Thomastown and Lalor Neighbourhood Activity Centre Investigations

Whittlesea 20 Minute NAC's Prioritisation Tool Testing

Key Findings Report, Final
For: Whittlesea City Council and Department of Transport and Planning
20 April 2023

PLAN2PLACE

Tim Nott
economic analysis + strategy

Peter Boyle_Urban Design+
Landscape Architecture

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ABBREVIATIONS AND LEGISLATION

Abbreviations

C1Z	Commercial 1 Zone
C	Council Amendment
DELWP	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
DTP	Department of Transport and Planning
DDO	Design and Development Overlay
ESD	Environmentally Sustainable Development
GRZ	General Residential Zone
LUFPs	Land Use Framework Plans
LAC	Local Activity Centre
LGA	Local Government Area
MAC	Major Activity Centre
MUZ	Mixed Use Zone
NAC	Neighbourhood Activity Centre
NCO	Neighbourhood Character Overlay
PPV	Planning Panels Victoria
PPN	Planning Practice Note
PPF	Planning Policy Framework
PSP	Precinct Structure Plan
PPTN	Principal Public Transport Network
PPRZ	Public Park and Recreation Zone
PUZ	Public Use Zone
RGZ	Residential Growth Zone
TRZ	Transport Zone
UFZ	Urban Floodway Zone
UDGV	Urban Design Guidelines for Victoria
VC	Victoria and Council Amendment
VPP	Victoria Planning Provisions
WCC	Whittlesea City Council
WPS	Whittlesea Planning Scheme

Numeric Abbreviations

ha	hectare
m	metre
m^2	metres squared
%	percent
sqm	square metres
Sq km	square kilometres

Related Legislation and Regulations

Planning and Environment Act 1987 (P&E Act)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
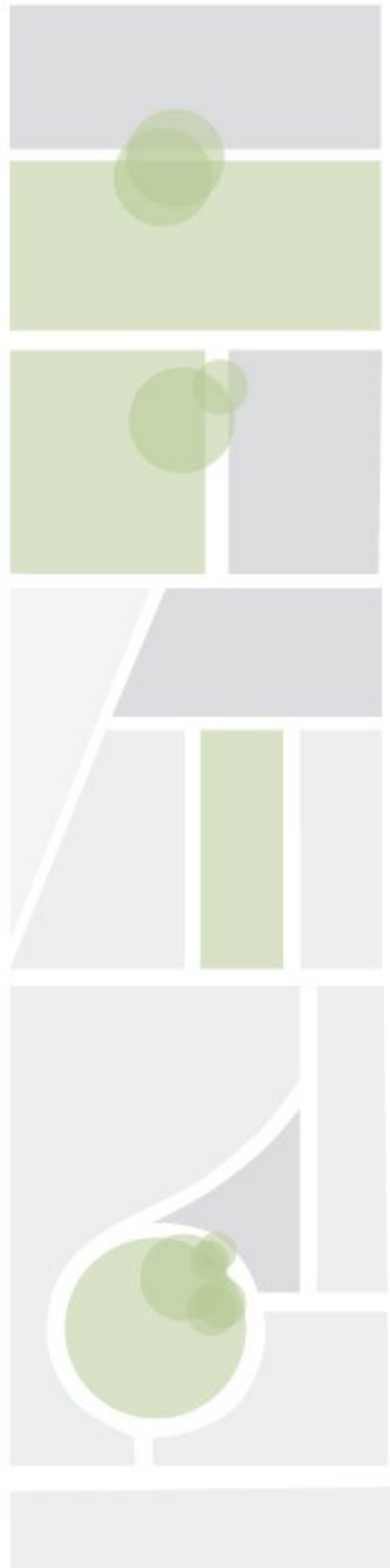
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Plan2Place Consulting in association with Peter Boyle Urban Design+Landscape Architecture and development economist Tim Nott were engaged by Whittlesea City Council to pilot the prioritisation tool that has been prepared for Neighbourhood Activity Centres (NACs) in the suburbs of Thomastown and Lalor.

This testing of the prioritisation tool is based on the approach that is detailed in the *'draft 20-Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres'* consultation report completed on the behalf of Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), now Department of Transport & Planning (DPT).

This project supports the general approach of applying a 20 Minute NAC Prioritisation Tool to NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne. Some changes are suggested to refining and complementing the elements incorporated in the prioritisation tool to improve their usefulness in application to a wide variety of NACs and in determining future planning and investment priorities for NACs.

It important that the prioritisation tool be adapted to the unique characteristics of each study area it is applied to and refined so that they can be applied more easily to the variety of NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne.

Seven NACs should be the focus of prioritisation in Lalor and Thomastown: Lalor Shopping Precinct, Thomastown Shopping Precinct, Alexander Avenue, Lalor Plaza, The Boulevard, Edgars Road, and Lalor Hub with specific priorities identified in section 4.8.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Plan2Place Consulting in association with Peter Boyle Urban Design+Landscape Architecture and development economist Tim Nott were engaged by Whittlesea City Council to pilot the prioritisation tool that has been prepared for Neighbourhood Activity Centres (NACs) in the suburbs of Thomastown and Lalor.

This testing of the prioritisation tool is based on the approach that is detailed in the *'draft 20-Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres'* consultant report completed on behalf of Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), now Department of Transport & Planning (DPT).

More specifically, the objectives of this project are:

- To develop an effective and efficient approach for the identification of priority NACs in Thomastown and Lalor, utilising and building upon the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool.
- To test the application of the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool for all local and neighbourhood centres in Thomastown and Lalor.
- To provide written feedback to DPT and Council on identified challenges in applying the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool, as well as recommend improvements to support DPT in refining the tool to have broad applicability across established urban areas.
- To maximise opportunities, capacity development, knowledge exchange and process development so that Council is well positioned to internally progress further work to evaluate and prioritise Whittlesea's NAC network.
- To inform Council's understanding of how investment in individual centres can deliver tangible economic benefits.
- To increase Council capacity and evidence base to embed 20-minute neighbourhoods across the municipality, including growth areas.
- To identify the current performance of the NAC network in Thomastown and Lalor and assist in supporting NACs into the future.
- To inform Council's new Place Based Approach, Thomastown and Lalor Place Framework, upcoming Liveable Neighbourhoods Strategy and Neighbourhood Revitalisation Plan to better align with 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- To support the identification of sites with the best potential to deliver community services in a place-based delivery model.
- To test and refine the methodology for identifying future priority areas for larger scale strategic work supporting 20-minute neighbourhoods.

The following outputs have been (or will be) delivered as part of this project:

- A draft Key Findings Report.
- A final Key Findings Report.
- A presentation in PowerPoint format.
- Associated plans/maps.

The project has been based on 20 Minute Neighbourhood grant funding provided by DELWP, now DPT.

This project supports the general approach of applying the draft 20 Minute NAC Prioritisation Tool to NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne. Some changes are suggested to refining and complementing the elements incorporated in prioritisation tool to improve their usefulness in application to a wide variety of NACs and in determining future planning and investment priorities for NACs.

BACKGROUND AND STATE STRATEGIC AND POLICY CONTEXT

2. BACKGROUND AND STATE STRATEGIC AND POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Project Overview

This project involves providing an analysis of the draft 20 Minute NAC prioritisation tool in its application to NACs in Thomastown and Lalor. The project study area of NACs in Thomastown and Lalor is detailed in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Project Study Area - NACs in Thomastown and Lalor

2.2 Reports and Information Reviewed

There are a range of background reports and information that provide important context for the project. The following reports and information have been analysed and assessed in this report:

- Plan Melbourne 2017-2050, Victorian Government.
- Plan Melbourne 2017-2050, Addendum 2019, Victorian Government.
- Draft 20 Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres consultant report completed for DEWLP.
- Town Centre Improvement Program, Revitalisation Plan, Local and Neighbourhood Centres, June 2020, City of Whittlesea.
- NACs Thomastown – Lalor Draft Place Framework, City of Whittlesea.
- Any other relevant documents identified throughout the course of the project….to be completed

Discussion about these reports and information as used in this project are provided below.

2.3   Victoria, Melbourne and Whittlesea Growth Projections

It is projected that by 2051, Melbourne will have grown to a city of around 8.4 million people. This means that an additional 1.8 million jobs and 1.6 million new dwellings are likely to be needed across the Melbourne metropolitan area by 2051, even despite the impacts from COVID-19. Of these dwellings, an estimated additional 1.01 million dwellings will be needed in established areas (215,000 in the inner-metro region and 795,000 in the balance of established suburbs) including in and around activity centres, along many tram and bus routes, close to train stations and on 'brownfield' sites ready for urban renewal [1].

Victoria in Future states that Whittlesea had a residential population of 223,320 in 2018 and this is projected to increase to 364,450 by 2036, an increase of 141,130 people at a growth rate of 2.8%[2]. This population and jobs growth will need to be supported by a range of housing and employment options as well as sustainable travel choices including reduced car dependency and increased walking, cycling, motor cycling and public transport. Much of this new residential development is focused to growth areas in Whittlesea's outer suburbs, but redevelopment and increased residential densities are forecast to occur in established suburbs such as Thomastown and Lalor.

Planning and developing new communities and neighbourhoods for a growing Victoria requires responses that evolve to ever increasing challenges and opportunities through population growth, demographic shifts, climate change, bushfire, health impacts, natural resource consumption and environmental changes. Growth and the challenges and opportunities it represents can impact in positive and negative ways on economic, social and environmental factors. Part of providing a more positive and improved development response in urbanised areas is through channelling Melbourne's growth into particular places and in supporting employment growth and economic activity as shown in Plan Melbourne's 2050 spatial framework.

2.4   Plan Melbourne and the Melbourne 2050 Spatial Framework

Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 (Plan Melbourne) provides a long-term strategic plan for metropolitan Melbourne to accommodate future growth in population and employment with development of 70% in established areas and 30% in growth areas (See Plan Melbourne and Plan Melbourne Addendum 2019). Plan Melbourne affirms Melbourne's traditional activity centre network through a hierarchy and large network of activity centres and employment growth into state and regionally significant places and industrial land.

Plan Melbourne reinforces the planning framework along the Principal Public Transport Network (PPTN) and around activity centres, National Employment and Innovation Clusters (NEICs), urban renewal areas and health and education precincts. Principle 3 - *A city of centres linked to regional Victoria*, encourages the growth of activity in these places and also in NACs. NACs play a supporting role within this framework for a range of commercial, employment, housing, community and recreational services and facilities, with well over 900 NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne. These centres complement Metropolitan and Major Activity Centres and are usually linked by local transport services to the PPTN.

NACs vary in size, role and function and can range in size and intensity of use from large shopping centres to small local strip-shopping centres. All activity centres have the capacity to continue to grow and diversify the range of activities they offer and have the opportunity for greater diversification, investment and employment growth.

Plan Melbourne states that: *"Diversification will give communities access to a wide range of goods and services, provide local employment and support local economies and the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods. In many activity centres, this growth will include housing, particularly at higher densities. To capture and to accommodate future growth opportunities activity centres will need greater flexibility in*

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1 *Victoria_in_Future_2019.pdf (planning.vic.gov.au), FINAL-Plan-Melbourne-Addendum-2019.pdf (planning.vic.gov.au)*
2 *Victoria_in_Future_2019.pdf (planning.vic.gov.au)*

planning controls than surrounding residential areas. Local plans undertaken in consultation with the community will identify the scope and nature of future growth within each activity centre."

Three actions are included in Plan Melbourne directly relevant to NACs being:

Action 75: Whole-of-government approach to 20-minute neighbourhoods
Embed the 20-minute neighbourhood concept as a key goal across government. Key steps are to:

- Identify and undertake flagship 20-minute neighbourhood projects with the metropolitan regions and the private sector to focus planning and implementation work.
- Provide guidance to local government on embedding the 20-minute neighbourhood concept into local planning schemes.
- Build community partnerships to help deliver 20-minute neighbourhoods.
- Improve information and research to be shared with local government.

Action 75.1: 20-Minute Neighbourhood Program
Support the delivery of place-based initiatives modelled on the community partnership approach for the 20-Minute Neighbourhood Pilot Program. Work across government to implement recommendations from the 20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating a more liveable Melbourne report, DELWP 2019. The recommendations are grouped into the following themes:

- Policy — Embedding 20-minute neighbourhoods in decision-making.
- Place — Guidance to design liveable places.
- Partnership — Connecting government, industry and communities. Note: Action added in accordance with the annual Report on Progress 2019.

Action 76: Metropolitan-wide 'neighbourhoods index'
Create a metropolitan-wide 'neighbourhoods index' that identifies the key characteristics of Melbourne's neighbourhoods (such as activity centres, schools, public transport, housing density and diversity, walkability and tree cover). This index will be a building block for establishing a more comprehensive, metropolitan-wide database of neighbourhoods for use in future planning and monitoring activities.

These three actions, particularly Action 75.1 are relevant to this project.

