



# Abbotsford Convent Foundation Strategic Plan

Ratified: April 2016

Abbotsford  
Convent

## Introduction and overview

---

This is the Strategic Plan of the Abbotsford Convent Foundation (ACF). The Strategic Plan sets out the principles and priorities established by the ACF Board. It also details the Board's approach to governance and stewardship of the ACF.

The Strategic Plan was produced through the collective work of the ACF Board members, ACF senior management and independent, professional members of our Board subcommittees. The process involved a number of workshops and meetings in which we reflected on the achievements and lessons of the last ten years and identified our aspirations for the site and the organisation for the next ten years.

The ACF's Strategic intent for the Abbotsford Convent is:

An entrepreneurial, financially independent, nationally recognised, creative catalyst and a welcoming, open and inclusive place that maximises cultural impact through complementary cultural and commercial activities.

### Purpose of the Strategic Plan

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to guide the ACF's strategic decision-making and its investments in assets and capability. It will be used when we measure our performance – to ensure the Strategic Plan is being followed and achieved – as well as in the Board's self-assessment processes and senior management recruitment and oversight. It is the peak document in a hierarchy of plans that includes the ACF Business Plan and operational plans. To ensure the Strategic Plan remains up-to-date and relevant, the Board will review it periodically and renew it as appropriate.

The Strategic Plan is complemented by concrete measures of outputs and outcomes (expressed in the ACF Business Plan). We will monitor our progress and measure our success, with indicators of creativity, inclusion, national recognition, visitation and engagement, cultural impact, complementarity of cultural and commercial activities, entrepreneurship, and return on investment.

### Context

The ACF is a not-for-profit Company Limited by Guarantee responsible for the management and stewardship of the Abbotsford Convent precinct and the assets and activities to which the precinct is home. Those assets and activities are unique and diverse. They serve, as does the precinct as a whole, a range of important values and purposes including heritage, cultural, community, educational and economic ones. (A brief history of the ACF is included at Appendix 1.)

Now ten years old, the ACF is moving into a new phase of its history. In our first years, the priority was to 'prove the model' and achieve financial sustainability. (At the very

beginning, basic ‘survival’ was an urgent imperative.) Now that that goal has been achieved, the next phase in the Convent’s history will be about activating the whole site (currently only 60 per cent of the buildings can be used) and operating in a more sophisticated way, using our assets with more ambition while keeping faith with our social purpose and the expectations of our community and partners. The Board is committed to achieving a step change in the quality and impact of the ACF’s assets and activities.

The ACF receives no recurrent government funding. Costs such as repairs and maintenance, security, staff salaries, insurance and gardening are funded from income generate by the ACF. Our custodianship of the Convent precinct is dependent on running a self-sustaining business.

The Abbotsford Convent is a unique social enterprise success story, built on a partnership between the community, the philanthropic sector, the corporate sector and the three levels of government. Our model and our success continue to attract national and international attention. The ACF Board’s task is to steer the ACF in a way that is congruent with our values and our partnerships; maintains our independent financial sustainability; and lives up to our growing expectations and ambition.

In line with the ACF’s vision and approach to resourcing, we have recently received funding for a crucial project. In May 2015 the Commonwealth Government announced that the ACF would receive \$2.681m from the National Stronger Regions Fund (NSRF) to restore the 3200 sq. m Sacred Heart building – a dilapidated historic building on the Convent site that awaits restoration and is therefore currently out of bounds. The NSRF support matches the generous \$2m donation from the Dara Foundation, as well as other funds the ACF has generated over the past decade.

With the building at serious risk of ruin if not secured soon, Sacred Heart has been a top priority for the ACF for some time. The Sacred Heart redevelopment is the biggest capital works program at the Convent since the original restorations a decade ago. Oversight of the Sacred Heart project is a key near-term priority for the Board.

In addition, the Commonwealth Government is assessing the entire Abbotsford Convent site for inclusion in the National Heritage List (NHL). The two-year-long assessment process will commence in 2016 and the ACF is confident that we will be placed on the prestigious NHL in the future.

