



14 June 2025

## **FEEDBACK ON INTEGRATED PLANNING & REPORTING DOCUMENTS**

The Murrumbateman Community Association (MCA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on Council's Integrated Planning and Reporting documents. While we acknowledge the significant financial challenges Council is facing, we fundamentally disagree that the community should bear the brunt of solving this through a special rate variation, fee increases and reduction of services—particularly when these issues stem from previous poor financial management and overcommitment to debt-heavy projects such as the Crago Mill development. The community needs to be provided with clear information of the broader context, especially given that only a year ago Council was assuring residents there were no major budget concerns. Now, we're being asked to respond to a financially constrained plan without being walked through how we got here, what our options now are and how Council plans to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Murrumbateman is at a turning point: from a growing rural village into a modern, sustainable town. Yet despite contributing approximately one-third of the region's rates, our community continues to miss out on basic facilities, regular mowing, and maintenance—gaps that have been filled by volunteer organisations like ours and local sporting groups. We are proud of our community's strong volunteer spirit, however, relying on volunteers to fill long-term service gaps is neither sustainable or fair.

We believe the economic value of Murrumbateman to the broader regional economy is understated in Council's planning and we'd like to see a stronger commitment to recognising and supporting the role our town plays in driving regional visitation, employment and growth.

Murrumbateman contributes significantly to the broader Yass Valley economy—punching well above its weight. The MCA has run the region's most significant economic event—the Murrumbateman Field Days for over 40 years. This event draws thousands of visitors, generating an estimated \$7.4 million in economic activity in the region in accommodation, food and agri-business sectors. The event provides opportunities for community groups to earn income by providing services or selling products at reduced site fees and as such has become the most significant annual fundraiser for many not-for-profit organisations in the Yass Valley region.

In addition, Murrumbateman is home to a thriving food and wine tourism sector, with premium wineries, restaurants and accommodation attracting visitors from across Australia and around the world. This world-class tourism offering has grown largely through the independent passion and investment of local businesses, with minimal support from Council. This industry sector also supports other local small agri-business and provides employment for many across the region.

We seek answers to the following questions:

- What is Council's plan to ensure Murrumbateman doesn't fall further behind during its fiscal tightening?
- Beyond reducing debt by developing and selling off the council-owned North Murrumbateman property, what is the long-term vision for supporting and investing in our community?
- How will Murrumbateman's growth be planned so as to support local businesses and the tourism sector - rather than undermining them by eroding the very qualities that attract residents and visitors alike, particularly our peaceful rural charm and landscape?

# **Specific feedback on documents**

## **Financial Sustainability Roadmap**

This talks about service reviews, are reduction in services part of that consideration and what services will be considered? Will the community be consulted to determine its priority needs, in a tight fiscal environment, as part of this roadmap?

Before proposing significant changes to its financial strategy, we agree that Council should first undertake a thorough review of its current service delivery—including where services may be lacking or could be delivered more effectively. As was raised by community members at the Murrumbateman Community Engagement Session, Murrumbateman's service delivery from Council—particularly in terms of parks & garden maintenance, roadside maintenance and weed control and maintenance of heritage assets—has been below acceptable standards for many years. The suggestion that these services could now be further reduced is deeply concerning and appears to overlook the longstanding service gaps already experienced by this community.

## **Operational Plan & Delivery Program 2025-26**

### ***Our Infrastructure***

#### **IN. 8.1.2 Construction of a Category 1 playground in Murrumbateman**

- This is a priority delivery for the Murrumbateman community. The text needs to also state all-abilities and all-ages as per original promises from both federal government and local councillors. Council staff must primarily focus their efforts on the capital works for this project to ensure effective delivery within the grant timeframe.

#### **IN. 8.1.6 Complete design for the Murrumbateman pump track**

- Question why has this project been prioritised above other projects in Murrumbateman given limited Council staff resources or funding available for any works in Murrumbateman. Suggest that this should be put on hold until after the community needs assessment and Masterplan is complete to determine priorities for investment and focus within the community. There is limited Council owned land currently available for such a project and Council needs to urgently release some greenfield land for future recreation projects such as this.

