

A River of Place and People

Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan
2022-2025

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country	4
Place and People	5
Message from the Chair.....	6
The Cooks River Catchment	7
The Alliance.....	8
Mission Statement	8
Working Together	8
Formation.....	8
Purpose	8
Governance.....	8
Strategic Plan	10
Building on a Vision.....	10
Focus Areas	10
Sequencing of objectives	11
Focus Area 1 – River Health	12
Overview	12
Objective 1.1: Complete the Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program (CMP) up to and including Stage 4	12
Objective 1.2: Develop and implement a Cooks River Report Card program.	14
Objective 1.3: Establish the Cooks River Litter Prevention Strategy	14
Objective 1.4: ‘Cooks River 2050’ – develop an aspirational long-term master plan that reflects the community’s vision for the river.....	15
Objective 1.5: Understand Our Urban Stormwater Challenge.	16
Focus Area 2 - River Community.....	18
Overview	18
Objective 2.1: A permanent Aboriginal voice to Place	18
Objective 2.2: A truly valued, community inspired whole of River celebration (Cooks River Wurridjal Festival).....	19
Objective 2.3: Develop and implement a school age program to inform the next generation ...	19
Objective 2.4: Empower community groups to advocate on their own behalf.....	20
Objective 2.5: Support connection between community groups and the broader community ..	21
Focus Area 3 – River Advocacy	22
Objective 3.1: Stay on message	22
Objective 3.2: Back the Cooks River community	23

Objective 3.3: Contribute to relevant local, state, and federal policy..... 24

Objective 3.4: Boost the Alliance’s voice through collaborative action 24

Focus Area 4 – River History 26

 Overview 26

 Objective 4.1: Build a modern Information Management System for the Alliance that integrates social media, website, and data storage..... 26

 Objective 4.2: Establish an inspection and maintenance program to look after our Aboriginal sites 27

 Objective 4.3a: Connect Place with People by creating a ‘big history’ style web experience..... 28

 Objective 4.3b: Connect Place with People by using the river as an interactive, augmented experience..... 29

Acknowledgement of Country

The Cooks River Alliance respectfully acknowledges the Wangal, Cadigal and Gameygal, the Traditional Custodians of the Cooks River catchment, and also acknowledges other Aboriginal people who have made the river their home. The Alliance pays respect to Elders past, present, and future.

For over a thousand generations, the Cooks River catchment has been home to Aboriginal people who have fostered cultural and spiritual connections to the river as it evolved over many millennia.

The Cooks River Alliance recognises that it is vital to maintain strong partnerships with Aboriginal people and organisations across the catchment.

Place and People

'Place and People' was chosen as the title for this strategy to acknowledge the Cooks River community's interest in, and **respect** for, Aboriginal culture, both historic and contemporary¹. This phrase was chosen to reflect **Aboriginal Philosophy** concerning the indivisible relationship between people and environment and, accordingly, our obligation to **look after the environment** in the same way we should **look after ourselves and our family**².

As such, the **Cooks River** becomes more than a natural resource to be exploited for its utility, instead becoming an **intrinsic part of the community**, where its fate is shared by the community (and vice-versa). This philosophy finds strong support in current scientific research, where **access** to healthy waterways and natural green space is shown to have a **direct impact** on human **health and wellbeing**³.

It is in the spirit of this philosophy, backed by science, that the **Cooks River Alliance**, through this strategy, **strives** to improve itself and the health of the Cooks River and, therefore, the **health of everyone** in our community.

Reviewed and approved by Uncle John Dickson on the 14 November 2022.

¹ Findings from the Cooks River Community Survey, 2021.

² Christrarasu, M. (2017). *Ideas of the Anthropocene: The Place of Aboriginal Philosophy in Contemporary Ecological Thought*. Arts Internship, University of Adelaide, The Jayco Group of Companies and Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation.

³ <https://www.powerlab.site/research/publications>

Message from the Chair

With a sense of both reverence and excitement, I am pleased to bring to you the Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025, *A River for Place and People*.

My excitement comes from the hope and ambition this new plan brings that not only aims to improve the health of the river and its community, but also how the Alliance itself operates to this end. My reverence comes from the importance of this river and its thousands of years of human history, and how this river continues to both define and reflect us as a community.

This new plan heralds an important milestone for the Alliance. It marks the beginning of the second decade of the Alliance, which has grown stronger and achieved much for the river and its community since it formed in 2011.

This new strategy celebrates the achievements from the previous decade, with a renewed focus not just on the health of the river, but importantly how the health and management of the river can improve the health and wellbeing of our community.

Given this ten-year milestone, this strategy also gives attention to the lessons learned over the past ten years. It provides specific objectives to improving the Alliance concerning how it operates and how it serves its Member Organisations and the Cooks River Community.

In addition to our four committed councils, Bayside, Canterbury Bankstown, Inner West and Strathfield, we are now excited to be joined by Sydney Water. All of these organisations understand the importance of caring for and revitalising the Cooks River and the benefits of collaborative action towards this goal.

On behalf of the Cooks River Alliance, I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to building the Alliance over the past 10 years, and those who have helped shape the Cooks River's Place and People plan.

So, in the spirit of collaboration, let's all pull together and see this plan implemented.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cr Clare Raffan".

Cr Clare Raffan
Chair Cooks River Alliance.

The Cooks River Catchment

The Cooks River starts at Graf Park, in Yagoona and flows for approximately 23 km before it reaches Botany Bay. Along the way, it is joined by seven creeks. The catchment of the river covers an area of approximately 100 km² with the majority of the catchment dominated by impervious surfaces (pavement, roofs, roads, etc.). However, various pockets of green space exist along the river and scattered throughout the catchment, providing vital habitat for native animals and respite for the community from the harshness of urban development.