## **ACF Board governance approach**

The ACF Board is a skills-based board. The Board regularly assesses its performance and takes steps to ensure it has the necessary skills, structures, attributes and instruments to fulfil its mandate.

The Board has established a number of active subcommittees. Membership of the subcommittees comprises ACF Board members and other individuals who bring independence and additional expertise. Each subcommittee has specific terms of reference; members with relevant skills and expertise; and a mandate to consider

strategic matters and advise the full Board. The subcommittee arrangements mirror the Board's priorities, and reflect the diversity and growth of the ACF's activities and responsibilities. The Board will continue to use subcommittees to maintain the efficiency and effectiveness of its work.

(Details of the ACF's formal governance arrangements, including key governance documents, are provided at Appendix [2]).

## **Strategic Plan priorities**

The ACF's strategic priorities are congruent with our values. They are the roadmap that has been developed to lead us to our Vision. The ACF Board has four main aims for this next phase of our custodianship.

### **ACTIVATION**

the Abbotsford Convent will be a catalyst for cultural development, animated by creative and entrepreneurial people. It will be a place that encourages cultural engagement in a broad civic and social sense, as well as fostering excellence in the fine and applied arts

### **PLACE**

the Convent will be a place that inspires, supports and reflects a vibrant mix of cultural and community activities while conserving and enhancing the heritage assets of the Convent and ensuring maximum access and amenity for all visitors

### **VIABILITY**

the ACF will achieve financial independence through uses that generate income and extend the scope and quality of outcomes relating to the place and its activation

### **GOVERNANCE**

the ACF will make decisions and perform our role in a manner that reflects our core values and that encourages accountability, operational efficiency and responsiveness to needs as they arise.

Our Strategic Plan identifies a number of strategies and key directions developed to guide the ACF in the achievement of each of these aims.

The ACF's Strategic Plan will be implemented through ACF Business Plan. The Board expects the following considerations to be areas of focus in the implementation of the Strategic Plan:

- investing in our spaces, to activate the whole precinct
- enhancing the amenity and visual coherence of the whole Convent precinct, through a landscape plan that guides investment and facilitates integration of internal and external spaces
- understanding the value of the precinct – what people appreciate and how the Convent site brings people together
- investing in the ACF's internal capability, in priority areas such as project management, fundraising and business development
- operating as a business in a more sophisticated way – using our assets with more ambition while keeping faith with our social purpose and the expectations of our community and partners

# Strategic Plan

---

## Strategic Intent

An entrepreneurial, financially independent, nationally recognised, creative catalyst and a welcoming, open and inclusive place that maximises cultural impact through complementary cultural and commercial activities

## 1. ACTIVATION

The Abbotsford Convent will be a catalyst for cultural development, animated by creative and entrepreneurial people.

It will encourage cultural engagement and support excellence in the fine and applied arts, with a particular focus on contemporary and digital arts and culture.

The activation of the entire site will be key to achieving this aim.

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Key directions</b>
<b>1.1</b> Encourage creative collaboration and broad social participation across the site as a whole.	Make a public place that people want to be part of.
<b>1.2</b> Create opportunities for a broad cross-section of the community to engage with the arts and cultural issues ranging from looking, to making, to critical debate.	<p>Provide venues for a broad range of community and cultural events.</p> <p>Provide dedicated performance venues and live art spaces.</p> <p>Create places for creative work and interchange in the public realm.</p> <p>Encourage opportunities for creative retail.</p>
<b>1.3</b> Animate indoor and outdoor spaces across the entire site using curated interventions.	<p>Maintain and enhance a changing program of events and interventions to create a steady flow of activity all year, day and night.</p> <p>Explore opportunities for major annual works and events.</p>
<b>1.4</b> Accommodate skilled creative practitioners working on-site across a spectrum of new and traditional art forms.	<p>Develop and improve accommodation in different buildings to focus on different media, art forms and/or workspace requirements.</p> <p>Develop the Convent as a hub for international residencies.</p>
<b>1.5</b> Promote artistic values that contribute to a vibrant cultural milieu at the Convent.	<p>Emphasise the Convent's unique site and history.</p> <p>Encourage a diversity of art forms and expression.</p> <p>Encourage collaboration and help artists to connect with each other and the public.</p> <p>Encourage experimentation and risk-taking and accept failure as an element of artistic practice.</p>

## 2. PLACE

The Abbotsford Convent will be a place that inspires, supports and reflects a vibrant mix of cultural and community activities.

