



Benalla Rural City Council Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan

September 2024
to November 2026





Statement from CEO of Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia welcomes Benalla Rural City Council to the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program with the formal endorsement of its inaugural Reflect RAP.

Benalla Rural City Council joins a network of more than 3,000 corporate, government, and not-for-profit organisations that have made a formal commitment to reconciliation through the RAP program.

Since 2006, RAPs have provided a framework for organisations to leverage their structures and diverse spheres of influence to support the national reconciliation movement. The program's potential for impact is greater than ever, with close to 3 million people now working or studying in an organisation with a RAP.

The four RAP types — Reflect, Innovate, Stretch and Elevate — allow RAP partners to continuously develop and strengthen reconciliation commitments in new ways. This Reflect RAP will lay the foundations, priming the workplace for future RAPs and reconciliation initiatives.

The RAP program's strength is its framework of relationships, respect, and opportunities, allowing an organisation to strategically set its reconciliation commitments in line with its own business objectives, for the most effective outcomes.

These outcomes contribute towards the five dimensions of reconciliation: race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity; unity; and historical acceptance.

It is critical to not only uphold all five dimensions of reconciliation, but also increase awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge, and leadership across all sectors of Australian society.

This Reflect RAP enables Benalla Rural City Council to deepen its understanding of its sphere of influence and the unique contribution it can make to lead progress across the five dimensions. Getting these first steps right will ensure the sustainability of future RAPs and reconciliation initiatives, and provide meaningful impact toward Australia's reconciliation journey.

Congratulations Benalla Rural City Council, welcome to the RAP program, and I look forward to following your reconciliation journey in the years to come.



Karen Mundine
Chief Executive Officer,
Reconciliation Australia

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“My work aims to create conversations. These conversations would build understanding about what it means to us to come together and keep our culture alive. This, I believe, is the essence of reconciliation.”

Banmirra

Aunty Cheryl Cooper

Throughout 2024, Benalla Rural City Council developed and received endorsement of its first Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan. The Plan affirms the Council's commitment to strengthening relationships with the region's First Nations Peoples through acknowledgment, relationship building and reflection.

As an integral part of this journey, Benalla Rural City Council invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who live on Yorta Yorta or Taungurung Country to submit designs to feature prominently throughout the Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan document and associated activities.

The artwork commissioned would reflect the local people, communities, and/or landscape of Benalla Rural City, and celebrate the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Through this process, Aunty Cheryl Cooper was selected to produce the Benalla Rural City Council's Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan artwork, which was unveiled at the city's 2024 NAIDOC Week celebrations, and will now be displayed on a regular basis at various civic venues.

Aunty Cheryl Cooper is a local mixed media textile artist, whose works are inspired by culture, connection and country. The artist finds her inspiration in the use of ochres from our region, and explores her love of applique and stitching work, imbued with symbolism.

Born in Alexandra in 1955 to Norma and Frank — an Aboriginal man from Warrnambool way — Cooper's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer at a very young age. This saw the family move to Baddaginnie to be closer to Benalla's larger hospital and family support in the area.

Cooper's parents were hard working and community minded people; her mother working at the Benalla Clothing Factory alongside migrant women, and her father a farm worker, drover, and active community volunteer.

Following her education, and marriage to Milton Cooper — a Noona man from Western Australia and a well-known boxer in Victoria — Cheryl moved into the Benalla township.

Her childhood love for art has informed her professional career, instinctively applying 'art therapy' techniques in her work in Aboriginal Community Health for many years.

Throughout her life, Cooper has had direct experiences of racism; from a childhood sense that being Aboriginal was considered shameful or to be hidden, to rental properties being made unavailable upon learning of her and her husband's Aboriginality.

Despite this, Cooper has dedicated many decades of her life to reconciliation efforts, delivering programs such as the Bra Fence by the Many Threads group in Cherbourg, and winning community awards for NAIDOC projects. A respected Elder and community worker, she continues to run Aboriginal art and craft workshops for Benalla Health and VACCA, and to strive towards reconciliation as a member of the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group.

Cooper's resulting artwork, displayed here, is titled *Banmirra*. She explains;

"Banmirra' is the Yorta Yorta word for river.

The river was, and always will be, a meeting place. The Yorta Yorta are river people.

Before colonisation the Broken River was a place for corroborees and ceremony between all mobs. This ancient energy is still here — the river is still a gathering place.

