

Challenges and Opportunities Report

Thomastown and Lalor Urban Design Framework

June 2021





Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

The City of Whittlesea recognises the rich Aboriginal heritage of this country and acknowledges the Wurundjeri Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of this place.

Cover Image: High Street, Thomastown

Thomastown and Lalor: Challenges and Opportunities Report		
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Contents

Introduction	4
The Urban Design Framework	6
Strategic Context	6
The Study Area	7
Community Engagement	8
Proposed Principles	10
Principle: Strengthening the public space network	12
Principle: Celebrating local culture and experiences	14
Principle: Enhancing movements and connectivity	16
Principle: Reintroducing a quality natural environment	18
Principle: Supporting the community to thrive	20
Principle: Managing urban renewal and character	22

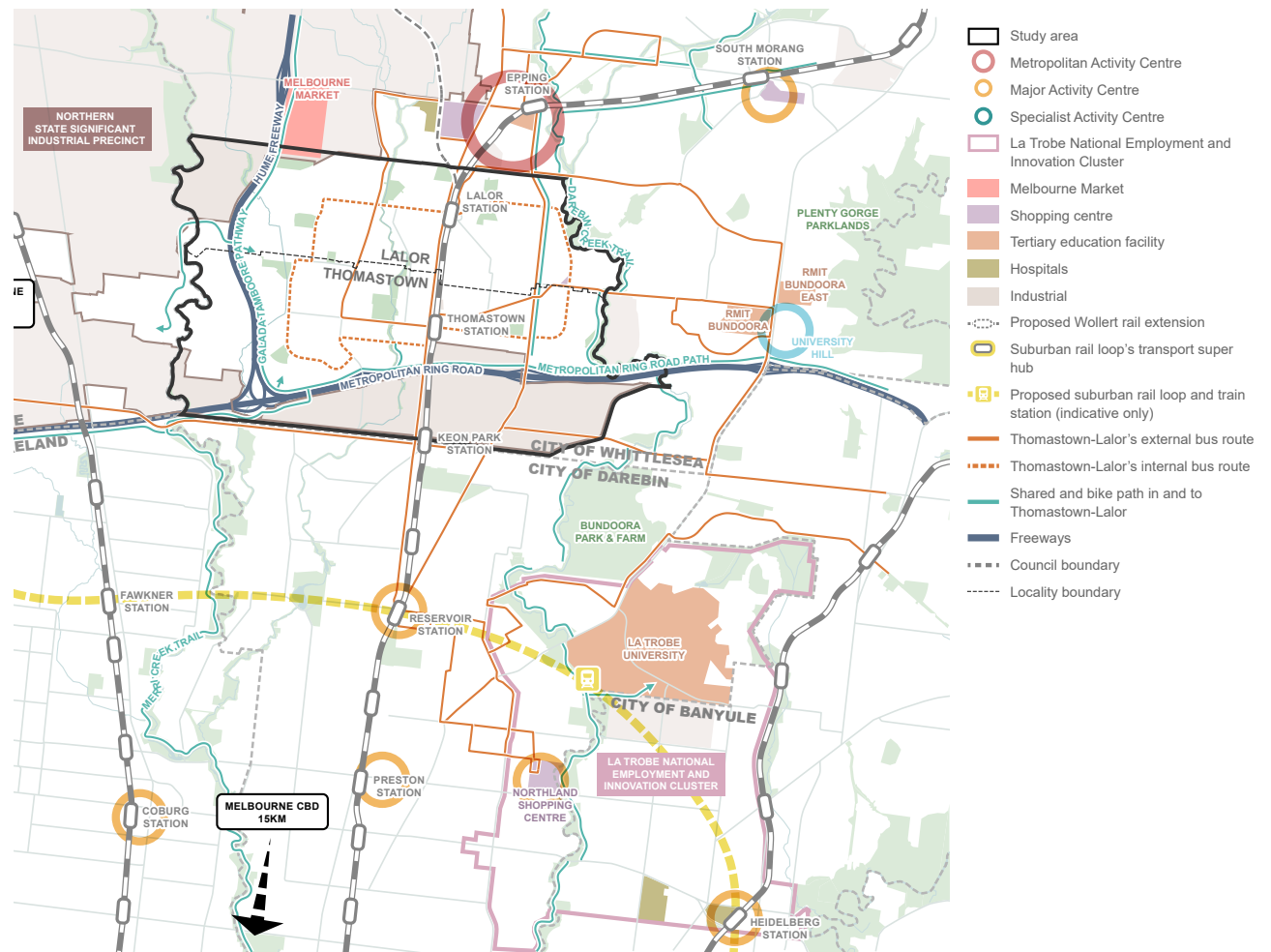


Introduction

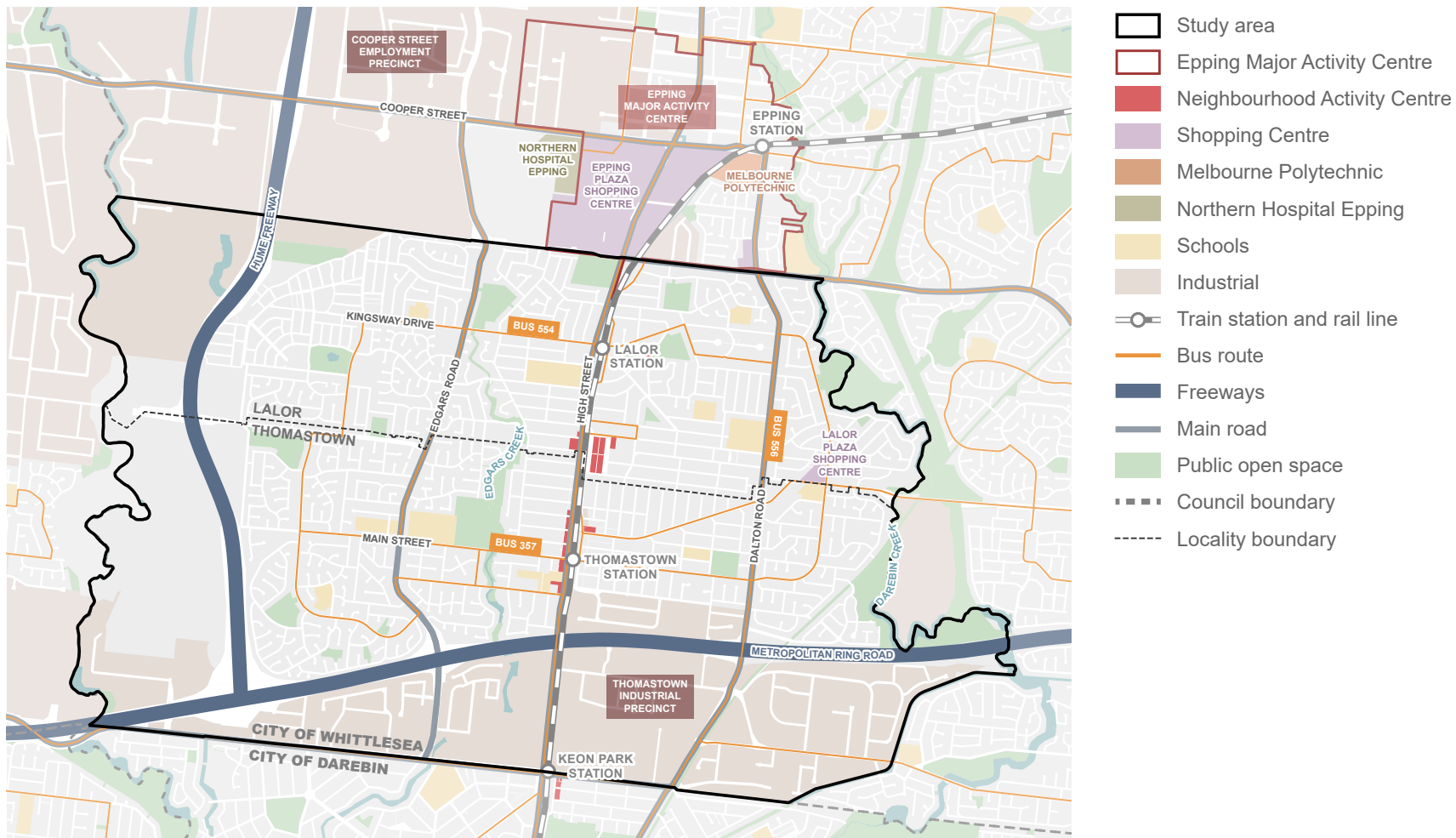
Thomastown and Lalor are located along the High Street corridor, strategically positioned within the City of Whittlesea between the Epping Metropolitan Activity Centre and the future Suburban Rail Loop and only 16km to the Melbourne CBD. Thomastown and Lalor have good access to regional retail, transport, education, health and employment opportunities.

These attributes will draw new pressure to the area with increased demand for residential and commercial land and related infrastructure into the future. Thomastown and Lalor are expected to see population growth in the next twenty years that is comparable to the growth areas of Mernda and Doreen. As the City of Whittlesea's oldest suburban area, it is important that Thomastown and Lalor continues to thrive and that its full potential is unlocked locally and regionally.

A clear vision of Thomastown and Lalor's future is required along with a plan to guide this change. For this reason Council is preparing an Urban Design Framework.



The Study Area



The Urban Design Framework

What is an Urban Design Framework?

An Urban Design Framework (UDF) is a tool that sets out a vision for the future look and feel of a place. It helps guide future development outcomes through a design vision, a set of development principles, images of key design concepts, and an implementation strategy.

The key objectives driving the Thomastown and Lalor Urban Design Framework are to:

- Develop a clear and strategic Council led vision, informed by the Thomastown and Lalor communities.
- Identify opportunities, key action areas and important relationships.
- Guide future decision making.
- Develop planning & design tools that are responsive to local needs.
- Translate the vision for Thomastown-Lalor's future into objectives and actions to guide how the area should develop in the short, medium and long term.
- Visualise key design concepts.
- Recommend improvements to infrastructure.
- Prepare a detailed Implementation Plan.

