

# Annual Report

2020/21



## From the Chair

While COVID continued to challenge local communities, businesses and council organisations, the Eastern Region Group of Councils came together to think about the future and put in place a positive direction to guide the ERG over the medium and longer term.

Following the 2020 elections, ERG members met monthly to share council priorities, identify regional issues and opportunities and to workshop these with key council officers and stakeholders to draft our Strategic Plan 2021-2025.

This is a significant step forward for the ERG.

With a Vision for the region, clear outcomes and objectives supporting our four pillars (communities, environment, economy and infrastructure & buildings) and a forward program of actions, the group is well placed to 'hit the ground running' each year and overcome the inertia that an annual leadership change can often bring.

To provide a united voice to government in the lead up to the Federal election, we identified emerging priorities for the region, knowing the election could be as early as August 2021. The ERG advocates for shared regional priorities that benefit our communities and benefit the future of Melbourne's eastern region,

The introduction of the new Local Government Act 2020 brought with it many requirements for planning and engagement, as well as opportunities to explore areas for collaboration. When we combine our vision, knowledge and resources we can deliver better outcomes across the region, and this is particularly true for a vast range of officer groups and Councillor/officer forums such as the Eastern Transport Coalition and the Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us all how important our local communities and neighbourhoods are, and the need to access services and amenities close to home. Through the ERG we will continue to work together to ensure that service gaps and challenges are addressed, and that we can enjoy connected, healthy, sustainable and prosperous communities for generations to come.

I would like to thank my Councillor and CEO ERG colleagues for their support and hard work in what has been another challenging year. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of this foundational work for years to come and look forward to communities coming together again in the not too distant future.



**Cr Kylie Spears,**  
Chair, Eastern Region Group of Councils  
Mayor, Maroondah City Council

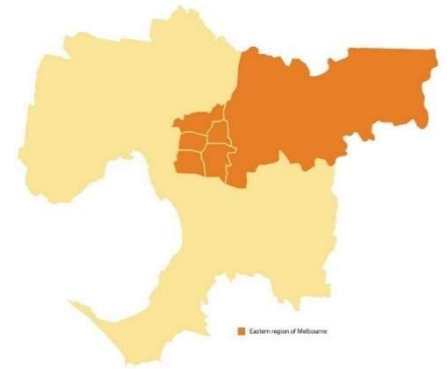


## Indigenous acknowledgement

The ERG recognises the traditional custodians of the land we call the eastern region. We acknowledge their rich cultural heritage and spiritual connection to the land. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and value their ongoing contribution to the cultural heritage of the region.

# Our region

The eastern region is the traditional home of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation. The region stretches from middle and outer ring suburbs, such as Glen Waverley, Doncaster, Box Hill and Ringwood, to townships like Warrandyte, Yarra Junction and Olinda in the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges.



## About the ERG

The Eastern Region Group of Councils (ERG) is a collaboration between six councils of eastern metropolitan Melbourne: Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges.

**We collectively strive to support nearly 1 million residents and 440,000 jobs producing \$59B in gross regional product in 2020.**

We work collaboratively on shared priorities through advocacy, research and integrated planning on behalf of the eastern region. Our vision for the region is to be a connected, healthy, sustainable and prosperous region.

**We work towards our vision through a focus on four strategic pillars:  
Our communities, our environment, our economy, our infrastructures and buildings**



**Communities** that are more resilient and cohesive, and who enjoy an improving quality of life, with better health and wellbeing and great access to services



A region known for its **environmental** stewardship and regional responses to sustainability (water, waste, energy and emissions), with space for people & nature, where healthy ecosystems support healthy people & growing economies



**Economy:** Through diverse local employment opportunities that support an adaptable workforce, the region is ready for the jobs of the future and will enjoy a connected, competitive, diverse & prosperous future.



**Buildings & infrastructure** that promote social cohesion, equality of opportunity, resource efficiency and health in a region that is easy to get around and where active or public transport is preferred for short distances.