We will conserve and enhance the heritage assets of the Convent while ensuring maximum access and amenity for all visitors.

Our aim is to have an updated Conservation Management Plan and a new strategic site planning framework in place by 2017.

Strategies	Key directions
<p><b>2.1</b> Enhance the Convent's practical connections to the surrounding city while maintaining its character of seclusion within the Yarra River corridor.</p>	<p>Connect the Convent to the surrounding city through uses addressed to, and an entry from, Johnston Street.</p> <p>Enhance the character of the Convent as a place set apart from the city and connected to the Yarra River corridor.</p>
<p><b>2.2</b> Improve and manage the Convent's different types of spaces to support different types of uses.</p>	<p>Improve courtyards as securable event venues.</p> <p>Develop a robust civic space for markets and other community activities.</p> <p>Create a campus for creative and social interchange, activated by building uses that spill into outdoor spaces.</p> <p>Expand and improve the garden areas available for public use.</p> <p>Ensure a good fit between uses and spaces to minimise the need to alter heritage fabric, and in new works aim to maximise the adaptability of spaces to allow for potential changes in use.</p>
<p><b>2.3</b> Enhance the accessibility, amenity and functionality of indoor and outdoor spaces throughout the Convent.</p>	<p>Create modern, high quality user, operational and maintenance support facilities and infrastructure.</p> <p>Improve access while maintaining the Convent's character as a place to explore.</p> <p>Improve the standard of site maintenance and presentation.</p>

### 3. VIABILITY

The ACF will achieve financial independence through uses that generate adequate income to support the ongoing maintenance and operation of the site.

It will extend the scope and quality of public outcomes supported at the Convent through external funding sources that are sustainable, risk managed and aligned with our values, with each stream targeted as appropriate to particular types of works and programming.

As a starting point, our aim is to generate a sustainable operating surplus of at least \$300k per annum complemented by philanthropic support.

Strategies	Key directions
<p><b>3.1</b> Optimise the commercial balance of site uses to generate income while achieving other objectives.</p>	<p>Increase the site's capacity and maximise occupancy.</p> <p>Establish and maintain a sustainable balance between commercial uses, total site costs and cross subsidies for cultural and community uses.</p> <p>Deliver destination drawcards.</p> <p>Encourage and support footfall and stay time to maximise the value of hospitality and other retail tenancies.</p> <p>Enhance facilities to attract use.</p> <p>Maximise financial returns from the car park.</p> <p>Charge admission for access to events.</p>
<p><b>3.2</b> Develop an embedded culture of philanthropy and community support.</p>	<p>Ensure everyone understands the ownership and management model and contributes financially.</p> <p>Communicate the impact of philanthropy and outcomes that won't occur without support.</p> <p>Encourage large infrequent contributions.</p> <p>Encourage small regular contributions.</p>
<p><b>3.3</b> Develop a culture of active participation and support from the community and business.</p>	<p>Develop Membership and Volunteer programs.</p> <p>Develop the offering for corporate partnerships and sponsorship.</p>
<p><b>3.4</b> Secure government support for the provision of public services.</p>	<p>Seek funding for restoration of heritage buildings in light of NHL status.</p> <p>Obtain State and local government support for open space enhancements in recognition of its value for the broader community.</p>

## 4. GOVERNANCE

The ACF's business practices will ensure consistency with our core values, operational efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness to needs as they arise.