Project Stages (* current stage)



Strategic Context

The following strategic documents support the Urban Design Framework, by providing strategic context and direction.

Whittlesea 2040: a place for all

“Our vision is that in 2040, the City of Whittlesea will be a place for all” .

Whittlesea 2040: a place for all, is the long-term vision for the City of Whittlesea. It guides all of Council’s work and future partnerships with the community and others. Four goals have been identified to enable the City of Whittlesea to be *a place for all*:



Whittlesea Planning Scheme

State and regional policy contained within the Whittlesea Planning Scheme is broadly applicable to Thomastown-Lalor, however there is no specific policy directly applying to the area. 125 local policy strategies can apply broadly to Thomastown-Lalor, but only six directly apply.

Council Strategies

Several Council strategies provide thematic guidance relevant to Thomastown-Lalor which will be considered in the UDF development, including:



Plan Melbourne & 20 Minute Neighbourhoods

Plan Melbourne is Metropolitan Melbourne’s overarching strategy, setting the direction for managing long-term growth and achieving Melbourne’s vision for the next 30 years. As Plan Melbourne is focussed at the State level, six of the seven outcomes and 36 policy strategies broadly apply to Thomastown-Lalor. Plan Melbourne’s 20 Minute Neighbourhood Policy will be a key consideration in the UDF development.



Community Engagement

To date Council has undertaken the following engagement to inform the development of the Urban Design Framework:

Direct engagement

- Thomastown Precinct Action Group (TPAG) and Lalor community and service providers.
- Held a number of face-to-face meetings with several stakeholders (including: Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre and Thomastown Primary School).
- Participated in the 'Walking Thomastown' event on 23 and 24 April 2021.

Indirect engagement

Community feedback collected from a range of other relevant Council sources and services has been reviewed and considered in the development of this Report.

Emerging feedback themes in Thomastown-Lalor:

- More services, spaces and activities to engage youth is needed.
- Edgars Creek is an important asset and should be more visible.
- People like going to the Lalor Shops to socialise, as well as shop.
- More greenery in the suburbs is needed - along waterways, the streets, and within open space.
- Improved connections between key destinations such as Thomastown Recreation and Aquatic Centre and the High Street shopping strip.
- Acknowledgement of the significant Aboriginal heritage that predates the suburbs.
- Celebrate Thomastown and Lalor as the gateway to the municipality.
- People reported feeling unsafe during the day and at night at a higher rate than people living in other areas of the municipality.

Next steps in community engagement:

Online engagement

An online engagement hub is now available where community can provide feedback and view all key project documents and updates. Go to:

<https://engage.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/activate-thomastown-lalor>

Draft Urban Design Framework

All community feedback received by Council through the online hub and other associated upcoming engagement activities will inform the development of the draft Urban Design Framework, and the draft framework itself is expected to be open for community consultation in late 2021.

What we've already heard from community about Thomastown and Lalor:

What the community loves about Thomastown and Lalor:



Challenges:



Opportunities:



Proposed Principles

Council's research, including previous community engagement, identified principles to address challenges and opportunities in Thomastown and Lalor.



Strengthening the public space network

- Connecting the open space network
- Filling open space gaps
- Increasing perceptions of safety in public spaces



Celebrating local culture and experiences

- Recognising Aboriginal cultural heritage
- Promoting local heritage and culture
- Celebrating food as experience and connection



Enhancing movements and connectivity

- Activating the High Street corridor
- Improving east-west connectivity
- Providing active travel options



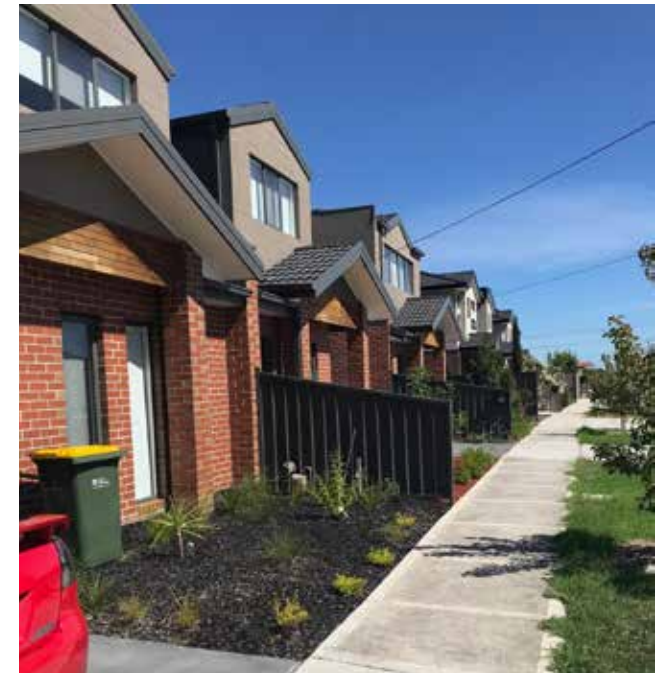
Reintroducing a quality natural environment

- Re-imagining Edgars Creek
- Increasing tree canopy coverage
- Re-establishing local vegetation and habitat corridors



Supporting the community to thrive

- Strengthening community hubs
- Enhancing town centres and supporting local businesses
- Opportunities for all ages



Managing urban renewal and character

- Housing diversity and affordability
- Retaining and valuing character
- Managing transitions between land uses

PRINCIPLE

Strengthening the public space network

Delivering housing was the fundamental priority of the initial development of Thomastown and Lalor. This led to open space being mainly assigned to land not suitable for housing, which is predominantly related to one of the four waterways or odd shaped parcels created by the subdivision design.