The lake is a beautiful environment for all people, and it can ground and heal us. Sitting by the river brings calm and a connection to nature.

My art tells the visual story of the river and riverbanks of Benalla. I use native grass, bark and twigs collected from around the Benalla Aboriginal Garden. The ochres that I use to paint, I have collected in sacred places and crushed myself.

I am featuring our Yorta Yorta totem, the long-necked turtle.

The frame is made of 120 year old Red Stringybark, an old strong wood salvaged from Baddaginnie. It is typical for river country and it was gifted to me by a local family in the spirit of reconciliation, specifically for this work.

My hope with this work is to share our stories and connect community."



▲ *Aunty Cheryl Cooper*

Our Business

Benalla Rural City (Benalla) is a small local government area (2,350 sq km) located in the north-eastern region of Victoria. It comprises the township of Benalla and the communities of Baddaginnie, Boweya, Chesneyvale, Devenish, Goomalibee, Goorambat, Lima, Lurg, Molyullah, Moorngag, Swanpool, Tatong, Thoona, Warrenbayne and Winton. Only two hours from Melbourne along the Hume Freeway, the Rural City has a population of over 14,000, with 9,000 people living in the Benalla urban area. Council's vision is to provide a sustainable, thriving and cohesive community where lifestyle, culture, health and wellbeing are supported by strong leadership and community partnership.

Benalla Rural City Council is responsible for more than 100 services, from family and children's services, parking regulation, open space maintenance, youth services, waste and recycling management; to matters concerning business and tourism development, planning for appropriate development, governance and financial accountability. Council currently employs 145 staff across all departments. At this time, Council processes do not capture the number of staff who identify as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. We will work within the implementation of this RAP in a culturally safe way to understand this better.

The Council has a number of site/office locations including the Customer Service Centre in Bridge Street, the Civic Centre and the Visitor Information Centre/Cinema in Mair Street, the Sir Edward Weary Dunlop Learning Centre in Fawckner Drive, the Benalla Art Gallery in Bridge Street, Benalla Community Care in Coster Street, the Works Depot in Gillies Street and the Benalla Landfill and Resource Recovery Centre Old Farnley Road.

Our Vision

To provide a sustainable, thriving and cohesive community where lifestyle, culture, health and wellbeing are supported by strong leadership and community partnership.

Our Purpose

Through leadership and quality service we will meet our community's needs and aspirations with a focus on thoughtfully planned growth to maintain and enhance the high productivity of our collective community.

Our Values

We will:

- Plan and guide the community of Benalla Rural City with unwavering accountability.
- Strive for continuous improvement.
- Make decisions based on sound research and participate in decision making that meets the needs of the whole community in solid equity.
- Act with transparency, truthfulness and integrity.
- Provide clear, innovative and strong leadership.
- Serve our community, environment and council with respect.

Yarning circle at Winton Wetlands





Our Reconciliation Action Plan

Our workplace is developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to demonstrate our commitment to reconciliation and to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We recognise the importance of building respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and promoting equality, inclusivity, and diversity within our organisation and the broader community.

Our approach to implementing our RAP is structured and comprehensive. We aim to foster genuine reconciliation and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a series of 13 strategic actions listed below. By establishing meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, promoting cultural understanding and awareness, and integrating anti-discrimination strategies into our practices, we demonstrate a commitment to positive change. Our focus on accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement ensures that our efforts contribute to lasting reconciliation within our organisation and the broader community.

Manager Community, Jane Archbold, who also acts as Chair of the RAP Working Group and is Council's primary liaison with the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group, will be our RAP Champion. Jane is part of Council's Leadership Team.

The RAP Working Group is comprised of:

- Manager Community
- Tourism Economy Coordinator
- Admin and Customer Relations Officer
- Public Health Coordinator
- Manager Finance
- Manager Economic Development and Tourism
- Director Benalla Art Gallery
- Communications and Engagement Coordinator
- Admin Officer Community
- Library Services Customer Relations Officer
- Community Development and Recreation Coordinator

The RAP Working Group First Nations Representative is the Aboriginal Support Worker at Benalla Health, who is also an active member of the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group.

Council staff provide in-kind resourcing to the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group, formed in 2019. The Advisory Group has an agreed Terms of Reference and continues to expand its membership. The Advisory Group has representation from many organisations including Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA), Victoria Police, Benalla Health, Benalla P-12 College, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI), Education Department Koorie Engagement staff, Mungabereena Aboriginal Corporation, Thales Australian Munitions (local business), Waminda Community House, Winton Wetlands, Benalla Art Gallery and currently six local Aboriginal community members. The membership includes a majority of members who are First Nations people.