The Cooks River hasn't always looked like it does today, with the *Cooks River Improvements Act 1946* changing the banks and the nature of the river. Designed to reduce flooding and efficiently remove water from the catchment, steel sheet piling and concrete was installed along the riverbanks, removing any habitat that may have existed and cutting it off from its natural floodplain. This situation still exists today, and extensive restoration works would be required to remove the concrete and steel to naturalise the banks.

Despite the state of the river, it is a well-loved feature for so many in the community, offering valuable greenspace and an oasis from the urbanised catchment. Walking, bike riding, bird watching, and kayaking are some of the many activities that take place alongside or on the river, and the types of activities are only likely to increase as the health of the river improves.



Figure 1: Cooks River Catchment

The Alliance

Mission Statement

“Enhancing the wellbeing of our community by taking a long-term, holistic and cooperative approach to managing the health of the Cooks River”

The Cooks River Alliance mission statement is derived from the Cooks River 2030 Community Vision, the outcomes of the Outcomes of the 2021 Cooks River Alliance Congress⁴, the findings of the 2021 Cooks River Community Survey⁵, and contemporary science on the link between healthy urban rivers and healthy communities.

Working Together

The Cooks River Alliance is an alliance between the four councils that make up the bulk of the Cooks River catchment and Sydney Water (collectively referred to as Member Organisations). The delivery of this strategic plan is directly dependent on the collaborative efforts of these Member Organisations, their capacity to work with key stakeholders and the community, and their ability to access funding and resources. Accordingly, the success of this strategic plan is dependent on these factors.

Formation

The Cooks River Alliance was formed in 2011 between eight councils, Ashfield, Bankstown, Canterbury, City of Sydney, Hurstville, Marrickville, Rockdale and Strathfield. Its formation was driven by the need to manage the Cooks River at a whole of river / catchment scale and the lack of any single entity able to perform this important service.

Today, the Alliance is made up of four councils (mostly due to council mergers in 2016) – Bayside, Strathfield, Inner West, and Canterbury Bankstown – and Sydney Water. Sydney Water is the most recent member, marking an important and positive turning point in the cooperation between local government and a state government entity caring for Cooks River.

Purpose

The purpose of the Cooks River Alliance is to facilitate the management of the Cooks River in a wholistic manner on behalf of the Cooks River community. It allows Member Organisations to combine their resources, experience, knowledge, and skills with those in the community to address the complex environmental and social challenges facing the Cooks River.

Governance

The current governance structure of the Cooks River Alliance is illustrated in Figure 2.

⁴ CRA (2021). “Strategic Workshop Summary”, Cooks River Alliance, Campsie (internal document)

⁵ CRA, NSW DPE. (2021). “Survey Outcomes”, Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program, Campsie.

The **Cooks River Alliance Management Committee** oversees strategic direction and makes decisions on Alliance activities. This committee consists of nominated councillors from councils that have made an agreed financial contribution to the Alliance, and senior managers from Sydney Water which has also made a financial contribution. These councils and Sydney Water are collectively referred to as “Member Organisations”. The Management Committee may invite other organisations onto the Committee, either as a financial or non-financial voting member.

An **Executive Committee** made up of senior staff from Member Organisations provides administrative direction to the Secretariat and advice to the Management Committee.

The **Secretariat** administer the day-to-day operations and financial management of Cooks River Alliance projects. This includes project management; liaison between Member Organisations, stakeholders, and the community; coordinating working groups; and convening Alliance general meetings and congresses. In essence, the Secretariat helps the Cooks River Alliance Member Organisations work together with each other and key stakeholders (e.g. state government entities) towards a healthier Cooks River on behalf of the community.

