Regional priorities

Victoria's infrastructure
strategy 2021–2051

Ovens
Murray
Summary

August 2021

**INFRASTRUCTURE
VICTORIA**

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**
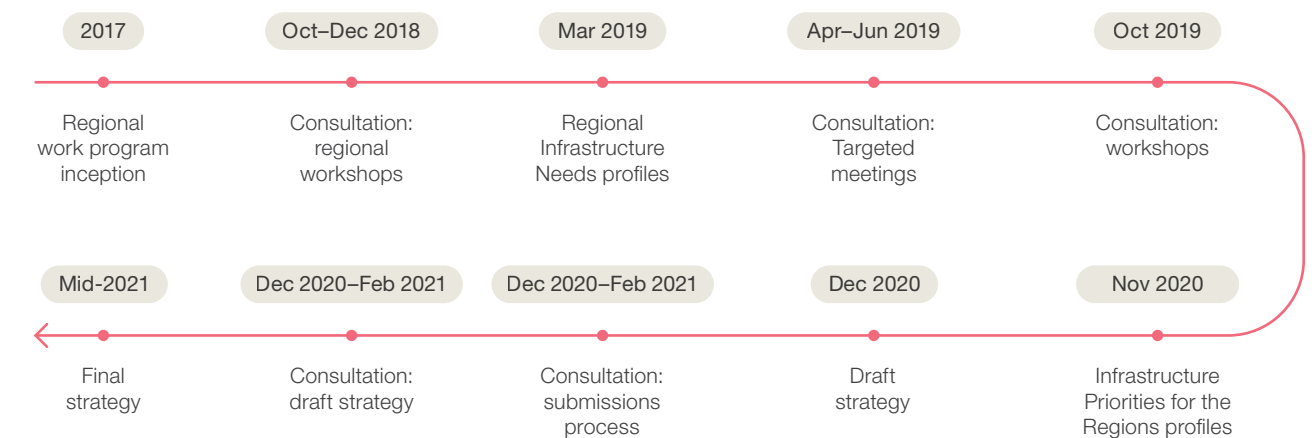
Aboriginal acknowledgment

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 Taungurung and Yorta Yorta peoples, whose traditional lands are in the Ovens Murray 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 Ovens Murray 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 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 an *Ovens Murray regional profile*, an *Ovens Murray regional industry profile*, and a *Factsheet on Ovens Murray regional disadvantage*, all available on our website. We used this evidence to develop strategy recommendations that can apply to the Ovens Murray region.

Engagement timeline

2017	Oct–Dec 2018	Mar 2019	Apr–Jun 2019	Oct 2019
Regional work program inception	Consultation: regional workshops	Regional Infrastructure Needs profiles	Consultation: Targeted meetings	Consultation: workshops

Mid-2021	Dec 2020–Feb 2021	Dec 2020–Feb 2021	Dec 2020	Nov 2020
Final strategy	Consultation: draft strategy	Consultation: submissions process	Draft strategy	Infrastructure Priorities for the Regions profiles

