

2026 ANNUAL GRANT PROGRAM

Report Author: Executive Officer Partnerships & Community Building
Responsible Officer: Director Communities
Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

Council's Annual Grants Program (the Program) supports not-for-profit community groups, including heritage and arts groups and artists, to deliver community-led initiatives that foster connected, vibrant and resilient communities and strengthen culture and the arts.

The Program criteria align with Council's strategic objectives, ensuring funded projects contribute meaningfully to broader community goals, enabling projects that promote social cohesion, enhance liveability, strengthen a sense of place through art and cultural projects, and build community resilience to be supported.

The program is delivered across three funding streams:

- Community Development
- Arts and Heritage
- Festivals and Events

All funding streams encourage an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, leveraging the skills, strengths, knowledge, and creativity of local communities. The 2026 Annual Grant Round will support project delivery in 2026.

Two independent assessment panels (Community Development and Creative Communities) assessed the applications. The panels' funding recommendations are outlined in this report. The total recommended funding allocation of \$574,535.15 falls within the endorsed 2025-26 Council budget for Community Grants. The panels' recommendations include a slight reallocation of funds across the three streams. This is part of the collaborative panel process.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council notes

- 1) *The recommendations of the independent community assessment panels to award 2026 Annual Grants funding as follows***
 - a) *Arts & Heritage: 15 projects.***
 - b) *Community Development: 40 projects.***
 - c) *Festivals and Events: 20 projects.***
- 2) *Acknowledge the contribution of panel members and their commitment of time and expertise in evaluating applications and shaping their funding recommendations.***

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

Council endorsed the 2026 Annual Grants Guidelines, selection criteria and assessment panels on 13 May 2025.

In 2024 Council endorsed an increase in funds for the *Annual Grants* from \$500,000 to \$575,000 as follows:

- (a) \$150,000 Festivals and Events
- (b) \$150,000 Arts and Heritage
- (c) \$275,000 Community Development.

Council endorsed its Grant Policy in May 2020, establishing high-level guidance for its grant-making activities.

DISCUSSION

Section 9(2)(b) of the *Local Government Act 2020* states: “*priority is to be given to achieving the best outcomes for the municipal community, including future generations*”.

Council’s Grant Programs invest in projects that strengthen community connections and foster a sense of belonging, laying the groundwork for a more resilient and inclusive future.

Purpose and Background

This report outlines the recommendations of the two independent 2026 Annual Grants program panels, for noting by Council.

The Program invited initiatives that promote wellbeing, foster social connection, celebrate local culture, foster creative practice, and strengthen community resilience. It comprised three funding streams, each aligned with Council's strategic priorities.

- **Arts and Heritage:** Encourages storytelling, creative expression, and cultural identity
- **Festivals and Events:** Supports community-led celebrations that enhance local culture and liveability
- **Community Development:** Builds social connection, equity, and capacity through asset-based approaches

The Community Development and Creative Communities assessment panels convened separately in August to deliberate and reach consensus on projects to receive funding.

The successful projects will enable community groups and creatives to deliver inclusive, skill-building initiatives that foster volunteerism, strengthen local networks, and support meaningful community engagement. These activities are designed to reflect diverse voices and cultures, promote participation, and contribute to resilient, connected and creative communities.

Options considered

The scope of the 2026 Annual Grants Program, including the criteria, budget, and assessment processes, was formally endorsed by Council in May.

A rigorous assessment process was undertaken, comprising of:

- eligibility checks by the grants team and staff reflections by officers;
- individual assessments by panel members; and
- a deliberation day for each panel to reach consensus on funding decisions.

The panel assessment method is robust and consistent with the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) recommendations for transparency and accountability in local government grant making processes.

The two independent assessment panels have allocated funds to a diverse range of projects that align with Council's program criteria and strategic priorities.

The Panels commended the high standard of this year's applications, highlighting the significant volunteer contributions and strong community engagement across the Yarra Ranges.