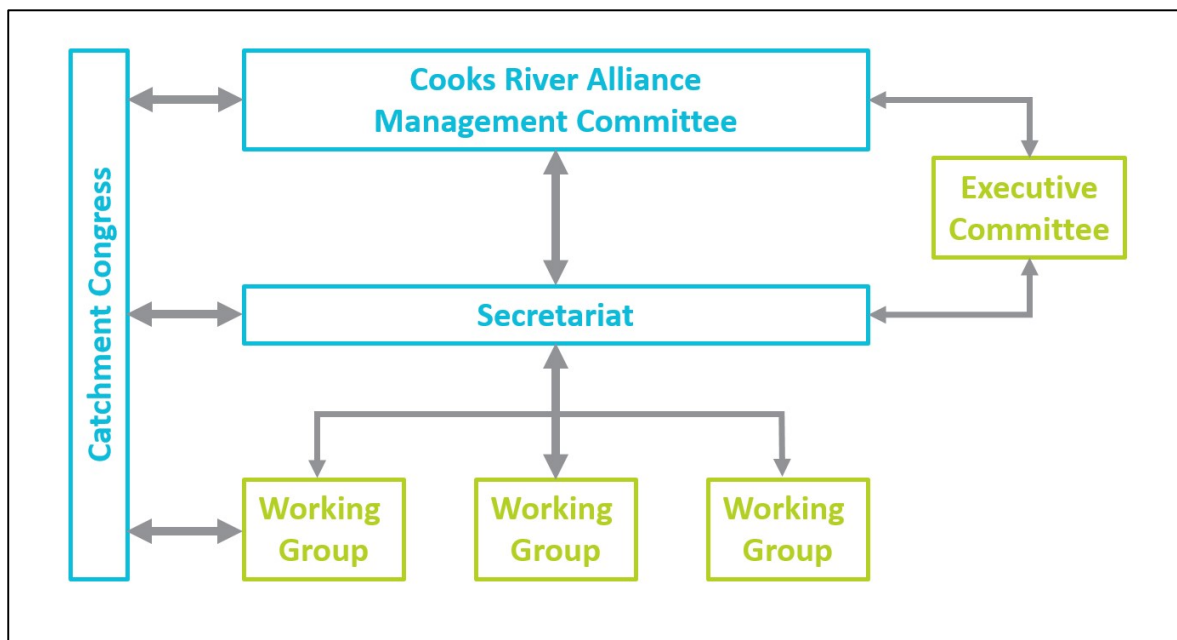


Figure 2: Current Cooks River Alliance structure

A **Catchment Congress** will be held towards the end of the time horizon of this strategic plan (latter half of 2024). It will be made up of representatives from Member Organisations, stakeholders and community groups. This congress will perform two crucial roles. The first is to act as a bellwether for the impact and effectiveness of the Alliance, providing critical information for calibrating Alliance activities and operations towards better outcomes. The second is to provide critical feedback and aspirations from Member Organisations and stakeholders ahead of the drafting of new strategic plans.

Working groups are groups made up of appropriate technical and consultative personnel formed to address or execute specific Cooks River Alliance projects and activities, such as the Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program. These working groups can be formed and dissolved as needed, as projects and activities begin and end. Depending on the project or activity, group members can be a mix of professional staff from Member Organisations and stakeholder

organisations, as well as relevant community organisations and industry (e.g. sporting clubs, recreation clubs, and advocacy groups).

Strategic Plan

Building on a Vision

The community vision for the Cooks River is *A loved and healthy River Valley, enriching the heart of Sydney*. This strategic plan is intended to translate this vision into actions and outcomes.

The 2021 Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program Community Survey gives further clarity to this vision, as follows:

- A biodiverse river valley supporting a clean river
- Every community accessing and enjoying the river
- Aboriginal ways of thinking are valued from Yana Badu to Kamay
- Holistic and cooperative approaches are guiding river restoration.

It is in the spirit of this vision that this strategic plan has been written, giving an operational framework to its intent.

Focus Areas

This Strategic Plan is built around four ‘focus areas’, as illustrated by Figure 3. This diagram shows these focus areas overlapping because, while thinking of them separately helps with planning, in reality, they all inform and influence each other towards managing the river according to the Place and People philosophy.

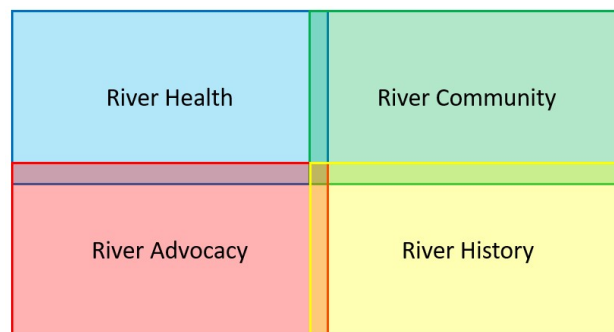


Figure 3: Focus Areas for the Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan 2022-25

This Strategic Plan is framed according to each of these focus areas. Each focus area identifies key objectives to be achieved in whole or in part over the term of this Plan. Importantly, the intent of this Strategic Plan is not only to improve how we manage the river, but also how we improve the Alliance itself towards this end. Each focus area and their objectives are drawn from several sources, the most important of which were:

- The findings of the 2021 Cooks River Community Survey.⁶
- Outcomes of the 2021 Cooks River Alliance Congress.⁷
- The previous Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan, titled ‘The Cooks River People’s Plan.’⁸

⁶ CRA, NSW DPE. (2021). “Survey Outcomes”, Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program, Campsie.

⁷ CRA (2021). “Strategic Workshop Summary”, Cooks River Alliance, Campsie (internal document)

⁸ CRA (2018). “The Cooks River People’s Plan”, Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Cooks River Alliance, Campsie.

- Results of detailed agency and community stakeholder engagement.

Sequencing of objectives

Some objectives are more likely to see long term success if other objectives are actioned first. Also, some objectives are long-term aspirations that exceed the time horizon of this strategic plan (three years). Accordingly, the following sequencing system has been applied as follows

- Type 1 Objectives: objectives that, if addressed first, will improve the efficiency and likelihood of success of other objectives.
- Type 2 Objectives: those objectives that are dependent on the delivery of Type 1 Objectives.
- Type 3 Objectives: objectives that can be delivered independent of Type 1 Objectives.
- Type 4 Objectives: ongoing Alliance commitments that have no specific end dates.

This simple system allows for the ordering of Objectives, where Type 1 Objectives would serve the river and the Alliance best by being delivered first, Type 2 Objectives would benefit from Type 1 Objectives being delivered first, and Type 3 and Type 4 Objectives can be completed at any time, being only restricted by available resources.

Focus Area 1 – River Health

Overview

River Health focuses on both:

1. The ecological health of the Cooks River system
2. The health of the Cooks River community.

The first is concerned with improving the ecological health of the river through improvements in water quality, water flow, and the protection and expansion of aquatic and riparian habitats. The second is concerned with how improvements to the river contribute to the physical and mental health of the Cooks River community by improving opportunities for recreation, exercise, social gatherings, general access, and the provision of ‘natural’ spaces to escape the harshness of the urban environment.

The decision to combine these two perspectives is based contemporary science⁹ and current NSW Ministry of Health guidelines¹⁰. Conventional Anglo-Australian thinking for the past 200 years has separated these two perspectives, often pitting one against the other when considering value and return on investment. However, this thinking has led to the current condition of the Cooks River, with substantial opportunity costs in livability, economic potential, and biodiversity. For this reason, Aboriginal philosophies of Place and People that acknowledge the inseparable link between human health and their environment have been chosen as an alternative perspective to inform this focus area.

Objective 1.1: Complete the Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program (CMP) up to and including Stage 4.