Strategies	Key directions
<p><b>4.1</b> Cultivate organisational values that support good governance and treat all people in a fair and ethical manner.</p>	<p>Encourage a lively dialogue about the activities and directions of the site in an atmosphere based on transparency, tolerance, respect and open-mindedness.</p>
<p><b>4.2</b> Improve the ACF's financial systems to ensure its accountability, capacity to meet objectives, and flexibility to respond to external opportunities as well as internally driven programs.</p>	<p>Improve financial systems and reporting to enable effective review and planning of expenditure.</p> <p>Use debt and outsourcing to achieve efficiencies and increase capacity to support activities, programs and works.</p> <p>Use delivery partnerships to realise synergies between the ACF's objectives and those of other organisations with congruent values, especially other site users.</p> <p>Increase cash reserves to support maintenance works and new projects when required.</p>
<p><b>4.3</b> Improve the ACF's organisational capacity for strategic planning, efficiency in day-to-day operation, and responsiveness to new opportunities.</p>	<p>Balance resourcing of staff and as-needed contract/consultant services to ensure support for both strategic and day-to-day requirements.</p> <p>Set targets and monitor performance.</p> <p>Develop long term maintenance schedules for all buildings, outdoor spaces and infrastructure.</p>

## Appendix 1: The Abbotsford Convent's History

The Abbotsford Convent site, on a peninsula formed by the Yarra River, has long been an important meeting place. At the time of its first human occupation, the site was a point where two groups – the Wurundjeri and Boonerwung of the Kulin nation – could come together. Surrounded by a natural amphitheatre, the site was downstream of a crossing point of Birrarung, the 'river of mists'.

In 1838 Robert Hoddle surveyed land on both sides of the river and divided it into farming allotments. Three pioneers occupied the Abbotsford peninsula. One of them, Edward Curr, was a pastoralist who built his villa estate, St Heliers, on the eastern bend of the river. Curr became active in the campaign to separate the Port Phillip District from New South Wales. Another riverside villa and farming estate, Abbotsford House, was constructed by John Orr, on the Clarke Street edge of the subdivision. Orr became an early Member of the City of Melbourne Council. He ran steamers on the Murray and, later, gold escorts to Melbourne.

Charles Liger, who for a number of years rented Orr's Abbotsford House, was a Member of Victoria's first Legislative Assembly. He was the first Vice-Chancellor of The University of Melbourne and later became the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Great Britain.

In 1850, Edward Curr passed away, just months before the announcement of the separation of the Port Phillip District. A tree, still standing, is said to have been planted by Curr's family to commemorate the new colony. While both houses are gone, many traces of the 'gentleman farmlets' remain, including gates and garden remnants.

The gold rush led to a population influx and rapid construction of houses and factories in the area. Gold hysteria and social change also brought social problems. In 1863, four Sisters of the Good Shepherd came to Melbourne to establish an outpost of their Order, to 'toil for the salvation of souls', namely young women at risk due to the societal flux. The Sisters bought Abbotsford House, opening it as a convent on 26 August 1863. Fundraising for further buildings was conducted through a bazaar organised by local benefactors. By the end of the year, temporary buildings were constructed for a laundry and reformatory. By the following year, sixty women in the Magdalen Asylum were employed in laundry and needlework onsite.

In 1865 the Sisters purchased St Heliers, which they used to expand the Asylum. The Preservation School was established for girls in need. Two years later, an Industrial School was established with government funding as part of a network of such schools housing children at risk. Ninety-five girls were housed by 1870.

After further building works and expansion of pastoral and welfare activities, the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Abbotsford became, by the turn of the century, the largest charitable institution in the Southern Hemisphere.

In 1972 the Sisters of the Good Shepherd reviewed the Order's work and the future of their institutional complexes. Abbotsford then cared for 139 women of all ages, a far cry from the peak of nearly 1,000 girls and women. The Sisters adopted a new approach to the delivery of social services, focusing on direct provision of services to the community.