2.5   Land Use Framework Plans

Land Use Framework Plans (LUFPs) are sub-regional plans under Plan Melbourne's spatial framework for Melbourne's regions that were prepared and released for public comment. They provide a regional 30 year land use planning and infrastructure framework for the northern metropolitan region, helping to better align and bridge State and local planning issues and manage growth and land use pressures. LUFPs are anticipated to set regional level planning policy that will be implemented into local planning schemes and inform decision making for precinct planning, local and regional planning strategies, and infrastructure and servicing projects.[3]

In relation to NACs, the Draft Northern Regional LUFP:

- Affirms a strong network of activity centres to provide jobs closer to where people live.
- Seeks to create 20-minute neighbourhoods around activity centres and close to public transport.
- Supports the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods with a diversity of high-quality, affordable housing close to good public transport, services and amenities.
- Supports people living and working in 20-minute neighbourhoods.

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3 *Northern Metro Melbourne's Future Planning Framework Engage Victoria, p. 2, 6, 12, 14, 16*

2.6 Victorian Planning System and its Relationship to the Whittlesea Planning Scheme

Within the above strategic context, there are a range of mechanisms and planning frameworks available in the Victorian planning system that help to guide and implement planning and development responses relevant to the Whittlesea Planning Scheme. The Victorian Government has also produced reports and initiatives relevant to planning for activity centres and residential areas in the City of Whittlesea. Relevant mechanisms, frameworks, guidelines, initiatives and report findings are detailed below.

2.6.1 Planning and Environment Act 1987 and Planning Schemes

The Planning and Environment Act 1987 (P&E Act) establishes a framework for planning the use, development and protection of land in Victoria in the present and long-term interests of all Victorians. The Act provides for a single instrument of planning control for each municipality called a planning scheme, derived from the Victoria Planning Provisions (VPP), which set out the way land may be used or developed. Planning schemes contain state, regional and local planning policies, zones and overlays and other provisions that affect how land can be used and developed. Zones and overlays are mapped and those maps form part of local planning schemes. In most cases, land in NACs is represented usually by the Commercial 1 Zone (C1Z) in retail and commercial areas, the Residential Growth Zone (RGZ), Mixed Use Zone (MUZ) and/or General Residential Zone (GRZ) for areas of housing around commercial areas, the Public Use Zone for community, education, health and local government activities and the Transport Zone (TRZ) for roads and railways.

The P&E Act sets out procedures for preparing and amending planning schemes, the need to conduct regular strategic reviews to inform planning policy and provisions, obtaining a permit under the planning scheme, settling disputes, enforcing compliance and other administrative procedures. The P&E Act sets out the broad process for considering a planning scheme amendment and are supplemented by regulations and various Ministerial Directions. As part of any review, planning scheme reviews and evaluation and continuous improvements of specific planning controls are proposed from time to time so that planning tools are efficient, effective and provide net community benefits. Strategic projects such as this one also inform best practice approaches to planning for future community needs.

This framework for the Whittlesea Planning Scheme comprises the following elements:

- The PPF which is the policy content of a planning scheme and provides a context for spatial planning and decision making by planning and responsible authorities. The PPF is a single integrated policy source that includes state content in the form of state and regional planning policy and local content in the form of local planning policy.
- The MPS which complements policy content in the PPF. The MPS outlines the planning outcomes the municipality seeks to achieve that will be implemented by the policies and requirements of the planning scheme.
- Zones which are the primary tool for guiding the fair and orderly use and development of land. A zone sets expectations about what land use and development activity is or may be acceptable and the requirements for uses and developments. Schedules accompany many zones and provide for specific matters to be regulated at the local level. Many residential zones allow for objectives to be included.
- Overlays which are a complementary planning control to a zone. Unlike zones, that deal primarily with the broader aspects of the use and development of land, an overlay generally seeks to control a specific aspect of the development of land. Each overlay contains purposes that specify the planning outcome sought by the overlay. These purposes are achieved through the application of the controls in the overlay. An overlay may include a schedule that enables more specific objectives to be applied to identified land and particular requirements or exemptions.
- Particular Provisions which include detailed requirements relating to specific land uses and development types.

More details about these aspects of the planning framework are provided below.

2.6.2   Planning Policy Framework

The Planning Policy Framework (PPF) forms part of the VPP and all Victorian planning schemes. Those policies of most relevance to land use and development in NACs in this project are:

- Clause 11.01 – Settlement which includes Clauses 11.03-1S – Activity Centres and 11.03-1R Activity centres – Metropolitan Melbourne which set the state and regional policy settings for activity centres. These clauses promote the sustainable growth and development of Victoria through a settlement framework with a network of metropolitan, major and neighbourhood activity centres of varying size, role and function and adjoining residential, commercial, employment and recreational areas that support their function. A regional settlement strategy for metropolitan Melbourne includes creating mixed-use neighbourhoods at varying densities that offer more choice in housing, create jobs and opportunities for local businesses and deliver better access to services and facilities.

- Clause 15.01 – Built Environment which contains Clauses 15.01-1S – Urban design and 15.01-1R – Urban design - Metropolitan Melbourne that aim to create urban and rural environments that are safe, healthy, functional and enjoyable and provide good quality environments with a sense of place and cultural identity. A high level objective and eight related strategies are considered along with the *Urban Design Guidelines for Victoria* (DELWP 2017). These guidelines incorporate objectives, principles and tips for development in activity centres and provide high level guidance for best practice approaches to the management of development within and interfacing with the public realm.

- Clause 16.01 – Housing which contains Clauses 16.01-1S Housing supply, 16.01-1R – Housing supply - Metropolitan Melbourne and 16.01-2S Housing affordability. These clauses provide policy for housing diversity and affordable housing by ensuring the sustainability and efficient provision of infrastructure with access to services, including walkability to activity centres, public transport, schools and open space. Increased housing is facilitated in established areas to create a city of 20 minute neighbourhoods close to existing services, jobs and public transport and provide certainty about the scale of growth by prescribing appropriate height and site coverage provisions for different areas. Residential areas include a range of minimal, incremental and high change residential areas that balance the need to protect valued areas with the need to ensure choice and growth in housing.

- Clause 17.01 – Housing which contains Clauses 17.01-1S Diversified economy, 17.01-1R – Diversified economy - Metropolitan Melbourne, 17.02-1S Business and 17.02-2S Out-of-centre development. These clauses seek to strengthen and diversify the economy and facilitate growth in a range of employment sectors, including health, education, retailing, tourism, knowledge industries and professional and technical services based on the emerging and existing strengths of each region. They also seek to improve access to jobs closer to where people live and support rural economies to grow and diversify. Strategies seek to plan for an adequate supply of industrial and commercial land in appropriate locations, ensure commercial facilities are aggregated and provide net community benefit in relation to their viability, accessibility and efficient use of infrastructure. Commercial facilities should be located in existing or planned activity centres. Out-of-centre development and proposals for expansion of single use retail, commercial and recreational facilities outside of activity centres are strongly discouraged.

- Clause 18.01 Land Use and Transport which includes Clauses 18.01-1S Land use and transport integration, 18.01-1L Land use and transport planning, 18.01-2S Transport system, 18.01-3S – Sustainable and safe transport, 18.01-3R – Sustainable and safe transport – Metropolitan Melbourne, 18.02-1S Walking, 18.02-2S Cycling, 18.02-2R Cycling – Metropolitan Melbourne, 18.02-2L Sustainable personal transport, 18.02-3S Public Transport, 18.02-3R Principal Public Transport Network, 18.02-3L Public Transport, 18.02-4S Road system and 18.02-5S Freight. Transport planning policy aims to create a transport system that integrates land-use and transport, and allows for the ongoing improvement and development of the State Transport System in the short and long term. The transport system should be safe and accessible to all users and development should be designed to promote walking, cycling and the use of public transport, in that order, and minimise car dependency. These clauses seek to coordinate all transport modes to provide a comprehensive

transport system that supports 20 minute neighbourhoods. The State Transport System is to be planned and developed comprising the: Principal Bicycle Network; Principal Public Transport Network; Regional Rail Network; Principal Road Network; Principal Freight Network; and, Principal Transport Gateways.

2.6.3 Whittlesea Municipal Planning Strategy

A summary of the Whittlesea Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS) is included below and includes strategic directions at:

- Clause 02.03-1 for Settlement with an activity centre network that provides for the development of Epping Central as a Metropolitan Activity Centre and other major and neighbourhood activity centres with their own role and function.
- Clause 02.03-5 Built environmental and heritage by upgrading the image and appearance of activity centres, retailing local environmental features and landscape qualities, and attractive and walkable neighbourhoods that use spaces to encourage recreation and social interaction.
- Clause 02.03-6 Housing with differing levels of housing change based on their location, character and proximity to activity centres and the PPTN. Urban renewal is encouraged around Epping Central and Plenty Valley (South Morang) and neighbourhood renewal in areas close to the Thomastown and Lalor activity centres with medium and high density housing.
- Clause 02.03-7 Economic development supports employment growth by increasing the choice and location of land available for employment generating activities particularly in locations with easy access to residential areas or in and around activity centres.
- Clause 02.03-8 Transport which supports an integrated transport system by locating smaller neighbourhood centres so they are served by local public transport.
- Clause 02.03-9 Infrastructure with medical centres, child care centres and other community facilities in or adjacent to activity centres to support existing and future local community needs.

2.6.4 Zones

This section provides an overview of zones within the Whittlesea Planning Scheme used in Lalor and Thomastown's NACs.

Clause 34.01 Commercial 1 Zone (C1Z)

The C1Z creates vibrant mixed use commercial centres for retail, office, business, entertainment and community uses and residential uses at densities complementary to the role and scale of the commercial centre. It is the key convenience retailing zone for activity centres and is applied to all NACs to varying extents. Cinema (and cinema based entertainment facility), education centre, food and drink premises, retail premises, shop, and accommodation (many with conditions such as an accommodation frontage condition) are 'as of right' uses. A permit is required for industry, place of assembly, and warehouse and very few uses are prohibited in the zone. A permit is required for buildings and works and subdivision. Since the reforms to the industrial and commercial zones in 2013, the C1Z has emerged as a significant mixed use zone for convenience retailing areas with significant areas of housing locating in these zones.

Clause 32.07 Residential Growth Zone (RGZ)

The purpose of the RGZ is to provide housing at increased densities in buildings generally of up to four storeys. The RGZ is used in locations in and near activity centres, train stations and other areas suitable for increased housing. The zone encourages medium density residential development to make optimum use of available services and facilities. A discretionary building height of 13.5 metres applies to a dwelling and residential building (but can be scheduled to a greater height) and aims to provide a transition between areas of more intensive use and development and areas of restricted housing growth. The zone requires a permit for subdivision and medium density residential development. Minor extensions to a dwelling can be undertaken via the VicSmart pathway. The RGZ1 schedule specifies several local variations to the Clause 54 and Clause 55 dwelling standards and is applied to residential land within and around the Lalor, Thomastown, The Boulevard and Tramoo Street NACs.

Clause 32.08 General Residential Zone (GRZ)

The GRZ encourages development that respects the neighbourhood character of the area and a diversity of housing types and housing growth particularly in locations offering good access to services and transport. No permit is required for a dwelling, unless it is on a lot of less than 300 sqm but a permit is required to subdivide land and address the relevant provisions under clause 56. Subject to a permit, the GRZ allows some non-residential uses such as food and drink premises and specifies an 11 metre maximum building height (3 storeys) for a dwelling and residential building. A minimum garden area requirement of varying percentages applies to different lot sizes. The zone requires a permit for subdivision and medium density residential development. The GRZ4 and GRZ5 schedule specifies several local variations to the Clause 54 and Clause 55 dwelling standards. The GRZ1 schedule specifies no variation to Clause 54 and Clause 55 or to building heights. GRZ1, GRZ4 and GRZ5 are applied to residential land within and around the Alexander Avenue, Edgars Road, Mosaic Drive, Judith Court, Lalor Hub, Lalor Plaza and Lorne Street NACs.

Clause 32.09 Neighbourhood Residential Zone (NRZ)

The NRZ recognises predominantly single and double storey residential development and ensures development respects the identified neighbourhood character, heritage, environmental or landscape characteristics. The schedule to the zone must outline the objectives to be achieved for the areas. The NRZ allows some non-residential uses such as food and drink premises and specifies a 9 metre maximum building height (2 storeys) for a dwelling and residential building. The NRZ1 schedule specifies several local variations to the Clause 54 and Clause 55 dwelling standards and is applied to residential land within and around the Rochdale Square and Ruthven Crescent NACs.

Clause 32.04 Mixed Use Zone (MUZ)

The MUZ provides for a range of residential, commercial, industrial and other uses and is suitable for areas with a mixed use function. The zone encourages development that responds to the existing or preferred neighbourhood character of the area and provides housing at higher densities. The MUZ requires a permit for subdivision, a section 2 use and medium density residential development. A schedule to the zone may specify objectives, maximum building heights and local variations to the Clause 54 and Clause 55 dwelling standards. The MUZ1 is applied immediately adjacent and to commercial land within the Mosaic Drive NAC and does not specify any variation to Clause 54 and Clause 55 as well as no specific building heights.

Clause 36.01 Public Use Zone (PUZ1, PUZ2)

The PUZ is applied to public land recognising public land use for public utility, infrastructure and community services and facilities. It specifies a range of use, buildings and works and subdivision requirements to ensure public land management and development. It is applied to the local schools, and infrastructure.