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

Combined, this comprehensive process of consultation and engagement guided the development of this Ovens Murray regional summary and the relevant strategy recommendations. It focuses on infrastructure-related opportunities to build on Ovens Murray's 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 Ovens Murray.
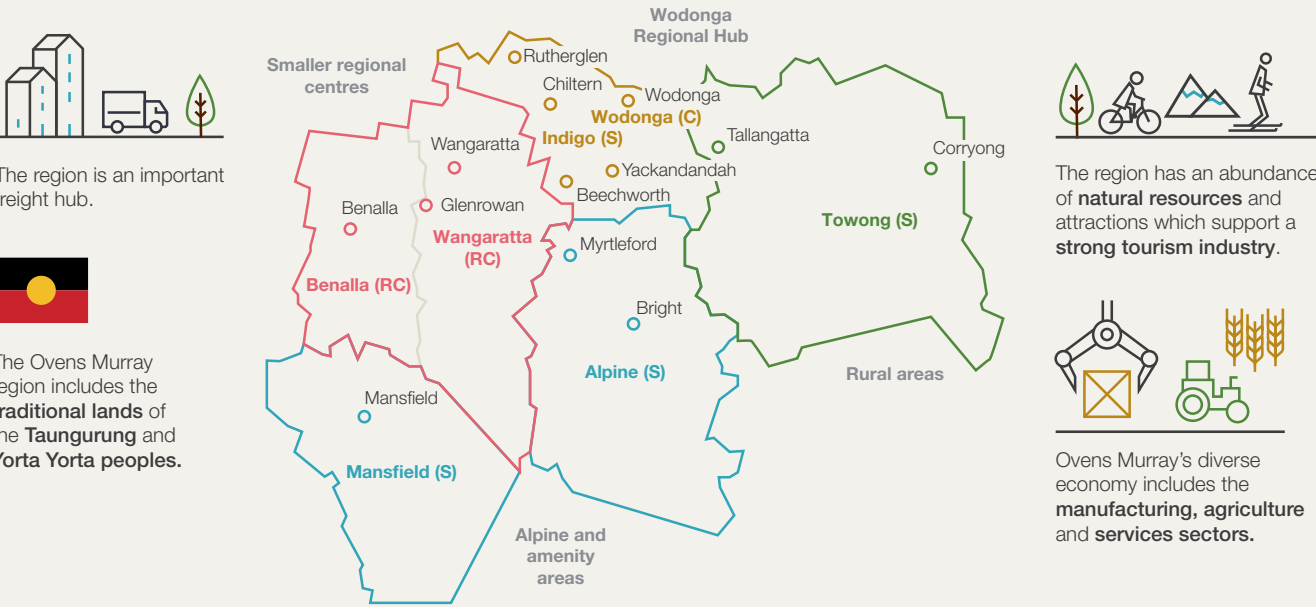
Overview

Ovens Murray is situated in northern Victoria, with its northern reaches forming part of the New South Wales border along the Murray River. The region has an abundance of natural resources and attractions which support a strong tourism industry. The alpine region offers a range of outdoor activities during both summer and winter periods.

Ovens Murray's diverse economy includes the manufacturing, agriculture and services sectors. Wodonga, with its twin city of Albury in New South Wales, is the regional hub and provides significant services and employment opportunities to the region. With its strategic border location, the region is an important freight hub, with major transport routes to Sydney, regional New South Wales and Melbourne.

Ovens Murray's regional centres, Wodonga, Wangaratta and Benalla, all lie within the north of the region and are generally well connected to each other. As a border region, Ovens Murray provides services to, and receives services from, New South Wales.

The Ovens Murray region includes the traditional lands of the Taungurung and Yorta Yorta peoples. The land of the Taungurung people spans the south western Ovens Murray region, while some of the lands of the Yorta Yorta people are in the north west.

Mount Buffalo National Park

The regions of Ovens Murray

The region is an important freight hub.

The Ovens Murray region includes the **traditional lands** of the **Taungurung** and **Yorta Yorta peoples**.

The region has an abundance of **natural resources** and attractions which support a **strong tourism industry**.

Ovens Murray's diverse economy includes the **manufacturing, agriculture** and **services sectors**.

Smaller regional centres

Rutherglen
Chiltern
Wodonga Regional Hub
Wodonga (C)
Wodonga
Indigo (S)
Tallangatta
Corryong
Wangaratta
Glenrowan
Yackandandah
Beechworth
Towong (S)
Benalla
Wangaratta (RC)
Myrtleford
Benalla (RC)
Bright
Alpine (S)
Rural areas
Mansfield
Mansfield (S)
Alpine and amenity areas

Enhance market access and regional economic growth

Unlock industry growth opportunities

Ovens Murray stakeholders identified that electricity infrastructure can constrain the growth of the region's more established industries, such as food processing and manufacturing. Outdated single-wire earth return power lines provide electricity to many of the region's farms and processing facilities. Changing industry practices and more energy intensive equipment are leading to capacity constraints which can limit production and prevent business expansion. Power supply improvements could produce significant benefits, including allowing businesses to expand, attract new investment, and support local communities.