## Working in partnership

Our vision is strengthened by our working relationships with regional groups and council officers across the east, including the Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance (EAHA); Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (EAGA); Eastern Transport Coalition (ETC); Melbourne East Region Economic Development Group (MEREDG); Eastern Alliance for Sustainable Learning (EASL); Eastern Metropolitan Partnership (EMP) and the Economy and Planning Working Group (EPWG).

We also work closely with council staff networks, such as Communications Managers, Procurement Managers, and with other regional local government groups such as the Local Government Homelessness & Social Housing Charter Working Group, Northern Councils Alliance, Greater South East Melbourne and LeadWest.



# 2020/21 highlights and achievements

## New four-year Strategic plan

The ERG's new four-year Strategic Plan 2021-2025 was endorsed in June 2021.

The Strategic Plan provides a clear path forward in uncertain times, with a focus on collaboration among councils towards COVID recovery as well as a range of opportunities to align effort and progress regional priorities.

The plan sets out the vision for the ERG and the region, and is framed around 'Four Pillars': Social, Economic, Environmental and Buildings & Infrastructure. Each pillar is supported by objectives that are being pursued by the region's councils. These objectives inform 18 actions that will be driven by the ERG from 2021-2025, involving integrated planning, shared services, joint procurement and advocacy.

The concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood underpins much of the ERG's thinking and approach. ERG priorities and actions aim to help communities access more services and meet more of their needs locally – open spaces, transport choices, health, education and jobs closer to home have all become more important than ever before.

## COVID-19 challenges

The year saw the region navigate the many challenges of re-opening after extended lockdown periods due to COVID-19, with significant efforts by councils, residents, businesses, community and sporting groups to ensure COVID-safe practices were in place.

While lockdown provided residents with positive opportunities to re-discover their local areas, it also put pressure on the region's open spaces, facilities and services and highlighted where service gaps and poor access needed to be improved.

There was a strong focus on stimulus priorities for COVID recovery and support for communities and businesses, as well as collaboration within the ERG for regional recovery. Councils introduced business and community support packages, despite direct COVID impacts on Council budgets due to reduced revenue and increased costs. Initiatives included joining the 'Be Kind' campaign which was then expanded to business to encourage kindness, goodwill and build resilience through supporting local businesses and local jobs.



### Establishing a regional adult mental health facility and addressing youth mental health needs

With mental health emerging as a priority issue in the past year, significant progress has been made towards the expansion of mental health facilities in Melbourne's east.

The ERG wrote to Federal Minister for Health, Mr Greg Hunt in August 2020 requesting funding and planning assistance for an adult mental health facility for the east as well as better access to youth mental health services in the region.

Subsequent additional funding of \$31.9 million was announced to create 15 mental health clinics across Victoria to expand available mental health supports. A new Victorian Mental Health Taskforce will assist with on-the-ground coordination.

The ERG continues to advocate for a centre in the eastern region to acknowledge the profound effect of COVID-19 and other social stressors such as homelessness, financial vulnerability, family violence and social isolation.

Active discussions continue with local health organisations to identify an appropriate site or sites to establish adult mental health centres and address access and service gaps for youth.

## Social support in the east

In addition to its focus on mental health for youth and adults, the ERG recognises the importance of safe and affordable housing for people's mental health and wellbeing.

To address homelessness and increase social housing, the ERG has continued to work closely with Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance and the Homelessness and Social Housing Charter Group on opportunities to address homelessness and increase social housing. Councils are looking to planning mechanisms, surplus land or buildings as well as forging new partnerships towards an integrated and supported homelessness service system.

The ERG also supported the need for more funding and planning to address gambling related harm by limiting exposure through schools and community clubs.

## Supporting active transport

The challenges of COVID 19 have strengthened people's local connections with their neighbourhood and the 20-minute neighbourhood concept underpins many of the ERG's priorities, particularly in the area of active transport and related services.