Clause 36.02 Public Park and Recreation Zone (PPRZ)

The PPRZ is applied to public parkland recognising areas for public recreation and open space and protecting and conserving areas of significance where appropriate. It specifies a range of use, buildings and works and subdivision requirements to ensure public park land management and development. It is applied to public reserves and parks within and around the NACs.

Clause 36.04 Transport Zone (TRZ)

The TRZ provides for an integrated and sustainable transport system and identifies transport land use and land required for transport services and facilities. The zone is applied to land for state transport infrastructure such as railways and stations and the principal road network. It often flows through NACs and affects the Mernda line, High Street, Edgars Road and Dalton Road.

The UFZ is applied to urban land where the primary function of the land is to carry or store floodwater subject to the views of the relevant floodplain management authority. The UFZ applies to high hazard areas with high flow velocities, where impediment of flood water can cause significant changes in flood flows and adversely affect flooding in other areas.

Other zones such as the Industrial 1 Zone, Industrial 3 Zone and Commercial 2 Zone are also applied in or adjacent to NACs such as the Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard and Thomastown NACs.

2.7   Reformed Residential Zones

Residential zones were reformed significantly by the Victorian Government in 2012-14 to introduce three new zones: minimal change (NRZ), moderate change (GRZ) and substantial change (RGZ). These zones were applied by many planning authorities consistent with adopted housing and neighbourhood character strategies, although many municipalities chose to translate their existing Residential 1 Zone to the GRZ and/or retained zones such as the Low Density Residential or Mixed Uses Zones.

In 2017 through Amendment VC110, further changes were made to the NRZ and the GRZ to restrict building height to 9 metres in the NRZ and 11 metres in the GRZ. A garden area percentage requirement was also introduced based on lot size which has had some impacts on dwelling yield.

Amendment VC143 in May 2018 amended the RGZ to restrict shop and food and drink premises as permit required uses. The RGZ encourages four storey developments and is encouraged in and around the edge of activity centres to support the implementation of housing strategies and initiatives in local policy frameworks.

Recently, Amendments VC148 and VC159 implemented further changes to the structure of the residential zones, land use terms and the VPP more generally. In 2021, Amendment VC169 revised Clauses 15.01-5 and 16.01 of the PPF to simplify and clarify policy objectives for housing, affordable housing and to ensure improved alignment of preferred neighbourhood character and housing growth policy objectives.

These Amendments have had a significant influence on the context of residential zones, overlays and planning policy and how housing and activity centre strategies are best implemented.

2.8   How Residential Zones and Schedules Operate and Interact with NCO Schedules

Residential zones act as the primary or parent provision for land use and development. Where specified in the parent provision and the accompanying schedule template from the Ministerial Direction, a zone schedule can include additional matters such as maximum building height, minimum garden area, site coverage or front fence height. Schedules are limited by what is allowed in terms of drafting and content by the Ministerial Direction and through the strategic basis underpinning the inclusion of any local content.

Some residential zone schedules and NCO schedules can specify the same variations to Clause 54 and 55 standards. Without careful drafting and oversight, duplication of provisions can inevitably result and navigation of the planning system for the user made more difficult. DELWP has recently provided additional guidance about these matters which is detailed below.

2.9   Overlays

Relevant overlays within the Whittlesea Planning Scheme that could be utilised in the activity centre context are summarised below.

Clause 43.02 Design and Development Overlay (DDO)

The Design and Development Overlay (DDO) aims to implement requirements based on a demonstrated need to control built form and the built environment through building height and setback provisions. The DDO can provide subdivision, minimum lot size, plot ratio and other requirements for a range of strategic redevelopment sites, activity centres and precincts across the municipality.

Clause 43.05 Neighbourhood Character Overlay (NCO)

The NCO identifies areas of existing or preferred neighbourhood character and seeks to ensure that development respects that neighbourhood character. A permit is triggered for the construction of a building, to construct or carry out works and to demolish or remove a building or to destroy or lop trees if specified in the schedule to the NCO. Variations to selected Clause 54 and 55 standards can be specified through the NCO schedule. It is not usually used to control built form outcomes in areas where increased housing density and built form are sought.

2.10 Ministerial Direction on the Form and Content of Planning Schemes

The *Ministerial Direction on the Form and Content of Planning Schemes* (Ministerial Direction) sets out instructions about how the VPP and planning schemes are created and constructed. It includes schedule templates and details about what can and cannot be included in a schedule, and suggested drafting of provisions and maps.

Further guidance about how particular themes or issues should be regulated in planning schemes is provided in Planning Practice Notes (PPN) which include advice about how to prepare, apply and use some planning provisions, the required strategic basis and other relevant matters as detailed below.

2.11 Relevant Planning Practice Notes

There are several PPNs that directly relate to housing, neighbourhood character and residential zone and overlay application as shown below.

2.12 Applying the Minimum Garden Area Requirement, Planning Practice Note 84, 2018

This PPN provides information and guidance about how to interpret the garden area requirement that operates in the GRZ and NRZ. The minimum garden area requirement aims to ensure the open garden character of suburbs is protected. The PPN provides greater guidance to councils on where the garden requirement applies, how much must be provided and how it is defined. The minimum percentage of a lot to be set aside is 25% for lots less than 500sqm, rising to 30% for sites of 500-650 and above 650 sqm is 35%. The minimum garden area requirement can be exempted in a schedule.

2.13 Planning for Housing, Planning Practice Note 90, 2019

This PPN provides information and guidance about how to plan for housing growth and protect neighbourhood character to ensure a balanced approach to managing residential development in planning schemes. The PPN provides greater guidance to councils on how to plan for a municipality's housing needs and best practice approaches in applying strategy, policy and tools that are aligned with state planning policy and local housing strategies.

Key to providing a plan for housing is the development of a residential housing framework which consists of a local housing strategy and a neighbourhood character strategy. These along with an assessment of other pieces of strategic work (e.g. heritage, landscape, environment or land capability studies) enable the development of a coherent strategic vision containing a plan that balances competing objectives by prioritising preferred development outcomes for different areas. This is demonstrated below.

Identifying change areas is outlined as a key action associated with developing a framework with categories of minimal, incremental and substantial change. The PPN acknowledges that a greater breakdown of housing change areas may be acceptable. Guidance is provided on categorising change areas based on a range of specific considerations and change categories are relative to their context with the existing built form as the starting point.

The PPN provides direction on how a neighbourhood character strategy should feed into a housing strategy that identifies minimal, incremental and substantial change areas to balance the need to protect valued character with the need to ensure housing growth and diversity. It also forms the basis for neighbourhood character statements, policies, objectives and local variations to Clauses 54 and 55 being included in residential zone schedules, a Neighbourhood Character Overlay or other overlay. The PPN should be read with Planning Practice Note 91: Using the residential zones (see below). Any changes to the residential development framework and activity centre development need to be considered in this type of strategic approach.

2.14   Using the Residential Zones, Planning Practice Note 91, 2019

This PPN was introduced following reforms to the residential zones approved through Amendment VC110 in 2017 and VPP Planning Reforms in 2018-19. These changes strengthened maximum building height controls and introduced the minimum garden area requirements in the GRZ and NRZ.

The PPN outlines the principles underpinning the residential zones and links the zone to the housing outcomes being sought through varying categories of residential change. A series of five principles provide guidance to the residential zones.

Principle 1 - Housing and neighbourhood character plans need to be consistent and align with one another when specifying preferred future housing and neighbourhood character outcomes for an area.

Principle 2 - All residential zones support and allow increased housing, unless special neighbourhood character, heritage, environmental or landscape attributes, or other constraints and hazards exist.

Principle 3 - The Residential Growth Zone promotes housing intensification in locations close to jobs, services and facilities serviced by public transport including activity centres.

Principle 4 - The General Residential Zone is a three-storey zone with a maximum building height of 11 metres.

Principle 5 - The density or number of dwellings on a lot cannot be restricted in the Neighbourhood Residential Zone unless special neighbourhood character, heritage, environmental or landscape attributes, or other constraints and hazards exist.

The PPN also provides criteria for the application of the NCO.

2.15   Building Heights

The residential zones provide the ability to regulate building height through either the default parent provisions of the zone or tailored through the schedule to the zone. The maximum building height must not be less than the parent provisions of the zone and only applies to residential development.

If built form controls are sought for all commercial and residential development and cannot be achieved through a residential zone, the use of the Design and Development Overlay (DDO) is usually more appropriate to provide this guidance. This is particularly the case for design objectives and building setback controls for precincts, particularly where residential density and mixed use developments are being encouraged in a precinct or area.

2.16   DRAFT DPT NAC Report and Prioritisation Tool

Application and testing of the tool that emanates from the Plan Melbourne Action 75.1: *20-Minute Neighbourhoods – Creating a more liveable Melbourne report, DELWP 2019* to the NACs in Thomastown and Lalor is key to this project.

This action is complemented by the report *draft 20 Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres* consultant report completed for DEWLP. This report (often called the Consultant Report) categorises NACs into three main types, outlines key benchmarks for these centres and proposes the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool to assess the current state of these centres.

NACs are described in Plan Melbourne as high streets and specialised commercial and community strips that serve the needs of the surrounding community and provide a focus for local jobs, social interaction and community participation.

The Consultant Report NAC categories are:

- Type 1: Large NAC.
- Type 2: NAC.
- Type 3: Small NAC.

The key benchmarks of these NAC categories are also outlined in the report. These benchmarks include retail and commercial floorspace, retail capacity, population within walking catchment, hospitality, commercial space, healthcare, community services, training and education facilities, housing, public spaces and access to public transport. These benchmarks have been used to assess the selected NACs in both Thomastown and Lalor in order to rate the current state of each benchmark. The benchmarks are used to determine whether a neighbourhood-scale centre is a Type 1, 2 or 3 NAC in the NAC Prioritisation Tool.

In our assessment of the selected Whittlesea NACs we have utilised the draft NAC prioritisation tool but expanded upon it to help quantify the current state of each NAC. These expansions include:

- The current value of each benchmark.
- What level in the centre hierarchy this value meets.
- A brief description of how a centre can meet a benchmark if it doesn't already do so.

The Consultant Report also outlined some additional benchmarks for the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool. These have been incorporated into the assessment of the Whittlesea NACs. These include:

- Safety.

- Level of council investment so far.

These additional benchmarks are described in section 4.4, table 3.

The scope of some existing benchmarks has also been adjusted. These include (noting the qualifications below):

- Community services to consider places of worship.
- Training and education facilities to consider kindergartens and special government schools as well as adjusting catchment radiuses to 200m for Large NACs and 400m for NACs.
- Population within walking catchment to include a smaller catchment for large NACs, NACs and small NACs (refer to section 4.2.5 Population thresholds). The high levels of population within walking catchment benchmarks of 10,000+ people in Large NACs and 8,000 to 10,000 people in NACs is not appropriate for NACs in less densely populated areas such as Thomastown and Lalor. Thus, a centre that functions as a Large NAC or NAC will not meet the population within walking catchment benchmark which is why it has been adjusted to a lower figure.

Ease of Replication of a NAC Prioritisation Tool
The draft NAC Prioritisation tool has been developed with the intention to apply it to other NACs in metropolitan Melbourne. While some of the benchmarks used could be easily applied to other centres, some may not be appropriate. These include:

- Not including places of worship in the Community Services benchmark, which can function as important meeting places for the community, is inappropriate for areas that may not have many other community services (such as those provided directly by local government).
- Training and education facilities including a catchment radius of 400m for large NACs and 800m for NACs is inappropriate for areas that have a large number of education facilities. In these areas, large radiuses may result in centres being rated as larger NACs when they function as small NACs.
- The population catchments set out in the population within walking catchment benchmark is too high for less densely populated areas such as Thomastown and Lalor. Smaller catchments are necessary for these areas.

It is unlikely that a draft NAC Prioritisation Tool can be easily prepared and applied to many NACs in metropolitan Melbourne. NACs vary so greatly throughout Melbourne and many do not achieve the population and retail benchmarks that have been established in the prioritisation tool. The current population density benchmark that has been included is not necessarily helpful.

Catchment analysis is required to identify gaps in the activity centre network that can be filled to provide more walkable services. Smaller catchment populations of a sufficient population density can support the retail component of viable and attractive NACs to fill identified gaps in the network.

There are also implications for network planning in growth areas, where NACs with small and mid-range supermarkets may have a bigger role to play in meeting the needs of new communities.