Ovens Murray is within one of Victoria's potential renewable energy zones. Stakeholders told us that there are various renewable energy opportunities in the region, particularly associated with pumped hydro and solar generation. Hydroelectric power is produced at Lake Dartmouth, Victoria's largest single hydro generator. The *Hume Renewable Energy Roadmap* outlines further opportunities for renewable energy in Ovens Murray. Stakeholders highlighted existing transmission infrastructure constrains new renewable energy generation in

Ovens Murray, but planned upgrades may contribute to future development opportunities. For instance, stakeholders said proposed upgrades to the South Morang-Dederang-New South Wales transmission line could support large scale solar energy generation in the region.

Recommendations to remove energy infrastructure barriers in Ovens Murray

Co-funding power supply upgrades can remove constraints associated with outdated power supply infrastructure and allows new investment opportunities for Ovens Murray 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.

Coordinating the development of renewable energy zones can remove constraints to future renewable energy industry development, providing solutions which leverage potential renewable energy opportunities in Ovens Murray and enhance economic growth.

Recommendation 03

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 04

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.

Enhance water security and industry resilience

Ovens Murray has highly developed beef, sheep and dairy industries, and a strong food-processing base. Given the importance of agriculture and related industries to the region's economy, climate change poses risks to primary production in Ovens Murray. The region has historically benefitted from the availability of good rainfall and access to water, but climate projections indicate declining rainfall and increasing temperatures. By the 2030s, the average maximum temperatures in the Ovens Murray could increase by up to 1.9°C, while average annual rainfall is projected to decrease by 11%. By the 2050s, Ovens Murray could have twice as many days over 35°C and up to 44% more very high fire danger days, increasing the already high bushfire risk in many parts of the region.

More frequent droughts and higher bushfire risks could threaten Ovens Murray's farms and related businesses. Water supply security can ensure a sustainable future for the agriculture industry. Irrigation development initiatives, such as the maintenance and modernisation of existing infrastructure and planning for new water infrastructure projects, can contribute to better water security and improve climate change resilience in the region. Similarly, stakeholders also observed that water infrastructure projects can support a sustainable water supply for communities in Ovens Murray, particularly in those areas experiencing population growth.

Recommendations to improve water security for Ovens Murray's agriculture industry

Continuing to modernise irrigation systems, using all sources of water supply, and upgrading Victoria's network of emergency water supply points can further strengthen water security in Ovens Murray. Our recommendations will help ensure that farmers can get water as rainfall continues to decline, benefitting Ovens Murray's agriculture and food processing sectors and supporting continued 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 2021–2051* (section 1.2) for additional recommendations on water and responding to a changing climate.

