative to public transport within the region to access services in the larger centres and townships such as Ballarat, Geelong, Bacchus Marsh, and Ararat. Timely and reliable access to transport helps the Central Highlands' rural communities access the services they need and fosters social inclusion. This includes residents who do not own a car or drive, such as older residents, young people, low-income individuals, and people with a disability.

### Recommendations to enable viable transport options across Central Highlands

The Victorian Government is making significant rail investments to improve service quality and capacity between Melbourne and Ballarat. The investments aim to deliver a minimum frequency of a train every 20 minutes at peak times and every 40 minutes in off peak periods. Crowding on Ballarat regional trains can be reduced by extending the metropolitan rail network towards Ballarat, such as to Rockbank.

Reforming regional public transport can improve transport options within the Central Highlands region. Solutions which integrate traditional public transport with more innovative, flexible transport options can deliver services which respond to community needs. Providing long-term transport certainty to local communities can ensure that Central Highlands residents can access education, health and other services which are increasingly centralised in Ballarat and other regional centres. The *Ballarat integrated transport action plan* aspires to transition from the city's bus network to a network of high frequency transit corridors between key nodes and destinations.

Improvements to public transport are accompanied by our recommendation to transform cycling in Ballarat, including implementation of the Ballarat Bicycle Network, as first floated in the *Ballarat Cycling Action Plan 2017-2025* and subsequently endorsed as part of the city's *Integrated Transport Action Plan*. The recommendation will improve access and safety of active transport in the region, help reduce localised congestion and improve health outcomes.

### Recommendation 39

#### Transform cycling in Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong

In the next 10 years, prioritise and significantly progress developing a continuous network of high quality, safer cycling corridors in Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, including separated cycle ways and more storage at train stations and activity centres. In the next five years, immediate priorities include connections within and between central Melbourne and surrounding suburbs, and connections to the Monash, La Trobe and Sunshine National Employment and Innovation Clusters.

### Recommendation 74

#### Extend rail services in Melbourne's western and northern growth areas

In the next two years, develop business cases to extend electrified metropolitan train services from Sunshine to Rockbank, from Craigieburn to Beveridge, and on the Wyndham Vale corridor, to be delivered by 2031. Deliver extra services to south-east Melbourne by running Rockbank services to Pakenham via the Melbourne Metro Tunnel. Consider adding extra stations on the Wyndham Vale and Melton corridors, and secure remaining land required for stations and stabling.

### Recommendation 83

#### Redesign regional public transport to meet local needs

In the next five years, redesign existing regional transport services so they are integrated, based on regional needs assessments, and sustainably funded. Use significant technological and reform opportunities to deliver innovative service models that meet local needs.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 3.1) for additional recommendations on shaping the transport network for better access.

## Improve digital connectivity and telecommunications infrastructure

Central Highlands residents have lower rates of internet connection, inferior internet speed and less reliable mobile coverage when compared with Melbourne. One in six Central Highlands households do not have internet access, rising to one in four in Ararat and Pyrenees. This compares with an average of one in eight in Melbourne. Poor digital access jeopardises people's engagement in education and access to online services. It also has implications for public safety in times of emergency. As services shift online, digital access and digital literacy become increasingly necessary, for example for banking, job search, health and social services, and education. Stakeholders tell us vulnerable groups have become further disadvantaged during the COVID-19 pandemic due to digital exclusion and an inability to access telehealth services.

The *Central Highlands digital plan* identifies a lack of availability of adequate, affordable business-grade telecommunications and digital connectivity services in the region. Central Highlands businesses experience accessibility issues and bottlenecks on broadband and wireless technology, making it difficult to leverage digital technologies. The Victorian Government is funding faster broadband for regional towns and eradicating mobile black spots in populated areas of regional Victoria, in partnership with the Australian Government. Central Highlands stakeholders are advocating for regional roaming, including emergency roaming to improve safety during natural disasters by ensuring mobile users have backup coverage when out of range of their own network.

The Internet of Things (IoT) enables devices embedded with sensors to connect to and interact with each other via the internet, collecting information and monitoring data to help farmers make more informed decisions. The Victorian Government's On-Farm IoT trials are supporting uptake of IoT technologies in Victoria's agriculture industry. Innovative programs such as Eat Drink West and Farmers2Founders are helping to connect the region's producers with customers, supporting collaboration and developing entrepreneurship and technical capabilities.