It is, therefore, important that the prioritisation tool be adapted to the unique characteristics of each NAC it is applied to and refined so that they can be replicated and applied more easily to the variability of NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY
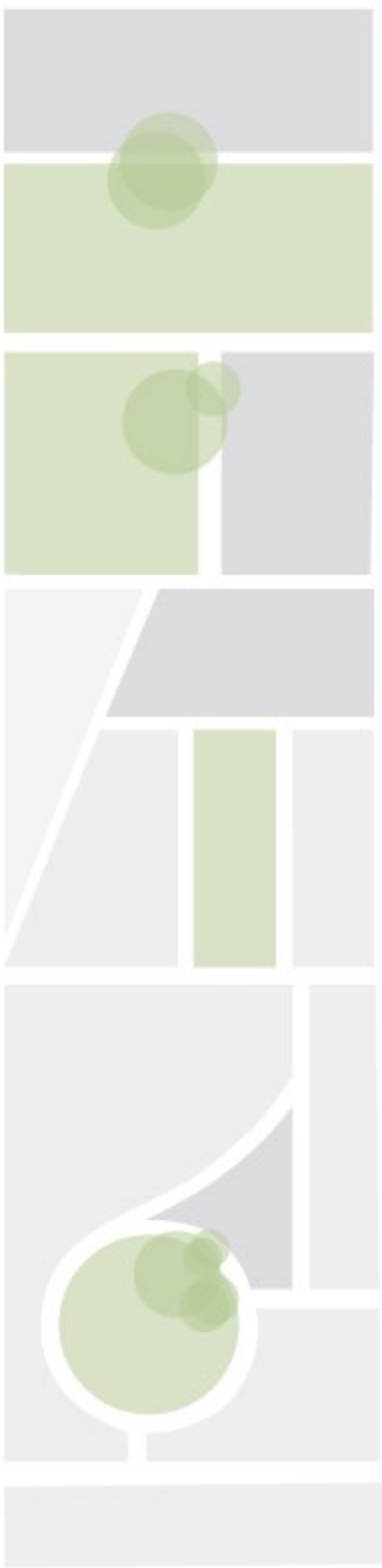
3. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

3.1 Determination of NACs for Assessment and Methodology for Benchmarks

There are 21 existing NACs in Thomastown and Lalor within the City of Whittlesea and 14 have been selected for analysis in the project. The methodology and approach to the benchmarks utilised in the assessment of the selected NACs are detailed below.

3.1.1 Selected NACs from Whittlesea's Activity Centre Network

The existing Whittlesea activity centre network is detailed in **Table 1**:

Table 1: Whittlesea Activity Centre Network

Activity Centre Name	Activity Centre Designation	Location	Town Centre Code	Assessed in Project
Epping Central	Metropolitan	Epping	-	N
Lockerbie	Metropolitan - future	Lockerbie	-	N
Plenty Valley (South Morang)	Major	South Morang	-	N
Mernda	Major	Mernda	-	N
Wollert	Major - future	Wollert	-	N
Lalor Shopping Precinct	Large Neighbourhood	Lalor	L1	Y
Thomastown Shopping Precinct	Large Neighbourhood	Thomastown	T1	Y
Alexander Avenue	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T4	Y
The Boulevard	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T3	Y
Lalor Plaza	Neighbourhood Centre	Lalor	L2	Y
Edgars Road	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T2	Y
Rochdale Square	Local Centre	Lalor	L5	Y
Lorne Street	Local Centre	Lalor	L6	Y
Tramoo Street	Local Centre	Lalor	L7	Y
Ruthven Crescent	Local Centre	Lalor	L9	Y
Lalor Hub	Local Centre	Lalor	L3	Y
Mosaic Town Centre	Local Centre	Lalor	L8	Y
Barry Road	Local Centre	Thomastown	L4	Y
Judith Court	Local Centre	Lalor	L10	Y
Robert Street	Local Centre	Lalor	L11	N
Mick's Place	Local Centre	Thomastown	T6	N
Darebin Drive	Local Centre	Thomastown	T7	N

Activity centre names derive from both Plan Melbourne and the City of Whittlesea Map of Thomastown and Lalor – Context.

Given that the project is concerned with testing the prioritisation tool to neighbourhood activity centres in the City of Whittlesea, all metropolitan and major activity centres have been excluded for analysis from this project.

The centres being analysed for this project include the following:

- The two large neighbourhood centres of Thomastown and Lalor, given their large size and mix of activities.
- The four neighbourhood centres identified of Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard, Lalor Plaza and Edgars Road due to their size, mix of activities and potential opportunities for greater utilization.
- The seven local centres identified of Edgars Road, Rochdale Square, Lorne Street, Tramoo Street, Ruthven Crescent , Lalor Hub, Mosaic Town Centre and Barry Road given their local role for surrounding community.
- The one convenience store identified of Judith Court given its limited local role for the surrounding community. This place has been analysed as typical of a convenience store typology and findings will be used to apply to other convenience stores and their locations.

3.1.2   Methodology for Benchmarks

The methodology used in this project for the analysis of benchmarks for NACs in Thomastown and Lalor is detailed below in **Figure 2** and relates to five project phases and a sixth phase after the project is completed for replication to other NACs.

Figure 2: draft 20 Minute NAC Prioritisation Tool Project Phases and Tasks
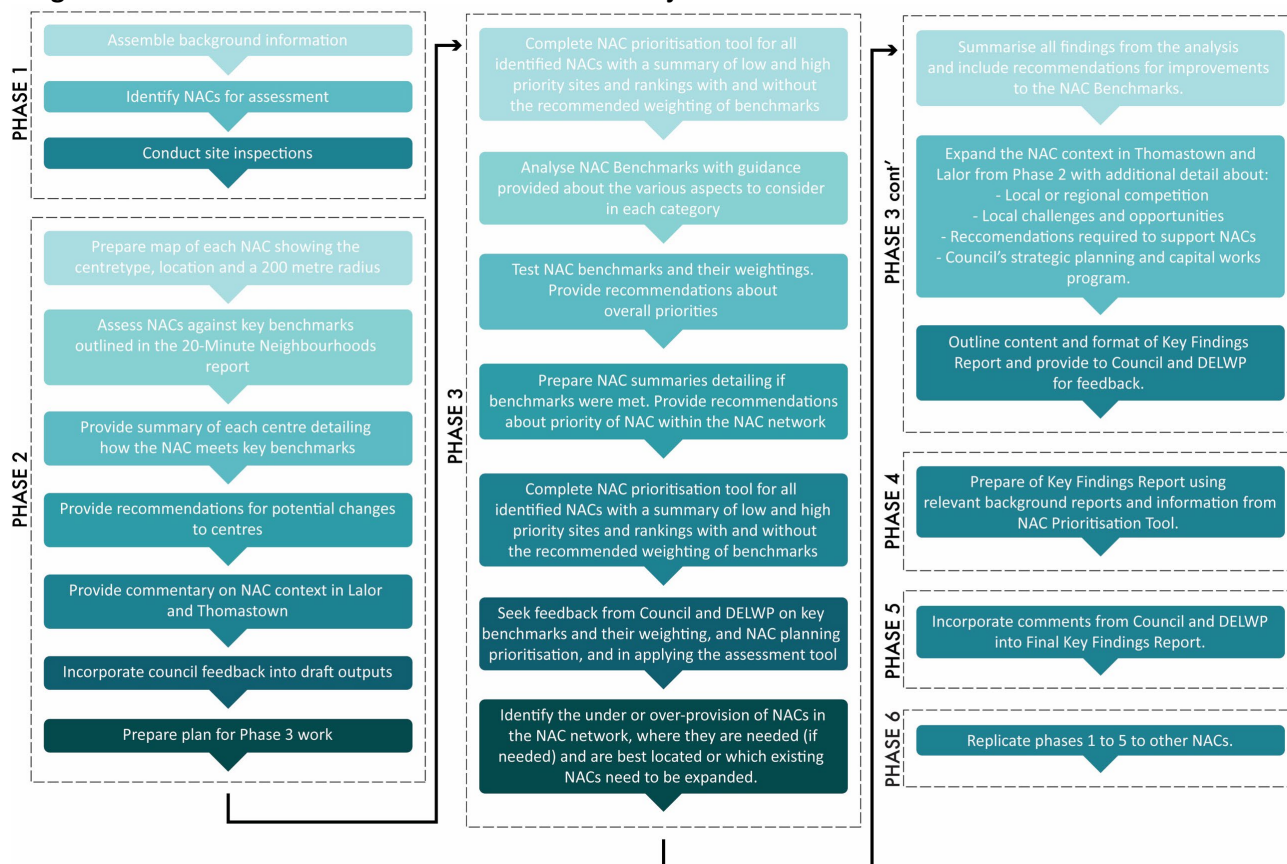
The methodology used in the rating of identified benchmarks is as follows:

- A list of identified NACs in Thomastown and Lalor for benchmarking in the project was agreed.
- Site inspections were conducted in each identified NAC and surrounds.
- Maps of each NAC were prepared showing the centre type and location and a 200 metre radius.
- Walkability catchments of 800 metres were shown around all NACs.

- NACs were assessed against the key benchmarks provided in the draft 20 Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres guidelines consultant report completed for DELWP.
- Additional benchmarks, utilising information that provides metrics and measurable qualitative data was added to the assessment table for each NAC.
- A summary of each centre was prepared detailing how the NAC meets each of the activity items and the centre designation of Type 1: Large NAC, Type 2: NAC or Type 3: Small NAC.
- The draft NAC prioritisation tool was completed for all identified NACs with a summary of low and high priority sites and rankings with and without the recommended weighting of benchmarks.
- Draft NAC Benchmarks were analysed with guidance provided about the various aspects to consider in each category including type, location, scale and quality of retail and commercial floor space that should be supported, population estimates and targets and other relevant matters.
- Draft NAC benchmarks and their weightings were tested with recommendations provided about overall priorities.
- NAC summaries were prepared detailing if identified benchmarks were met with recommendations about priority within the NAC network.

3.1.3 Benchmarks

Benchmarks were determined by providing a rating from 1 to 3. The value given depends on whether or not the centre already fully satisfies the NAC benchmark and whether or not it has the potential to fully satisfy the NAC benchmark. The values of between 1 – 3 have then been used to provide a score for each benchmark and then for each NAC as follows:

- If a centre both satisfies the benchmark and has the potential to further satisfy the benchmark, it receives a rating of 3 for that benchmark.
- If a centre doesn't currently satisfy the NAC benchmark but has the potential to satisfy the benchmark, the centre receives a rating of 2 for that benchmark.
- If the centre doesn't currently satisfy the benchmark and does not have the potential to satisfy the benchmark, it receives a rating of 1 for that benchmark.

There are many quantitative values that can be used in the determination of these values such as retail or commercial floor area and the number of services provided in a particular NAC or nearby. However, there is some subjectivity and judgement that is required in the determination of these ratings. Ratings determined have been based as much as possible on quantitative data. Where that is not available, experience with similar centres, site inspections and understanding of municipal and regional trends/demands have helped to inform ratings. At this point no weightings have been used in determining ratings for benchmarks.

These limitations are reflective of the inherent design of the draft NAC prioritisation tool and the challenges of quantitative data used in NAC assessments.

3.1.4 Radius around NACs

In relation to the radiuses applied to the selected Whittlesea NACs, an 800m walkability catchment has been applied, consistent with the recommendations outlined in Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 and delivery of its actions, which states that 20 minutes, or 800 metres, is the maximum time/distance that people are willing to walk to meet their daily needs locally.

Comparatively, a 400 metre walkability catchment has been applied to the selected local centres in the study area. These centres cannot fulfil residents' daily needs and as such cannot be considered as Neighbourhood Activity Centres, but rather as local centres that meet more limited needs. Thus, it is unlikely that residents will be willing to walk 800 metres from home to these centres and back. The 400 metre distance has been identified as the ideal walkable distance by both Victoria Walks and the Whittlesea Planning Scheme; as such, a 400 metre walkable catchment has been applied to these local centres.

3.1.5   *Methodology for Calculating Dwelling Density.*

When calculating the dwelling density around a NAC, the total number of dwellings was divided by the total land area of the corresponding mesh blocks. Only residential mesh blocks have been included in the calculation. The density figure is measured in dwellings per hectare.

A mesh block is included in this calculation if it is at least partially within a 400-metre radius of each centre. This results in a precise density figure within approximately 400 metres of each centre. A map detailing which mesh blocks were included in the calculation of each centre's dwelling density has been included in **Figure 3** in **Appendix 3**.

NAC BENCHMARKS AND WHITTLESEA NACS ANALYSIS
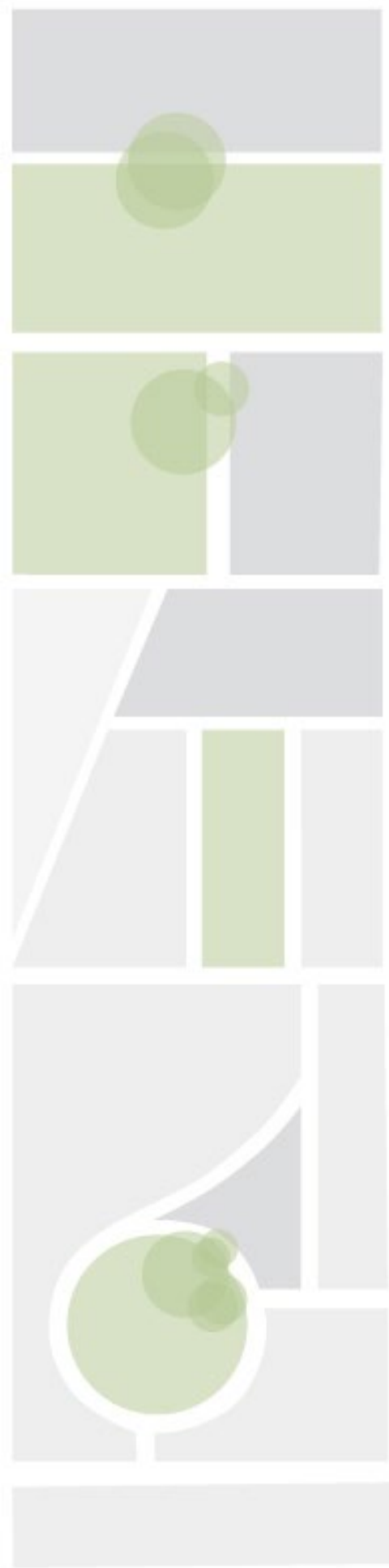
4.DRAFT NAC BENCHMARKS AND WHITTLESEA NACS ANALYSIS

4.1　Overview

The draft NAC benchmarks are provided in the report titled draft *20 Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres* Consultant Report completed for DELWP*.* These are included over three types of NACs:

- Type 1: Large NAC.
- Type 2: NAC.
- Type 3: Small NAC.