By the 2030s

↑ 1.9°c

Average **maximum temperatures could increase** by up to 1.9°C

↓ 11%

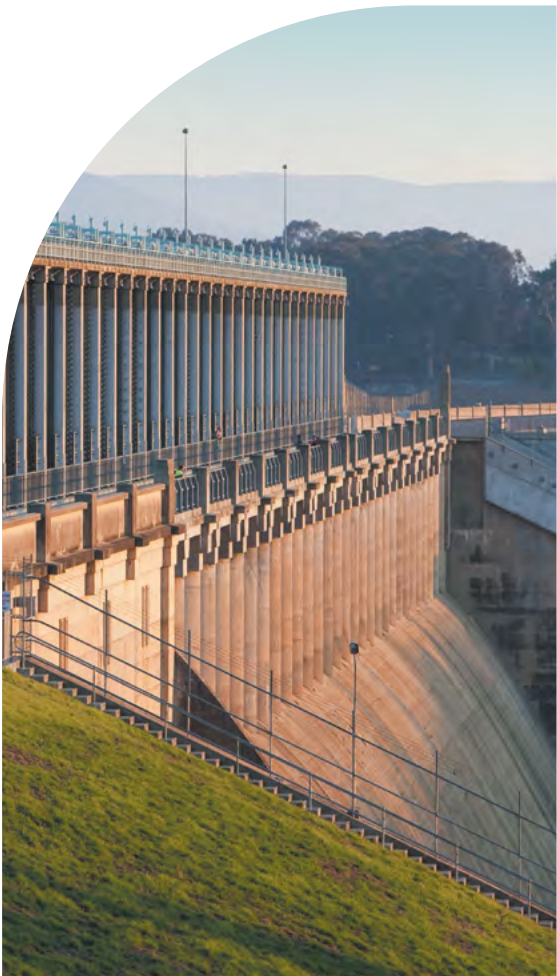Average **annual rainfall is projected to decrease** by 11%

By the 2050s

x2 35°c

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

↑ 44%

Could have up to 44% more **very high fire dange**r days

Foster tourism in Ovens Murray

The Ovens Murray region has a diverse tourism industry centred around the alpine regions of Mount Buller, Mount Stirling, Falls Creek and Mount Hotham. Beyond the winter ski season, the region is increasingly viewed as an all seasons destination. Ovens Murray offers cycling, water-based recreation, nature-based tourism and a diversity of food and wine experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 summer bushfires substantially impacted the Ovens Murray tourism industry. A virtual roundtable hosted by Ovens Murray Regional Partnership noted that areas which rely heavily on tourism, such as Alpine Shire, were significantly affected and that many of the region's tourist-related businesses in the region suspended operation.

Tourism can help the region's economy recover. Ovens Murray can leverage its existing strengths in nature-based tourism, agritourism experiences and Aboriginal culture and heritage. Opportunities include further development of walking and cycling trails in the alpine regions to improve visitation beyond the summer and winter peak periods. Ovens Murray stakeholders suggested that road and facility infrastructure improvements could also increase the tourism potential of both the Great Alpine Road and Dargo High Plains Road.

Victorian alpine resorts have finalised Visitor Economy Development plans, which outline further tourism infrastructure priorities in Ovens Murray. When planning for tourism infrastructure improvements, Ovens Murray stakeholders noted the unique constraints facing alpine resorts. For example, they said the management and self-sustaining funding model that Victorian Alpine Resort Management Boards operated under may

no longer be fit for purpose. The Victorian Government recently established Alpine Resorts Victoria to investigate alpine management reforms, which is scheduled to start work by July 2022. Ovens Murray stakeholders also told us improvements in housing affordability could help attract and retain tourism workers, which would strengthen and grow the tourism sector.

The region also has important Aboriginal cultural heritage assets. For example, Marnong, or Mount Buller, is an important site for the Taungurung people, including for food and traditional ceremony purposes. Archaeological artefacts and scar trees can be found on both Mount Buller and the nearby Mount Stirling. Lake Eildon has many scar trees in the area. The Warby-Ovens National Park, and the plains of the Goulburn Broken Catchment are important sites for the Yorta Yorta people.

Recommendations to support a recovery in regional tourism

Enhancements to nature-based and Aboriginal tourism can help foster sustainable growth in Ovens Murray's tourism industry. Developing a nature-based tourism strategy to guide future investment in Ovens Murray's tourist infrastructure can help ensure that tourism experiences, and supporting facilities and infrastructure, meet visitor expectations, and protect and enhance the region's natural assets. Nature-based tourism sites, including national parks, require basic amenities and infrastructure to encourage investment in experiences, food, and accommodation services. Re-examining existing policies, such as policies around tourism leasing in national parks, can help encourage investment in tourist facilities and services, as well as support longer term industry growth in Ovens Murray.