The purpose of the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group is to improve the local community's understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage. The Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group meet monthly with a current standing agenda item being the progress of Council's RAP development. Following the adoption of the RAP this group will assist with the implementation of the actions identified herein.

Reconciliation Journey to Date

2012	Tours of Aboriginal Community Gardens offered by local Aboriginal community member Chris Thorne.
2013	Informal NAIDOC Week committee established.
2013 to 2023	Council began celebrating NAIDOC week each year during NAIDOC week, promoting where possible through the local media, this has become an annual celebration.
2015	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags installed outside Civic Centre and permanently flown.
2016	Renaming of Indigenous Gardens to Aboriginal Gardens after recommendation from the NAIDOC Week committee (now known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group) who preferred 'Aboriginal Gardens' as a more respectful name.
	Yarning Day at Swanpool Cinema targeting rural schools and home-schooled children.
2018 & 2019	Proud and Deadly Awards to celebrate the achievements of First Nations students in our community in partnership with local schools through the Department of Education Koorie Engagement Officer. The event is supported by Council and is delivered by the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group.
2019	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group established (see Our RAP and below entries for further detail).
2020	Registered on Reconciliation Victoria's Maggolee website supporting engagement and partnerships between local government and First Nations communities.
2021	Additional funding committed to an upgrade of the Aboriginal Gardens.
	Partnership formed with Benalla Art Gallery.
	Acknowledgement of Country report to Council sought guidance from the Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on the most appropriate wording for the Acknowledgement of Country.
2022	National Reconciliation Week Family Fun Day event.
	In person cultural awareness training offered to 21 staff from Community Department by Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency.
	Aboriginal History Group (sub-committee of Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group) began work on researching history of Benalla pre-colonisation.
2023	Facilitated National Reconciliation Week information sessions held in partnership with Yorta Yorta leader for Year 7, 10 & 12 students at FCJ College.
	Aboriginal Advisory Group invited to tour new Visitor Information Centre prior to opening to undertake cultural audit.
	Aboriginal craft workshop facilitated by three local Aboriginal artists offered as part of Seniors Festival.
	Formation of internal Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group which links in with the local Aboriginal Advisory Group.
	Meeting held at Education Centre at Winton Wetlands with Council and Benalla Health's RAP Working Groups to collaborate on development of Reconciliation Action Plans.



▲ *Yarning circle at the Aboriginal Gardens*

Our partnerships and current activities

Council staff resource the local Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group which meets monthly and has been Invited to consult in relation to key community projects, buildings, and events such as naming of the new Police station precinct, building relationships with local First Nations families at the school and updated signage at the Aboriginal Gardens.

Council developed the BRCC Community Engagement Framework and Toolkit in 2022. The framework outlines Council's commitment to genuine and purposeful engagement of the local community. It provides a clear, consistent four step approach to community engagement: Plan, Act, Close, Evaluate (PACE). It also offers an understanding of the different forms of engagement, some helpful tools and an awareness of other available resources.

Action Plan



▼ *Mia Mia (traditional shelter) at Winton Wetlands*



Relationships



ACTION	DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE	RESPONSIBILITY
1 Establish and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations	Identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations within our local area or sphere of influence	September 2024	• Manager Community
	Research best practice and principles that support partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations	September 2024	• Manager Community
	Maintain and strengthen partnership with Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group	December 2025	• Manager Community
	Consult with Benalla Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group to update and review BRCC Community Engagement Framework and Toolkit to establish preferred communication and engagement strategies	February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Development and Recreation Coordinator • Communication and Engagement Coordinator
2 Build relationships through celebrating National Reconciliation Week (NRW)	Circulate Reconciliation Australia's NRW resources and reconciliation materials to our staff	May 2025	• Communication and Engagement Coordinator
	RAP Working Group (RWG) members to participate in an external NRW event	May 2025	• Manager Community
	Encourage and support staff and senior leaders to participate in at least one external event to recognise and celebrate NRW	May 2025	• CEO
3 Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence	Communicate our commitment to reconciliation to all staff	September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEO • Communication and Engagement Coordinator
	Publish RAP on Council's website to communicate the commitment to reconciliation publicly	September 2024	• Communication and Engagement Coordinator
	Deliver Internal communications campaign raising awareness of RAP amongst staff, Councillors and volunteers	September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and Engagement Coordinator • Manager Community
	Identify external stakeholders that our organisation can engage with on our reconciliation journey	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Community • CEO
	Identify RAP and other like-minded organisations that we could approach to collaborate with on our reconciliation journey	November 2024	
	Review staff induction process to ensure new staff are aware of local Traditional Owners	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Community • Manager People and Performance
4 Promote positive race relations through anti-discrimination strategies	Research best practice and policies in areas of race relations and anti-discrimination.	February 2025	• Manager People and Performance
	Conduct a review of HR policies and procedures to identify existing anti-discrimination provisions, and future needs.	March 2025	• Manager People and Performance