These benchmarks have been assessed and analysed with recommendations considered for the identified NACs in Lalor and Thomastown.

4.2　The Consultant Report Benchmarks

Review was undertaken of the benchmarks that was developed by an independent consultant.

A benchmark assessment system has been prepared to enable NAC benchmarks to be viewed on a comparative basis.

Each benchmark has been rated from 1 to 3 depending on whether or not the centre already fully satisfies the NAC benchmark and whether or not it has the potential to fully satisfy the NAC benchmark. The values of between 1 – 3 have then been used to provide a score for each benchmark and then for each NAC. This is demonstrated as follows:

- If a centre both satisfies the benchmark and has the potential to further satisfy the benchmark, it receives a rating of 3 for that benchmark.
- If a centre doesn't currently satisfy the NAC benchmark but has the potential to satisfy the benchmark, the centre receives a rating of 2 for that benchmark.
- If the centre doesn't currently satisfy the benchmark and does not have the potential to satisfy the benchmark, it receives a rating of 1 for that benchmark.

Further investment and prioritisation for a NAC does not necessarily follow either a high or low rating. In many cases, a qualitative assessment is required to determine future investment priorities and other prioritisation.

The benchmarks included in the report provide a useful foundation for the understanding of NACs, their attributes, their limitations, their opportunities for improvement and investment priorities to meet growing community needs and expectations.

The benchmarks include a range of limitations which need to be reconsidered before the prioritisation tool is adapted for NACs further across Whittlesea and metropolitan Melbourne.

4.3　Benchmarks – Issues and Challenges

4.3.1　*Centre Definition: Current State verses Future Potential*

The draft guidelines attempt to describe both the "current state and future potential" of a centre in order to define it (Consultant Report). This creates confusion in the analysis of centres; the reader and the analyst may be unclear about whether the current state of the centre is being discussed or its future potential. It would be more straightforward to describe the current state of the centre and then, subsequently, to describe its potential, based on the extensive range of characteristics identified in the guidelines. As an example, the benchmark examining commercial space talks about "capacity" to accommodate different levels of floorspace. A better approach would be to identify the existing level of commercial space and then identify opportunities for change.

In defining large neighbourhood, neighbourhood and small neighbourhood centres, it is unclear which benchmarks the assessment should rely upon. As the report notes, all centres are different and are unlikely to meet all the benchmarks identified for any one level in the hierarchy. This could lead to different analysts defining the same centre differently, depending on their area of interest. Previous activity centre planning across Victoria has generally based its definition of centres on the scale and function of its retail offering. Most activity centre strategies only make the distinction between neighbourhood centres and local centres; in which neighbourhood centres have a supermarket and a range of convenience services and local centres provide top-ups of a very limited range of goods and services. This can be seen, for example, in:

- Greater Geelong Retail Strategy (SGS, 2020).
- Greater Shepparton Commercial Centres Strategy (Essential Economics, 2015).
- Melton Retail and Activity Centres Strategy (Tim Nott, 2014).

If neighbourhood centres *are* differentiated, this is usually done on the basis of the scale of the food and grocery offering. Typically, smaller activity centres fall into one of the following categories (although most activity centre hierarchies do not have all these levels present):

- A neighbourhood centre is one with a substantial supermarket or its equivalent, usually with a food and grocery floorspace of 2,500 sqm or more.
- A large neighbourhood centre is one with a much larger food and grocery element, usually with two supermarkets or their equivalent.
- A small neighbourhood centre is one with food and grocery floorspace of less than 2,500 sqm, often characterised by a small or mid-range supermarket.
- A local centre is a small collection of shops or a single shop, where the food and grocery element, if any, is usually confined to a general store.

This kind of hierarchy can be seen in the Mornington Peninsula Activity Centres Strategy, for example (although the names of the centre categories are different, the functions are similar). The typical categorisation of smaller centres in growth area planning usually has Local Town Centres (neighbourhood or large neighbourhood centres) and Local Convenience Centres (small neighbourhood or local centres).

Using food and grocery retailing as the principal means of defining neighbourhood centres is certainly a shorthand measure and does not take into account all the other many roles that these smaller centres play. However, as a system of classification, it has the benefit of being simple and relatively straightforward. It is based on what is usually the largest land-use in these centres; and it is a continuation of the existing system of retail planning.

There is a wide variety of centre categorisations, and these often depend on the local circumstances. Nevertheless, they typically follow the patterns outlined above. It would be simpler, for both analysts and readers, to retain the pre-existing range of categories and the way in which centres are categorised using the scale of food and grocery retailing as a key benchmark. This work provides the opportunity to settle on definitions that all analysts can use, aiding our common understanding and making for easier comparisons across municipalities.

4.4   Densities in Residential Areas and Activity Centres

Residential densities in both residential areas and activity centres throughout metropolitan Melbourne (outside of the central city and immediate surrounds) were once at a level that better supported economic and social vibrancy, sustainability and functions based on a traditional type of urban structure. These areas were typically developed in the pre-World War II period and services and employment were often within a walkable distance with densities ranging between 25-80 dwellings per hectare.

Largely in response to the growing ownership of private vehicles and the move to a more dispersed suburban urban structure in the post-World War II period, shopping, employment, services and social

interactions were based more around the car with larger lot sizes and dwellings and characterised by less walkability. Residential and commercial development was generally separated by land use zoning controls and densities tended to be more in the range of 10-20 dwellings per hectare. Walkability, accessibility, connectivity and housing diversity were impacted in often very negative ways.

What has emerged in the last 30-40 years is a growing need for Melbourne's suburbs to focus on the existing and future needs of the community for more diverse housing, employment and services that require a rethinking of the existing urban structure of the middle suburbs that were constructed after World War II. Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 has a large focus on the renewal and delivery of Melbourne's middle suburbs, particularly through actions which seek to deliver the 20 minute city.

Residential densities are dependent on a number of factors. What has been elaborated on above is the dwellings per hectare measure but there are other measures including population density, which is often a more reliable metric to measure the viability of services or businesses for a NAC. Residential density is not a function of building height and these two concepts are quite distinct from one another.

There are many ways to measure density including net or gross, residential or population, and at different scales being the metropolitan, regional, neighbourhood or site levels. Residential density can vary widely across a neighbourhood and is often impacted by encumbrances such as parks and schools, which is the case with many of the NACs in this project.

Whatever the measure, better supporting NACs is partially contingent on projects which seek to reimagine and deliver a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable urban form in Thomastown and Lalor by considering increases in residential densities from those that have been conventionally delivered. There are ways that the planning system can help to deliver these changes by facilitating residential and mixed use developments through zones and overlays that encourage urban renewal and greater densities. These opportunities for particular centres are identified in **Figures 4 – 8** in **Appendix 4**.

The range of dwelling densities is addressed in the Glossary in **Appendix 2**. Existing dwelling densities and target dwelling densities in seven NACs are detailed in **Table 2** and relate to the density opportunities in applying higher density residential zones as shown in **Appendix 4**.

Table 2: Whittlesea Dwelling Density (Dwellings Per Hectare):

Whittlesea NAC	Dwelling density	Target dwelling density
Alexander Avenue	14.52 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
Edgars Road	12.24 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
Lalor Hub	12.25 dwellings/ ha*	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
Lalor	15.33 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
Lalor Plaza	13.29 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
The Boulevard	15.31 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare
Thomastown	16.01 dwellings/ ha	30-40+ dwellings per hectare

* Note: A large lot at 11 Linoak Avenue has been redeveloped since the 2016 Census period. As such, it is likely that the dwelling per hectare density is higher than what has been recorded.

4.5   Greening the Greyfields

The Greening the Greyfields project was a joint project of the Maroondah City Council and Swinburne University. The project involved the renewal of greyfields areas as supported under Plan Melbourne based on the identification of precincts with ageing housing stock and infrastructure, and the major of lots containing housing on large lots that had not been recently redeveloped for greater densities.

The Greyfields concept promotes housing regeneration in the middle suburbs in a sustainable way by guiding the redevelopment of the greyfield precinct and encouraging housing renewal through lot amalgamation to support varying residential densities across the precinct. Greater dwelling yields and types are encouraged within well landscaped developments that are well setback from site boundaries, incorporating water sensitive urban design and recessive/underground car parking. Consolidated lots are encouraged to help deliver improved development outcomes on the site and to the surrounds.

Two planning scheme amendments were implemented into the Maroondah Planning Scheme being Amendment C134maro for Ringwood North and C136maro for Croydon South. The planning mechanisms involved the application of the GRZ with tailored schedules and accompanying Development Plan Overlay schedules and Development Contribution Plan Overlay Schedules.

The Greyfields concept is an appropriate one for Melbourne's middle suburbs, but relies on the identification of renewal precincts that are residentially zoned, with the majority of housing in a precinct having not been recently redeveloped (within the last 30-40 years). Viable Greyfields precincts are based on housing that is of a particular age and stock, at values that support residential renewal and near but not including commercially zoned land. They also depend on development contributions plans and tailored development requirements being prepared for precincts. At this point, they would be a number of years off in the planning of residential areas within and surrounding Whittlesea's NACs.

4.5.1   Describing Thomastown and Lalor

Applied to Thomastown and Lalor, the categorisation outlined above would result in the following picture as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Categorisation of Whittlesea NACs

Category	Centre
Large neighbourhood centre	Lalor
Neighbourhood centre	Edgars Road, Lalor Plaza, Thomastown, Tramoo Street (although really this is part of Lalor)
Small neighbourhood centre	Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard
Local centre	Barry Road, Darebin Street, Judith Court, Lalor Hub, Lorne Street, Mick's Place, Mosaic town centre, Robert Street, Rochdale Square, Ruthven Crescent,

Several of these centres have the potential to provide an improved service and move up the hierarchy. Mosaic town centre, for example appears to be underserving its local population. It could most likely host a supermarket if there were space available in the centre.

Using this categorisation, the local network can be described in the following terms:

- Lalor town centre - a central hub, delivering extensive food and groceries to the Thomastown and Lalor suburbs, as well as a wide variety of non-food goods, dining, commercial and community services.
- Neighbourhood centres to the east, west and south of the central hub, providing limited supermarket services to their neighbourhoods. Thomastown also has a range of legal and other services, not usually present in a neighbourhood centre but its retailing offer is relatively small because of the proximity of Lalor.
- A scattering of smaller centres that are attempting to fill gaps in accessible retail provision but which also have a variety of other specialties – medical facilities at Lorne Street, church at Lalor Hub, gym at Mosaic town centre etc.
- Epping – a metropolitan activity centre to the north, outside the study area, provides the widest range of goods and services in the network and draws many of those who are seeking more than food and groceries as well as those who live in the north of Lalor and may live closer to Epping than other centres.

This pattern of centre provision developed in the 1960s and 70s, when the car was bringing unprecedented freedom to move. It does not fit well with the desire to create walkable neighbourhoods. Many residents of these suburbs are well beyond an 800m walk to the nearest neighbourhood centre. The scatter of small centres also means that services are dispersed; economies of scale and scope are lost. Residents have to travel between centres to access the range of everyday services that they require.

The application of an 800 metre catchment to any but the large neighbourhood centres is difficult to support given the limited offerings in the smaller centres and their relatively compromised walkability. It is doubtful that enough customers/users would undertake a 1.6 km round trip to the smaller centres to sufficiently underpin their economic vitality. A 400 metre catchment appears a more appropriate metric catchment for smaller centres considering their limited retail and service offering, walkability and population densities.

4.5.2   Supply and Demand - Getting Both Sides of the Story

The benchmarking exercise looks at the "supply" of centres and their services. This kind of assessment works best in an area with a single centre serving each neighbourhood. Growth areas are typically planned along these lines because services can be centralised to maximise multi-purpose trips, reducing the need for car travel and encouraging the efficient provision of infrastructure. Demand for neighbourhood level services is assumed to be focused on the single centre. However, Thomastown and Lalor have multiple centres and services are scattered. In this circumstance, it is necessary to look at demand from the neighbourhood for services and determine:

(a)   Whether that demand is being satisfied.
(b)   Where the supply of services should be located to best suit the community.

This then enables local citizens to have an input to the service planning process. A focus on the supply side only really includes centre property owners and traders as actors, and this is only one side of the picture.

A set of benchmarks on the demand side is also required. These should be designed to show whether communities are being served adequately, not whether individual centres are delivering. These kinds of benchmarks are arguably the more important.