### Recommendations to continue to bridge the Central Highlands digital divide

Maintaining the focus on improving both fixed broadband and mobile services in the long term can help address the Central Highlands' digital connectivity gaps. Improved connectivity can help more Central Highlands businesses take advantage of digital opportunities. Reliable and high-speed internet connections can help businesses to operate and compete from any region, placing businesses in a stronger position to withstand future crises.

Improving regional telecommunications infrastructure resilience, which includes enabling emergency mobile roaming, can help Central Highlands' residents stay connected during emergencies.

Leveraging the existing infrastructure and expertise in Central Highlands' library network can support digital literacy skills development and improve access to the internet for those who cannot access it at home. This will complement Ballarat's VicFreeWiFi pilot, a partnership between the Victorian Government, local government and industry.

#### Recommendation 84

### Address regional Victoria's digital connectivity gaps

In the next five years, continue delivering regional digital connectivity improvements, and monitor and review the need for further government investment following the roll-out of the Digital Future Now initiative.

#### Recommendation 85

### Improve regional telecommunications infrastructure resilience

In the next five years, develop more resilient regional telecommunications infrastructure so communities can stay safe during emergencies, including better mobile coverage, back-up systems and power supply, and emergency mobile roaming.

#### Recommendation 86

### Fund regional libraries to provide better internet access

In the next year, start a five year funding program provide funding for libraries in regional towns and rural areas to improve community access to fast, free internet services, leveraging existing library infrastructure.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 4.2) for additional recommendations on better connecting the regions.

## Foster regional Victorians' health, wellbeing, and inclusion

### Improve access to healthcare

Parts of the Central Highlands region demonstrate relatively poor health, social and education outcomes when compared with Victorian averages. For example:

- \ Health indicators reveal a gap between the east and the west of the region, with poorer health outcomes in western rural areas when compared with the region's east.
- \ Ararat is the ninth most disadvantaged local government area in Victoria. It has relatively poor early childhood outcomes. One third of children in Ararat are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared with one in five across Central Highlands.
- \ Both Ballarat and Ararat have relatively high numbers of registered mental health clients per 1000 population, with Ararat more than double the Victorian average. Ararat also has more than double the number of people receiving drug and alcohol treatment services per 1000 population.

Across the region Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) play a central role in the provision of services and the promotion and protection of Aboriginal people's rights. Central Highlands' Aboriginal population is projected to grow 76% between 2018 and 2028, the highest rate in regional Victoria, which could lead to additional demand for

Aboriginal and other services in the region. Stakeholders tell us that increasing client numbers and inadequate infrastructure is restricting the ability of Central Highlands' ACCOs to provide timely and effective service delivery.

### Recommendations to improve health outcomes for people in Central Highlands

Fostering innovation by expanding the use of technology in service provision can better connect regional communities with specialist health services. This will build on Central Highlands' recent progress in increasing uptake in online health treatments and support services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A plan for future investment in Aboriginal community controlled infrastructure can respond to the current and future infrastructure needs of Central Highlands' Aboriginal community. Improved access to mental health facilities in the region can respond to local demand for services.

Our recommendations build on recent Victorian Government investments in Central Highlands' healthcare infrastructure, including funding towards the redevelopment of Ballarat Base Hospital, planning for the new Melton Hospital and more mental health services in the region.

#### Recommendation 25

### Use innovation to deliver better models of health care

Within two years, help slow the growth in demand for hospital infrastructure by developing a comprehensive statewide health innovation strategy, supported by a funding over five years to promote and progressively implement better models of health care.

#### Recommendation 67

### Co-design an Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure plan

In the next year, start a co-design process with Aboriginal Victorians to develop a plan to guide investment in Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure to meet current and future social, economic and cultural needs.

#### Recommendation 70

### Deliver infrastructure for a more responsive and integrated mental health system

In the next year, establish a dedicated infrastructure fund to support more responsive and integrated mental health and wellbeing services, consistent with the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.





## Improve and better use community and council infrastructure

Demographic changes, such as an ageing population, are affecting the scope and mix of services councils provide. Smaller rural councils have a relatively small ratepayer base, which is further constrained by declining populations and lower average incomes. Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh and Bannockburn may continue to experience higher rates of population growth, increasing pressure on services and existing community facilities. Many ageing community facilities across the Central Highlands region need upgrading, including single purpose facilities, such as old public pools and community halls.