#### **IN. 10.1.1 Advocate for grants to undertake works identified in the Yass and villages masterplans**

- Note that as Murrumbateman doesn't have a Masterplan in place, how are works being prioritised for grant applications in Murrumbateman. An initial identification of urgent works in Murrumbateman may be required prior to the Masterplan to ensure that our streetscapes are made more vibrant and accessible.
- Release of greenfield land for recreation is urgent to meet the needs of this community but it must address the Open Space Strategy recommendations and not be ad-hoc.
- Works that are listed need to be prioritised to enable clear strategic planning goals that provide grant funders with confidence, attracting investment from other sources.

### ***Our Environment***

This section could be strengthened in ways in which long term sustainable development can be achieved across the valley e.g. tree canopy goals, energy efficient ratings for new buildings, measures to reduce resource consumption and waste, improved water security and quality and improvement to protect soil quality. It is crucial that Council should ensure that new developments

consider extreme weather events (and other climate change impacts e.g. prolonged heatwaves) and take measures to manage impacts including through water sensitive urban design e.g. innovative stormwater/flooding measures.

It was also concerning to note that Council is still working through the emergency repairs that occurred in October 2022 and significantly impacted our local residents and businesses. As we are increasingly experiencing the impacts of climate change, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe. This trend is predicted to continue, and it is essential for the Council to be prepared to respond to such events promptly. A review of the 2022 situation and delays experienced by residents and businesses during that event could help identify areas where improvements could be made. Specifically, the review should focus on how the Council can respond more quickly to natural disasters, minimise the impacts on businesses, and restore access to residents and businesses more promptly. Council should also be considering how it can quarantine funds for emergencies so it is in a position to quickly restore essential services and access to residents in the event of extreme weather events, or cumulative weather impacts e.g. prolonged rainfall events, rather than being reliant on state funding to address these after a disaster declaration. Furthermore, it is likely that many of these future events will be considered part of normal weather patterns and will not be declared disasters and eligible for state funding. Council should be preparing for this scenario.

## **EN.2 Implement effective integrated weed management**

As noted at the Murrumbateman Engagement Session, the community is concerned that weed control has dropped off in the region. There have been some anecdotal suggestions that this has occurred because of the vineyards in the locality. We recognise the importance of the vineyards to our regional economy and note that all weed control should be done in consultation with local vineyards and should employ appropriate spray contractors with experience in eliminating risk to vineyards. The proximity of vineyards should not be used as an excuse for weed control to not be pursued, rather control should be undertaken appropriately to avoid spray drift and damage, particularly from ester based chemicals, not just to vineyards but to residents and all agricultural businesses.

### **EN. 6.1.4 Complete community infrastructure needs assessment to inform development of North Murrumbateman**

- This should be to also inform future projects and masterplanning for Murrumbateman not just the north. Suggest removal of 'North'

### **EN. 6.1.5 Commence Murrumbateman Masterplan to inform development of North Murrumbateman**

- As discussed in the Murrumbateman Community Engagement session remove North Murrumbateman qualifier.
- Need to define what local character/aesthetic is for the region and Murrumbateman. This is crucial as when subdivision applications are assessed by Council this is vaguely described by different staff members and not consistent. Without such guidance from Council developers are using their own views to determine the character of individual estates leading to disjointed approaches across the region with no community input.

### **EN. 9.1.3 Provide a heritage advisory service**

- Please provide further details on what is envisaged under this item, will this be available to community organisations/businesses? How many staff will be allocated to this role?
- Currents arrangements do not provide the community with confidence as there appears to be a lack of knowledge, recognition and commitment to preserving the heritage aspects of Murrumbateman and the broader Yass Valley .

### **EN. 9.1.4 Provide a Local Heritage Fund**

- Advise on the amount of funding allocated to this Fund and whether this is just for projects on private land.
- There needs to be an assessment of all the heritage listed items in the Yass valley LEP

What is being done to maintain heritage sites - in Murrumbateman for instance we have the Old Schoolhouse and Hawthorn on council land, is Council no longer allocating funding to maintain historical assets on land it owns or manages?