Challenges

- Limited quality open space in Thomastown and Lalor.
- Council's Open Space Strategy identified that Thomastown requires one new local open space, four new small local open spaces and two new small local links into Edgars Creek. Lalor requires two new small local open spaces and two new small local links into Darebin Creek.
- Open space is often bordered by rear fencing from adjacent residences, reducing natural surveillance of the spaces which contributes to poor perceptions of safety.
- Open spaces are generally standalone rather than linked.
- Poor design and layout of buildings (pavilions, kindergartens, etc.) within open spaces contributes to their limited quality.
- Access to open space can be limited by a variety of barriers including roads, fenced areas and lack of paths.

Opportunities

- 1 Investigate opportunities to deliver new open space in locations already identified in Council's Open Space Strategy.
- 2 Improve open space connections to create a distinct network of spaces that are safe, inviting and accessible to the community.
- 3 Use Edgars Creek, Darebin Creek and Central Creek as anchors to improve local amenity and open space access.
- 4 Investigate Melbourne Water's 'Re-imagining your creek' program to transform Edgars Creek.
- 5 Seek ways to better integrate open space to support accessibility, perceptions of safety and improved character in the suburbs.
- 6 Improve the public spaces of local and neighbourhood centres to support social gathering.
- 7 Create a strong streetscape vision for High Street, to transform it over time.
- 8 Recognise Edgars Road and Dalton Road as boulevards and improve their streetscape quality through consistent street planting.

Key focus areas:

- **Connecting the open space network**
- **Filling open space gaps**
- **Increasing perceptions of safety in public spaces**





Figure 1: Strengthening the public space network

PRINCIPLE

Celebrating local culture and experiences

Thomastown-Lalor has a rich and diverse heritage that continues to define the area. There are 14 heritage sites clustered in four areas, however there is no identified precinct. The five key heritage areas are Westgarthtown (along Edgars Creek), Thomastown Primary School, Peter Lalor Housing Estate, Yan Yean Pipe Track and Thomastown Industrial Area. The area also has a strength in fresh food trading and direct to public trading.

Challenges

- Heritage sites are not visually prominent from the street or other public spaces and are not visually linked.
- There is a current under representation and celebration of Aboriginal heritage in the area.
- There are no specific local character policy requirements to ensure character elements are interpreted in new developments.
- Few heritage sites are accessible to the public.
- The Yan Yean Pipe Track passes through the area, however it is not well connected to the surrounding areas.
- The Thomastown Pioneer Cemetery and other heritage sites in the area are not accessible to the public.

Opportunities

- 1 Recognise and incorporate Aboriginal cultural heritage and social and cultural identity in partnership with Traditional Owners.
- 2 Celebrate Aboriginal cultural heritage through interpretive signage, place naming, planting and integrating Aboriginal images in design.
- 3 Incorporate elements of post-war built form and migrant influences into new buildings and infrastructure design.
- 4 Support and strengthen the role of community gardens and productive streetscapes.
- 5 Better define the Westgarthtown precinct by utilising Edgars Creek linear link.
- 6 Promote local heritage sites and markets as tourist attractions.
- 7 Identify locations for community gardens, events and cultural celebrations.
- 8 Investigate opportunities for improved community connections with the Thomastown Pioneer Cemetery.
- 9 Better connect and utilise the Yan Yean Pipe Track.

Key focus areas:

- **Recognising Aboriginal cultural heritage**
- **Promoting local heritage and culture**
- **Celebrating food as experience and connection**