The ERG has assisted the Eastern Transport Coalition to address service gaps and improvements to our road, rail and trail infrastructure. This includes bus service network reviews to increase patronage.

There has been an increased demand for passive open spaces, such as local parks and gardens. A review of the 2016 Regional Sport and Recreation Facilities Strategy is underway to identify priorities for regional facilities and how local councils can make better use of shared facilities and better cater for the community's diverse needs.



With walking and cycling paths identified as missing links in many areas, the ERG has also advocated for regional trails and local safe bike routes to neighbourhood centres. This includes funding to assist in marketing regional trails and for capital funds to complete the Eastern Region Trails Group priority projects.

## Government relations

The ERG continued to advocate the importance of better partnerships and timely guidance between all levels of government to enable consistent, organised implementation and management and use of local government facilities and assets.

The ERG has strengthened its relationships with the Municipal Association of Victorian, Local Government Victoria and the Eastern Metropolitan Partnership through regular meetings and sharing of knowledge and project related activity.

## Joint procurement and shared services

The ERG continues to encourage more proactive collaboration between councils through shared services, joint procurement, integrated planning and advocacy, with the aim of increasing effectiveness and efficiency within councils.

As part of the Local Government Act 2020, councils were required to prepare and adopt a procurement strategy that specifies the principles, processes and procedures for the purchase of goods and services and carrying out of works by the Council.

The ERG has been working with council Procurement Managers to develop a consistent approach to the development of new procurement policies through aligning terms used, social and local procurement objectives, thresholds and exemptions. This consistent approach should enable greater levels of collaborative procurement across the region in future.

# Regional group partnership highlights

**Officer networks and regional groups are a significant factor in the success of the region. Highlights from key groups in 2020/21 include:**

## **EAGA - Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action**

EAGA undertook an independent evaluation of their impact since inception, demonstrating member net benefits of about 7.9 times annual fees.

In late May, in an Australian first, the Victorian Energy Collaboration (VECO) was launched, bringing together 46 councils to switch to 100% renewable energy by 2030. The project, initiated by EAGA in 2017, is now the largest ever emissions reduction project by local government in Australia.

Working with other Victorian Greenhouse Alliances, EAGA led local government's response to the Electricity Distribution Price Review. The regulator ruled in favour of the Alliance-led submission, which will assist councils in avoiding more than \$10.7M in public lighting charges over the next five years, plus a further \$19.8M out to 2046. The initiative will also provide \$6.9M for lighting upgrade projects to reduce emissions by over 220,000 tonnes over the next 20 years.

## **ETC – Eastern Transport Coalition**

Pleasingly, the release of the Victorian Bus Plan by the Victorian Government in June 2021 reflected many of the areas of improvement the ETC had identified in the ETC Bus Review Working Group Issues and Case Studies document. Opportunities for engagement and promotion of local projects with DoT are being pursued.

The ETC and member Councils continued their campaigning for further level crossing removals on the Lilydale and Belgrave lines and the building of a new rail station at Croydon.

The ETC identified a number of congestion-alleviating capital works projects in their Bus Priority Infrastructure advocacy document for the upcoming Federal Election which are reflected in the ERG's federal election policy platform. Further road projects for advocacy are currently under consideration.

## **MEREDG – Melbourne's Eastern Region Economic Development Group**

MERDEG continued to administer business grants programs and assist local businesses impacted by COVID. The assistance was wide ranging and included:

- Digital upskilling programs
- Mentoring program, with a particular focus on financial aspects
- Retail activation strategies, such as outdoor dining initiatives to stimulate neighbourhood centres and support the principles of 20-minute neighbourhoods, and
- Support Local business campaign initiatives.

## **EAHA – Eastern Alliance for Affordable Housing**

EAHA has undertaken an extensive review of its focus, governance and impact over the past year, led by SGS Economics.

## **Regional Local Government Homelessness and Social Housing Charter - 13 Councils**

The Charter group developed a Charter document, endorsed by 13 Councils that sets out shared priorities to advocate for that will increase social housing and homelessness services for the 2 million+ population that the regional Charter Group represents.

