

Developing a plan for Benalla West Estate

Phase 1 Community Engagement Report
April 2020

capire

Prepared by Capire Consulting Group on behalf of
Department of Health and Human Services

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Unless otherwise stated, all feedback documented by Capire Consulting Group and any persons(s) acting on our behalf is written and or recorded during the engagement.

Capire staff take great care transcribing participant feedback but unfortunately cannot guarantee complete accuracy. We are confident that we have captured the full range of ideas, concerns and views expressed during our consultation activities.

Unless otherwise noted, the views expressed in our work represent those of the participants and not those of our consultants or the Department of Health and Human Services.

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Executive summary

An important part of developing a masterplan for Benalla West Estate is community engagement. In late 2019, Department of Health and Human Services (the department) undertook early engagement with Benalla West Estate community. They were asked what they 'like' about Benalla West Estate and what they 'want to see improved'. This feedback was a key input in drafting a set of proposed Key Directions that will inform the development of a masterplan for Benalla West Estate.

Between 18 March to 16 April 2020, the Phase 1 engagement period was held, where the community was invited to learn about what was heard during the early-engagement and provide feedback on the proposed Key Directions.

Approximately 93 people participated in the engagement by completing a survey or attending a workshop. Participants represented a mix of Benalla West Estate residents, residents of the surrounding community and broader residents of Benalla

The outcomes of the engagement showed overall agreement with the previously identified issues for Benalla West Estate. Public transport provision, private front garden maintenance, lack of public community spaces and accessible social services were additional issues identified.

Overall, participants supported the five proposed Key Directions.

An average of 78% of participants agreed with each of the Key Directions.

	1. Provide a mix of public and private housing in Benalla West Estate, and relocate some public housing to other areas of Benalla	67% agree
	2. Develop better connections from Benalla West Estate to surrounding areas, including new developments	75% agree
	3. Provide more social housing in new developments in Benalla	78% agree
	4. Provide more social services and facilities in Benalla West Estate	86% agree
	5. Create better public spaces, including Waminda Park	82% agree

Much of the feedback received related to the implementation of these Key Directions. Comments included both the opportunities and the challenges. The opportunities included increased connection through Benalla West Estate and with the wider community and fostering community pride and ownership through improvements to the physical spaces and places. Challenges included changing the stigma associated with the area and attracting private home buyers to achieve a greater mix of public and private houses.

The outcomes of the engagement are a critical input into developing the masterplan which will also be informed by technical studies. The community will have the chance to review and comment on a draft masterplan for Benalla West Estate later in 2020.

1 Introduction

1.1 Project background

The Victorian Government is committed to improving public housing across Victoria with funding of \$30 million for regional estates. This commitment includes \$10 million to improve Benalla West Estate.

To make the best use of the funds, the Department of Health and Human Services (the department), assisted by a team of specialists in planning, development, urban design, architecture and community engagement, is developing a masterplan to guide improvements.

Consultation is at the heart of the planning process. The department is committed to consulting with stakeholders and the community throughout the project to understand their needs and to make sure that the masterplan delivers the best possible outcomes for the community.

Benalla West Estate is located approximately two kilometres from central Benalla. The estate is located on the fringe of the residential area of Benalla. The Benalla West Estate comprises 179 dwellings of which 148 (83%) are public housing.

1.2 Overview of phase one engagement

In late 2019 early engagement was undertaken to introduce the project to the community. Community members were asked what they like about Benalla West Estate and what they want to see improved. The feedback was then used to develop a set of proposed Key Directions¹.

Phase one engagement was delivered between 18 March to 16 April 2020. The purpose of the engagement was to provide an opportunity for the community to confirm what they like about Benalla West Estate and what issues they want improved. They were also asked to review and help refine the proposed Key Directions.

1.3 Report purpose

This report summarises the approach and outcomes of phase one engagement. It includes an analysis of the feedback received on the issues for Benalla West Estate and the proposed Key Directions.

This report, alongside the Issues and Key Directions background report will inform the preparation of Benalla West Estate Masterplan.

¹ A Key Direction is a key opportunity, concept and/or value to be explored through the masterplanning process.

2 Overview of activities

Engagement activities were selected and designed to be accessible and inclusive for all members of the community. A summary of how the engagement was promoted, the engagement activities, and who participated is provided below.

Promotion of engagement

Letterbox drop	Emails to stakeholders	Facebook adverts	Newspaper	Phone calls to tenants
				
Project Update delivered to each Benalla West Estate resident.	To share with their networks.	One paid and then shared on popular local pages. ²	Print advert in the local paper Benalla Ensign.	DHHS called tenants encouraging them to complete the survey

Engagement activities and participation

Approximately 93 people joined in the engagement across different activities. Each engagement activity followed the same structure and format.