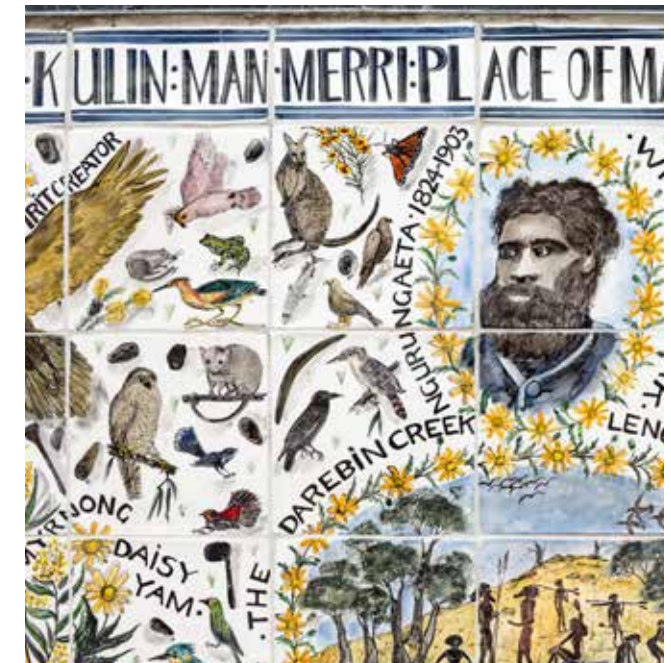




Figure 2: Celebrating local culture and experiences

PRINCIPLE

Enhancing movements and connectivity

Thomastown and Lalor contain three significant transport infrastructure elements: the Hume Freeway, Metropolitan Ring Road and Mernda Rail line. They also feature a comprehensive arterial and local road network. The Metropolitan Ring Road shared path and Galada Tamboore Pathway provide off-road links to surrounding suburbs.

Challenges

- The Mernda Rail line provides access to three train stations but as it has been delivered at ground level, it also presents a physical barrier.
- Traffic congestion caused by level-crossings: community cannot easily move across the suburbs due the limited number of rail crossings and delays when these crossings are closed. This effectively splits the suburbs into two halves which is also reflected in the bus network provision.
- High Street is currently a Principal Freight Network route, however this route will soon be relocated to Edgars Road.
- Existing transmission line easements are in private ownership and not publicly accessible.
- The Hume Freeway presents a barrier to accessing significant open space to the west.
- The Metropolitan Ring Road presents a barrier to the south and limits connectivity.
- The future E6 may present additional barriers to movement to the east when it is delivered.
- Very few shared path links are provided through the local street network.

Opportunities

- 1 Improve active and sustainable transport and options around neighbourhood centres and train stations to improve health and climate mitigation outcomes.
- 2 Connect people to destinations and public transport through green transport hubs.
- 3 Revisit High Street's transport mode priorities following its freight role removal.
- 4 Better utilise utility easements and creek corridors to provide off road connections through the area.
- 5 Implement the Northern Regional Trail Strategy to maximise connectivity, safety and amenity.
- 6 Level crossing removals or improved rail crossings can facilitate improved transport connectivity for all transport modes.
- 7 Seek ways to improve connections from residential and industrial areas to Merri Creek and Galada Tamboore.
- 8 Identify opportunities for cycling routes along local roads to improve safety and accessibility.
- 9 Ensure planning for the E6 considers the importance of maintaining east-west connectivity.

Key focus areas:

- **Activating the High Street corridor**
- **Improving east-west connectivity**
- **Providing active travel options**





Figure 3: Enhancing movements and connectivity

PRINCIPLE

Reintroducing a quality natural environment

The natural environment of Thomastown and Lalor is derived from the suburbs' location within the Victorian Volcanic Plains. Key features of the pre-contact natural environment of Thomastown and Lalor included flat topography, shallow waterways, stony rises and scattered River Red Gums. There are clear links between the quality of natural environments, liveability and human health benefits.

Challenges

- Very little pre-contact natural environment remains in Thomastown-Lalor. Small fragmented remnants have risks such as weed encroachment, human disturbance and climate change impacts.
- Two ecological communities of the Victorian Volcanic Plains, the Natural Temperate Grassland and the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland, are listed as critically endangered communities.
- Some sections of the waterways in Thomastown and Lalor have been concreted into drains which has reduced the amenity of these waterways and their connection to the natural environment.
- Very few River Red Gums remain.
- The area has the lowest municipal canopy cover of less than 7% and an existing pattern of canopy tree loss through new developments.
- Reintroducing natural elements into an existing developed area will be challenging due to existing fixed infrastructure and private landholdings.
- Some areas of public land along creeks have been encroached by extended backyards.

Opportunities

- 1 Reintroduce the values of the Victorian Volcanic Plain through publicly owned land including streets, open spaces, waterways and schools.
- 2 Preserve and expand the remaining pre-1750 natural environment in Thomastown and Lalor, including small stands adjacent to waterways.
- 3 Use waterways as environmental assets to help facilitate larger open space areas which provide habitat links between larger conservation sites.
- 4 Investigate re-naturalisation of some sections of the concreted waterways in Thomastown-Lalor.
- 5 Embed biodiversity and Water Sensitive Urban Design principles in infrastructure design.
- 6 Incorporate actions from Council's Integrated Water Management Strategy.
- 7 Introduce wild areas through layered locally indigenous vegetation - canopy, shrub layer ground cover and other habitat elements such as tree hollows and logs to support native species.
- 8 Increase native tree planting in public spaces, including open space, streets and car parking areas to support climate change resilience.