In 1975, the Victorian state government purchased the site to preserve its heritage and landscape values and to make it available for higher education use. The Collingwood Children's Farm was established on a parcel of the Sisters' former farming land.

In 1976 and 1977 the Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences and the School of Early Childhood Development established a joint campus on the site. In the late 1980s, national education reforms led to the amalgamation of smaller institutes. The Lincoln Institute was absorbed into La Trobe University, and the School of Early Childhood Development into the University of Melbourne. The University of Melbourne retained ownership of the former Junior School as a kindergarten; the rest of the site was transferred to La Trobe University.

In 1993, in recognition of the unique cultural and historical values, the university-owned Convent land and the Collingwood Children's Farm were placed on the Historic Buildings Register. In the following year, the Urban Land Corporation was commissioned to sell the land. In 1997, the Corporation accepted an offer from developer Australand. Reputed to be over \$20 million, it more than doubled the Valuer General's valuation. The initial Australand proposal was for approximately 240 units on the north and south sites including three-storey units along the bike path and numerous other large new buildings among the existing buildings. Many existing buildings were to be demolished, with some to retain just their facade.

In 1998 the Abbotsford Convent Coalition (ACC) was formed to oppose the development. The public's passion for the site saw a long and hard-fought community campaign in which the ACC developed an alternative proposal, based on community arts, tourism, hospitality and training objectives. This was lodged in the form of a planning application to the City of Yarra and was exhibited alongside the developer's application in Richmond Town Hall.

With the help of committed citizens, community members, future tenants, former Abbotsford Convent residents, and generous benefactors and philanthropists, the ACC achieved a major community victory. The campaign succeeded when the state government transferred the site to the Abbotsford Convent Foundation (ACF). The state government also provided the ACF with \$4 million to begin restoration and the City of Yarra provided \$1 million. Three staff were appointed and the restoration program began.

The following year (2005), a volunteer program commenced; necessary initial works were completed, and the Convent was opened to the public. The Convent soon achieved financial sustainability, thanks to revenue from donations, tenancies, events and the car park between St Heliers St and Johnson St.

Every subsequent year saw milestone achievements: commencement of the first major commercial tenants; opening of the c3 Contemporary Art Space; commencement of the Convent festival program; restoration of the upstairs section of the Rosina Building for performing arts use. In 2010 the Convent was accepted as a Member of the prestigious European network of historical monuments that are now arts and cultural sites: Réseau Européen des Centres Culturels de Rencontre. Today, it is a vibrant, multifaceted precinct for art and cultural production and engagement.

## Appendix 2: Governance of the Abbotsford Convent Foundation

The Abbotsford Convent Foundation (ACF) is a company limited by guarantee formed and operating under the provisions of the Corporations Act. The ACF is governed by a skills-based Board, which sets the organisation's vision and mission and is responsible for strategic planning and policy setting.

The Board and the Directors provide financial and fiduciary oversight and stewardship. The Board appoints the Chief Executive Officer and evaluates the CEO's performance.

### KEY ACF GOVERNANCE DOCUMENTS AND INSTRUMENTS

Type	Documents and instruments
Founding documents	Constitution of the ACF (includes objects and powers)  Deed with the State Government (ACF establishment deed)
Integrity	Directors' Code of Conduct  Values Statement  Conflict of interest policy
Strategy	Strategic Plan (this document)  Arts Manifesto  Master plan
Board governance	Board member induction process and induction pack  Board self-assessment process documentation  Board workplan and meeting calendar  Board agendas, papers and minutes  Board decisions register  Board committee charters and membership documentation
Risk management	Risk management framework  Risk register

---

Other key documents

ACFAT Constitution

Key policies including for Food and Beverage policy, Tenancy policy, and Open Space policy

CEO performance agreement and appointment documentation

Auditor appointment letter and charter

Register of compliance dates

Business plans

Annual budgets

ACF and ACFAT financial statements and reports

Key agreements including grant agreement for Sacred Heart redevelopment

Assets register

---