



City of Darebin

Preston (High Street)

Submission to Activity Centre Program

27/09/2024

Acknowledgement of Country

Darebin City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waters we now call Darebin and affirms that Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people have lived on this land for millennia, practising their customs and ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. Council acknowledges that Elders past, present and emerging are central to the cohesion, intergenerational wellbeing and ongoing self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. They have played and continue to play a pivotal role in maintaining and transmitting culture, history and language.

Council respects and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' values, living culture and practices, including their continuing spiritual connection to the land and waters and their right to self-determination. Council also recognises the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities have had and continue to play a unique role in the life of the Darebin municipality. Council recognises and values this ongoing contribution and its significant value for our city and Australian society more broadly.



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Introduction

Darebin is pleased to contribute to the engagement process for the 'Preston (High Street)' Activity Centre Plan (Preston AC Plan), which establishes a framework for growth and urban development for Preston Central (the Centre) through to 2034.

Darebin welcomes this opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to enhance planning and investment in the Centre. We support the intent within the Housing Statement and Activity Centre Program to update planning controls, aimed at increasing housing supply and diversity, and enhancing public spaces and community infrastructure in the Centre.

Council is encouraged by the Victorian Government's intention to use our Draft Preston Central Structure Plan to inform their plan. This plan, developed through comprehensive community consultation by Council, will guide the Centre's development in addressing housing needs while promoting sustainable and inclusive growth.

Our submission is based on key advocacy principles resolved at the Special Council meeting held on August 14, 2024, and provides local insights on the following areas: (i) engagement process, (ii) built form and housing, (iii) infrastructure planning, (iv) transport planning, and (v) place making.

Engagement process

Transparent planning processes and community engagement

Council has made significant progress in planning for the Centre, supported by extensive technical work and community engagement. We have sought authorisation to prepare and exhibit Amendment C218dare to implement the draft Structure Plan and Built Form Framework. Council is still awaiting the Minister's decision on authorisation of the amendment. To help the community understand the planning process, it is important that a decision on Amendment C218dare and how it feeds into the state's new work is communicated.

Community involvement and transparency are vital for aligning the Preston AC Plan with local needs and

goals. Darebin strongly believes that community input is critical to the success and vibrancy of our activity centres. To this end, decisions must be informed by a welcoming engagement and communications process designed to reach our diverse community by clearly sharing the proposed changes to the planning settings.

The current consultation being undertaken by the Victorian Government limits meaningful community and Council involvement. The consultation includes no detailed information on proposed planning provisions, controls, and maps, without which public understanding on the level of impact and change to current planning processes is limited.

A typical Standing Advisory Committee (SAC) process is intended to involve input from councils and local communities. However, the current proposal lacks adequate public or Council input and omits a public hearing. Darebin advocates for a more participatory SAC review process that includes contributions from both the community and the Council.

Improving transparency in the engagement process can lead to better outcomes. Findings from independent panels or an advisory committee should be publicly released to enable informed and transparent decisions. Darebin urges that these findings be accessible before the Minister's final decision and recommends that the report from any independent panel be released within 10 days of its submission.

Allowing sufficient time for community and stakeholder engagement is crucial for informed decision-making and improved planning outcomes. The Preston AC Plan suggests expediting the planning scheme amendment process to make land "development-ready". While it's important to be efficient, a rushed process without clearly tested planning provisions for the Centre and its catchment could lead to incoherent implementation of controls that are not sufficiently informed by community and stakeholder feedback.

To ensure a thorough review, Darebin encourages delaying the gazettal of planning changes until no earlier than early 2025. This would allow the newly elected Council sufficient time to review proposals



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thoroughly after local government elections later this year, and to form a considered position on draft planning controls and independent advice given to the Minister for consideration ahead of final approval.