Key focus areas:

- **Re-imagining Edgars Creek**
- **Increasing tree canopy coverage**
- **Re-establishing local vegetation and habitat corridors**



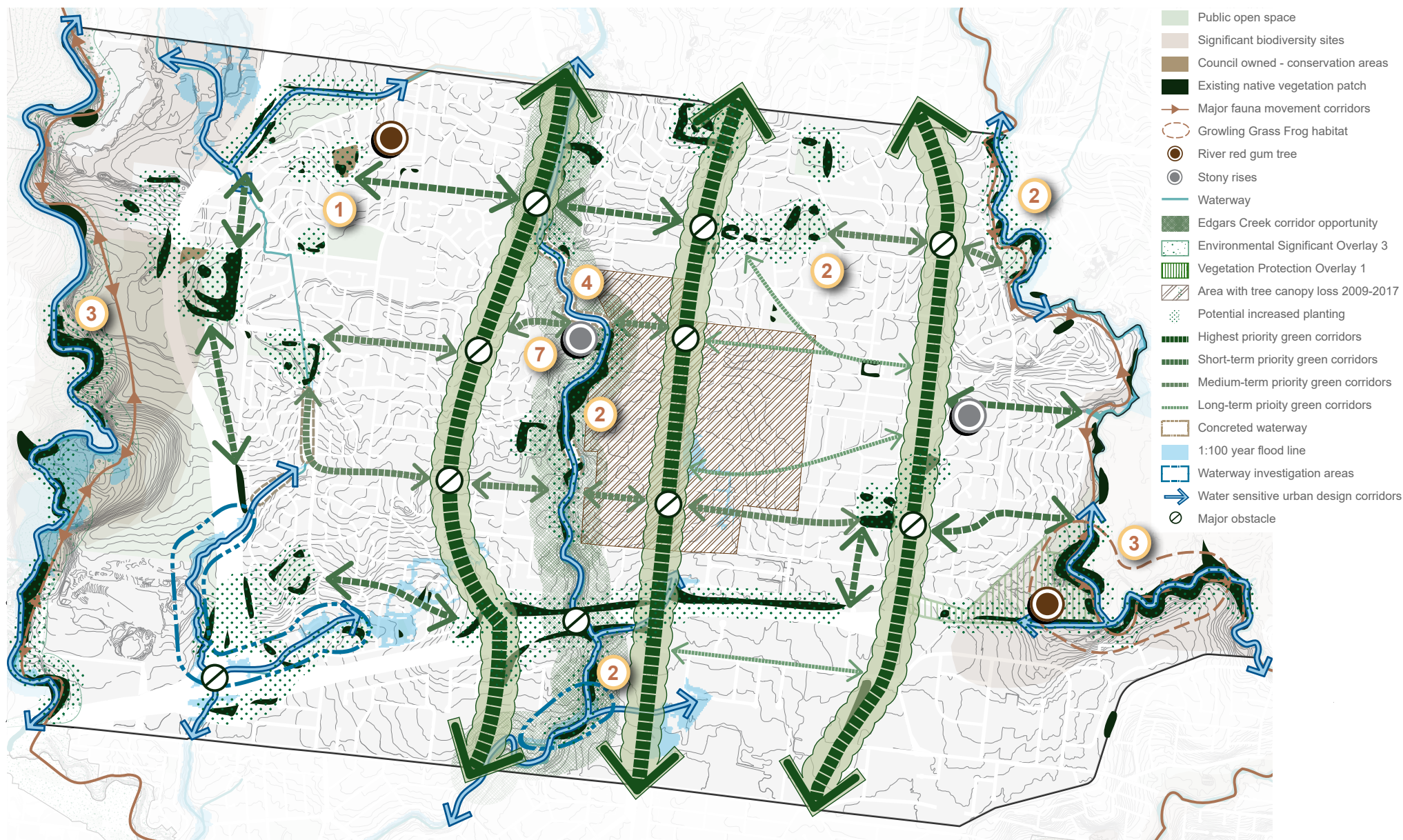


Figure 4: Reintroducing a quality natural environment

PRINCIPLE

Supporting the community to thrive

Thomastown and Lalor are vibrant and diverse suburbs, home to a community that is passionate about where they live, work and do business. A thriving community needs access to appropriate services, community hubs, strong local businesses and local employment.

Challenges

- Thomastown and Lalor's community experiences higher than average levels of disadvantage, unemployment and youth disengagement and kindergarten non-participation. The areas also have an ageing migrant population, lower education attainment rates, low levels of English fluency, considerable mortgage and rental stress and difficulties with transport.
- Thomastown-Lalor has ageing infrastructure and oversubscribed community spaces and the demand for community infrastructure and social services is increasing. Existing community infrastructure may not meet the future demand of the changing population.
- Some existing community infrastructure sites have limited potential for further expansion while the expansion of some sites may impact on other community provision such as open space.
- Town centres are aging and may not attract the community to visit local businesses and stay to connect with other people.
- Local retail centres compete with larger regional offerings in nearby Epping.

Opportunities

- 1 Investigate ways of upgrading or retrofitting existing infrastructure to meet demand.
- 2 Co-locate services to improve accessibility.
- 3 Improve access to nature and open space to support community health benefits.
- 4 Create places and spaces designed for youth.
- 5 Improve accessibility and amenity of places to gather, including town centres, community hubs and open spaces, with events and a variety of activities to attract people to visit and stay.
- 6 Better communicate the presence of local services, town centres and community facilities through wayfinding signage.
- 7 Support local businesses and job creation.
- 8 Celebrate and support the unique offering of small businesses in the area.
- 9 Improve town centres to support local businesses to maximise trading opportunities and provide gathering spaces for community.
- 10 Improve amenity to attract businesses and support workers in core employment hubs.