## ***Our Community***

### **CO7 - We support and promote services, community groups and local initiatives as a way of including new residents and supporting existing residents.**

Council needs to consider how it can actively give effect to this commitment, rather than allowing it to remain a motherhood statement. In recent times, the MCA has become increasingly concerned by Council's reluctance to meaningfully engage with evidence-based feedback from community groups and stakeholders during its decision-making processes. Relevant risks, factual input, and alternative proposals raised by our organisation have, at times, been overlooked or omitted from formal reports. This not only undermines the value of community input but also affects the wellbeing of volunteers and the ongoing viability of the very groups that Council purports to support and promote

## **OMISSIONS**

### **Parkwood Development**

We are concerned about the exclusion of any details regarding the Parkwood Development in the IP&R papers. This development is likely to occur in the timeframe of these papers and will have an impact on significant issues like the financial sustainability of YVC i.e. the cost of YVC servicing these new properties is likely to exceed the rates income generated.

### **Mowing & maintenance**

We are disappointed that Yass Valley Council has stepped away from its promise of a regular parks team in Murrumbateman. We would appreciate further discussions with community groups about mowing leas and schedule particularly on public land, including the Old Schoolhouse site which is fast becoming a fire risk. In May 2022 Council staff announced they were to establish an additional parks & gardens team (of 3 staff) to be based at Murrumbateman and covering Murrumbateman, Gundaroo & Sutton. However, this initiative never eventuated, and at the recent roadshow, Council staff confirmed that the team will not be established. This is just one example of the unmet Council commitments that have contributed to a growing sense of frustration and mistrust within the Murrumbateman community.

### **Community Hall**

The Murrumbateman Recreation Grounds Strategic Plan identifies the construction of a new community hall as a high priority. The community is in desperate need of a meeting place capable of hosting conferences and events. While the new school hall is a welcome addition to community facilities, it is inaccessible during school hours and is already in high demand by community groups and businesses. Therefore, we urge Council to prioritise the construction of a new hall. We understand that designs for a community hall already exist, which could form the basis for considering a new facility which could generate revenue for the region through conferences and events while also meeting community needs. It is also essential for Council to consider the necessary upgrades to make the current Murrumbateman Recreation Hall safe and able to accommodate the growing community's needs until a new hall is built. We recommend including funding for this upgrade in the planning documents.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

The MCA acknowledges the positive intent behind Council's *Community Engagement Strategy* and supports many of the principles outlined. It is also heartening to see the recognition of key challenges such as limited connectivity, diverse community interests, scepticism and mistrust, and volunteer fatigue. Many of which we as an organisation relate to. However, the strategy would benefit from clearer articulation of how Council intends to address these challenges. Acknowledging past shortcomings—particularly a lack of transparency and ineffective engagement—is essential for rebuilding trust. This includes recognising the emotional fatigue that exists within the community and the disproportionate reliance on a small group of volunteers who continually step up to represent the broader public.

Council must prioritise creating safe, inclusive spaces for engagement—spaces that encourage participation from those who may be less vocal or confident. For example, the current structure of the public forum is intimidating for many, even those within our own MCA Executive with public speaking experience. If it is difficult for us, how do we expect others to participate meaningfully? Furthermore, the lack of livestreaming of public forums limits the community's ability to understand the views being expressed or the basis for Council decisions. Transparency and accessibility must be at the core of all engagement.

We urge Council to guard against over-consultation and consultation fatigue. Engagement must be purposeful, timely, and supported by clear, factual information provided in advance. Without this, stakeholders are unable to contribute in a meaningful way. Too often Council imposes short deadlines on community organisations to respond on key issues and the many focus groups and committees are becoming a drain on volunteer time and effort. This strategy would benefit from clarification on how committees and focus groups are used in engagement, and reiterate that these mechanisms cannot replace direct consultation with the broader community.

Council should also diversify its engagement methods, ensuring multiple channels and opportunities for feedback—not just for consultation, but also for notification and communication of decisions. There is also a noticeable absence of cultural awareness within the strategy. We encourage Council to strengthen its engagement approaches with First Nations communities, recognising the need for culturally informed strategies that respond to the social disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This includes equipping Council staff with the necessary training in cultural awareness.

Furthermore, Council's communications during emergencies should be detailed in its document. We are concerned by the statement on page 6 that Council may choose not to engage during an emergency. While we understand this may not have been the intent of this statement, emergencies are precisely when clear, consistent, and responsive communication is most critical. An example of this is the lack of consultation or notice given to businesses impacted by road closures in October 2022. Council staff should have a clear plan for such emergencies and also be provided with appropriate training regarding stakeholder engagement in emergency contexts, and trauma-informed communication practices.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on these documents and would be happy to discuss our concerns in more detail.



Stephanie Helm  
MCA President