Online survey	Telephone surveys	Community workshop	Self-completed workbooks
			
Sixty-eight online surveys were completed via the project webpage. The webpage had 586 unique visits during this phase.	A project hotline was provided to support people to complete the survey over the phone. Eleven surveys were completed over the phone.	A workshop was held with the Consultative Committee ³ on 11 March 2020. Eleven people attended the workshop.	Consultative committee members distributed hard copy workbooks for community members. Four were returned.

Overview of participants

Of those participants that provided demographic data⁴, the analysis showed that:

- participants were aged between 18 and 84 years and older, with a higher representation from people aged 35 to 49 years
- the majority (72 participants) live in Benalla and 19 identified as tenants of Benalla West Estate
- 22 participants worked with members of the Benalla West community and others own businesses or work in Benalla.

² A total of 3,280 people viewed the Facebook ad and 488 people engaged with the post through either liking, commenting or sharing the post.

³ The Consultative Committee was established as part of the project launch. The Committee is made up of representatives from the key community organisations, Benalla Rural City Council, other government partners and Benalla West Estate tenants.

⁴ Participants were not required to provide demographic information.

How we adapted our approach to respond to COVID-19?

Due to risks associated with COVID-19, the two planned community events (a BBQ at Waminda House and a stall at the Benalla Lakeside Farmers Market) were cancelled. Our adjusted approach included increasing social media promotion to direct people to complete the online survey. Through the duration of the social media promotion there was a spike in the daily online surveys completed.

It also included increased communication with tenants to support them to complete the survey either over the phone or online.