Brief

The Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program is a joint program between the Alliance member organisations, Burwood Council, the City of Sydney, and the NSW Department of Planning and Environment. It consists of five stages (Figure 4) designed to develop robust, well informed and community-oriented actions to improve the Cooks River in line with the NSW *Coastal Management Act 2016*. Actions identified in the Cooks River Catchment CMP that have been certified by the Minister will be to apply for grant funding for implementation (Stage 5). The Alliance completed Stage 1 in 2020. Stages 2 through 4 are expected to be completed during the time frame of this strategic plan. Stage 5 will not be delivered as part of this strategic plan but instead will inform the objectives of future plans.

⁹ <https://www.powerlab.site/research/publications>

¹⁰ NSW Ministry of Health (2020). *Healthy Built Environment Checklist*. NSW Ministry of Health, St Leonards, NSW.

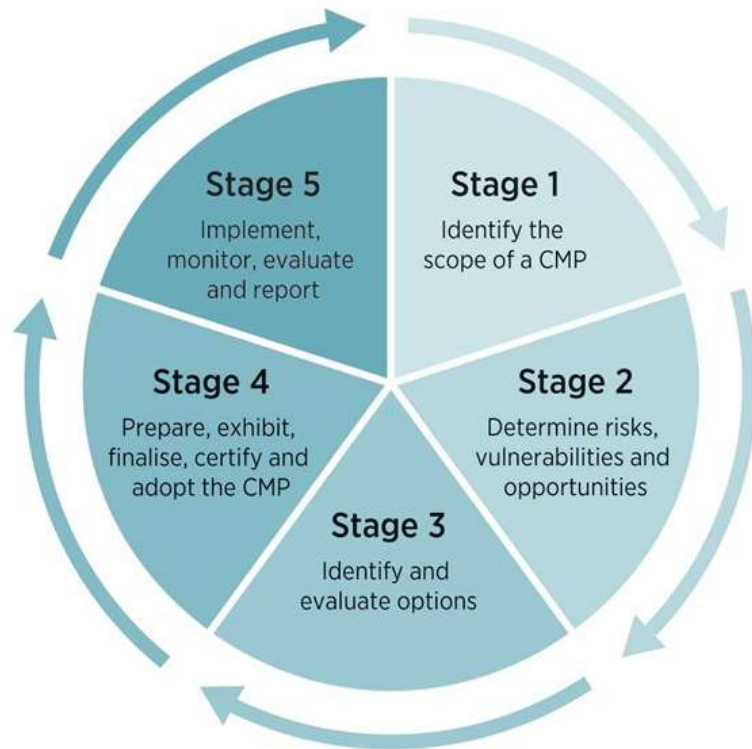


Figure 4: The five stages of the Coastal Management Program¹¹. Stage 1 has been delivered. Stage 2 is now underway. Stage 2, along with 3 and 4, should be delivered within the time frame of this strategic plan.

Sequencing

Type 3: Not dependent on any other objectives.

Intent

Develop a robust scope of works for the river that is supported by multiple stakeholders and attracts funding.

Indicative Timeline

It is expected that up to stage 4 (inclusive) will be completed within this strategic plan's time horizon (three years).

Progress waypoints

Three years:

- Stage 2 – Completed by June 2023
- Stage 3 – Completed by December 2023
- Stage 4 – Completed by December 2024.

¹¹ NSW Government. (2018). *Coastal Management Manual*. Coastal Management. Department of Planning and Environment, accessed 30 August 2022: <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/water/coasts/coastal-management/manual>

Objective 1.2: Develop and implement a Cooks River Report Card program.

Brief

Good management practice requires appropriate indicators to measure progress and performance. This is important for three reasons. The first is to measure the effectiveness of current management actions so their relative impact and value can be assessed. The second is to inform future planning by identifying actions that are working, those that aren't doing so well, and how the river is changing over time. The third is to report back to Alliance Member Organisations, key stakeholders and the community in a way that meets their needs.

Sequence

Type 2 Objective: This objective is reliant on the delivery of Objective 4.1

Intent

Provide a means of measuring the performance of activities and programs associated with the Cooks River over time.

Indicative Timeline

This objective is expected to be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

Establish a report card program and produce first report card within three years.

- By July 2022 – develop an Establishment Plan for a Cooks River Report Card to guide the development of the necessary governance and procedural frameworks to collect, collate and analyse data – completed by July 2022
- By July 2023 – establish a report card program for the Cooks River (i.e., implement the Establishment Plan for a Cooks River Report Card Program)
- By July 2024 – collect and collate data in line with the established report card program
- By December 2024 – produce first report card(s).

Objective 1.3: Establish the Cooks River Litter Prevention Strategy

Brief

The first phase towards a Cooks River catchment wide approach to managing litter was completed at the end of 2021, with the endorsement of the Cooks River Litter Prevention Strategy by Member Organisations. The development of this strategy was a collaborative effort between the Alliance and the River Canoe Club, and was funded by the NSW Environment Protection Agency (EPA).

On the basis of this success, the NSW EPA awarded the River Canoe Club/Cooks River Alliance collaboration an additional \$100,000 in February 2022 to conduct the next phase. This phase will focus on assessing the current opportunities and constraints facing member councils to manager litter within their local government areas, and to establish the necessary networks between and within these councils to meet challenges and grow opportunities. It will also be

used to inform the NSW EPA on how it can better work with councils and the community to prevent littering.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: A foundational and practical step towards a catchment wide approach to river improvement whilst strengthening Alliance Member Organisation collaboration.

Intent

Establish critical networks within member councils, Sydney Water, and the NSW EPA to deliver the objectives of the Cooks River Litter Prevention Strategy.