Developing a Victorian Aboriginal tourist strategy with Aboriginal communities can help drive further sustainable economic activity in Ovens Murray, helping to preserve and promote the region's Aboriginal cultural histories and heritage sites as well as creating job opportunities for Aboriginal communities.

This can build on Victorian Government investments, including funding towards the development of the Falls to Hotham Crossing, the Lake Benalla foreshore and early works on King Valley's Prosecco Road.

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.

Improve freight networks

The Ovens Murray region is strategically located on national freight routes and draws considerable freight movement between Victoria and New South Wales. The Hume Highway connects Melbourne and Sydney, while freight rail links also connect major cities through Wodonga and Wangaratta.

Ovens Murray stakeholders told us that there are opportunities to improve the road freight network. They noted the changing size of freight vehicles and said that major road freight routes require maintenance upgrades. Stakeholders particularly highlighted the need for road freight network improvements that address 'last mile' issues in the region. They said, for example, upgrades that allow B-doubles last mile access to farm gates could produce freight productivity benefits and enhance agriculture industry growth.

The region's agriculture, food processing and manufacturing industries will continue to need quality transport routes linking primary producers, storage, processors and end markets. The renewable energy and tourism industries can also benefit from better transport infrastructure. Safe and reliable country roads can transport people and equipment to often remote locations, including national parks and other tourism locations.

Recommendations to better connect Ovens Murray businesses with processors and markets

Providing funding certainty for road maintenance and upgrade programs can help leverage Ovens Murray's road freight networks to better support the region's businesses. It helps improve market access, connectivity, safety, and reduces supply chain costs, allowing businesses to remain competitive. As large freight vehicles and smaller private vehicles share the road network, ongoing maintenance and upgrades not only produce efficiency benefits, but also help keep all road users safe.

Funding and planning for ongoing rail freight network development and maintenance can help maximise efficient investment and support Ovens Murray's rail freight competitiveness.

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.

Facilitate regional recycling industries in Ovens Murray

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. Dozens of resource recovery centres across Victoria collect materials from their local areas for transport and further recovery, of varying capacity and capability. Supporting a strategically located, well-resourced resource recovery centre network can reduce the cost of transporting materials and bring them closer to end users.

The supply of recyclable materials has not been matched by demand for them. 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 Victoria's reliance on landfill. Markets for these materials vary greatly, presenting different challenges for each material. 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* suggests upgrading or building new processing infrastructure for six priority materials: plastics, paper, cardboard, glass, organics, tyres and e-waste. This would create over 5000 new jobs and create high quality, recycled products for use in major infrastructure projects, manufacturing and agriculture. Regional Victoria stands to benefit most from more processing capacity, with our advice recommending locating 52 out of 87 new or upgraded facilities outside metropolitan Melbourne.

The Ovens Murray region likely needs extra recycling and resource recovery infrastructure, including paper separation plants, plastic processing plants, glass, sand or aggregate plants and organic composting facilities.

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 planning.

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 2021–2051* (section 1.5) for additional recommendations on building a circular economy for waste and recycling

King Valley

Better connect the regions

Improve public transport

Ovens Murray residents are highly dependent on cars to get around. Less than 1% of the region's workforce travel to work by public transport, and access to public transport across the region is significantly lower than the state average.

Wangaratta, Benalla and Wodonga have the highest levels of access to public transport, with approximately half the residents of these regional centres living within ready access – but this compares with the Victorian average of 74%. Less than 10% of Indigo and Towong Shire residents have ready access to public transport, falling to just 3% in Alpine and Mansfield Shires.

Stakeholders have confirmed that access to public transport is a significant issue in the region, affecting people's ability to access work, health, education and services which are increasingly focussed in larger regional centres. These include:

\ Unreliable and infrequent public transport services to and from Ovens Murray, as well as within the region, which do not support the region's dispersed population.