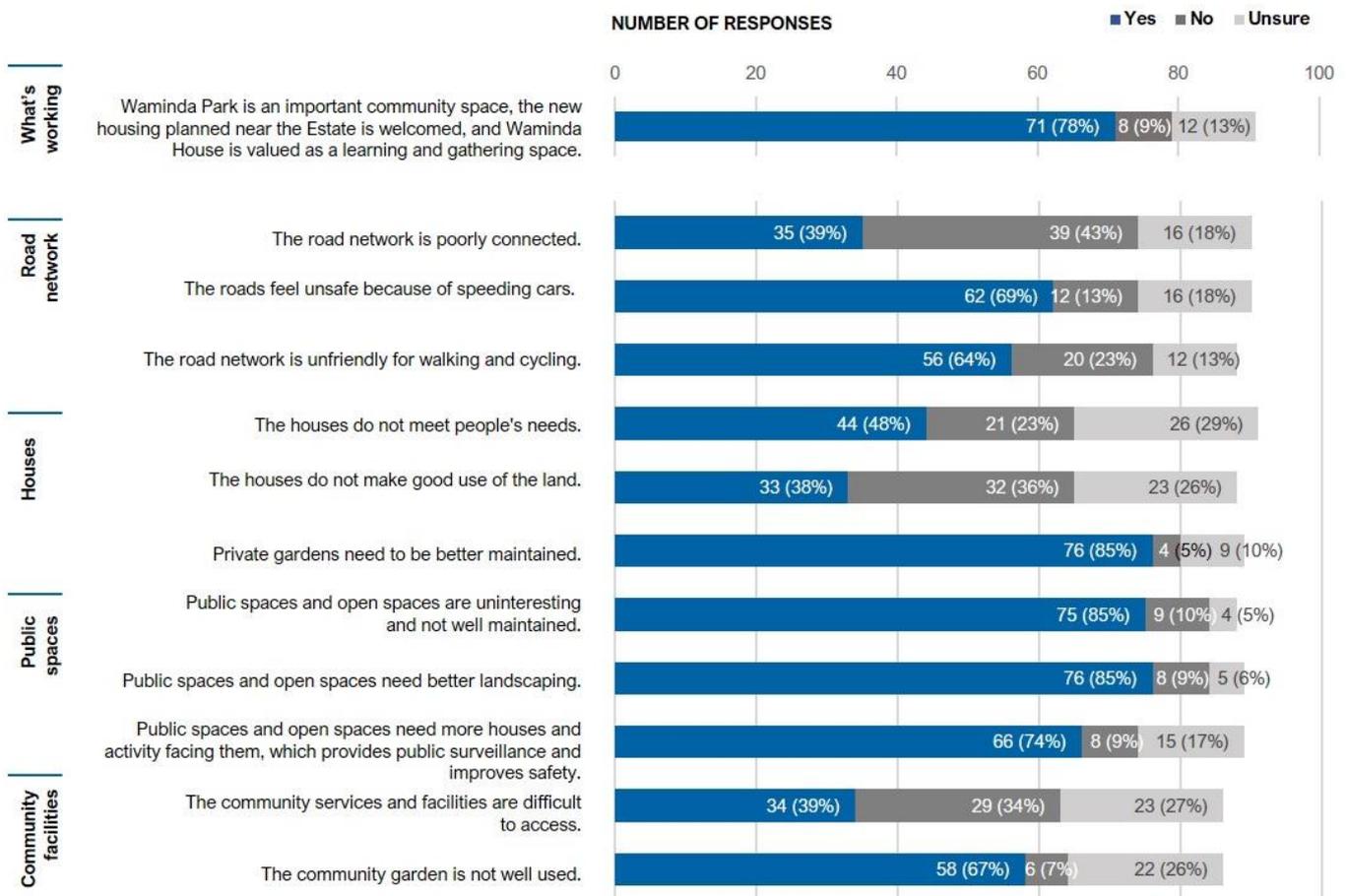
3 Engagement findings

The following section summarises the findings from the engagement. It is important to note when reading the feedback that not every participant answered every question, and therefore the total numbers vary between engagement questions.

3.1 What people like and what could be improved

Participants reviewed summary statements of what was heard previously and informed by the Issues and Key Directions background research. These statements focused on what people like about Benalla West Estate and what issues they want to see improved. Participants were asked to identify whether they agree with each statement. Statements were categorised into 'what is working' and 'what could be improved' (i.e. the issues). Four themes were identified for the issues: the road network; the houses; the public and open spaces; and the community services and facilities. Figure 1 summarises participant responses for each statement.

Figure 1: Participants' level of agreement with statements about Benalla West Estate



Overall, there were high levels of agreement with the 'what is working well' statement. A total of 78% (71 participants) agreed that Waminda Park is an important community space, the new housing planned near the Estate is welcomed, and Waminda House is valued as a learning and gathering space. The Issues statements received the most feedback, which has been summarised under each theme below.

Road network

Many participants (43%, 39 participants) did not agree that the road network is poorly connected. This statement was one of the least supported statements and those who disagreed were both locals and participants from the broader Benalla area. Many participants (69%, 62 participants) did agree that the roads feel unsafe because of speeding cars. Participants were particularly concerned about the risk of speeding cars to children playing in public areas across the estate. Participants commented on the need for traffic management devices or speedhumps to slow speeding cars.

The majority of participants (64%, 56 participants) agreed that the road network is unfriendly for walking and cycling. Participants identified a lack of connected and pedestrian friendly footpaths.

Additional issues relating to local road network included poor maintenance of drainage systems throughout the Estate.

'Kids won't stand a chance against a speeding car, let's save these kids and slow these ridiculous drivers down.' – Benalla West Estate resident

Housing

Statements relating to housing received mixed levels of agreement. Many participants (48%, 44 participants) agreed that the houses do not meet people's needs. Only 38% (33 participants) agreed that houses do not make good use of the land.

Participants were frequently concerned by the 'large amounts of rubbish and discarded items that accumulate in people's yards'. Many participants expressed concerns relating to unkept, rubbish-filled front yards and suggested solutions including more frequent hard rubbish collections and discount removal services. Participants also felt there should be greater consideration of who occupies houses in the estate and to support a greater diversity.

Additional issues relating to Benalla West Estate houses included:

- Lack of universally accessible housing options.
- Lack of one and two-bedroom units.
- Houses are poorly insulated.

'The houses in the Benalla West Estate do not meet people's needs as they are not well insulated and there are many gaps in the building envelope. The houses are very hot in summer and need a lot of heating during the colder months.' – Benalla West Estate resident

'Some of the front yards look messy... (there are some) who don't have a vehicle or trailer to do it themselves... it feels unwelcoming & unloved when I drive through there.' – Benalla West Estate resident

Public spaces

The statements relating to the public spaces received the highest levels of agreement. Participants widely agreed (85%, 75 participants) that the public spaces are uninteresting and not well maintained. Similarly, 85% (76 participants) agreed that public spaces need better landscaping. Participants also felt that the poor maintenance of the estate is a key factor in the negative perceptions the wider Benalla community have about the estate.

Participants also identified the lack of public open green spaces. There were many suggestions for how to improve the public spaces. These have been included in section 3.2 under Key Direction 5, which focuses on creating better public spaces in the estate.