What we would like to see:

- Incorporate a transparent engagement and planning process that actively seeks and values local community input to ensure the success and vibrancy of the Centre.
- Decisions are informed by an inclusive and welcoming engagement and communications process that is designed to reach our diverse community, and that provides the opportunity for the community to write submissions to inform the outcomes of any planning changes.
- Maintain public transparency by establishing an independent panel to consider submissions and draft planning controls, advise on final planning provisions, and publicly release its report within 10 days of submission to the Minister.
- Ministerial gazettal occurs in early 2025 at the earliest to allow independent review and for Council to form a considered position on draft planning controls and outcomes of any independent advice, for the Minister to consider ahead of final approval.

Alignment of state-led planning with local objectives

Council has advanced planning for the Centre based on years of technical work and community engagement. It is important that that state-led planning provisions align with Council's draft Preston Central Structure Plan, and are consistent with the vision, principles, and mandatory Floor Area Ratio approach outlined in Amendment C218dare. This will contribute to a cohesive approach to planning for the centre which builds on previous community engagement.

Council-owned land within the Centre has great potential for social housing, public spaces, and community infrastructure. For example, Council has supported social housing development at its car park

on Townhall Avenue. To preserve the development potential of these lands for public benefit, we urge the State government to maintain the flexibility provided by the current zoning (Priority Development Zone) or similar zoning for land in the Civic Precinct and other Council owned land in the Centre.

What we would like to see:

- Ensure planning controls are consistent with Council's draft Preston Central Structure Plan, reflecting its vision, principles, and Floor Area Ratio approach, and as outlined in Amendment C218dare.
- Maintain the current, or similar zoning for Council-owned land in the Civic Precinct and Centre (in Priority Development Zone) to preserve development flexibility for future development that would increase public benefits like social housing, public spaces, and community and civic infrastructure.

Further officer comments:

The Preston AC Plan promotes itself as a 'transparent' alternative to traditional structure plans developed by councils with community input. However, the introduction of potentially extensive 'deemed-to-comply' mechanisms for high density development undermines this transparency. Unlike traditional plans, which allow for discretionary assessments tailored to local needs, deemed-to-comply standards impose rigid, one-size-fits-all requirements that may overlook unique local contexts. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of transparency in setting the built form controls, with no ability for council or the public to consider draft planning controls.

For example, Preston AC Plan defers to Council's novel controls for the activity centre core area which includes not only mandatory, but also a range of discretionary provisions. The introduction of deemed-to-comply mechanism reduces Council's ability to negotiate development outcomes to achieve good design outcomes. This could result in poor and homogenised development outcomes that do not achieve key outcomes like design excellence and local design objectives. There is also reduced ability



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to reflect or enhance community values and identity established through structure planning processes.

While streamlining planning controls and expediting approvals aims to make land development-ready more quickly, it may sacrifice the flexibility needed to address evolving local needs and priorities. Efficient amendment pathways and permit processes are important but should not replace the nuanced, context-specific evaluations implemented through traditional structure plans. Deemed-to-comply mechanisms should complement, not replace, traditional planning processes.

Retaining local council discretion for high density development in our cities is essential to ensure developments align with and adapt to the unique needs and characteristics of each community.

Notably the draft Preston AC Plan provides no background or detail on the proposed deemed-to-comply standards. Council should be consulted during the development of any such mechanisms in the form of draft controls and local schedules.

For example, the Preston AC Plan defines catchment areas for future residential intensification with a standardised 800-metre walkable distance. Council's catchment area should be used instead as it follows best practice standards outlined in planning practice notes. It includes a thorough analysis of local context, covering topography, access to open spaces, key activity destinations, potential sites for future growth, and interactions with other activity centres.

To make strategic planning meaningful and transparent, the AC Plan should clearly outline how catchment areas are defined and characterised so that future development is contextually sensitive and responsive.

What we would like to see (officer-comment):

- Ensure decisions in the expedited planning amendment process are informed by community and stakeholder feedback on detailed draft planning provisions proposed for the Centre and its catchment.
- Develop any proposed new deemed-to-comply provisions and local schedules in consultation with Council to ensure they support local

discretion and flexibility, align with intended development outcomes with the community values outlined in the draft Preston Central Structure Plan.