\ Better connecting regional centres to surrounding towns and local areas. Public transport is very limited and, when services do exist, timetables are often not suitable for accessing work or education in the regional centres.

\ Public transport that provides access to local education. For instance, stakeholders noted the long distances between TAFE campuses, and said that students often can only attend classes if they have access to private vehicles.

\ Public transport services to the mountain resorts are infrequent, with fewer services during summer months.

In addition to passenger rail upgrades, regional stakeholders emphasised the need for bus network improvements such as east-to-west connections between Ovens Murray towns and cities. Stakeholders also told us that Ovens Murray could benefit from more inter-regional transport connections and shared that a bus service along the Midland Highway, for example, could help connect regional economies to Shepparton, Bendigo, and Ballarat.

Lack of access to a vehicle limits people's access to jobs and services. Timely and reliable access to public transport can help people in Ovens Murray's rural and semi-rural communities access the services they need and foster social inclusion. This includes for people who do not own a car or who do not drive—such as older people, young people, individuals on low incomes, and people with disabilities.

Recommendations to enable viable transport options across Ovens Murray

Redesigning regional public transport can help improve transport access and options within the Ovens Murray region. Developing solutions which integrate traditional public transport with more innovative, flexible transport options to deliver services that can better respond to community needs, such as by using community transport, on-demand services, and the school bus network. Lasting transport commitments provide long-term certainty to local communities to help ensure people can easily access important services, including health, education and community services.

The Victorian Government is improving service quality and capacity between Melbourne and Albury-Wodonga under the Regional Network Development Plan, which aims to deliver five train services every weekday.

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.

Improve digital connectivity and telecommunications infrastructure

The quality of digital infrastructure across the Ovens Murray region is highly variable, with parts of Ovens Murray struggling with reliable connectivity. *The Ovens Murray digital plan* identifies that regional businesses can benefit from adequate, affordable business-grade telecommunications and digital connectivity services, alongside good mobile coverage and better uptake of Internet of Things (IoT) applications. IoT helps farmers make more informed decisions, by collecting information and monitoring data using devices embedded with sensors that transmit using the internet. The Victorian Government's On-Farm IoT trials are supporting uptake of IoT technologies in Victoria's agriculture industry. Building on this program, the Victorian Government also launched a Digital Agriculture Investment Scheme as part of the Enabling the Digital Agriculture Revolution Program.

Ovens Murray stakeholders communicated that current digital connectivity levels constrain businesses across the region from fully benefitting from new technologies. For Ovens Murray businesses, improved digital infrastructure and connectivity could enable productivity gains for farm businesses and processing facilities, and could remove constraints caused by unreliable connections for tourism operators.

Poor digital connectivity also affects social equity and community safety in the region. North Victoria, including Ovens Murray, has the lowest levels of digital inclusion in Victoria. One in five Ovens Murray households do not have internet access, which compares with the average of one in seven across Victoria. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand for internet access, highlighting the importance of digital connectivity improvements so people can better access services and support.

The *Ovens Murray digital plan* revealed a persistent divide in the quality of mobile services available to regional users compared to Melbourne, with 294 mobile black spots registered across Ovens Murray. Poor mobile quality and coverage have

implications for public safety, affecting emergency services and the ability of residents to access critical information in times of need. The 2020 summer bushfires underscored vulnerabilities in Ovens Murray's telecommunications infrastructure. Several towns lost communications, some of which were also isolated by disrupted road access. Communities expect to access telecommunications during emergencies, including to make calls for emergency assistance, access relevant mobile apps and receive text-based emergency alerts.

In addition to digital connectivity access disparities, some people do not have good digital literacy, capacity and skills. As services increasingly move online, poor digital connectivity could jeopardise people's educational engagement and access to online services in Ovens Murray. The region's digital plan identifies that digital skills development can support the community in building the skills and aptitude to access digital technologies.

