



*ESTABLISHMENT PLAN FOR A*  
**COOKS RIVER**  
**REPORT CARD PROGRAM**



# Purpose

The community derived vision for the Cooks River for 2030 is ***"A loved and healthy Cooks River valley, enriching the heart of Sydney"***.

Accordingly, this plan intends to establish a robust Cooks River Report Card Program that will:

1. gauge how well all our efforts are helping towards this vision so that we can continuously assess and revise our actions towards this end. Our "efforts" and "actions" are those of the Alliance, government entities, not-for-profits, community groups, businesses and the community at large.
2. increase transparency and trust. By being open and honest about how progress towards our Vision is progressing, we will build stronger relationships between all stakeholders, and collectively and individually take responsibility for our roles in achieving the community's vision.

Further, by establishing a Report Card Program that measures progress across multiple indicators, we can begin to address some of the negative perceptions about the Cooks River. For too long the Cooks River has been described only in relation to its deficits: the damage inflicted on it over many decades; the gross pollutants in its channels; its unnaturalness including its concrete banks. Such a narrative overlooks the strong and dedicated base of local community groups that work to protect and improve the river, the region's biodiversity in flora and fauna, and the green and blue space that the river offers in a major population centre.

The Cooks River Alliance believes dismantling the negative narrative of the Cooks River goes hand-in-hand with improving its health. This lens is critical to advocacy efforts and garnering more community and political support. A core component of this approach is a renewed Cooks River Report Card Program that illustrates the environmental, economic and socio-cultural values that the Cooks River catchment supports and the positive actions that are being undertaken.





# The plan

The Cooks River Report Card Program Establishment Plan describes the establishment of the governance framework, and data acquisition and analysis protocols, necessary to produce robust river report cards for the ongoing management and improvement of the Cooks River. Accordingly, it provides a road-map that sets out the key steps to establish this framework and protocols to administer data collection, data storage, data analysis, and report production, including which parties will be responsible for the various parts of this endeavour.

# History

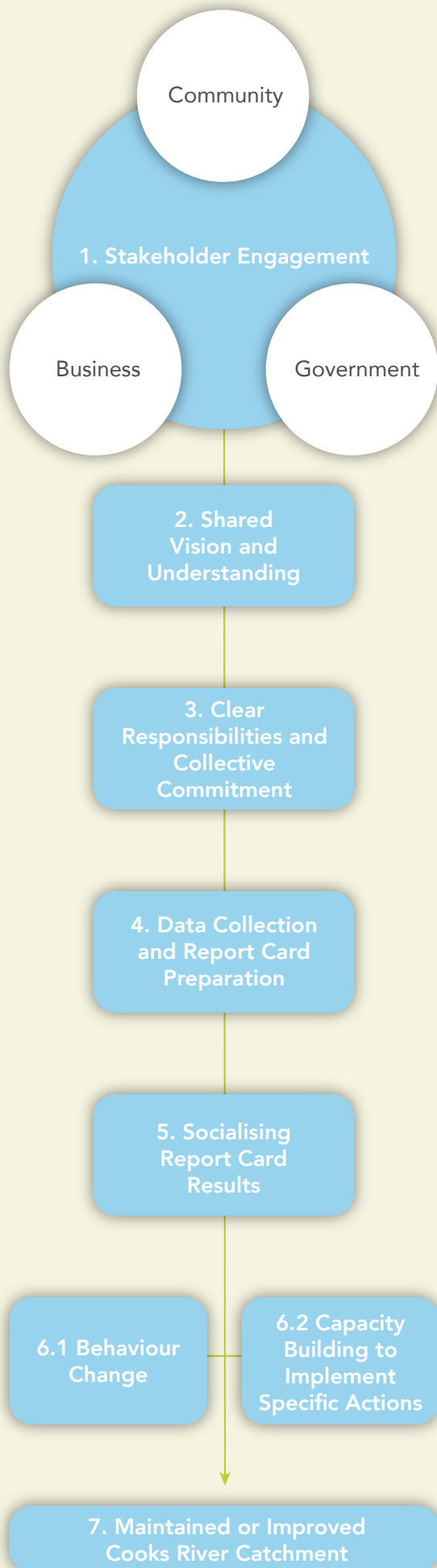
The Cooks River Alliance previously produced report cards on the ecological health of the Cooks River between 2011-2017. These report cards were based upon benthic macroinvertebrates and diatoms, water quality, riparian vegetation and creek channel condition.