Demand-side benchmarks are available, or could be adapted, from existing work on social and economic planning. The following benchmarks have been used elsewhere (including work for the Growth Areas Authority by Essential Economics and ASR in 2009):

- 85% of residents within 800m walk of a centre with a significant supermarket or equivalent food and grocery service.
- One state primary school per 10,000 people.
- One community centre per 10,000 people.
- Level 1 playground per 10,000 people.
- Long day child care centre per 10,000 people.
- 11.5 GPs per 10,000 people (actual 2020).
- Government secondary school per 30,000 people.
- Level 2 indoor recreational facilities per 30,000 people.
- 1 library branch for every 25,000 people (actual, 2020).

Further benchmarks could be created to identify levels of commercial floorspace per neighbourhood; social housing units per neighbourhood etc. Application of these benchmarks would reveal any gaps in provision and whether particular centres would be suitable locations.

4.5.3   Population thresholds

The population benchmarks identified in the 'Consultant Report' envisage populations of 8,000 to 10,000 or more people within 800m of the neighbourhood centres. This kind of population density is rare in the middle and outer suburbs. To demonstrate this, an assessment of population density of Victorian SA2s was undertaken. An SA2 (Statistical Area 2) is an area of statistical geography developed by the ABS to be roughly equivalent to a suburb. The average population of an SA2 in Victoria is 12,500 and in Greater Melbourne is around 13,800. This is equivalent to one or two neighbourhoods and so make reasonable proxies for the population densities around neighbourhood centres.

Table 4 provides a notional calculation of how many of the 361 SLAs in Greater Melbourne had the required population density to meet the benchmark in 2021.

Table 4: Notional Population Density Required Around NACs and Comparison With Current SA2s

Item	Result
Radius of neighbourhood centre catchment (m)*	800
Area of centre catchment (∏r2) (sq km)	2.01
Number of people preferred for large neighbourhood centre	10,000
Required population density (persons/ sq km)	4,972
Total SA2s in Melbourne	361
Current number that achieve the required population density	**29**
Share that achieve the required density	**8%**
Number of people for neighbourhood centre	8,000
Required population density (persons / sq km)	3,977
Current number that achieve the required density	**45**
Share that achieve the required density	**12%**

The walkable catchment around a centre will not usually be a perfect circle and will be smaller than 800m in most directions. However, this distance makes allowances for the walking catchment to be measured to the edge of the centre. Currently, only 8% of SA2s achieve the benchmark for a large neighbourhood centre and all but one of these are in the inner city. Currently, only 12% of SA2s meet the benchmark for a neighbourhood centre and all but two of these are in the inner city or immediately adjacent areas. Population density in Thomastown and Lalor ranges from 1,300 to 3,000 persons per sq km. As a tool to classify centres, the population benchmarks are not very helpful since most centres will not meet them. They may be more useful to describe the current situation and identify the share of the neighbourhood population that is within walking distance. The current situation would provide a baseline when identifying housing opportunities and the difference these might make to demand for services and their potential provision within walking distance. The current and potential future population density can also be used to help identify suitable locations for new centres.

It is worth noting that the 8,000 to 10,000 catchment population benchmark derives mainly from the size of the supermarket preferred by the two largest food and grocery operators. The 3,000 to 4,000 sqm "full-line" supermarket footprint preferred by Coles and Woolworths requires a catchment population of 8,000 to 10,000 to be viable. However, other operators provide supermarkets in the 1,000 to 2,500 sqm range which could anchor small-to-mid- sized neighbourhood centres. Such supermarkets would be viable with catchment populations of 5,000 to 7,000 people. This requires population densities of 2,500 to 3,500 persons per sq km, which includes many more Metropolitan SA2s (133 or 37% in 2021), including Lalor – East in the study area.

Supermarkets do not have to be "full-line" to provide a comprehensive food and grocery offering, although the presence of one of the two major chains is often able to encourage the co-location of a wide range of ancillary services in neighbourhood centres. In the past, larger neighbourhood centres have often been associated with more attractive urban design but this appears to be changing, with new and innovative neighbourhood centre designs with a smaller retail footprint.

These reflections suggest that smaller catchment populations will support the retail component of viable and attractive neighbourhood centres and that catchment analysis is required to identify gaps in the network that can be filled to provide more walkable services. The current population density benchmark is therefore not necessarily helpful. There are also implications for network planning in growth areas, where neighbourhood centres with small and mid-range supermarkets may have a bigger role to play in meeting the needs of new communities.

Walkability is key to the concept of 20 Minute Neighbourhoods with much of the emphasis focused on the distance to be covered such as the benchmark of 800 metres. However, less emphasis is placed upon other aspects of the built environment that influence walkability such as convenience, amenity, contiguous routes, accessibility, or perceptions of safety or personal security. The presence of barriers in the form of infrastructure easements, or transport corridors such as rail lines, waterways, large street blocks or land parcels, or even public open space also negatively impacts walkability and pedestrian access to NACs. A compromised sense of safety is a significant impediment to walkability, particularly for vulnerable or less able persons.

Thomastown and Lalor's urban structure and street layout mostly developed since WWII around increasing car ownership, separated and homogeneous land uses, and lower development densities. Many of the street blocks are long, oriented and directing movement towards High Street with intersections more than 300 metres apart. The less-permeable, coarse grained street network, coupled with barriers such as those noted above, significantly diminish the walkable catchment of many of the NACs within the study area. As a result, car use appears more convenient, and once people are in their car, they are more likely to travel to higher order centres that provide greater choice than the local NAC.

Reducing the barrier effects embedded within Thomastown and Lalor's urban structure will be necessary to ensure true walkability of the NAC catchments. Importantly, this also includes addressing safety and personal security within the public realm, especially for vulnerable or less able persons.

4.6   Additional Benchmarks

Council has identified additional benchmarks of type 1, 2 and 3 Neighbourhood Activity Centres shown in **Table 5** as follows.

Table 5: Additional Benchmarks

Activity	Type 1: Large NAC	Type 2: NAC	Type 3: Small NAC
Housing – Opportunities for growth	Capacity to accommodate higher density housing within the centre and within 400m of the centre. Presence of older housing stock and empty lots ready for redevelopment.	Capacity to accommodate medium density housing within 400m of the centre. Presence of older housing stock and empty lots ready for redevelopment.	Capacity to accommodate medium density housing within 200m of the centre. Presence of older housing stock and empty lots ready for redevelopment.
Buildings	Capacity to accommodate medium density housing within 200m of the centre. Presence of older housing stock and empty lots ready for redevelopment.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality and amenity of buildings within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality and amenity of buildings within 200m of the centre.
Arts and Culture	Capacity to accommodate creative industries within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to accommodate creative industries within 200m of the centre.	Capacity to accommodate creative industries within the centre.
Arts and Culture	Capacity to host public events and festivals within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to host public events and festivals within 200m of the centre.	Capacity to host public events and festivals within the centre.
Walking	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of walking within the centre and within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of walking within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of walking within 200m of the centre.

Activity	Type 1: Large NAC	Type 2: NAC	Type 3: Small NAC
Cycling	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of cycling within the centre and within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of cycling within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the quality, amenity and safety of cycling within 200m of the centre.
Sustainability (greening, energy, waste, WSUD, food production)	Capacity to substantially improve the sustainability of infrastructure and activities within the centre and within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the sustainability of infrastructure and activities within 400m of the centre.	Capacity to substantially improve the sustainability of infrastructure and activities within 200m of the centre.
Safety	Capacity to substantially improve safety within the centre and within 400m of the centre. Safety considerations include: • Active frontages and laneways • Sufficient lighting • Passive surveillance • Presence of roller shutters on private dwellings. • Pedestrian safety	Capacity to substantially improve safety within 400m of the centre. Safety considerations include: • Active frontages and laneways • Sufficient lighting • Passive surveillance • Presence of roller shutters on private dwellings. • Pedestrian safety	Capacity to substantially improve safety within 200m of the centre. Safety considerations include: • Active frontages and laneways • Sufficient lighting • Passive surveillance • Presence of roller shutters on private dwellings. • Pedestrian safety
Level of council investment so far	Refers to how much council has invested in the redevelopment of the NAC so far. Ranked from 1-3 with 1 being little investment, 2 being a moderate amount of investment and 3 being a large amount of investment. *If the centre receives a rating of 3, meaning the centre has received a large amount of Council investment in the past, Council should consider the cumulative total investment and whether or not continued public investment should be made or whether or not funding should be used in other centres.	Refers to how much council has invested in the redevelopment of the NAC so far. Ranked from 1-3 with 1 being little investment, 2 being a moderate amount of investment and 3 being a large amount of investment. *If the centre receives a rating of 3, meaning the centre has received a large amount of Council investment in the past, Council should consider the cumulative total investment and whether or not continued public investment should be made or whether or not funding should be used in other centres.	Refers to how much council has invested in the redevelopment of the NAC so far. Ranked from 1-3 with 1 being little investment, 2 being a moderate amount of investment and 3 being a large amount of investment. *If the centre receives a rating of 3, meaning the centre has received a large amount of Council investment in the past, Council should consider the cumulative total investment and whether or not continued public investment should be made or whether or not funding should be used in other centres.

Additional benchmarks raised by Council include:

• Urban Heat – Capacity to minimise urban heat.
• Flooding – Capacity to minimise impact of flooding within the NAC and surrounding areas.
• Biodiversity – Capacity to improve biodiversity within the NAC.
• Street tree planting program – Capacity to implement a street tree planting program within the NAC.
• Asset condition – The age of, need and cost of asset replacement and/or renewal.

Note: these benchmarks have been investigated and are difficult to rate.

4.7 Challenges

There are many challenges for the NACs that have been assessed in this report which include:

- NAC catchments are often negatively impacted by nearby Metropolitan and Major Activity Centres.
- Existing population densities are mostly too low to support smaller NACs in Whittlesea.
- Walkability/cycling (e.g. east-west) is significantly impacted by the physical barriers of railway, roads and overall poor connections such as a lack of traffic lights and priority signaling.
- People are likely to use higher order centres, not NACs, if using cars.
- The quality of the public environment and east/west and north/south connectivity is often poor.
- The quality of the public environment does not necessarily facilitate significant private investment.
- Council has invested significant amounts of money in NACs and more investment is needed.
- Some residential zonings tend to restrain commercial use and development in NACs and should be re-examined.
- Much of the housing stock around many NACs could be redeveloped to better support NACs and improved housing diversity.
- Public transport, particularly the bus network, and its relationship to the PPTN and NAC could be strengthened.
- The barrier effect of the railway north-south has significant negative effects on pedestrian and cycling connectivity and movement.
- There are significant financial and operational constraints on apartment development in and around the centres (which is more of a regional issue).
- Safety issues and concerns during both night and day.
- Often poor community perceptions of NACs.

4.8 Opportunities

There are many opportunities for the NACs that have been assessed in this report which include:

- Increasing residential densities and housing diversity in and around all NACs.
- Aligning planning controls in and around NACs to support their commercial vibrance and continuity and increased residential catchments through applying commercial and higher density residential zones.
- Improving walkability/cycling by reducing physical barriers of railway, roads, infrastructure easements and constructing better connections.
- Advocating for new Lalor Station adjoining the commercial centre and elevated rail/grade separation.
- Advocating for bus routes to link all NACs.
- Education facilities play significant economic and social roles to supporting many NACs.
- Health facilities play significant economic and social roles to supporting many NACs and provide a niche focus for some NACs.
- Targeting investment dollars, including for capital works, place based improvements and community strengthening activities to particular NACs.
- The role of Council owned land in providing for affordable housing, community services, public spaces and car parking.
- Retaining commercial zonings in all NACs.
- Considering reduced car parking for commercial uses and residential use/redevelopment above shops.
- Building on existing NAC strengths, allowing for specialisation and synergies to evolve with a particular focus on the arts, creative industries and particular retailing niches such as food and beverage production and consumption.

4.9   Benchmarks Analysis

Noting the limitations and challenges raised about benchmarks above, a comparative analysis for NACs in Lalor and Thomastown in provided in **Table 6.** This gives a guide as to further investments priorities and NAC prioritisation for consideration by Council.

Table 6: Whittlesea Activity Centre Network

Activity Centre Name	Activity Centre Designation	Location	Town Centre Code	Rating	Priority Focus
Lalor Shopping Precinct	Large Neighbourhood	Lalor	L1	61	Y
Thomastown Shopping Precinct	Large Neighbourhood	Thomastown	T1	56	Y
Alexander Avenue	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T4	50	Y
The Boulevard	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T3	53	Y
Lalor Plaza	Neighbourhood Centre	Lalor	L2	51	Y
Edgars Road	Neighbourhood Centre	Thomastown	T2	52	Y
Rochdale Square	Local Centre	Lalor	L5	51	N
Lorne Street	Local Centre	Lalor	L6	53	N
Tramoo Street	Local Centre	Lalor	L7	49	N
Ruthven Crescent	Local Centre	Lalor	L9	46	N
Lalor Hub	Local Centre	Lalor	L3	53	Y*
Mosaic Town Centre	Local Centre	Lalor	L8	59	N
Barry Road	Local Centre	Thomastown	L4	N/A	N
Judith Court	Convenience Store	Lalor	L10	48	N

* While Lalor Hub is classified as a local centre, it should be prioritised due to its capacity to accommodate a small supermarket which would allow the centre to transition to a small NAC.