Recommendations to continue to bridge Ovens Murray's digital divide

Reliable and high-speed internet connections can help Ovens Murray businesses operate and compete from anywhere, placing businesses in a stronger position to withstand future crises and explore potential opportunities created by any longer-term shift to remote working. Access to high speed internet can also offer community benefits, by supporting remote access to health and education services, and by fostering the maintenance of social connections.

Better regional telecommunications infrastructure resilience will also help address Ovens Murray's digital infrastructure and connectivity needs, including reducing mobile black spots in the region. We recommend continuing to address mobile coverage gaps to provide equitable access to mobile services and help ensure residents can remain connected during emergencies. A comprehensive approach across fixed, mobile and Wi-Fi networks can ensure more resilient telecommunications.

Providing better internet access in Ovens Murray's libraries can help support digital literacy skills development and improve access for those without internet access at home. Investments could foster better internet access, leveraging the existing infrastructure, expertise, and support available within the Ovens Murray library network. It can also complement improvements in business and household digital access.

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 for libraries in regional towns and rural areas to improve community access to fast, free internet services, leveraging existing library infrastructure.

Benalla Station

Foster regional Victorians' health, wellbeing, and inclusion

Improve access to health care and education

People living in Ovens Murray are below average on different health indicators, including life expectancy, obesity and incidence of type-two diabetes. The number of registered mental health clients per 1000 people is higher than the Victorian average in all local government areas, and much higher in Benalla, Wangaratta, Indigo and Wodonga. A total of 31% of Ovens Murray adults have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression, rising to 37% in Benalla. This compares with the Victorian average of 27%. Ovens Murray Regional Partnership's virtual roundtable noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on mental health, as home schooling and social isolation increased stress in the home.

The roundtable also flagged that the COVID-19 pandemic heavily affected the region's young people. Stakeholders are especially concerned about its effects on young people's employment and education, which may exacerbate disadvantage. The proportion of young people disengaged from school and not finishing Year 12 is already relatively high in parts of the region – 39% in Alpine Shire and 36% in Benalla compared with a Victorian average of 17%. Ovens Murray stakeholders shared that 15.6% of young people are not engaged in education or employment in South Wangaratta, which is 5% higher than the Victorian average. Ovens Murray stakeholders told us that Youth Foyers in Wangaratta and Wodonga would benefit disadvantaged young people, particularly those at risk from homelessness or are disengaged from education and employment.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) provide services to Aboriginal people in the region, and promote and protect their rights. Ovens Murray's Aboriginal population is projected to grow 70% between 2018 and 2028, the second highest rate in regional Victoria.

This could lead to more demand for service and increasing client numbers for ACCOs. Ensuring infrastructure is maintained and upgraded can help Ovens Murray ACCOs can provide timely and effective service delivery.

Recommendations to improve health and education outcomes for Ovens Murray residents

Innovation in health care delivery can expand the use of technology in service provision, to better connect regional communities with specialist health services. Better access to mental health facilities can respond to gaps in local service availability and provision. This can build on current priorities within Ovens Murray to strengthen youth mental health and wellbeing, through initiatives such as Deep Dive and Live4Life Benalla.

A plan for future investment in Aboriginal community controlled infrastructure responds to the current and future infrastructure needs of the Ovens Murray Aboriginal community, as well as contributing to Closing the Gap outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians.

Funding more Youth Foyers in regional Victoria can help address challenges facing young people, including in Ovens Murray. It aims to help break cycles of disadvantage by providing stable accommodation for young people aged 16-24 who commit to education and training pathways. Wangaratta and Wodonga are possible priority locations. This could complement existing initiatives in Ovens Murray such as the Education Benalla Program, which works to improve educational outcomes for Benalla's children and young people.

These recommendations can build on recent Victorian Government investments, including funding towards a new mental health clinical outreach facility in Wangaratta and rebuilding an aged care facility in Rutherglen.

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 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.