There was a desire by the Alliance to build upon the foundation that these historical report cards created, to include a broader range of ecological, socio-cultural and economic indicators. Renewed stakeholder engagement on these issues was initiated in early 2020 resulting in a set of new values. These new values have been incorporated into this Establishment Plan.





# Theory of change



- Stakeholder agreement on problems/issues within the Cooks River catchment
- Increased communication between sectors/stakeholders within Cooks River catchment
- Increased understanding of others' perspectives and needs

- Consensus on what's important to measure and what is healthy
- Agreement on priority solutions among stakeholders
- Greater willingness to collaborate with other sectors and stakeholders

- Identify organisations responsible for data collection, analysis and storage; program administration and oversight; expertise and authority
- Commitment amongst key stakeholders to collaborate, fund, and move forward on the development of a Cooks River Report Card
- Development of memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Cooks River Alliance Member Organisations and, if applicable, other stakeholders

- Data sourcing and analysis
- Identification of key messages and recommendations
- Review, sign-off and public release of report cards
- Review report card collation and production process

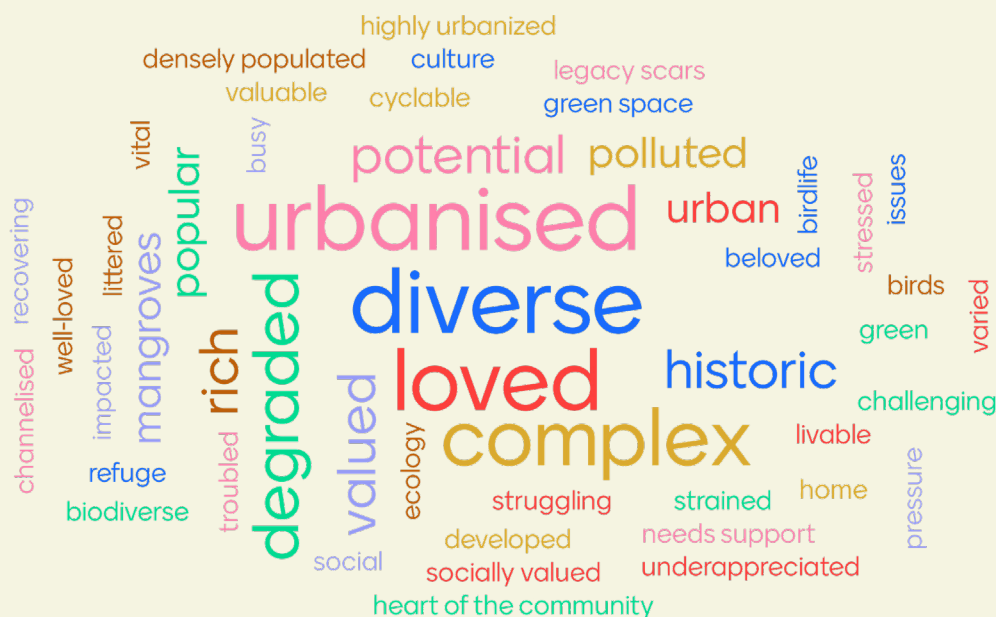
- Increased awareness of issues, problems, and solutions among wider public
- Increased demand for information and data collection
- Increased pressure on private and public sectors to address threats
- Clear understanding of specific actions needed

- New/updated policies to address threats
- Resources allocated to address threats
- Direct actions taken to mitigate threats / restore river catchment health

- Fulfill vision of a healthy Cooks River catchment
- Inform future strategic planning instruments for the Cooks River Alliance, Member Organisations and, where appropriate, key stakeholders

# Stakeholder engagement

The Cooks River Alliance has been engaging local stakeholders to determine what is valued about the Cooks River, and how these values can be measured and reported on. An overview of what stakeholders valued about the Cooks River is shown in below word cloud and summarised on the following page.



## 2 Shared vision and understanding

The outcome of this engagement is summarised in the figure below, highlighting nine separate values across three dimensions. These values form the foundation from which an integrated report card program can be developed. The report card will highlight these values and ongoing commitment of the community and catchment stakeholders to drive iterative river improvements, providing a platform to advocate for additional funding and support for the river.



## 3 Collective commitment

A collective commitment to support an ongoing report card program is essential from key Alliance member organisations and stakeholders within the Cooks River catchment. Commitments include a willingness to actively collaborate, including the provision of funding, collection and provision of data, provision of expertise, data analysis, and to act on recommendations that are derived from the report card program.