Respect



ACTION	DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE	RESPONSIBILITY
5 Increase understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge	Develop a business case for increasing understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights within our organisation.	February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager People and Performance • Manager Community
	Conduct a review of cultural learning needs within our organisation.	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager People and Performance
	Deliver cultural awareness training to staff and Councillors.	June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager People and Performance • Manager Community
6 Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by observing cultural protocols	Develop an understanding of the local Traditional Owners or Custodians of the lands and waters within our organisation's operational area.	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Community
	Support and encourage community groups in Benalla Rural City to acknowledge First Nations communities.	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Development and Recreation Coordinator
	Increase staff's understanding of the purpose and significance behind cultural protocols, including Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country protocols.	February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Manager Corporate
	Investigate opportunities for artwork and Acknowledgement of Country in public facing locations	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Community • Director Benalla Art Gallery
	Update email Council signatures to include an Acknowledgement of Country	November 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Facilities and Information Technology • Communications and Engagement Coordinator
7 Build respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories by celebrating NAIDOC Week	Raise awareness and share information amongst our staff about the meaning of NAIDOC Week.	July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and Engagement Coordinator
	Introduce our staff to NAIDOC Week by promoting external events in our local area.	July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and Engagement Coordinator
	RAP Working Group to participate in an external NAIDOC Week event.	July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Community • Communication and Engagement Coordinator



Turtle totem rock

Turtle sculpture at Winton Wetlands



Opportunities



ACTION	DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE	RESPONSIBILITY
8 Improve employment outcomes by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment, retention and professional development	Develop a business case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment within our organisation.	June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager People and Performance
	Build understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing to inform future employment and professional development opportunities.	June 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager People and Performance
9 Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supplier diversity to support improved economic and social outcomes	Develop a business case for procurement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned businesses.	June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Economic Development and Sustainability • Procurement Coordinator
	Research database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned businesses with the region.	June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Economic Development and Sustainability • Procurement Coordinator
	Investigate Supply Nation membership.	September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Finance • Procurement Coordinator

Governance



ACTION	DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE	RESPONSIBILITY
10 Establish and maintain an effective RAP Working Group (RWG) to drive governance of the RAP	Maintain a RWG to govern RAP implementation.	September 2024	• CEO
	Update and revise Terms of Reference for the RWG.	September 2024	• Manager Community
	Establish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on the RWG.	September 2024	• Manager Community
11 Provide appropriate support for effective implementation of RAP commitments	Define resource needs for RAP implementation.	December 2024	• Manager Community • Manager Finance
	Engage senior leaders in the delivery of RAP commitments.	September 2024	• General Manager Corporate
	Appoint a member of Leadership Team to champion our RAP internally.	September 2024	• CEO
	Define appropriate systems and capability to track, measure and report on RAP commitments.	September 2024	• Community Development Coordinator
12 Build accountability and transparency through reporting RAP achievements, challenges and learnings both internally and externally	Contact Reconciliation Australia to verify that our primary and secondary contact details are up to date, to ensure we do not miss out on important RAP correspondence.	September 2024	• Manager Community • Community Development and Recreation Coordinator
	Contact Reconciliation Australia to request our unique link, to access the online RAP Impact Measurement Survey.	August 2024	• Manager Community • Community Development and Recreation Coordinator
	Complete and submit the annual RAP Impact Measurement Survey to Reconciliation Australia.	September 2024	• Manager Community • Community Development and Recreation Coordinator
	Present a progress report on the implementation of the RAP to Leadership Team and Councillors twice yearly	February 2025	• Manager Community
	13 Continue our reconciliation journey by developing our next RAP	Register via Reconciliation Australia's website to begin developing our next RAP.	November 2025

Scar tree at Winton Wetlands





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