Central Highlands stakeholders identify specific opportunities for shared services, including co-located facilities to support young people experiencing disadvantage, and a centralised early years and community services hub in Bacchus Marsh. New schools located in the growth areas of Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh and Bannockburn will provide opportunities for shared facilities on school sites.

## Recommendations to make better use of community infrastructure

Better using community facilities can support regions and local governments to provide fit for purpose social infrastructure which can respond to local needs. Service planning can help identify gaps in existing infrastructure, or opportunities for shared facilities, supported by funding to retrofit, repurpose or retire existing community facilities. Transport planning can integrate with service planning, so they work together to ensure people can access essential services. Developing multipurpose shared social service facilities aligns with advocacy to develop a shared service delivery model for the region.

Creating climate-adapted facilities for rural communities can support local governments to develop facilities which can help reduce the health impacts of exposure to heat, and prolonged smoke from bushfires. Combined with the recommendation to build back better after emergencies, this helps build community resilience to the impacts of climate change.

### Recommendation 19

#### Build back better after emergencies

In the next year, consider policy changes and funding mechanisms so high priority public infrastructure destroyed by emergencies is built to a more resilient standard or in less vulnerable locations.

### Recommendation 88

#### Deliver multipurpose shared social service facilities in the regions

In the next year, start regional planning for social services to identify opportunities for multipurpose shared services facilities, then deliver them where appropriate, over the next five years, in partnership with local governments and community organisations.

### Recommendation 89

#### Update community infrastructure

Fund regional councils in the next five years to update, repurpose or retire outdated community infrastructure for better service delivery.

### Recommendation 90

#### Create climate-adapted facilities for rural communities

In the next five years, fund local governments to plan and help deliver a network of designated, accessible climate-adapted community facilities, to manage the health impacts of extreme heat and bushfire smoke.



Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy* (section 4.3) for additional recommendations on fostering regional Victorians health, wellbeing and inclusion.



## Address social housing challenges

Central Highlands Regional Partnership identifies an urgent need for affordable, long-term rental housing in the region. One in three Central Highlands' rental households are experiencing rental stress, the second highest rate in regional Victoria. At December 2020, 2186 households were on the Victorian Housing register for social housing, with more than half requiring urgent assistance. This suggests a shortage of affordable rental housing in the region. Central Highlands also has the third highest rate of homelessness in regional Victoria, at 3.1 people experiencing homeless per 1000 population at the time of the 2016 Census. Single people make up the largest group of people experiencing homelessness in the region. Reporting from within the region suggests the incidence of homelessness is increasing, driven by factors including mental health and domestic violence. Ararat, for example, has the eleventh highest rate of family violence in Victoria. The Shire of Moorabool has suggested there is opportunity to increase the provision of social housing in Bacchus Marsh through both the redevelopment of existing sites and the purchase of new sites which are well located. The Victorian Government has earmarked social housing funds for several local government areas in the regions as part of the Big Housing Build.

## Recommendations to enhance access to affordable, fit for purpose housing

Expansion of social housing in regional centres, in locations with good access to transport and services, can prioritise areas with strong forecast population growth such as Ballarat. Rapid renewal of old public housing stock can help ensure that the existing housing stock is fit for purpose. The Victorian Government has committed to building social and affordable housing in regional Victoria with minimum guaranteed investments already committed for Ballarat, Moorabool and Golden Plains.

Making social housing suitable for changing climates responds to the need for adequate heating and cooling in the region's social housing, building on recent Victorian Government funding commitments for energy efficiency upgrades in social housing properties. As well as installing split system air conditioning to better regulate temperatures in the home, solar panels are recommended to help low-income residents to manage energy-related cost of living pressures. Collectively, these recommendations aim to ensure a long-term focus on provisioning social housing following the roll out of the Victorian Government's four-year Big Housing Build program.

### Recommendation 55

#### Rapidly renew old public housing

Rapidly renew dilapidated public housing properties to improve functionality, accessibility and energy efficiency with a priority to renew at least half of all older low-rise apartments and older three bedroom detached dwellings by 2031.

### Recommendation 93

#### Expand social housing in regional centres, in locations with good access

Focus social housing investments in regional centres, near transport and services, for better access to health, social and economic support.

### Recommendation 94

#### Make social housing suitable for changing local climates

Continue to deliver a long-term program of modifying social housing to be climate-resilient by improving the energy efficiency and energy affordability of residences.





Sovereign Hill

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