Many participants (74%, 66 participants) agreed that public spaces and open spaces need more houses and activity facing them, which provides public surveillance and improves safety.

'(There's a) lack of community facilities such as BBQ, children's playground, shaded areas with activities and events bringing people together, also lack of activities for young people.' – Benalla West Estate resident

Community facilities and services

Some agreed (39%, 34 participants) that the community services and facilities are difficult to access. Those participants suggested that Waminda House should be more accessible, especially to vulnerable groups, and provide a greater variety of programs to different cohorts including families, young people and men to encourage neighbourhood connection. Participants widely agreed (67%, 56 participants) that the community garden is not well used. Some commented that in the past the community garden had been vandalised frequently and there was a lack of interest in its ongoing upkeep.

'We need more one-on-one effort to work with children and families to make different choices, attend educational opportunities, more access to health and wellbeing services etc so that they can get out of the poverty, the drugs and the Centrelink system.' – Benalla West Estate resident

Other issues

Participants commented on a range of public transport deficits including:

- infrequent and disconnected public transport options which limits access to kindergartens, childcare, schools and services
- lack of public transport provision on evenings, weekends and public holidays
- limited connections throughout the estate and links to broader Benalla.

Many participants raised their concerns of drug use and negative social behaviours. This had deterred residents from using their front yards and public spaces as they do not feel safe.

3.2 Feedback and proposed Key Directions

Participants reviewed the set of proposed Key Directions designed to guide the development of the masterplan for Benalla West Estate. Listed in Figure 2 are the proposed Key Directions. Participants identified whether they agree with each Key Direction and ideas for improvement. Figure 3 illustrates responses. Overall the proposed Key Directions received high levels of support. Many of the comments received were about how the Key Directions could be realised.

Figure 2: Proposed Key Directions for change for Benalla West Estate

1 Provide a mix of public and private housing in Benalla West Estate, and relocate some public housing to other areas of Benalla



Most of Benalla West Estate is public housing. We know that when public housing is located across a larger area and mixed with private housing, the opportunities for public housing tenants improve, and this benefits the whole community.

2 Develop better connections from Benalla West Estate to surrounding areas, including new developments



Benalla is growing. New residential development is expected around Benalla West Estate. Providing connections to new developments and into the town centre will create a safe and connected community.

3 Provide more social housing in new developments in Benalla



Housing for more vulnerable people is a shared responsibility. Communities do best when social housing is located across a large area. It is important that new developments contribute toward the provision of social housing.

4 Provide more social services and facilities in Benalla West Estate



Social services and facilities, like Waminda House, support communities to lead healthy and productive lives. We heard from the community that Waminda House could be better supported to provide even more benefit to the community.

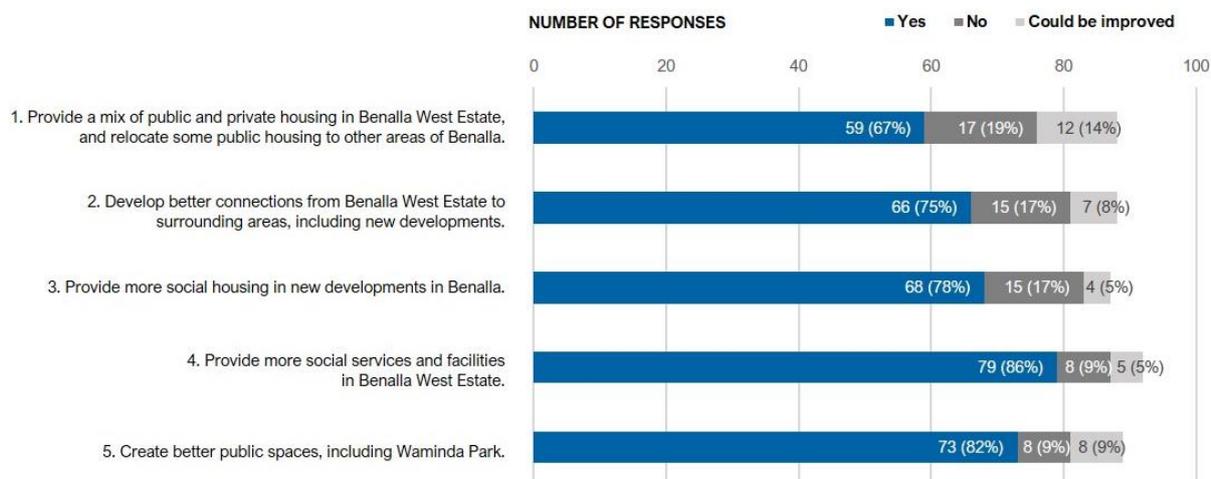
5 Create better public spaces, including Waminda Park



Public spaces are the hearts of communities. Currently, the spaces in Benalla West Estate are not well used and people want to see improvement.