Indicative Timeline

This project is expected to be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan (three years).

Progress waypoints

- By April 2023, complete this grant funded project
- By July 2023, secure grant funding from the NSW EPA to progress findings and outcomes of this project.

Objective 1.4: ‘Cooks River 2050’ – develop an aspirational long-term master plan that reflects the community’s vision for the river.

Brief

Addressing degraded urban river systems like the Cooks River is a complex process. It requires wholistic and careful urban planning that accounts for catchment scale processes and multiple stakeholders. Further, as is the case with any urbanised catchment, implications of changes made within the Cooks River Catchment can take years to manifest within the river (good or bad). Consequently, revitalizing the Cooks River not only requires careful environmental planning, but also careful urban planning that is capable of translating the community’s aspirations into practical outcomes.

To meet this challenge, a mechanism is needed that gives form and function to the community’s vision for the Cooks River: *A loved and healthy river valley enriching the heart of Sydney*. This objective is intended to meet this need by providing planners with a Cooks River Master Plan that clearly articulates and gives geographical illustration to this vision. The development of such a plan would be undertaken in collaboration with Member Organisation planning teams and close consultation with the community and relevant stakeholders. To ensure this plan remains current, this master plan will be updated periodically going forward.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: This objective is dependent on the delivery of Objective 1.5.

Intent

Develop an aspirational, whole of river Master Plan for the Cooks River to inform and guide urban planning and opportunistic projects.

Indicative Timeline

It is expected that the delivery of the first iteration will be beyond the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

It is estimated that the development of such a plan will take between five to ten years. It will need to be a staged project, initiated with a scoping study.

Indicative timeline as follows:

- Research / investigate similar examples from around the world and draft up a Delivery Plan – October 2023
- Formation of an oversight committee made up of Member Organisations and Key Stakeholders – March 2024
- Finalise Delivery Plan and obtain commitments from Member Organisations and Key Stakeholders – October 2024
- Start development of Master Plan – 2025
- Completion of Master Plan – to be determined in the next strategic plan.

Objective 1.5: Understand Our Urban Stormwater Challenge.

Brief

Urban stormwater is now recognised as the main factor contributing to the ongoing degradation of urban rivers, bringing in pollutants and disrupting waterway hydrology. Consequently, advances made in managing urban stormwater will likely have the largest positive impact on the health of the Cooks River.

While engineering solutions and management practices have been available for several decades to help mitigate this problem, they are yet to be applied in most urban scenarios. The reasons for this are complex, involving legacy development decisions, policy shortcomings and inadequate resourcing. Yet these solutions do present a viable means of addressing the urban stormwater problem whilst providing additional benefits such as improved liveability, climate change resilience and biodiversity within urban areas.

This objective is intended to be a first step towards addressing the detrimental impacts of urban stormwater on the Cooks River by assessing stormwater management at each Member Organisation to ascertain where each Organisation currently stands in terms of their stormwater infrastructure and management practices. Information derived from this objective will place the Alliance in a position to develop a catchment-wide approach to address stormwater management to maximum benefit.

Sequencing

Type 3 Objective: This objective is not directly dependent on the delivery of any other objective.

Intent

Through the application of tools such as the Water Sensitive Cities Index¹² (or similar), assess each Member Organisations' urban water management status.

Indictive Timeline

The delivery of this objective is expected to be delivered beyond the time horizon of this strategic plan and is estimated to take between three and five years to complete.

Progress waypoints

Indicative progress waypoints as follows:

- By October 2023: Develop a proposition paper that identifies options for assessing this challenge
- By March 2024: Identify and obtain endorsement of preferred option
- By December 2024: completion of assessment

This will be a complex task, requiring the assessment of current infrastructure, management practices, and policy and governance frameworks of each organisation within the broader state government policy landscape. Consequently, waypoints may need to be revised in the next Cooks River Alliance Strategic Plan.

¹² CRC WCS. (2021). *Water Sensitive Cities Index*. Water Sensitive Cities, accessed 1 September 2022: <https://watersensitivecities.org.au/water-sensitive-cities-index-tool/>

Focus Area 2 - River Community

Overview

This focus area recognises that the Cooks River community is a highly socio-economic and multi-culturally diverse community. It understands that the fate of the Cooks River is closely tied to how the community perceives and values the river. As demonstrated by the 2021 Cooks River Community Survey, it also recognises that the community has a high regard for both historic and contemporary Aboriginal culture and heritage.

The intent of this focus area is not to simply consult with the community, nor to act paternalistically towards it. Rather, it seeks to provide the community with opportunities to shape the ongoing revitalisation of the river, and how it is utilised to promote and celebrate the rich cultural diversity and history of the Cooks River. This includes supporting these groups with training and education opportunities to this end. Importantly, this focus area is also concerned with delivering equitable outcomes in terms of access and benefits from an improved Cooks River.

Objective 2.1: A permanent Aboriginal voice to Place

Brief

Community feedback from the 2021 Cooks River Community Survey revealed a strong interest in and respect for historic and contemporary Aboriginal culture. Accordingly, this objective seeks to honour this finding by establishing a mechanism for ensuring Aboriginal perspectives are considered in everything the Alliance does.

Utilising an existing grant from Landcare NSW, a culturally appropriate consultant will lead this objective. The successful consultant will develop a strategy / protocols for engaging with the Aboriginal Community to ensure Aboriginal culture and thinking is appropriately incorporated into all Cooks River related activities executed by the Alliance.

Sequencing

Type 1 Objective: An Aboriginal perspective is an essential element to guide and inform all Alliance decisions and outputs.

Indicative Timeline

It is expected that this objective will be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Intent

Establish a permanent mechanism that ensures Aboriginal ways of thinking remain a key input into all aspects of the management of the Cooks River.

