

# Painkalac Creek Flood Mitigation and Adaptation Engagement Results

May 2025

## Contents

Summary of engagement results:.....	1
Purpose.....	2
How we engaged.....	2
Your Say survey results.....	3
Questions with 'drop down' responses.....	3
Questions with open ended responses .....	4
Painkalac Creek is special to me because.....	4
Is there something important in the Painkalac Creek area we might not know about? ....	4
Do you have specific concerns about climate change impacting Painkalac Creek? .....	6
Looking ahead to the year 2100, what do you choose to protect? .....	7
Are there any other comments you would like to make about Painkalac Creek? .....	9
What are your favourite spots along Painkalac Creek? Map markers .....	10
Onsite visit.....	12
Social media results .....	12

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## Summary of engagement results:

Painkalac Creek is viewed by community as vital to the local way of life. Respondents want careful, long-term management that puts nature and sustainability first.

Most enjoyed activities are walking / running, birdwatching, and canoeing. Most valued aspects are a healthy environment and scenic beauty.

Key Themes raised include:

- Natural Beauty & Biodiversity: loved for its tranquillity, wildlife, and seasonal changes.
- Recreation & Community: used for walking, swimming, kayaking, picnics, and social connection.
- Cultural Significance: important to Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung peoples; valued local heritage.
- Environmental Concerns: pollution, poor past planning, and overdevelopment are key concerns.

- Climate Change Impact: fears of flooding, habitat loss, and responses like forced estuary openings.
- Future Priorities: strong support for ecosystem protection, climate resilience, and restoration, even over private property interests.

## Purpose

The purpose of the engagement was to:

- let community know about our Flood Study currently underway.
- understand community values associated with the Painkalac Estuary.
- understand what flood risk concerns the community have now and into the future.

The engagement was open Thursday 13 March through Wednesday 23 April 2025. Throughout this time, we collected the following statistics;



## How we engaged

We received feedback from community in 3 ways:

- Via an online survey on Council's Your Say page
- Face to face on site at the top shops, bottom shops and outside the primary school.
- Reactions to social media posts on Council's Facebook page.

To get the word out about the project and encourage feedback we prepared the following communications:

- Media release (Issued 13 March 2025). Picked up by two local radio stations.
- Advertisement in the Surf Coast Times on 21 March 2025
- Social media posts: a primary post and a reminder post, shared to two Aireys Inlet community noticeboards on Facebook