What do you think of the key directions? Did we get them right?

Figure 3: Participant's level of agreement with each of the proposed Key Directions



The following paragraphs provide a summary of feedback received on each of the proposed Key Directions.

1. Provide a mix of public and private housing in Benalla West Estate, and relocate some public housing to other areas of Benalla

Overall, 67% (59 participants) agreed with this Key Direction. Participants considered how this direction could reduce the stigma associated with public housing and increase social connectedness with the wider Benalla community. Several Consultative Committee members discussed that a mix of housing provision will decrease pockets of social disadvantage and alleviate areas prone to antisocial behaviour and conflict. Several participants were concerned about the difficulty in attracting private home buyers to the area and the different quality of provision between public and private houses.

Some mentioned that new housing should be designed in a sustainable and energy-efficient way, including the use of solar power.

*‘Combined housing encourages more positive communication and pride for all in the area.’
– Consultative Committee member*

2. Develop better connections from Benalla West Estate to surrounding areas, including new developments

This Key Direction was widely supported by survey respondents, with 75% (66 participants) in agreement. At the Consultative Committee meeting, members discussed the need for greater opportunities for estate residents to connect with the wider Benalla community through increased access to services, employment, education and community infrastructure. Many participants also commented on the need for better transport connections including improvements to footpaths, street lighting, public transport and road networks.

*‘Connecting to other areas of Benalla provides less of a them/us mentality and better transport improves opportunities for all.’
– Consultative Committee Member*

3. Provide more social housing in new developments in Benalla

Overall, 78% (68 participants) agreed with this Key Direction. Participants were eager to see an increase in social housing provision in Benalla. Several members of the Consultative Committee considered how an increase in social housing will accommodate the housing needs of vulnerable people.

'There is a growing number of homelessness in Benalla and a need for some different options of social housing.' – Consultative Committee Member

4. Provide more social services and facilities in Benalla West Estate

This proposed Key Direction received the highest level of support (86%, 79 participants). Feedback frequently noted that social services and facilities need to be more accessible, equitable and inclusive of Benalla West Estate residents. Participants discussed the importance of Waminda House to the local community and also the opportunity it offers in help provide greater access to community services. Members of the Consultative Committee and tenants suggested improving Waminda House to better integrate outreach community services and programs within the Benalla West Estate. Access to community health and wellbeing services was identified as a key priority for residents.

'By improving social services and facilities that benefit the whole community, everyone the whole of Benalla could be improved. The health and welfare of everyone can improve and a fair go for all.'
– Consultative Committee member

5. Create better public spaces, including Waminda Park

Participants strongly support this proposed Key Direction (82%, 73 participants). Participants recommended the development of public spaces that increase community connectedness and all-age activities. Many participants advocated for well-maintained playgrounds and green spaces which cater towards young people. Frequent comments regarding better public spaces included the provision of shared BBQ facilities, shelter and seating, and allowing people to use nature strips as vegetable gardens.

Members of the community considered how safe, engaging and family friendly public spaces would increase community pride and encourage outdoor activity.

Some suggestion for improving the safety of public spaces included:

- increasing street lighting
- introduce a Neighbourhood Watch program
- increase use of surveillance cameras
- provide a legal graffiti wall.

'(There is a) need for an area the community can feel proud of, connect with and feel safe in – e.g. BBQ facilities, good children's playground (with shade and variety of activities) something targeting young people also.'
– Consultative Committee member

4 Next steps

On behalf of the department and the project team, we would like to thank the community members and members of the Consultative Committee for their time and consideration of the work completed to date. The outputs of this phase of engagement is an important piece of the work being undertaken to prepare the masterplan for Benalla West Estate.

Other work and considerations that will feed into the development of the masterplan and subsequent implementation plan include:

- housing yield and typology assessments;
- review of community services and facility needs;
- transport and connectivity assessments;
- public realm and urban design assessments;
- utility and services infrastructure supply and capacity assessments;
- statutory planning assessments;
- development cost, feasibility and implementation assessments; and
- identification of project partners and further funding opportunities to support larger-scale changes.

It is important to note that not all the issues and desired improvements identified through the engagement are within the direct control of the department, such as public transport. However, the community feedback will be valuable in advocating the relevant stakeholders or potential future project partners.

The community will have the chance to review the draft masterplan and provide feedback in the second half of 2020.