Recommendation 92

Fund more Youth Foyers in regional Victoria

Fund at least six new Youth Foyers in regional Victoria by 2026, to better use existing education infrastructure and support vulnerable young people.

Beechworth Library

Improve and better use community and council infrastructure

Demographic changes, such as an ageing population, are affecting the scope and mix of services councils need to provide. Regional councils can lack the revenue to upgrade and repurpose existing infrastructure, often relying on Victorian Government grants. Ovens Murray faces various challenges in ensuring that residents have access to the services that they need, including:

\ Dispersed rural councils, such as Towong, have a relatively small ratepayer base which is further constrained by below average incomes, affecting the financial viability of these councils, and their ability to maintain services and facilities in line with community expectations.

\ High seasonal population variability in Mansfield and Alpine Shires associated with peak tourism periods.

\ Pockets of relative socio-economic disadvantage across the region. Wodonga is the sixteenth most disadvantaged local government area in Victoria, while Benalla is the eighteenth, leading to a relatively high per capita demand for a range of health and community services.

\ High population growth in Wodonga, increasing pressure on services and existing community facilities.

The impact of climate change adds further complexity to the challenges facing local governments and communities. The 2020 bushfires, for example, had a devastating impact on Ovens Murray.

The region continues to be exposed to the impacts of climate change with higher temperatures, more days of extreme heat and declining rainfall forecast, and more risks of catastrophic bushfires. More extreme weather patterns caused by climate change are also increasing flood risks. For instance, stakeholders listed Wangaratta as a possible location for flooding infrastructure projects because it provides key services and transport links in Ovens Murray. It is already at high risk for flooding as it is located at the meeting of the Ovens and King rivers. Ovens Murray stakeholders were concerned some communities could be cut off in emergencies. They reported, for example, that some Ovens Murray communities lacked adequate road access during the 2020 bushfires.

Spring Creek – Beechworth Gorge Walk

Recommendations to make better use of community infrastructure

The Victorian Government can support regions and local governments to create 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. Integrating transport planning and planning for service delivery can ensure people can access the essential services they need.

Creating climate-adapted facilities for rural communities can support local governments to deliver a network of facilities which can help reduce the health impacts of exposure to heat, and prolonged smoke from bushfires. Building back better after emergencies can also 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.

Address social housing challenges

Across the Ovens Murray region, approximately one in three rental households experience rental stress and less than 50% of new rentals are considered affordable – falling to just 20% in the Mansfield local government area. Despite having the highest proportion of social housing in Ovens Murray, Wodonga experiences significant housing demand and high rates of homelessness. More than one fifth (21%) of low-income households in the area experience rental stress, the highest proportion in regional Victoria. In March 2021, nearly 1500 Ovens Murray households were on the waiting list for social housing, with over 700 households requiring urgent assistance.

The region's variable climate, with cold winters and increasingly hot summers, indicate a reliance on heating and cooling to maintain a comfortable, healthy temperature in the home. Cheaper housing is often poorly heated or cooled, and people on lower incomes can struggle to afford the higher energy costs. Maintaining adequate home temperatures can be particularly important for the health of vulnerable residents, including infants, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

The Victorian Government Big Build is investing in regional Victoria to build social and affordable housing. There are current minimum investment commitments for Wangaratta and Wodonga.

Recommendations to enhance access to affordable, fit for purpose housing

Expanding social housing in regional centres, in locations with good access to transport and services, can prioritise areas with good access to transport, work, education, and services and strong forecast population growth, such as Wodonga.

Making social housing suitable for changing climates helps respond to the need for adequate heating and cooling in Ovens Murray's social housing. As well as installing split system air-conditioning to better regulate temperatures in the home, solar panels can help low-income residents offset additional energy costs during extreme temperatures.

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.

Please refer to *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021–2051* (section 2.4) for additional recommendations on adapting infrastructure for modern needs.

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.

Benalla Historical Society Museum
Photography: Rob Blackburn

INFRASTRUCTURE VICTORIA