Key focus areas:

- **Strengthening community hubs**
- **Enhancing town centres and supporting local businesses**
- **Opportunities for all ages**



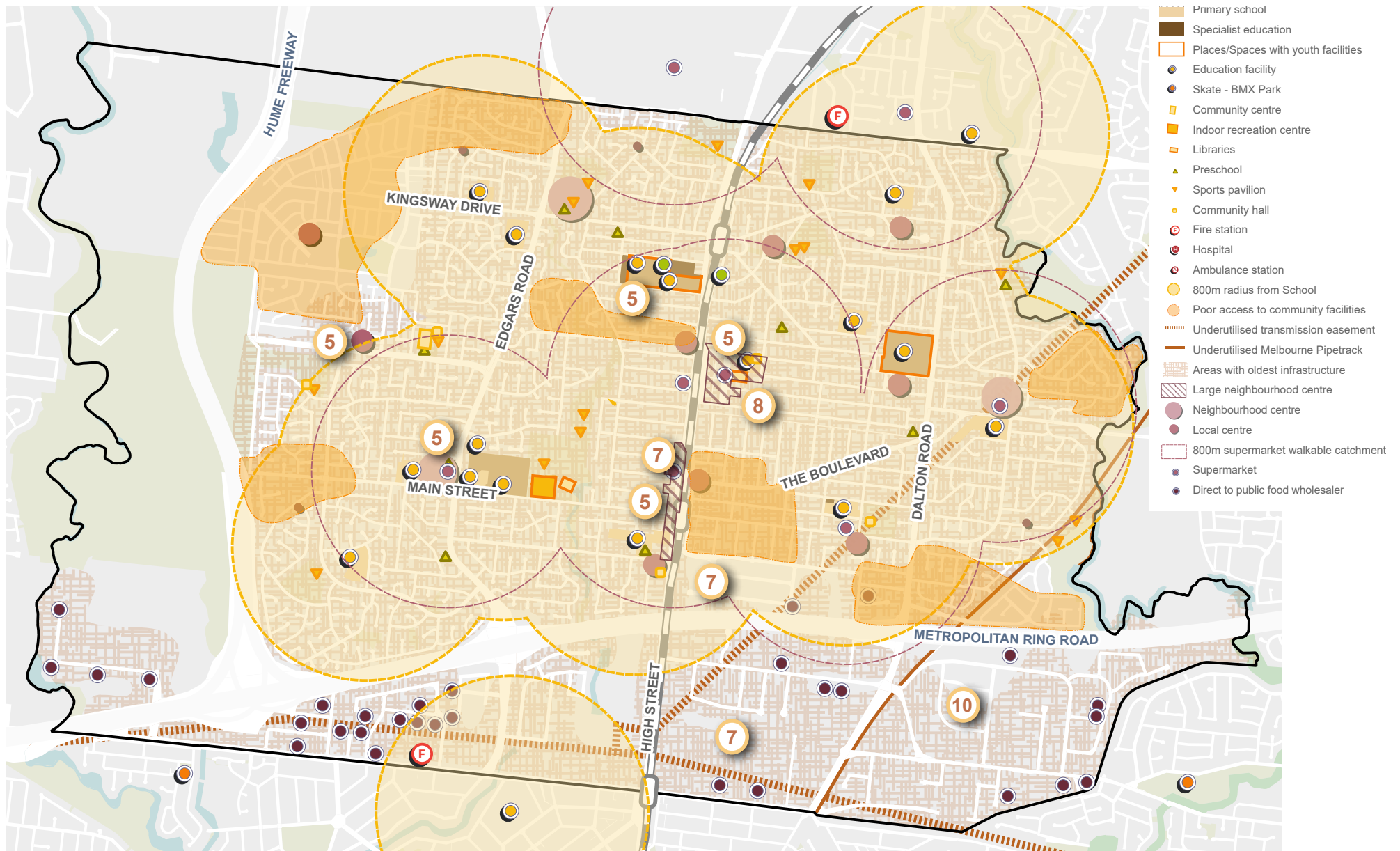


Figure 5: Supporting the community to thrive

PRINCIPLE

Managing urban renewal and character

Thomastown and Lalor are facing increasing redevelopment pressure, with the area transitioning from single dwellings on lots to duplexes, multi-unit developments, townhouses and small scale apartments. The Housing Diversity Strategy identifies areas along the High Street spine for increased housing diversity due to its accessibility to public transport, employment and other services.

Challenges

- The area is becoming increasingly unaffordable for existing residents due to increased housing costs and site redevelopments.
- Infill developments presently may not provide an appropriate built form response to existing character.
- Some abrupt changes in land use (e.g. industrial to residential) are present within the area and do not always have specific guidance to manage this change appropriately.
- Higher density developments rely mainly on existing Planning Scheme controls that may not deliver outcomes in line with local expectations.
- Community concerns relating to the bulk of new developments, built form and site coverage have been raised.