- Refine the walkable catchment to be closer in line with Council's work to ensure the residential catchment area criteria and its planning reflect best practice catchment planning and the Centre's unique characteristics.

Infrastructure planning

Infrastructure contributions and value capture mechanisms

As the Centre grows, infrastructure improvements must be synchronised with housing development to prevent strain on existing services and to ensure growth is accompanied by investment in community facilities, streetscapes, active and public transport, and open spaces. Funding these upgrades will better equip the Centre to meet the needs of its expanding community, ensuring a vibrant and well-supported environment for residents.

It is essential to fairly allocate funds and direct investments to benefit Preston's local community. The Preston AC Plan's introduction of value capture mechanisms and infrastructure contributions marks a promising step in supporting housing growth, however uplift capacity will be minimal, and this should not replace broader standardised contributions mechanism for activity centres.

The Plan must be paired with an alternative funding mechanism and distribution model and focusing on directing funds to local projects, the Preston AC Plan can maximise the positive impact of these contributions, fostering the Centre's growth and long-term development. Key areas for investment should include upgrading transport infrastructure, enhancing public spaces, and developing community facilities, which are essential for sustaining growth and improving quality of life.

What we would like to see:

- Value capture mechanisms and infrastructure contributions are built into planning controls,



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informed by a Community Infrastructure Needs Assessment. Any funding is collected by local government, or if centralised then mechanisms are in place to ensure investment is redirected to the local area. This is in addition to Council's current Development Contributions Plan.

Further officer comments:

We recognise that new standardised development contributions systems will require changes to the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and that this will need to be a separate process. However, the state government should endeavour to introduce standardised development contributions provisions at the same time as increasing the development capacity of the 10 activity centres to support this growth. And if that is not possible, make a firm government commitment that links it to this program.

New build-to-rent developments do not involve subdivision and are exempt from open space contributions despite increasing the demand for open space. It is important that Preston Central contributions mechanism accounts for these models and ensures open space provisions are sufficient to match the growth. This will improve recreational areas and enhance the Centre's overall attractiveness and resilience.

What we would like to see (officer comment):

- Ensure new standardised infrastructure contributions are introduced at the same time as the implementation of new controls through the Activity Centres Program.
- Provide clear and transparent practice notes and guidelines on the operation of any new planning provisions and controls like standardised development levies and value capture mechanisms.

Built form and housing

Housing affordability and diversity

Darebin supports the Victorian Government's commitment to creating walkable neighbourhoods

and advancing transit-oriented developments, recognising these as essential for a vibrant, liveable future. To ensure that development aligns with these goals while respecting local heritage and neighbourhood characteristics, we call for several key measures to enhance the effectiveness of the Preston AC Plan.

The voluntary contributions by developers towards affordable housing are insufficient to meet the municipality's needs effectively. Implementing mandatory social and affordable housing requirements aligns with Darebin's longstanding vision for inclusive growth by addressing diverse housing needs in both the Centre and the municipality.

While the Preston AC Plan aims to facilitate affordable housing in the Centre, it is unclear if these measures will be mandatory or where they apply. We urge the state government to enforce clear and robust affordable housing requirements in implementing the Preston AC Plan.

What we would like to see:

- Implement mandatory affordable housing planning mechanisms across the Centre to mitigate social and affordable housing shortfalls.

Design excellence and environmental sustainability

Council's draft Structure Plan identifies residential transition areas that are closely aligned with the Centre's commercial and transit core as suitable for higher-density development. However, this is contingent on further analysis of the feasibility and impact of denser forms on internal and external amenity. We urge the state government to provide leadership in implementing lot consolidation incentives and addressing design concerns related to the potential amenity impacts of proposed four to six-storey developments under the Preston AC Plan.