The Group also made a joint submission in the form of a letter to Homes Victoria in response to the '10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy for Victoria' Discussion Paper and to the Federal Government's inquiry into homelessness.

In partnership with ERG and GSEM The group hosted a Zoom breakfast forum with Charter CEOs and Housing Agencies CEOs to broker new partnerships in response to the Homes Victoria \$5.3B 'Big Housing Build.' Homes Victoria CEO Ben Rimmer was a guest and panellist at this event).

## ERG Financial Position - at 30 June 2021

Income	2020 (\$)	2021 (\$)
Annual ERG Council member contributions	210,000	210,000
Carry forward surplus	65,721	111,850
<b>Total income</b>	<b>\$ 275,721</b>	<b>\$ 321,850</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>		
Salaries	114,482	87,854
Travel / Phones / sundries	3,868	2,158
Consultancies	<b>45,171</b>	<b>39,303</b>
- Graphic design and website	4,213	2,519
- Strategic Advocacy Plan development	0	15,000
- Workshop facilitation	9,758	784
- Regional economic and demographic data	6,000	6,000
- Government relations advice	24,500	15,000
- Legal fees	700	0
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>\$ 163,871</b>	<b>\$ 129,315</b>
<b>Surplus (Deficit)*</b> due to COVID delay in recruitment + reduced engagement / projects activity	<b>\$ 111,850</b>	<b>\$ 192,535</b>

## ERG members & meeting attendance 2020/21

The ERG comprises the Mayor, Deputy Mayor (or Cr) and CEO (or their delegate). Membership is renewed after annual Mayoral elections in December when the ERG elect the Chair and Deputy Chair. The ERG generally meets every two months.

July - November 2020*		December 2020 - June 2021**	
<b>Knox</b>			
Cr Nicole Seymour, Mayor	1	Cr Lisa Cooper, Mayor	6
Cr Marcia Timmers-Leitch, Deputy Mayor	1	Cr Susan Lauken, Deputy Mayor	4
Tony Doyle, CEO	3	Tony Doyle, CEO	9
<b>Manningham</b>			
Cr Paul McLeish, Mayor	1	Cr Andrew Conlon, Mayor	5
Cr Mike Zafiropoulos AM, Deputy Mayor	1	Cr Anna Chen, Deputy Mayor	6
Andrew Day, CEO	2	Andrew Day, CEO	9
<b>Maroondah</b>			
Cr Mike Symon, Mayor, (ERG Deputy Chair 19/20)	1	Cr Nora Lamont, Deputy Mayor	6
Cr Marijke Graham, Deputy Mayor	1	Cr Kylie Spears, Mayor (ERG Chair 20/21)	5
Steve Kozlowski, CEO	3	Steve Kozlowski, CEO	11
<b>Monash</b>			
Cr Stuart James, Mayor	1	Cr Brian Little, Mayor	6
Cr Rebecca Paterson	1	Cr Rebecca Paterson (ERG Dep. Chair 20-21)	4
Dr Andi Diamond, CEO	3	Dr Andi Diamond, CEO	11
<b>Whitehorse</b>			
Cr Sharon Ellis, Mayor, (ERG Chair 19-20)	1	Cr Andrew Munroe, Mayor	6
Cr Denise Massoud	1	Cr Raylene Carr, Deputy Mayor	6
Simon McMillan, CEO	3	Simon McMillan, CEO	8
<b>Yarra Ranges</b>			
Cr Richard Higgins, Deputy Mayor, Mayor	1	Cr David Eastham, Deputy Mayor	4
Cr Len Cox, Deputy Mayor	0	Cr Fiona McAllister, Mayor	4
Tammi Rose, CEO	3	Tammi Rose, CEO	8
<b>*1 ERG + 2 CEO meetings due to elections and caretaker period</b>		<b>**6 ERG + 5 CEO meetings</b>	

# Melbourne's eastern region. One united voice.

## Contact

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