Progress waypoint

- By September 2023, have an agreed mechanism for a permanent voice, including identification of potential funding opportunities.

Objective 2.2: A truly valued, community inspired whole of River celebration (Cooks River Wurridjal Festival)

Brief

Given the rich natural and human history of the Cooks River, the Cooks River has great untapped potential as a place of reflection and celebration.

This objective recognises that by creating a vibrant festival that uses the river as a backdrop and staging area, we establish yet another way to bring the community to the river, increasing awareness of it not just as a river system, but also as a Place for People. In this way, the community can grow to value the river beyond its current utility, helping to build a sense of community whilst growing support for its revitalization.

Sequencing

Type 2: This objective is dependent on the delivery of Objective 2.1.

Indicative Timeline

It is expected that momentum will take at least five years to build before the festival becomes self-perpetuating.

Intent

To grow this event by:

- Increasing buy-in via a community-led Wurridjal Festival steering committee made up of community groups' representatives, giving them creative input into the festival.
- Encouraging Member Organisations to have representatives on this committee to formalize the festival as a whole of river event and support the community groups' representatives on the committee.
- Making this event one of the leading festivals in NSW.

Progress waypoints

Goals considered achievable within the time period of this strategic plan:

- By December 2022 – Hold first steering committee meeting
- By March 2024 – See a doubling of events relative to March 2021 Wurridjal Festival.
- By March 2025 – Active commitment by all Member Organisations as demonstrated by involvement of event / community engagement staff from all Member Organisations in the steering committee and events.

Objective 2.3: Develop and implement a school age program to inform the next generation

Brief

River management requires effective catchment management; however, this relationship and the concept of catchments is not common knowledge. This program seeks to address this knowledge gap by targeting primary school age children in an interactive and tactile way, utilising the Alliance's Catchment Management Model. The Alliance will work with local

schools and the Georges River Environmental Education Centre (GREET) to develop this program such that the program can be executed easily across schools within the Cooks River Catchment. The Alliance will also collaborate with Member Organisations' personnel to compliment similar programs.

Sequencing

Type 3 Objective: This objective is not directly dependent on the delivery of other objectives identified within this strategic plan.

Intent

To teach the next generation about the importance of urban catchments and rivers whilst introducing them to their local River and its value.

Indicative Timeline

This objective is expected to be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan (three years).

Progress waypoints

- Pilot program up and running by December 2022
- Fully-fledged program in place by December 2023
- At least four schools engaged annually thereafter.

Objective 2.4: Empower community groups to advocate on their own behalf

Brief

Empowering community groups to affect change is not only healthy for the groups themselves but could also act to increase resources and funding flowing into the Cooks River. However, engaging with politicians and government departments to drive change and acquire funding can seem daunting for community groups made up of volunteers. To advocate effectively, groups need to have a working understanding of Australia's governmental systems so they can better access funding, resources, and relevant partnerships.

Accordingly, this objective seeks to mentor community groups interested in engaging in advocacy concerning the Cooks River as it relates to the focus areas of this strategic plan. This will include developing and identifying webinars and training courses that will assist community groups with such undertakings.

Sequencing

Type 3 Objective: This objective is not directly dependent on the delivery of other objectives identified within this strategic plan.

Intent

To inform Cooks River related community groups about Australia's democratic mechanisms for engaging with government and how to use them effectively and respectfully.

Indicative Timeline

This is an ongoing commitment and therefore has no specific end date.

Progress waypoints

The following goals will help measure and assess this objective for the period of this strategic plan:

- Starting 2023 – provide at least three webinars annually on this topic.
- By December 2023 – produce a web page on the Alliance’s website that provides guidelines and related information on effective advocacy technics.
- Starting January 2024 – Deliver at least three free webinars to community groups on how to navigate the political landscape or set up their community group to better access grant funding.
- Starting January 2024 – Deliver or identify two viable training courses that community groups can attend that assist with advocacy or grant project related activities.

Objective 2.5: Support connection between community groups and the broader community

Brief

With the rise of the internet and subsequent explosion in social media, it is now possible to integrate both to significantly improve awareness of, and connection to, community groups. The proposed revamp of the Alliance’s information management systems (including website) provides an ideal opportunity to boost connection of these groups with the Alliance, each other, and the community.

This objective recognises this opportunity and seeks to transform the existing website to this end as part of Objective 4.1. This will include utilising social media as means of connecting the community to these groups via the Alliance website, serving to not only boost the exposure of these groups, but also help to promote the work of the Alliance and the work of its Member Organisations to revitalize the river.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: The achievement of this objective is dependent on progressing Objective 4.1

Intent

To improve the Alliance Secretariat administration and digital systems to better support connection between community groups and the broader community.

Indicative Timeline

It is expected that this objective can be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

This objective is dependent on the partial completion of Objective 4.1 in the form of a new website. It is expected that this objective will be up and running within six months of the establishment of the new website.

Focus Area 3 – River Advocacy

Overview

River advocacy is considered to be a key role of the Cooks River Alliance (Figure 5). This focus area reflects the pivotal role of the Alliance, seeking to represent the concerns and interests of Member Organisations, stakeholders and community concerning the health and fate of the river. It also recognises the great potential the Alliance has in advocating for the river, drawing on the immense technical, bureaucratic, and democratic authority held by its member organisations.



Figure 5: Word cloud illustrating those issues raised during the 2021 Alliance Member Organisation and Stakeholder Feedback Workshop, where the large and closer to the centre, the more the issue was mentioned.

Objective 3.1: Stay on message

Brief

While technical and engineering solutions have their challenges, it is advocacy work that is often more critical in driving change. But advocacy brings with it a unique set of challenges that are, arguably, often more protracted, and difficult than the solutions themselves. Hence, staying on message and being persistent is essential.