Opportunities

- 1 Improve industrial building design where adjacent to residential areas and suburb entry points.
- 2 Improved residential designs to provide passive surveillance opportunities to open space, creek corridors, transmission easements and car parks.
- 3 Prepare design guidelines for future development, with specific guidance for highly visible locations and/or adjacent to important public spaces.
- 4 Seek ways to improve development designs to benefit community outcomes in public spaces.
- 5 Medium to high density residential developments should be encouraged around the train stations, neighbourhood centres and public open space.
- 6 Align existing actions from Council's Thomastown Industrial Area Plan with the findings of this report.
- 7 Earthy tones should be the preference in colour and material selection for the broader Thomastown and Lalor area.
- 8 Leverage large lots and laneways to deliver different housing typologies to maintain affordability.

Key focus areas:

- **Housing diversity and affordability**
- **Retaining and valuing character**
- **Managing transitions between land uses**



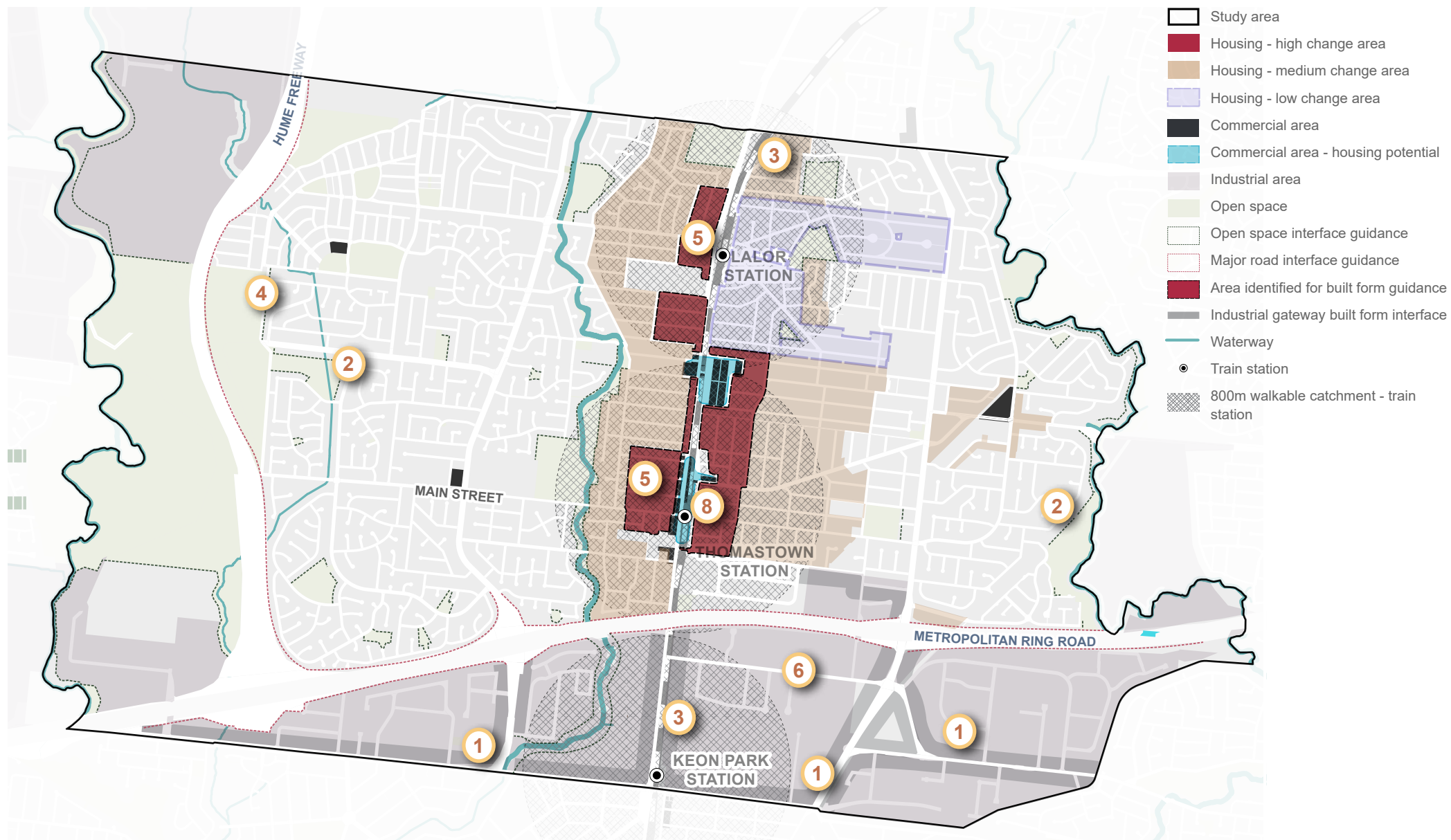


Figure 6: Managing urban renewal and character