Furthermore, we recommend a considered interface between Preston Central with the Preston Market redevelopment.



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Darebin declared a climate emergency in 2016, which was followed by over 2,351 governments worldwide. Council has recently endorsed its Climate Emergency Plan 2024–30, which sets forth ambitious goals around emissions reductions by 2027.

The Preston AC Plan currently lacks detailed environmentally sustainable development provisions for both the core and catchment areas. To address this gap, it is crucial to extend sustainability efforts beyond individual building standards. This includes implementing built form controls that support environmental outcomes and encourage sustainable transport options. New developments within the Centre should aim for net-zero carbon emissions to align with climate goals.

Council seeks Ministerial approval for the CASBE amendment, which would elevate Environmentally Sustainable Development Targets and ensure high environmental standards for development within the Centre.

What we would like to see:

- Design planning controls to provide a considered interface between the commercial core and the newly adopted Preston Market precinct controls.
- Implement high-quality design and controls that incentivise lot consolidation within residential transition and catchment areas.
- Built form controls promote environmental sustainability and net zero communities as our built form legacy for decades to come.
- Embed ESD standards in the Centre's planning provisions by securing Ministerial approval for the CASBE led amendment and implementing the Elevating ESD Targets to ensure high environmental standards in new developments.

Further officer comments – proposed catchment areas:

Balancing density with local character requires a tailored approach. Concentrating development near the activity centre core, as outlined in the Council's draft Structure Plan, ensures that growth is supported by adequate infrastructure and is responsive to community needs.

Council urges flexibility in defining the 800-metre catchment area for housing growth. The Draft Structure Plan outlines defined transition areas for intensification, and Council is currently consulting on its Draft Housing Strategy. Together, these strategic documents identify suitable housing growth areas, unaffected by environmental or planning constraints, suitable for increasing housing supply. The proposed catchment extent does not fully reflect local conditions or development opportunities.

The AC Plan identifies examples of four, five and six storey residential development types for the Centre's 800 m catchment area. Most of the examples in the AC Plan however, are based on lots significantly larger than 700 sqm, which are not representative of the majority of lots in the catchment. For example, within the catchment area nearly three quarters of the lots are under 500 sqm. Only 2% of the lots exceed 750 sqm and are readily suitable for accommodating such built forms (See map). There are no individual lots over 1000m², however there could be multiple adjacent lots in one ownership. The lack of suitable lots for higher density infill redevelopment highlights the challenge of managing density and intensifying residential development within the Preston activity centre catchment.

Further consideration should be given to ways to require or incentivise lot consolidation to achieve density ambitions. Larger lots will facilitate higher-quality, sustainable developments with sufficient private and public open space, fostering cohesive communities.

Moreover, larger lots are unevenly dispersed within the catchment area with many located at its edges. This raises concerns about uneven development with poor built form transition and design outcomes, which may affect the Centre's character.

Effective management of transitions of built form between the activity centre core and surrounding residential areas is essential for developing a cohesive built form character.

Addressing climate change and enhancing resilience in our community, infrastructure, and built environment requires a coordinated approach to tackle emerging threats and risks such as flooding.



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Darebin urges coordinated effort between state, local authorities and Melbourne Water to impacts of urban intensification and flood risk in the centre.

What we would like to see (officer comment):

- Collaborate with Council to adjust the 800m catchment area to better reflect local conditions and infrastructure capacity.
- Implement a balanced approach to density with a focus on development intensification in the activity centre core and manage transitions between the activity centre and surrounding residential areas with attention to local conditions.
- Collaborate with Council to develop any deemed-to-comply components that seek to implement Council's draft built form controls and objectives stated in the draft Structure Plan.
- Ensure local government decision-making powers are maintained in the planning frameworks for the Centre.
- Adopt a more efficient, state-led approach to flood management and enhance community resilience against climate hazards.