The Cooks River Alliance Secretariat is perfectly placed to facilitate this shared commitment and will prepare a MoU between all parties. The MoU will describe the convergence of willingness between parties to work towards the Vision for the Cooks River, the intent of the report card program providing a format to achieve the vision, and roles and responsibilities of each party in this endeavour. Such an agreement is needed to ensure the initial and ongoing success of the initiative through the provision of a robust and reliable data set.



## 4 Data collection and report card preparation

The validity, usefulness and ultimate success of a report card program is underpinned by the data used to create it. The Cooks River catchment represents a diverse series of habitats, land-uses, and corresponding activities that will require equally diverse health indicators and associated data (as outlined in the nine values identified and short-listed by stakeholders for the report card program). Data will need to be sourced from across the Cooks River catchment, and in some cases, at varying times throughout the year to adequately describe the health of these values.

It is proposed that the Cooks River Alliance Secretariat co-ordinate data collection and act as a central repository for data storage used in the report card program, dependent on funding. This would require development of a report card specific database and data sharing agreements between the various data collectors (i.e. local councils, Sydney Water and the NSW State Government, and others) and Cooks River Alliance. The Cooks River Alliance would work with data providers to decide on the spatial and temporal collection of data so that it well represents the catchment and is scientifically robust. The Cooks River Alliance would also coordinate cross-organisational training so that data is collected and handled in a uniform manner.

The Cooks River Alliance would be responsible for forming and hosting a Report Card Advisory Panel and a Scientific Expert Panel comprising mixed representation from the stakeholders groups and data providers. The role of these panels would be to provide oversight for the report card program initiative, approve report card outcomes and recommendations, and ensure scientific rigour. These panels would also oversee the long-term, continuous improvement of the report card program. The Cooks River Alliance would be responsible for undertaking, or organising, data analysis and preparation of report cards once every three years (to align with the Strategic Plan timeline).

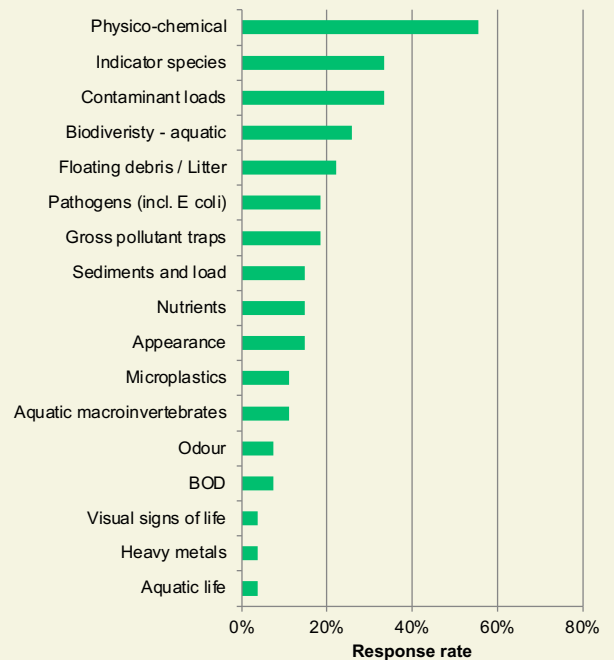


*The Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program area comprises nine sub-catchments encompassing natural, urban and industrialised lands that drain into Botany Bay.*

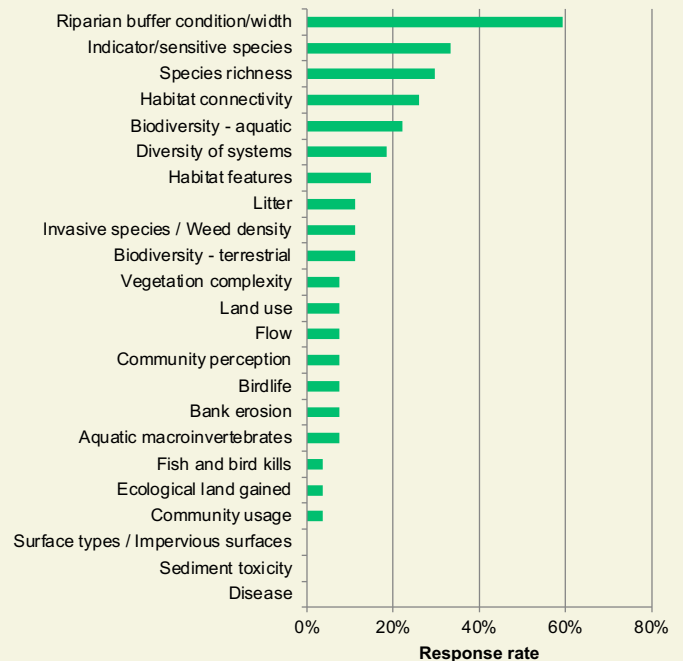
A review of previous report cards for the Cooks River, as well as recent stakeholder engagement, identified numerous potential indicators for each of the nine values outlined in Section 2. These are outlined in terms of popularity amongst stakeholders on the following pages. A review of available datasets found insufficient information to reliably report on these values. However, these values do provide the framework for development of a set of uniform indicators that will need to be developed and agreed upon by all stakeholders.