4.10   Emerging Future Priorities

From the benchmarks analysis of the above NACs, future priorities emerge. NACs for future prioritisation against a range of actions are identified by a yes or "Y" in Table 5. While these should be a focus, a NAC with a no or "N" should still be a focus of Council and private sector investments for redevelopment, capital works, place making activities and zonings that better support the economic and social function of the NAC. Also, emerging opportunities presented through private sector interest and investment should be harnessed, facilitated and coordinated into planned outcomes from Council

The opportunities and challenges identified above point to particular NACs being the priority focus for further investments. Specifically the priority NACS are:

- Lalor Shopping Precinct, where the focus should be on:
    - Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
    - Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities.
    - Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
    - Advocating for the grade separation of the railway line.
    - Advocating for a new Lalor railway station adjacent to the commercial area.
    - Improving bus services and frequency to other NACs

- – Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
- Thomastown Shopping Precinct, where the focus should be on:
  - – Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
  - – Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities.
  - – Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
  - – Advocating for the grade separation of the railway line.
  - – Improving bus services and frequency to other NACs.
  - – Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
- Alexander Avenue, where the focus should be on:
  - – Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
  - – Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities.
  - – Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
  - – Advocating for the grade separation of the railway line.
  - – Improving bus services and frequency to other NACs.
  - – Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
  - – Supporting capital works investments in the public realm which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover.
- Edgars Road, where the focus should be on:
  - – Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
  - – Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities including pedestrian only areas in place of 10-20 car spaces as congregation points.
  - – Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
  - – Improving bus services and frequency to the Lalor and Thomastown NACs.
  - – Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
  - – Supporting capital works investments in the public and private realms which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover.
- Lalor Hub, where the focus should be on:
  - – Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
  - – Supporting the specialisation of the centre for food and drink, food retailing and office.
  - – Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities including pedestrian only areas in place of 10-20 car spaces as congregation points.
  - – Encourage the introduction of a supermarket in vacant retail spaces.
  - – Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
  - – Improving bus services and frequency to the Lalor and Thomastown NACs.
  - – Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
  - – Supporting capital works investments in the public and private realms which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover.
- The Boulevard, where the focus should be on:
  - – Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed-use developments.
  - – Supporting the specialisation of the centre for health, food and drink and food retailing.
  - – Sponsoring/supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities.

- Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity.
- Improving bus services and frequency to the Lalor and Thomastown NACs.
- Rezoning residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area.
- Supporting capital works investments in the public realm which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover.

4.11 Cost and Benefit Analysis

The cost and benefit of key actions have been identified and captured in a preliminary cost-benefit analysis as shown in **Table 7** and **Figure 9**.

Table 7: Cost-Benefit Analysis of Emerging Options

	Key Action/Issue	Relevant Centres	Cost	Likelihood	Benefit	Likelihood
1	**Supporting continued commercial activities and mixed use developments**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct), The Boulevard, Edgars Road, Alexander Avenue, Lalor Hub	Council may appear to be favouring one centre over another and, by extension, one group of businesses over another.	Moderate	Supports existing and future businesses and makes for a more vibrant and economically sustainable commercial area.	High
			May result in higher congestion in centres.	Moderate	Aggregation of multi purpose trips actually reduces congestion overall.	High
			-	-	Housing in activity centres provides passive surveillance and boosts the viability of services.	High
			-	-	Improves resident interaction and community development outcomes.	High
2	**Sponsoring/ supporting retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct), Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard, Lalor Hub.	Council may appear to be favouring one centre over another.	Low	Is a relatively low cost investment that provides for a community strengthening and economic investment through an improved sense of place, image improvements and pride for the community.	High
3	**Sponsoring/ supporting retailing and community festivals and**	Edgars Road, Lalor Hub.	May receive community and trader opposition that reduced car parking will result	Moderate	Is a relatively low cost investment that provides for a community strengthening and	High

6	Key Action/Issue	Relevant Centres	Cost	Likelihood	Benefit	Likelihood
	other place based activities including pedestrian only areas in place of 10-20 car spaces as congregation points		in poor accessibility.		economic investment through an improved sense of place, image improvements and pride for the community.	
4	**Improving the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct), Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard, Edgars Road, Lalor Hub.	May receive community opposition from those who support driving rather than active transport modes.	Low	Is a relatively low cost investment that provides for a growing catchment and economic investment through improved connectivity and health outcomes for the community.	High
			-	-	Improves the attractiveness of the centre for residents and the viability of activities in the centre.	High
			May receive opposition from traders if parking infrastructure is reduced to accommodate improvements to pedestrian and cycling environments citing accessibility issues and negative impacts to their business.	High	Is a long term investment that provides a catalyst for urban renewal and economic investment and improved connectivity and health outcomes for the community.	High
5	**Advocating for the grade separation of the railway line**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct), Alexander Avenue.	Is likely to be disruptive to local traders and residents.	Moderate	Is a long term investment that provides a catalyst for urban renewal and economic investment and improved connectivity and health outcomes for the community.	High
6	**Advocating for a new Lalor railway**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct).	Would result in significant travel behaviour pattern	Moderate	Travel change patterns are adaptable and can be	High

	Key Action/Issue	Relevant Centres	Cost	Likelihood	Benefit	Likelihood
	station adjacent to the commercial area		changes and disruptions.		supported with investment in alternatives.	
			Will be costly and require significant state funding.	High	Is a long term investment that provides a catalyst for urban renewal and economic investment.	High
7	**Advocating for improved bus services and frequency to the Lalor and Thomastown NACs**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct.	Has a cost to the state and changes to existing timetabling and services could cause some disruption.	Low	For relatively low levels of cost, has high dividends for the community, particularly for those who are disenfranchised from car ownership.	High
8	**Advocating for improved bus services and frequency to other NACs**	The Boulevard, Edgars Road, Alexander Avenue, Lalor Hub.	Has a cost to the state and changes to existing timetabling and services could cause some disruption.	Low	For relatively low levels of cost, has high dividends for the community, particularly for those who are disenfranchised from car ownership.	High
9	**Replacing residential land with zones such as the MUZ and RGZ that support the commercial area**	Lalor (Lalor Shopping Precinct), Thomastown (Thomastown Shopping Precinct), The Boulevard, Edgars Road, Lalor Hub.	May receive opposition from local residents who do not support increasing densities around NACs.	High	Is likely to facilitate greater residential diversity and density and commercial spaces that support economic, environmental and social sustainability.	High
			May result in higher levels of congestion as densities increase.	Moderate	Aggregation of multi purpose trips actually reduces congestion overall.	High
10	**Supporting the specialisation of some centres**	Lalor Hub, The Boulevard.	May receive opposition from traders who are concerned specialisation will not allow their businesses to remain in the centre.	Low	Supports existing and future businesses and makes for a more vibrant and economically sustainable commercial area.	High
			Specialisation may indirectly result in competition with larger existing	Moderate	Lower order centres are unable to usually compete with higher order centres.	Moderate

	Key Action/Issue	Relevant Centres	Cost	Likelihood	Benefit	Likelihood
			specialised centres in the region (Epping) making specialisation unrealistic and unfeasible.		Specialisation of NACs and LACs to focus on their unique attributes can give them an economic edge.	
11	**Supporting capital works investments in the public realm which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover**	Alexander Avenue, The Boulevard, Edgars Road, Lalor Hub.	May receive opposition from residents and traders who are concerned removing vehicle infrastructure will worsen accessibility.	High	Is a long term investment that provides a catalyst for urban renewal and economic investment.	High

4.12   Summary of Key Findings

A summary of key findings for the draft NAC prioritisation tool and the Lalor and Thomastown NACs are as follows:

- Draft NAC Prioritisation Tool review:
    - The tool is a useful starting point to assess NACs without requiring the usually costly and lengthy process involved in structure planning.
    - The benchmarks used in the prioritisation are often more applicable to larger NACs and require a level of quantitative and qualitative analysis to be usefully applied.
    - Suburb and regional analyses are needed to underpin the NAC assessment and hierarchy in relation to population density and catchments, retail hierarchy and catchments, the regional activity centre network and the regional transport network.
    - The methodology that underpins benchmark ratings are underpinned by qualitative assessments and judgements and are difficult to quantify.
    - Several of the metrics used in the categorisation of NACs are relatively blunt and not particularly applicable to many NACs in metropolitan Melbourne (e.g. a 10,000 population catchment around a NAC).
    - the prioritisation tool needs to be further adapted to the unique characteristics of each study area it is applied to and refined so that they can be applied more easily to the variability of NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne.
- Lalor and Thomastown NACs:
    - Seven NACs should be the focus of prioritisation in Lalor and Thomastown: Lalor Shopping Precinct, Thomastown Shopping Precinct, Alexander Avenue, Lalor Plaza, The Boulevard, Edgars Road, and Lalor Hub with specific priorities identified in section 4.8.
    - Existing population densities are mostly too low to support smaller NACs in Whittlesea.
    - The quality of the public environment and east/west and north/south connectivity is often poor.
    - Residential zonings tend to restrain commercial use and development and should be focused on higher density mixed use zonings in and around NACs.
    - Education facilities play significant economic and social roles to supporting many NACs.
    - Health facilities play significant economic and social roles to supporting many NACs and provide a niche focus for some NACs.
    - Much of the housing stock around many NACs could be redeveloped to better support NACs and improved housing diversity.
    - Public transport, particularly the bus network, and its relationship to the PPTN and NACs could be strengthened.
    - Advocacy is needed to the Department of Transport for a new station at the Lalor NAC and reducing the barrier effect of the railway through grade separation which could have positive effects on improved pedestrian and cycling connectivity and movement.

Replicability of the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool

In terms of the replicability of the draft NAC Prioritisation Tool it is unlikely to be easily prepared and applied to many NACs in metropolitan Melbourne. NACs vary so greatly throughout Melbourne and many do not achieve the population and retail benchmarks that have been established in the prioritisation tool.

It is important that the tool be adapted to the unique characteristics of each NAC it is applied to and refined so that they can be applied more easily to the variability of NACs throughout the City of Whittlesea and metropolitan Melbourne more generally. In terms of this project and how to replicate the project findings to other NACs, the following summary is provided:

- Use the project methodology developed in Chapter 3 of this report.
- Use site inspections and photos to understand the unique characteristics of the NACs.

- Undertake and/or provide a base level of economic information (particularly retail and commercial floor space and turnover figures) to enable centres to be more easily categorised.
- Undertake walkability analysis and scores, and provide them in GIS format.
- Utilise 200 metre, 400 metre and 800 metre catchments to spatially consider the activity centre network and to analyse any gaps that may exist.
- Audit and map key attributes, facilities and services to assist in assessing the centre offer and that of the NAC's surrounds.
- Use the benchmarks guidance developed for the 20 minute neighbourhood project but adapt these benchmarks to the centres that are being assessed.
- Use place-based approaches to inform and direct renewal of the NACs and surrounds.

These reflections suggest that smaller catchment populations can support the retail component of viable and attractive NACs and that catchment analysis is required to identify gaps in the network that can be filled to provide more walkable services. The current population density benchmark in the draft NAC prioritisation tool is not necessarily helpful. There are also implications for network planning in growth areas, where neighbourhood centres with small and mid-range supermarkets may have a bigger role to play in meeting the needs of new communities.

Planning the optimal urban structure in growth areas is critical based on accepted urban design principles that are embedded in the Urban Design Guidelines for Victoria (UDGV). This type of approach requires establishing a permeable street network with a range of dwelling densities that support NACs but also allow for the growth of a suburb and NACs based on changing population and demographics over a 20-30 year period.

Designing and locating mixed uses in NACs is important so that they become a magnet for the community, as is a diversity of dwelling types for a range of different people in the community when a new suburb is being initially developed. Activities that tend to be large consumers of land such as public open space for active and passive recreation, schools and hospitals need to be carefully located near the centre's edge so that they contribute to the success of the NAC and do not detrimentally reduce its population catchment.

Retaining sites for different dwelling typologies (such as apartments when they are economically viable) are key to the evolution of a growth area and the NACs within them. Development viability will be highly depend on a range of different circumstances and there is no one uniform approach to assessing development viability. Advice received to the Victorian Government states that generally the cost of an apartment needs to be no more than 75% that of the median house price in the same area, and preferably lower at around 65%, to ensure an ongoing high-density residential market can be sustained. Furthermore, a median house price of around $850,000 in 2019 was required to support a viable high density residential market.[4] This often results in quite a time lag between the development of a NAC and when apartment typologies can be expected to be delivered in a NAC.

The issues raised above are important to be considered in replicating the draft NAC prioritisation tool to other NACs including growth area NACs and to ensure that these issues are considered in the preparation of Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs) and in their timely review.

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[4] *FINAL-REPORT-Viability-of-High-Density-Residential-Development-in-Activity-Centres-Refresh-EE-Report.pdf (planning.vic.gov.au), p. 29*

CONCLUSION

5.   CONCLUSION

Plan2Place Consulting in association with Peter Boyle Urban Design+Landscape Architecture and development economist Tim Nott were engaged by Whittlesea City Council to pilot the prioritisation tool that has been prepared for Neighbourhood Activity Centres (NACs) in the suburbs of Thomastown and Lalor.