Recommended option and justification

The funding allocations of the two assessment panels, as outlined in Attachment 1, 2 and 3, are submitted for Council noting.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The 2026 Annual Grants budget was \$575,000 with a summary of the applications received, and funds requested, detailed in Table 1 below.

Funding Requests (Table 1)

Funding Stream	Number of Applications	Funds Requested
Community Development	48	\$419,020.33
Arts and Heritage	27	\$251,433.00
Festivals and Events	25	\$265,469.65
Total	100	\$935,922.98

The total funding pool for the 2026 Annual Grants is \$575,000. In 2026, demand across all funding streams remained strong.

The assessment panels demonstrated a significant commitment to the grant process, undertaking thorough individual evaluations (scoring) followed by a day of collaborative group deliberations. Their collective expertise, time, and thoughtful consideration ensured a balanced and rigorous review of applications, reflecting a deep dedication to supporting community-led initiatives through fair and transparent funding decisions.

The Panel funding recommendations are outlined below.

Funding Awarded by Stream

Funding Stream	Projects Awarded	Amount Applicants Requested per Stream	Amount Panel Recommended
Arts/Heritage	15	\$141,233.00	\$ 130,233.00
Community Development	40	\$351,020.99	\$255,275.00
Festivals/ Events	20	\$212,469.65	\$189,027.15
Total	75	\$704,723.64	\$574,535.15

The Community Panels generally supported projects at the requested level; however, following a thorough assessment of scope and budget, partial funding was recommended for some projects. The Panels were confident these projects remained viable with reduced funding support and for some a revised project scope will be agreed during the development of funding agreements, to ensure success.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

The Annual Grants program supports Council's strategic objective to build Healthy Connected Communities, as outlined in the Council Plan.

It also advances Council's Creative Communities Strategy across its three focus areas: People & Experience, Production and Industry, and Place and Environment.

In addition, the Program contributes to broader objectives within a range of Council strategies, plans, and policies outlined below.

<i>Health and Wellbeing Strategy</i>	<i>Healthy and Active Ageing Plan</i>
<i>Creative Communities Strategy</i>	<i>Liveable Climate Plan</i>
<i>Equity Access and Inclusion Strategy</i>	<i>Environment Strategy</i>
<i>Child and Youth Strategy</i>	<i>Reconciliation Action Plan</i>
<i>Municipal Recovery Plan</i>	<i>Recreation, Open Space Strategy</i>

RELEVANT LAW

Council's grant programs are primarily guided by the *Local Government Act 2020* and the *Gender Equality Act 2020*, with no additional legislative provisions directly governing their operation.

Child Safe Standards form a key part of Council's commitment to child safety and wellbeing. Compliance with these standards is a requirement for grant recipients where direct or incidental contact with children may occur. Support is available to assist community organisations in understanding and meeting these obligations.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Section 9(2)(c) of the *Local Government Act 2020* states:

"The economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks, is to be promoted".

The Annual Grant program includes criteria for applications that support sustainability.

Economic Implications

Festivals and events continue to deliver economic benefits across the municipality, including increased visitation, local spending, and employment opportunities for artists, performers, craft persons and vendors.

A range of events (20) from across the Yarra Ranges funded in this round, represent a diverse mix of long-standing events, vibrant street fairs, music festivals, youth-focused creative initiatives, neighbourhood events and community picnics.

Grant applicants are encouraged to prioritise the local procurement of goods and services, in alignment with Council's Grants Policy and its commitment to strengthening local economies and supporting regional businesses.

Social Implications

The Program supports Council's objective of fostering healthy and connected communities. It aligns with the Health and Wellbeing Plan by promoting mental health through social connection and community-led initiatives.

The Program supports social wellbeing by enabling communities to lead initiatives that reflect local strengths, address emerging needs, and foster inclusive participation.