Transport planning

Public and active transport integration

The state government, through its Preston AC Plan, must make a clear commitment to expanding both public transport and active transport opportunities. While building new homes near public transport and employment hubs is a positive step, it does not guarantee that current infrastructure can support the projected population growth. As the Centre expands, prioritising and upgrading transport systems is essential. However, the Preston AC Plan lacks clear direction on how it will integrate public and active transport to meet these challenges.

Effective transport planning also depends on the state's support for comprehensive assessments to guide infrastructure investments. This will ensure that public and active transport solutions improve connectivity, accessibility, reduce reliance on private vehicles and address congestion within the Centre.

To achieve these goals, substantial state investment is required. The state government must provide the necessary funding to expand the capacity of bus, tram, and train services, ensuring they can accommodate the growing population and prevent overcrowding and longer commutes.

Additionally, the development of active transport infrastructure is crucial. This includes creating a comprehensive network of bike paths and pedestrian-friendly streets, to promote walking and cycling as attractive alternatives to driving.

What we would like to see:

- Planning provisions are informed by transport assessment outcomes and promote public transport, active and sustainable transport in the Centre.
- Supporting reforms to parking requirements in the planning scheme to improve land use efficiency and promote a sustainable transport network, alongside necessary infrastructure and public transport investments.
- Provide state funding to expand and upgrade public and active transport infrastructure, including buses, trams, and trains, as well as bike paths and pedestrian routes.
- The state government makes a clear commitment to increasing the capacity and coverage of public transport services to meet the needs of the growing population and alleviate congestion.

Place making

Civic realm enhancement

The civic realm plays a crucial role in enhancing community well-being and quality of life within the centre. Although the Preston AC Plan recognises the need for improved public spaces and facilities, it lacks specific strategies and funding commitments essential to transform the area into a vibrant, thriving Centre.

The draft Structure Plan proposes substantial improvements to the civic realm, with a focus on revitalising High Street. Transforming High Street from



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a transit route into a vibrant 'main street' will create a dynamic public space that better supports the community and boosts the Centre's economy.

In a rate-capped environment, coordinated federal and state funding and investments are critical for supporting effective place-making and improving civic infrastructure. Such funding will enhance public spaces and streetscapes, boosting the economic vitality of the Centre and supporting its growth. Council welcomes the opportunity for state and federal funding to support the planning, piloting, and delivery of place-making initiatives to support this growth.

What we would like to see:

- State and Federal funding is available to support the planning, piloting and delivery of data-driven place-making initiatives that support economic revitalisation of the Centre.
- Public spaces are enhanced through community-led place-based initiatives, with a focus on streetscape improvements along High Street.
- State funding is available to increase the capacity of public and active transport needed to serve a growing community and mitigate congestion that will occur if there are no real alternatives offered to private car use.

- Ensure the proposed planning provisions implement Council's draft structure plan and provisions, while consulting with council in its design.
- Implement mandatory affordable housing provisions and incentives for lot consolidation to provide diverse and accessible housing options.
- Establish clear development contribution and value capture mechanisms to reinvest in local infrastructure, ensuring that growth benefits the community.
- Expand public and active transport networks to support sustainable growth and reduce reliance on private cars.
- Prioritise proactive enhancements to the civic realm and streetscapes, supported by state and federal funding and community-led initiatives, to improve public spaces and foster a vibrant environment.
- Enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Darebin City Council to establish a robust partnership to achieve our shared vision for Preston Central, ensuring a vibrant, welcoming, and greener Centre.

Conclusion

Darebin welcome's the state government's recognition of the centre's role in a growing Melbourne and focus on planning reform and investment into the 'Preston (High Street)' Activity Centre. We support the state's goals of ensuring more good quality homes are built in the centre but urge that this does not come at the cost of proper and transparent planning and quality and sustainable design.

Council seeks the following key actions:

- Ensure transparent and inclusive planning, ensuring meaningful community engagement to align with local needs and aspirations.



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Map 1 – Lot size within Preston AC Plan 800m walkable catchment area