This objective recognises this and understands that the Alliance Member Organisations carry significant technocratic, engineering, and scientific capability, along with the democratic authority of its council members, making the Alliance a formidable advocate for the river and its community. This objective seeks to give overt focus to this capability, and seeks to proactively engage in it to the betterment of the river and its community.

Sequencing

Type 4 Objective: This objective is an ongoing commitment to the Cooks River community and has no specific end date.

Intent

To continue to work together as an alliance to address the more intractable, long-term issues facing the Cooks River and its community.

Indicative Timeline

Not applicable.

Progress waypoints

This is an ongoing objective and has no specific end date. However, there are specific existing actions that can be used as progress waypoints:

- By March 2023 – Securing the \$10 Million (or part thereof) pledged by the Federal Labor Party ahead of its May 2022 election win for the river.
- By December 2024 – Establish clarity concerning ownership, responsibility, and funding for addressing sheet piling along some of the Cooks River’s banks (Objective 1.1)
- As part of Objective 1.4 – Addressing access inequity in terms of the uneven distribution of access points geographically and accounting for the ease of access for individuals with varying degrees of personal mobility.

Objective 3.2: Back the Cooks River community

Brief

The Cooks River boasts several independent community groups that have their own visions and focus. This objective recognises the legitimacy of these groups, derived from their community roots. Accordingly, where their agendas align with those of the Alliance, it makes sense to support them in whatever way we can. This may include assisting these groups by helping them gain access to government representatives, helping with grant applications, partnering in projects, and assisting such organisations to make cases to relevant bodies.

Sequencing

Type 4 Objective: This objective is an ongoing commitment to the Cooks River community and has no specific end date.

Intent

Where appropriate, get behind our community groups in support of their agendas and projects.

Indicative Timeline

Not applicable.

Progress waypoints

Time based and target-based waypoints are difficult to define as they are dependent on factors outside the control of the Alliance (i.e., they are dependent on community groups’ decisions).

Alternatively, progress will be measured by seeking feedback from community groups on an annual basis, via the Cooks River Alliance annual reporting.

Dependencies

Nil.

Objective 3.3: Contribute to relevant local, state, and federal policy

Brief

As a catchment group, the Alliance has a vested interest in state and federal policy that affects urban rivers (e.g., guidelines, planning policies, funding mechanisms and legislation). This objective recognises this and represents a commitment by the Alliance to (1) review and, where necessary, provide responses to such instruments when on public exhibition, (2) participate in workshops and other policy development activities and (3) proactively lobby state and federal government elected representatives to improve and / or change policy to the betterment of urban rivers and their communities.

Sequencing

Type 4 Objective: This objective is an ongoing commitment to the Cooks River community and has no specific end date.

Intent

To contribute to the policy landscape where it relates to the health and development of the Cooks River.

Indicative Timeline

Not applicable.

Progress waypoints

Time-based and target-based waypoints are difficult to define as they are dependent on factors outside the control of the Alliance (i.e., they are dependent on decisions made by state and federal government departments).

Alternatively, it is proposed that progress be measured by reporting on contributions annually, via the Cooks River Alliance annual reporting.

Objective 3.4: Boost the Alliance's voice through collaborative action

Brief

While the Alliance has at its disposal significant technical and bureaucratic resources, as well as democratic authority derived from its elected representatives, its voice can be diluted in the clamour of many other groups and entities in the public policy arena. This objective is a strategic response to this situation, seeking to join up with other catchment groups and like-minded entities ('natural allies') to advocate on state and federal issues that relate to urban rivers. By working together with our natural allies, we benefit by spreading the workload (e.g. when reviewing policy as per Objective 3.3) increasing intellectual input and, importantly, advocating with a louder voice.

Sequencing

Type 4 Objective: This objective is an ongoing commitment to the Cooks River community and has no specific end date.

Intent

To participate in and, where necessary, proactively initiate collaborative action with, 'natural allies' to advocate on behalf of urban rivers.

Indicative Timeline

Not applicable.

Progress Waypoints

Specific goals are difficult to define as such work is predominately opportunistic. However, as a minimum, the following measures are provided:

- Continue to participate in and partner with Stormwater NSW's franc.sydney annual conference and associated activities
- Where opportunities arise for Objective 3.3, proactively seek out other catchment groups and, where applicable, other entities to develop combined responses

Dependencies

Nil. While this objective may work in concert with Objective 3.3, it is not dependent on it.

Focus Area 4 – River History

Overview

River history covers two intersecting aspects:

- Technical, referring to the effective collection, management and archiving of information for operational and planning purposes (reports, studies, and mostly quantitative data)
- Place and People, referring to the collection, management, accessibility of information that clearly and accurately articulates a historic narrative on the natural and human history of the river.

The technical aspect is a response to the 2021 Alliance Member Organisations and Stakeholder Feedback Congress, which identified the Alliance Secretariat as an ideal entity to collect and maintain data and information for the ongoing management of the Cooks River. This recognises that effective river management hinges not simply on the collection of robust data (e.g., Objective 1.2), but also providing an effective means of collating, storing, and gaining access to that data. The goal of this aspect is to establish a mature, sophisticated information management system that is overseen by the Alliance’s Secretariat, providing a reliable, centralised, and user-friendly portal for Alliance members, relevant state government departments and the public.

The Place and People perspective recognise that people’s perceptions of Place govern how they value and interact with the river. Its intent is to weave a narrative around the river and its human habitation, creating an immersive experience that, eventually, will be augmented along the river itself such that people of all ages, mobilities and backgrounds can learn about the river. The goal is to bring to life the rich history of the Cooks River and, in doing so, help the community better understand the river’s character and their place in it.