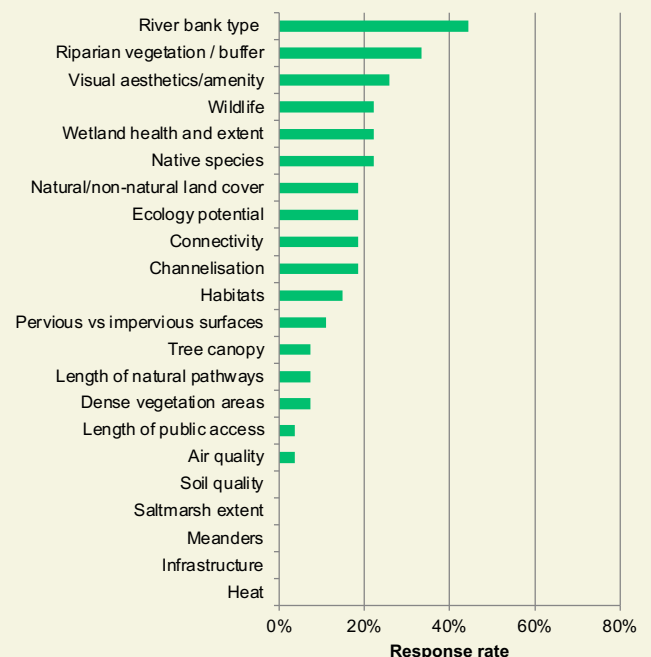
**Clean Water** refers to waterways capable of sustaining life within the catchment. Stakeholders identified physico-chemical water quality, indicator species, and contaminant loads as priority indicators for this value. Information on water quality and litter exists for the Cooks River, however its collection has been sporadic, poorly distributed and stored in an uncoordinated manner across multiple entities.

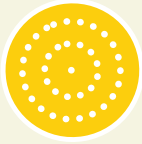


**Biodiversity and Ecosystems** refers to the health of river flora and fauna communities and the habitats they live in. Stakeholders identified riparian buffer condition, indicator species, and species richness as priority indicators for this value. Insufficient up-to-date and geographically representative information currently exists for biodiversity in the Cooks River catchment.

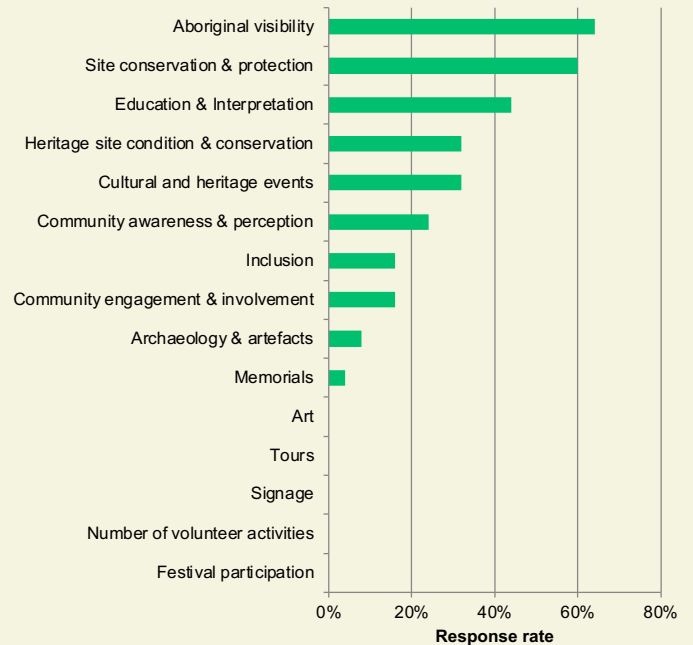


**Naturalness** refers to the intactness of riparian vegetation and "greenness" of the catchment. Stakeholders identified river bank type (natural vs. non-natural), riparian buffer condition, and visual aesthetics as priority indicators for this value. Information on these parameters are collected periodically within the catchment, however more information and better coordination of data collection is needed.