Funded activities include connection groups for mothers and seniors, youth engagement programs, career pathway initiatives, wellness and recreation activities, intergenerational projects, support for solo parents, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, community gardening, and resilience-building efforts led by emergency groups. These initiatives promote leadership, skill development, and stronger local networks.

The Festivals and Events stream also aligns closely with community development objectives and delivers social outcomes. Festivals and events promote social connection and belonging, celebrate local identity, and are driven by the contributions of volunteers, community groups, businesses, and performers.

Grant criteria encourage inclusive participation across age groups, cultures, abilities, and locations within the Yarra Ranges. While implementation varies, this remains a key focus area.

Environmental Implications

Applicants are encouraged to incorporate environmentally sustainable practices into their projects. Suggestions include waste reduction, promotion of sustainable living, and educational elements such as FOGO displays. These guidelines are supportive rather than prescriptive.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To support community engagement and build grant-seeking capacity, Council delivered grant information sessions and offered complementary skill-building workshops to develop ideas, refine project plans, develop cultural awareness and

build knowledge in grant writing. Networking opportunities embedded in the design of these opportunities helped to foster collaboration and strengthen connections across community groups and initiatives.

Applications were received from across the four regions of the municipality, reflecting broad geographic engagement. A comprehensive promotion strategy supported this reach, including social media, Council newsletters, website and roadside banners in key locations.

Council's Grants Team maintains ongoing dialogue with community groups and individuals seeking support with the application process or testing their project idea. Officers across Council contribute contextual reflections as an additional resource for panel deliberations, though they do not provide recommendations.

Acknowledging the Panel Contributions

Following noting at the Council meeting of 28 October 2025, formal funding notifications will be provided in November 2025.

A celebration and networking event is scheduled to occur in December 2025, with the Mayor and Councillors invited. The event will showcase selected 2025 projects and acknowledge the 2026 grant recipients. The event deliberately focuses on networking and peer connection between grant recipients. The celebration event has traditionally been a vibrant gathering where community groups enjoy connecting with each other, Councillors and hearing about the successful projects.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Grants team works in close collaboration with the Cultural Development Team to deliver the Annual Grants Program. Officers from across Council - including Community Development, Health and Wellbeing, Environment and Healthy & Active Ageing also play a key role. They engage with applicants and offer guidance and support through the process.

Feedback and continuous improvement are integral to the success and sustainability of Council's grant programs. Each round includes a review process informed by input from applicants, assessment panel members, and Council officers.

This feedback helps refine program design, strengthen strategic alignment, and enhance delivery outcomes. By actively incorporating lessons learned and stakeholder insights, the program remains responsive to community needs and ensures transparent, equitable, and effective grant-making practices.

Refinements speak to the Program's core purpose: to support and enable community-led projects that respond to local priorities.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Risks managed through the grant making process include:

Risk	Mitigation
Conflicts of interest	• Panel members declare conflicts of interest (COI) before conducting assessments to ensure transparency. • Those with a COI do not assess the application and leave the room during the face-to-face deliberations.
Confidentiality	• Panel members are required to maintain confidentiality of recommendations until the Council meeting noting the successful projects. • A confidentiality agreement is signed by all panel members.
Funding ask exceeds funding budget	• Manage communications transparently and conversations with applicants. • Provide clear feedback and offer to assist unsuccessful applicants to succeed in future (standard practice). • Ensure partially funded groups understand they can revise the scope of their project if needed to reflect the funding awarded.
Disappointed unsuccessful applicants	• Unsuccessful applicants are offered constructive feedback and supported by Officers to refine and further develop their project concepts. Where appropriate, applicants may be referred to Council's monthly grants program for seed funding to test and trial their ideas. • Skill Building workshops can assist with building grant seeking success.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

Panel members with a conflict with any applications declare the conflict and do not assess. There were conflicts for some panel members and the process outlined above was followed.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Arts and Heritage Stream
2. Festivals and Events Stream
3. Community Development Stream