Objective 4.1: Build a modern Information Management System for the Alliance that integrates social media, website, and data storage.

Brief

Managing an urban river system is a complex task that needs to factor in environmental, social, and economic factors, working across diverse fields including aquatic ecology, asset management, community engagement, urban planning, and climate science. Consequently, large amounts of diverse types of information need to be stored, managed, and analysed effectively. Further, the Alliance needs to manage this information for and on behalf of its Member Organisations for a range of audiences, including researchers, technical specialists, engineers, elected representatives, community groups and the general public.

While this is a daunting task, it is a necessary one, and one that will provide significant dividends. The advent of digital technologies now makes this task much easier, but does require initial investment to set in motion. This objective recognises this and is intended to address it by researching advances in digital technology and information management practices to build a system that best serves the Alliance and its ongoing commitment to the river and its community.

Sequencing

Type 1 Objective: This objective is considered to be a foundational objective, the implementation of which will improve all Alliance and Cooks River related activities.

Indicative Timeline

This objective is expected to be delivered within the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Intent

Develop a modern information management system that integrates with website and social media underpinned by a customize back-end digital platform to provide a more seamless and use-friendly information management system for the Alliance Member Organisations.

Progress waypoints

The following goals will help measure and assess this objective for the period of this strategic plan:

- By July 2023 – Concept design completed
- By July 2024 – Implementation and user testing
- By Dec 2024 – System operational.

Objective 4.2: Establish an inspection and maintenance program to look after our Aboriginal sites

Brief

An inspection of sites during late 2021 identified that several of the existing Cooks River cultural sites needed maintenance, including repairs due to weathering. However, it appears there is currently no formal system in place to inspect and maintain these sites. This initiative seeks to maintain the dignity and importance of these sites by redressing this situation.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: The achievement of this objective is dependent on the achievement of Objective 4.1 and Objective 2.1.

Intent

To maintain the dignity and integrity of cultural sites

Indicative Timeline

While this program will be ongoing, it is expected that the program itself should be established within the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

Providing appropriate Aboriginal input can be sourced, this should be achievable within the time period of this strategic plan.

- By April 2023 – Determination of appropriate stakeholder input

- By July 2023 – Development of an inspection protocol and procedures
- By March 2024 – Conduct an inspection
- By July 2024 – Establish a funded maintenance program.

Objective 4.3a: Connect Place with People by creating a ‘big history’¹³ style web experience

Brief

The Cooks River has a rich history that reflects the natural and human history of Australia. As such, the Cooks River has much to teach us about pre-colonisation, the consequences of European settlement, and the many phases of immigration and cultural diversity since. Yet its rich history is not widely known and, as a consequence, nor are the lessons the river has to teach us. This objective recognises this potential and seeks to bring together this history into a digital, web-based package, that, by default, will also act to collect the river’s history as it is made.

This objective also understands that such a project is quite ambitious. To meet this challenge, the project will need to incorporate at least three stages, beginning with a preliminary research phase that explores current practices in web-based user-centric delivery, the types of resources needed and how these can be best customized to the needs of the Alliance and potential users. Once complete, a project planning phase will be needed that will draw on the findings of the first to develop a plan to build the web platform, incorporating appropriate technical, cultural, and historical expertise. Then, once these phases are complete, the development and testing phase will occur, followed by formal launch. Accordingly, this objective will need to carry over into the next strategic planning time frame.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: The achievement of this objective is dependent on the achievement of Objective 4.1.

Intent

To encourage and promote the Cooks River and its rich history through an engaging, web-based user-enhanced experience. Will also provide a resource to enhance current (Objective 2.3) and future educational programs.

Indicative Timeline

This project is expected to take between three to five years to complete and will therefore be delivered beyond the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

Given the unknowns associated with this project, identifying a completion timetable is not yet viable. However, the following goals can be used to measure progress towards this objective:

¹³ OER (2022). *Big History Project: 13.8 Billion Years of History*. Open Educational Resources, accessed 6 September 2022: <https://www.oerproject.com/big-history/>

- By August 2023 – completion of a preliminary report detailing the types of resources needed to build such a platform
- By February 2024 – completion of a detailed project plan of sufficient detail to understand funding requirements and, if viable, begin procurement processes
- By July 2024 – Decision by the Alliance Management committee to proceed with project.

Objective 4.3b: Connect Place with People by using the river as an interactive, augmented experience

Brief

While this objective is currently aspirational and unlikely to see specific progress during the timeframe of this strategic plan, it has been included to ensure its consideration in Objective 4.3a, and that it is carried over into the next Strategic Plan.

The purpose of this objective is to turn the river into a timeline, allowing people to explore the river's history while physically exploring the river itself. By combining physical signposting along the river with digital technologies such as Quick Response coding (QR Codes) and positioning systems (e.g., GPS and mobile networks), the intention is to create an augmented user experience, where visitors can learn about the river's history and current happenings while exploring it physically. This objective would piggy-back off Objective 4.3a, adding value and exposure to this objective.

Apart from the importance of helping local residence understand their place within the river's history, such a project could also be used for educational purposes and provide an enhanced experience for tourists. As such, this initiative will not only help to build stronger ties with the river, but also gain interest (and potential funding from) educational and tourism institutions and agencies.

Sequencing

Type 2 Objective: The achievement of this objective is dependent on the achievement of Objective 4.1 and Objective 4.3a

Intent

Increase participation in Objective 4.3a via augmented reality, adding additional educational and tourism value.

Indicative Timeline

This project is expected to begin beyond the time horizon of this strategic plan.

Progress waypoints

Currently aspirational. The progress of Objective 4.3a is to be used as a marker towards this objective ahead of the next Cooks River Alliance strategic plan.