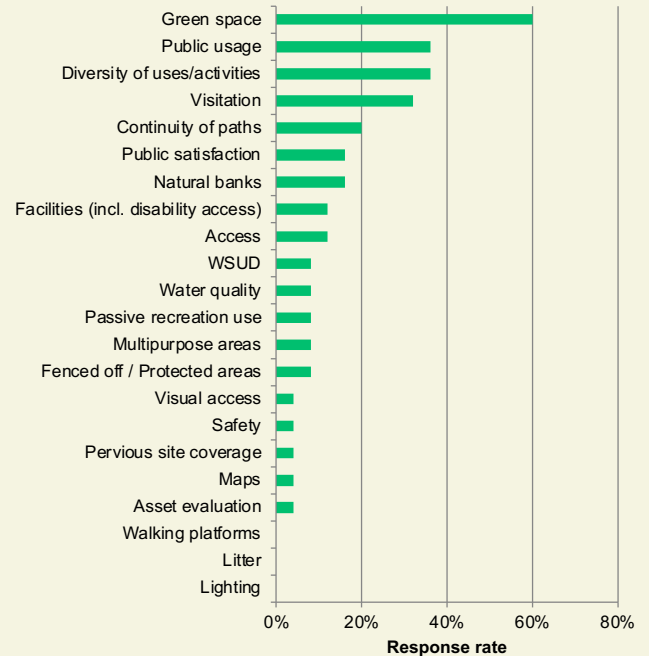




**Heritage & Culture** refers to Aboriginal, colonial and multi-cultural history and awareness. Stakeholders identified Aboriginal visibility, site conservation and protection, and education and heritage as priority indicators for this value. A community survey was undertaken by the Cooks River Alliance in 2021. It revealed a keen interest in both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal history and its expression within the Cooks River system.



**Healthy Living** refers to growing scientific evidence that reveals access to blue and green infrastructure (green space and waterways) has a significant impact on human health and well-being. This includes measurable reductions in obesity, type 2 diabetes, dementia and loneliness. Stakeholders identified green space, public usage and diversity of activities as priority indicators for this value where the Cooks River system is concerned. Despite robust information being available for certain recreational activities such as walking and cycling, this information was restricted to a small portion of the catchment.

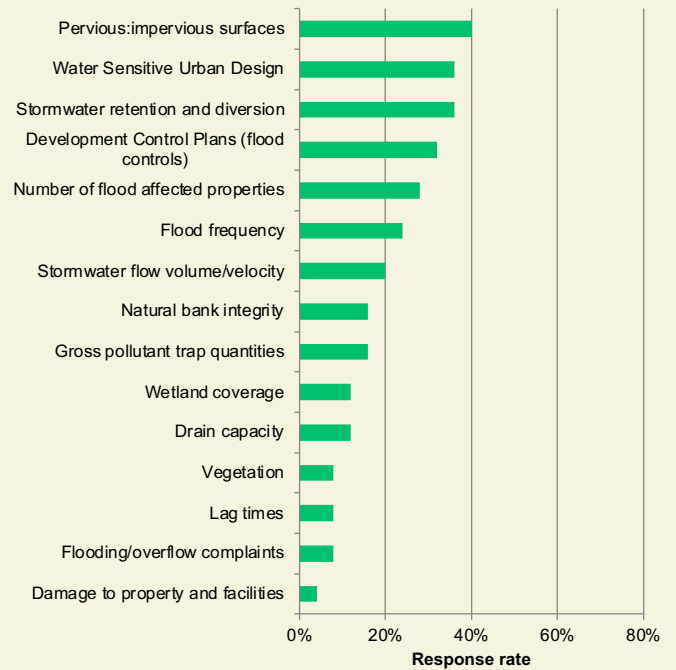


**Education & Science** refers to community and school engagement, research projects and information dissemination related to the Cooks River and its catchment. Stakeholders identified community engagement, number of research projects, and school engagement as priority indicators for this value. This information has not been formally collated across the catchment.