This testing of the draft prioritisation tool is based on the approach that is detailed in the *'draft 20-Minute Neighbourhoods: Guidelines for Neighbourhood and Local Activity Centres'* consultant report prepared for Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), now DPT.

This project supports the general approach of applying the draft 20 Minute NAC Prioritisation Tool to NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne. Some changes are suggested to refining and complementing the elements incorporated in prioritisation tool to improve their usefulness in application to a wide variety of NACs and in determining future planning and investment priorities for NACs.

It important that the prioritisation tool be adapted to the unique characteristics of each study area it is applied to and refined so that they can be applied more easily to the variability of NACs throughout metropolitan Melbourne.

Seven NACs should be the focus of prioritisation in Lalor and Thomastown: Lalor Shopping Precinct, Thomastown Shopping Precinct, Alexander Avenue, Lalor Plaza, The Boulevard, Edgars Road, and Lalor Hub with specific priorities identified in section 4.8.

Appendix 1 – Draft NAC Prioritisation Tool Assessment Sheets

NAC Plans/Assessment Sheets included under separate cover (see Whittlesea NACs V5 (V24 internal)).

Appendix 2 – Glossary of Terms

Dwelling Density: The number of dwellings in an urban area divided by the area of the residential land they occupy, expressed as dwellings per hectare. It is based on the following sub-categories:

- Low density: 8-20 dwellings per hectare.
- Medium density: 21-80 dwellings per hectare.
- High density: 80+ dwellings per hectare.

Education: Education or an education centre is defined as land used for education. This includes the following:

- Primary Schools
- Secondary Schools
- Tertiary Institutions including Tafe
- Special Government Schools
- Kindergartens

Healthcare: Land used to provide healthcare services. This includes the following:

- General Practitioners
- Surgeons
- Dentists
- Specialist medical service providers (e.g. physiotherapy)

Social/ Community: Land used for community services. This includes the following:

- Places of worship - Land used for religious activities, such as a church, chapel, mosque, synagogue, and temple.
- Libraries
- Post Offices
- Community Halls
- Scout Halls
- Senior Centres

Other Supermarket: Land used to sell food and household goods or services but does not include major supermarket franchises such as Woolworths, Coles, Aldi, IGA and Foodworks. This includes the following:

- Private or specialty grocers
- Butchers or Fishmongers
- Fresh fruit and vegetable retailers
- Liquor Stores

'Other supermarket' does not include bakeries as these are classified as food and drink premises.

Retail Store: Land used to sell goods by retail, or by retail and wholesale; sell services' or hire goods. This includes the following:

- Computer or IT supply stores
- Florists
- Clothing or fashion stores
- Home décor stores

'Retail Store' does not include supermarkets as these are classified as either 'supermarket' or 'other supermarket' as they primarily focus on food and household goods.

Civic and Justice: Land used for civic and justice services. This includes the following:

- Police stations
- Fire Stations
- Municipal offices
- Legal services
- Magistrate's Courts

Appendix 3 – Dwelling Density

Figure 3: Mesh blocks Included in Calculation of Dwelling Density

Legend:

Study area
Railway Line
Train Station
Main Roads and Freeways
Public open space
Water Bodies
Commercial and Industrial Areas
Mesh Blocks

Retail Typology
- Large Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Small Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Local Centre
- Local Centre (Unassessed)

NAC Labels

Large NAC:
L1 - Lalor Shopping Precinct
T1 - Thomastown Shopping Precinct

NAC:
L2 - Lalor Plaza
T2 - Edgars Rd

Small NAC:
T3 - The Boulevard
T4 - Alexander Ave

Local Centre:
L3 - Lalor Hub
T4 - Barry Rd
L5 - Rochdale Square
L6 - Lorne St
L7 - Tramoo St
L8 - Mosaic TC
L9 - Ruthven Cres
L10 - Judith Ct
L11 - Robert St
T6 - Mick's Place
T7 - Darebin Dr

Dwelling Density
- 400 metre radius
- Mesh blocks included in dwelling density calculation

Appendix 4 – Opportunities for Rezonings and Increased Density

Figure 4: Key actions – Rezoning Edgars Road
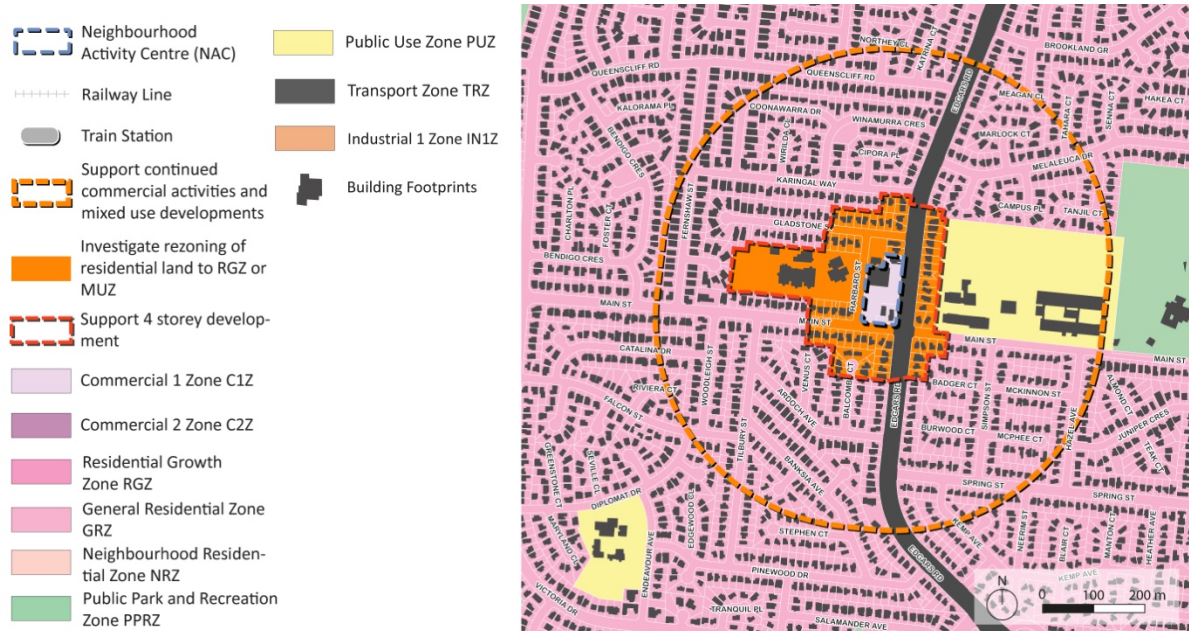
Figure 5: Key actions – Rezoning Lalor Shopping Precinct

Figure 6: Key actions – Rezoning Lalor Hub
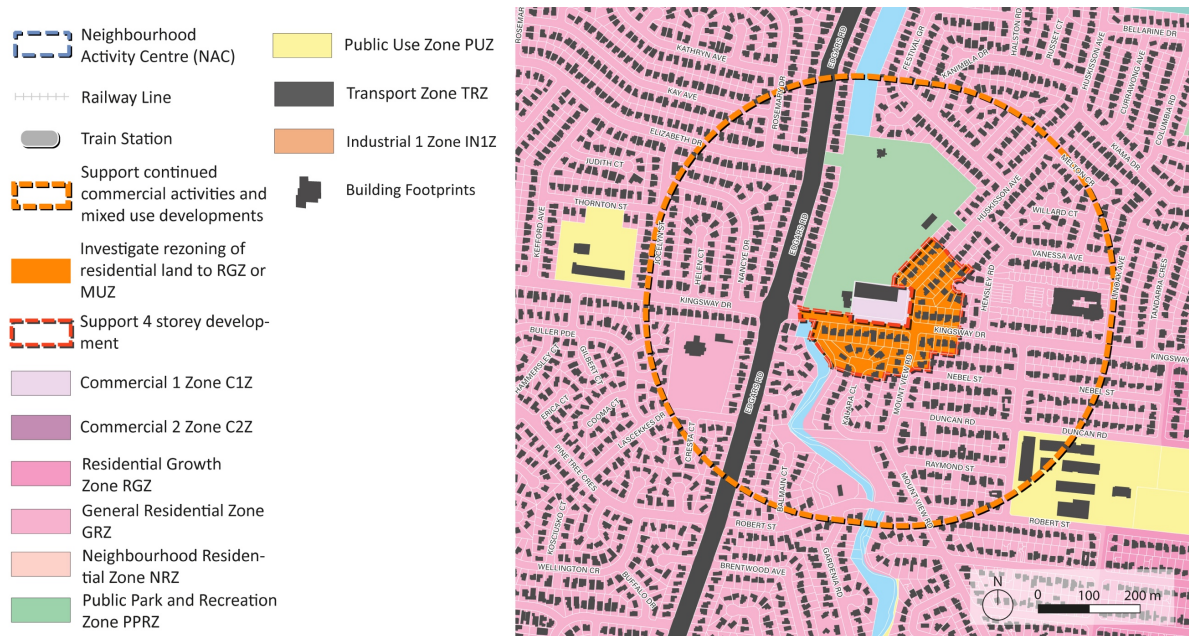
Figure 7: Key Actions – Rezoning The Boulevard

Figure 8: Key Actions – Rezoning Thomastown Shopping Precinct

Figure 9: Key Actions in Thomastown and Lalor

Legend:

- Study area
- ++++ Railway Line
- Train Station
- PPTN Linked Bus Network
- Bus Stops
- Freeways
- Main road
- Public open space and creek
- Road and infrastructure easement
- Water Bodies
- Support continued commercial activities and mixed use developments
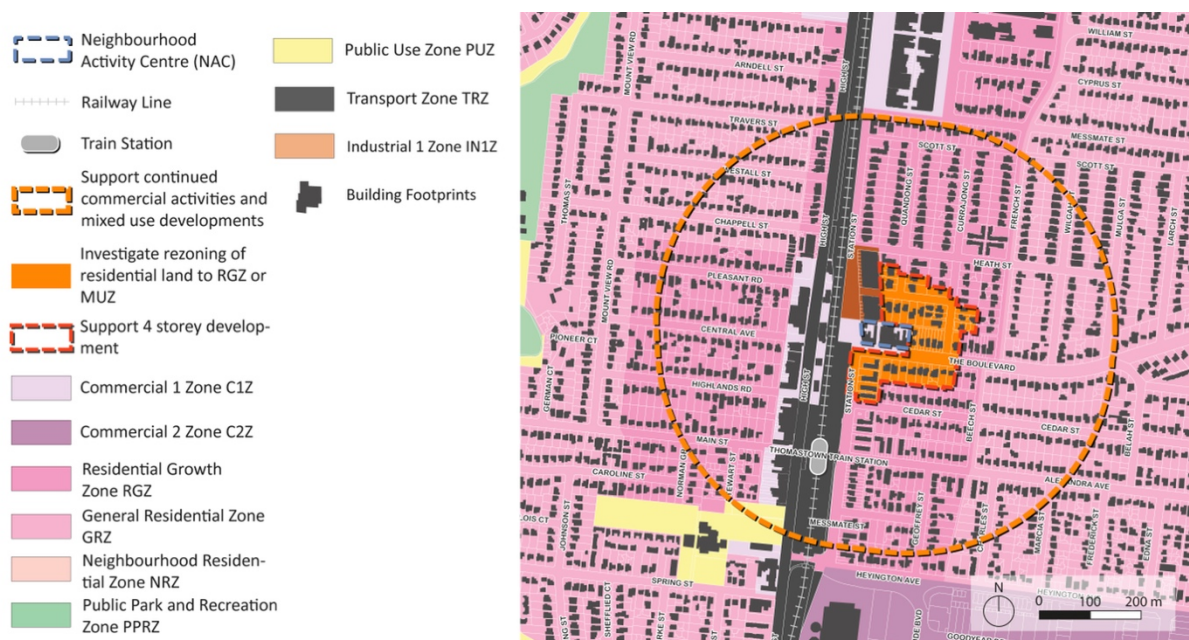- Sponsor/ support retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities
- Sponsor/ support retailing and community festivals and other place-based activities including pedestrian only areas in place of 10-20 car spaces as congregation points
- Improve the pedestrian and cycling environment and connectivity
- Advocate for grade separation
- Advocate for new Lalor railway station adjacent to commercial area
- Advocate for improved bus services and frequency to Lalor and Thomastown NACs
- Advocate for improved bus services and frequency to other NACs
- Replace residential land with MUZ and RGZ to support commercial area
- Support the specialisation of some centres
- Supporting capital works investments in the public realm which reduce the dominance of vehicles and car parking, improve the pedestrian experience and increase vegetation cover
- Facilitate a supermarket on the vacant MUZ land

Retail Typology

- Large Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Small Neighbourhood Activity Centre
- Local Centre
- Local Centre (Unassessed)

NAC Labels

Large NAC:
L1 - Lalor Shopping Precinct

T1 - Thomastown Shopping Precinct

NAC:
L2 - Lalor Plaza

T2 - Edgars Rd

Small NAC:
T3 - The Boulevard

T4 - Alexander Ave

Local Centre:
L3 - Lalor Hub

T4 - Barry Rd

L5 - Rochdale Square

L6 - Lorne St

L7 - Tramoo St

L8 - Mosaic TC

L9 - Ruthven Cres

L10 - Judith Ct

L11 - Robert St

T6 - Mick's Place

T7 - Darebin Dr