

# Strategy Presentation – 17 October 2016

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## **Presentation by ACF Board Co-Deputy Chair, David Laidlaw**

### **Context for Strategy Review**

The Abbotsford Convent Foundation (ACF) is just 11 years old.

Its formation followed a remarkable campaign to persuade government that the Convent could become a successful and self-sustaining, arts, cultural and community precinct.

Against the odds, and in the face of widespread pessimism, the Convent has succeeded in moving through survival to core sustainability, providing a unique arts, cultural and community resource for Victorians, which is increasingly evolving in national and international awareness.

Board members who have joined the ACF board in the last few years have inherited both the achievements of the first decade, and the challenge to guide the Convent into a new, ambitious phase of its future.

The Convent's new Strategic Plan, which was adopted by the board in April 2016, provides a broad framework for this ambitious new phase – while leaving the detail of how it is to be implemented to management, and to the Convent's next round of business planning.

Critically the Strategic Plan builds on the Convent's successes to date and ensures that elements that have been important to our success, are maintained.

The 2016 Strategic Plan embraces four main, interdependent themes:

1. Activation;
2. Place;
3. Viability; and
4. Governance.

## Activation

Currently only around 60% of the Convent's buildings can be used. There is also considerable potential to build on the current use of the gardens and outdoor spaces. The key to this theme is the activation of the entire site, both built and unbuilt.

The idea is to progressively activate the site to extend and build on the Convent's current role as a catalyst for cultural and community engagement, and to support excellence in the arts – particularly in contemporary arts and culture.

Initiatives in the Activation space are likely to include:

- Creating new public places that the public will want to be part of;
- Establishing new dedicated performance venues and live arts spaces;
- Exploring opportunities for major annual works and events;
- Providing customised accommodation in different buildings for different media and art forms;
- Creating a hub for international residencies;
- Encouraging collaboration between artists, and between artists and the community; and
- Encouraging experimentation and risk-taking in the artistic space – working at the cutting edge.

## Place

The focus of this theme is on the dual responsibilities of conserving and enhancing the Convent's heritage assets while ensuring maximum access and amenity for all visitors.

Initiatives to be embraced under this theme will include:

- Producing an updated Conservation Management Plan and a new strategic site planning framework in 2017;
- Enhancing the Convent's practical connection to the surrounding city while maintaining its unique character of seclusion within the Yarra;
- Enhancing accessibility, amenity and functionality of the Convent's indoor and outdoor spaces;
- Supporting robust public spaces for markets and community activities;
- Providing better access from Johnston Street; and
- Building modern high quality infrastructure and support facilities – extending from digital infrastructure through to lavatories.

## Viability

To this point the Convent has been able to survive and sustain its core functions – and cross-subsidise important but less commercially viable elements of its programs – without recurrent government funding.

We see the relative independence that comes with this as being important in the future.

However the ambitious programs and initiatives that the strategic plan envisages will need public support from the government and philanthropic sectors – and this, in turn, will mean that we will have to embrace projects and program initiatives that are exciting and offer exceptional value, if we are looking to secure strong public support.

Building maintenance and upkeep of the historic buildings and site will also have substantial ongoing price tags for the Convent, and it will be important that we are able to maximise returns on our commercial activities, while ensuring that they are consistent with the overall tenor of our strategy; and will include:

- Maximising occupancy;
- Continuing to utilise the car park to generate a strong income stream;
- Exploring other sources of commercial financing initiatives; and
- Maintaining a sustainable balance between commercial users and cross-subsidised space

## **Governance**

Essential to the success of the new ambitious phase will be sound and effective governance which will be characterised by:

- Continued adherence and alignment of its programs to delivering value to our stakeholders;
- Fair and ethical management;
- Operational efficiency;
- Sound financial management; and
- Accountability and responsiveness to needs and opportunities as they arise.

As we raise the bar on our ambitions for realizing the potential of this world class site, we also need to raise the bar on the degree of professionalism we bring to our governance and management of it.

## **Conclusion**

So concludes a very quick overview which has hopefully given you a taste of the scope and challenges of the strategic vision for the next phase of the Convent's life.

It goes without saying that it is an ambitious program –one which will depend for its success on:

- The creativity, vision and energy of the management team under CEO Collette Brennan's leadership;
- The support of government and the community; and
- Critically, the support of you, our supporters and stakeholders, who have been so important to the achievements of the Convent to date.