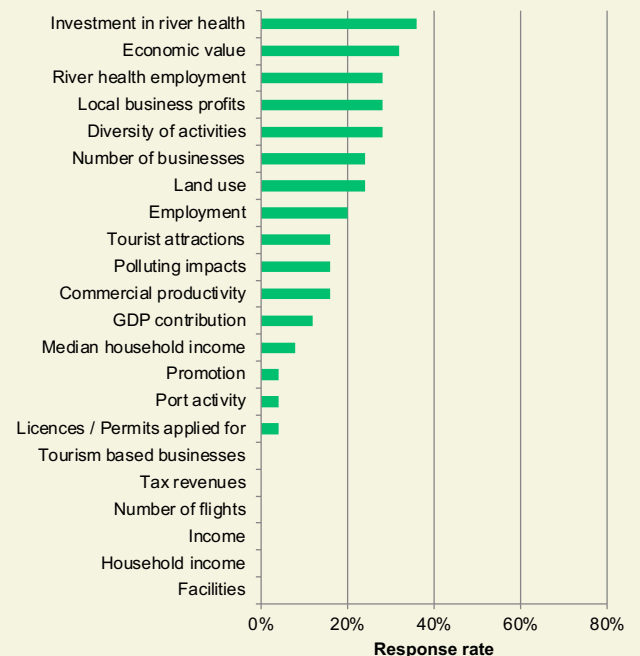




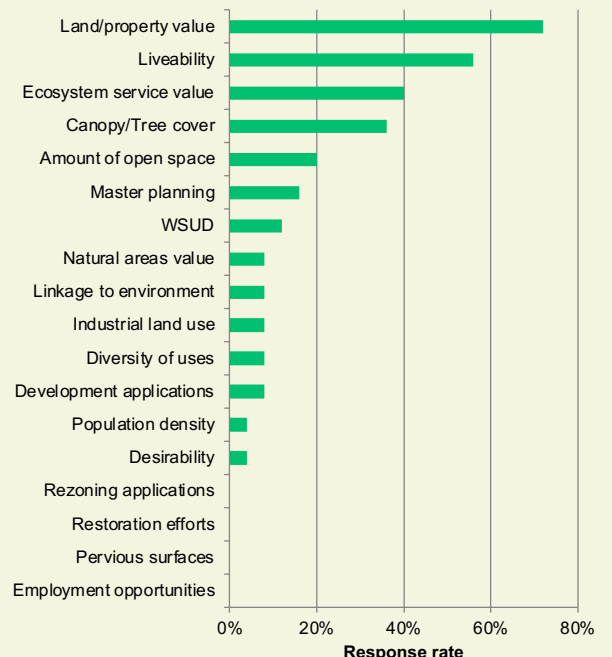
**Flood Resilience** refers to planning for, and responsiveness after, flooding within the Cooks River catchment. Stakeholders identified pervious: impervious surface, water sensitive urban design and stormwater retention and diversion as priority indicators for this value. This information has not been formally collated across the catchment.



**Trade & Commerce** refers to the trade and commercial benefits that come out of an improve Cooks River, such as growth in cafes and restaurants, and ecotourism. Investments in river health, economic value of the river, and river-based employment were identified as priority indicators by stakeholders.



**Land Value**, as described by stakeholders, refers to property value, housing affordability and the degree to which the community perceives the value of the River system as desirable natural asset in terms of where they live and how they interact with it. Some of this data is available, but has yet to be formally coordinated and collated across the catchment.





## 5 Socialising report card results

The Cooks River Alliance will be responsible for socialising the data and information collected via the Cooks River Report Card Program, providing an audience sensitivity summary of the key findings, recommendations and specific actions needed. The primary purpose should be to increase awareness of the issues and problems facing the Cooks River and its catchment, and provide critical information to inform medium to long-term strategic planning for the River and its Catchment. Accordingly, the Cooks River Report Card Program should aim to produce report cards that speak to a public audience and, where appropriate, to specific technocratic audiences. By doing so, the Cooks River Report Card Program will form a robust, performance based feedback mechanism to enhance strategic planning and, importantly, keep the public informed on the improvement of their River system.

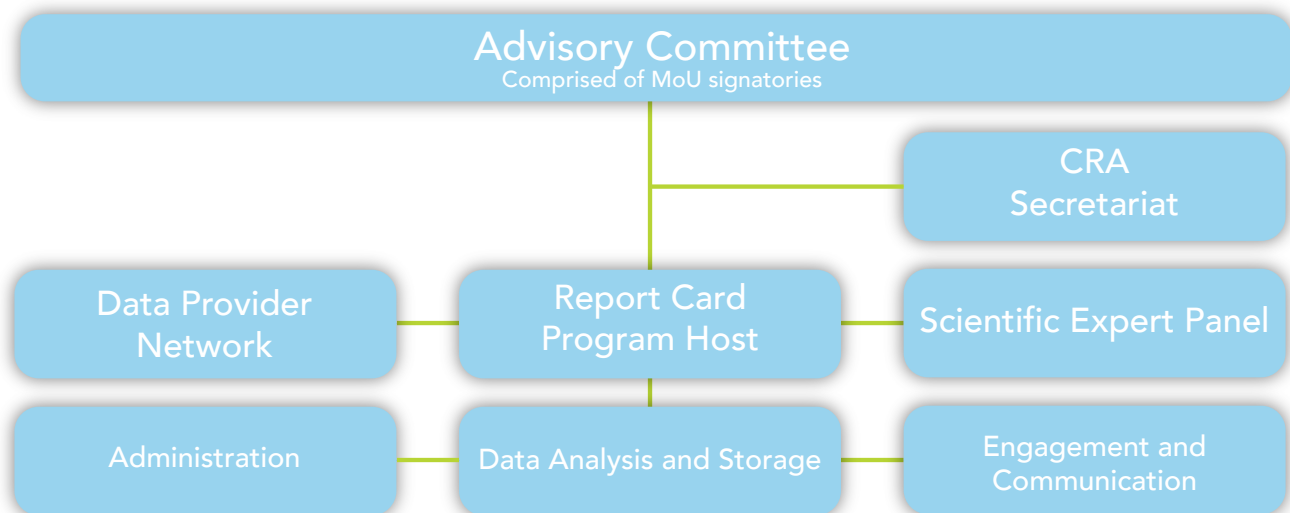
## 6 Behaviour change and capacity building

The issues associated with the Cooks River catchment are mostly complicated and difficult to address quickly. Therefore, the Cooks River Report Card Program will need to be a continuous, cyclic program to enable the tracking of progress towards long-term goals over time. Armed with credible, science-based information produced in periodic report cards, stakeholders and technocrats will be empowered to make decisions, develop new policies, allocate resources, and become advocates for improving the health and utility of the Cooks River.



# Roles and Responsibilities

A successful report card program requires a robust foundation consisting of administration, data sources, scientific expertise, communication and oversight. The below framework outlines an indicative approach for a Cooks River Report Card Program.



*A proposed Cooks River Report Card Program management framework.*

## Advisory Committee

An advisory committee would be comprised of a representative from organisations that either fund, or contribute data to, the report card. The role of the Advisory Committee would be to:

- Ensure the report card program is aligned with the shared vision of all stakeholders.
- Ensure the report card program maintains relevance to stakeholders of the Cooks River Catchment.
- Assist with resolving strategic level issues and risks.
- Approve or reject changes to report cards and oversee continuous improvement of the program.
- Provide advice and guidance on business issues facing the report card program.
- Use influence and authority to assist the report card program in achieving its outcomes.
- Review and approve final report card program deliverables including recommendations.

## Report Card Program Host

The Cooks River Alliance Secretariat would host the report card program. The Host would:

- Administer the report card program (including financial management).
- Collate, analyse and store report card program data including organising data sharing agreements.
- Prepare report cards and communicate findings and recommendations.
- Engage and update Cooks River Alliance Member Organisations and stakeholders throughout the process.

## Data Provider Network

As data is to be sourced from multiple sources, a formalised data provider network would be required to secure data for preparation of the report card. The purpose of the Data Holder Network would be to:

- Collect and provide data to the Cooks River Alliance.
- Assure quality control of data collection.
- Perform preliminary data analysis if required (e.g. conversion into standardised formats).

## Scientific Expert Panel

As report cards are underpinned with scientific data, the report card host will require access to suitable scientific expertise. The purpose of the Scientific Expert Panel would be to:

- Provide scientific advice on report card indicator development and data interpretation.
- Provide advice in formulating report card recommendations.
- Contribute to the project's design and implementation.
- Ensure the report card program remains up-to-date with accepted methods and standards for data collection, analysis and reporting.



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