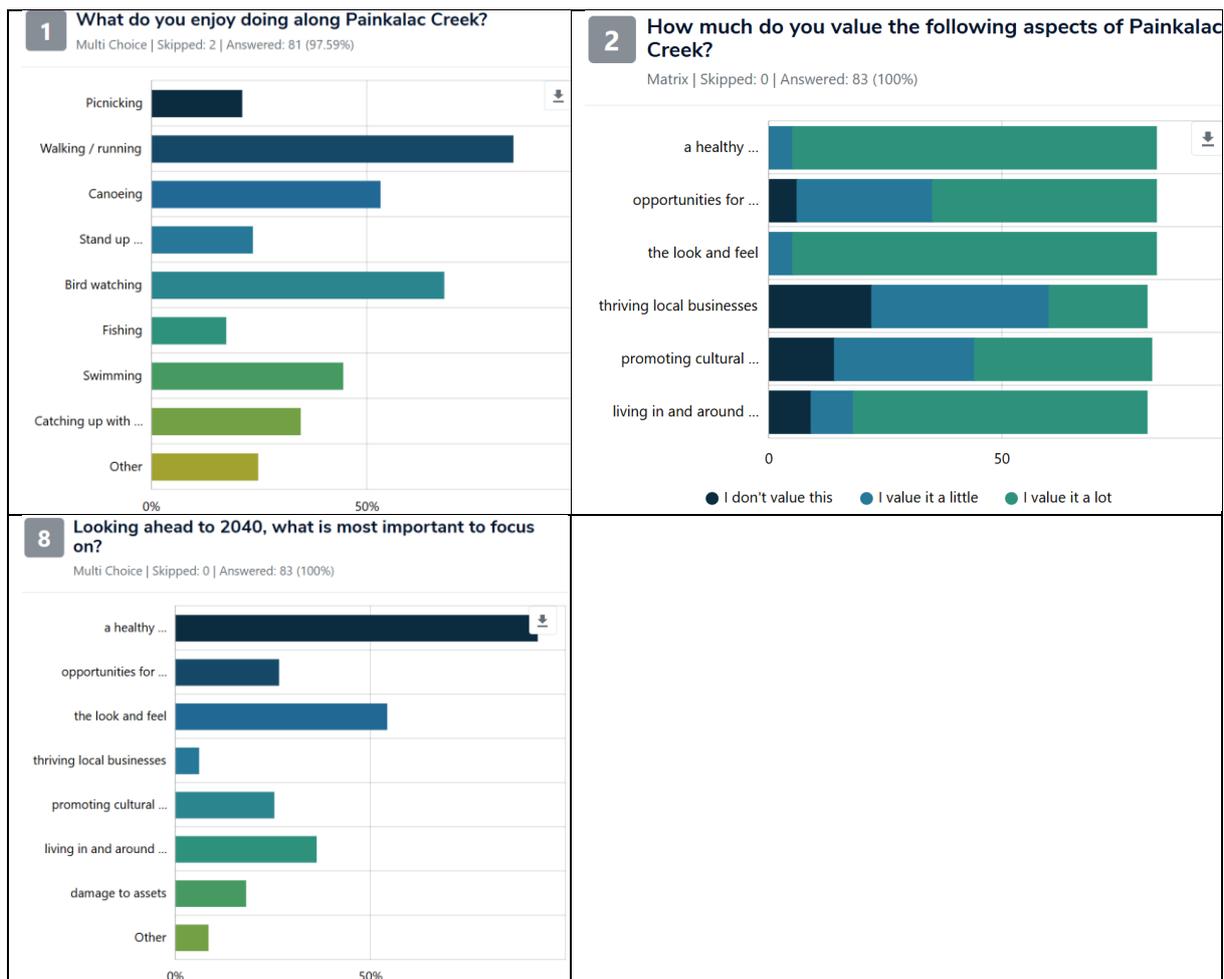
- Pointer to Your Say page in the March/April edition of the Country and Waters newsletter
- Fact sheet
- Postcard
- Letter to river adjacent residents

## Your Say survey results

We had 82 contributions to the survey along with 185 markers placed on the map. Overall, the responses reflect a deep emotional, ecological, and cultural connection to Painkalac Creek. Residents see it as foundational to the town’s character, health, and future.

### Questions with ‘drop down’ responses

When asked what they enjoy doing along Painkalac Creek, the three highest responses were walking / running (68 people), bird watching (55 people) and canoeing (43 people). A healthy environment and the look and feel of the Painkalac Creek was most valued with 78 people saying they valued these aspects a lot. These were also the top responses when looking ahead to 2040.



## Questions with open ended responses

### Question: Painkalac Creek is special to me because...

*"It is a place for reflection, enjoyment of wildlife, family gatherings, recreation and peace."*

*"I grew up with the Inlet. I learned to swim at the mouth, swam to the bridge with my family, rowed and sailed boats, fished, made sand castles. Now I walk there and hope that it will be clean enough to swim in. I walk there every day and live by the river"*

Key themes raised in community responses	Description
Natural Beauty & Scenic Value	Descriptions of the creek as beautiful, scenic, tranquil and picturesque. Central to Aireys Inlet identity and charm.
Biodiversity and ecology	Emphasis on rich biodiversity including native flora and fauna, bird life, fish, kangaroos, and other animals. Importance as a thriving wetland.
Mental health and wellbeing	Association with peace, reflection, calmness, and mental health benefits. Described as a "harbour against the pressures of modern life".
Recreational use and lifestyle	Support for outdoor and family activities like walking, kayaking, swimming, fishing, bird watching. Multi-generational use of the creek.
Environment protection and conservation	Concerns about past or potential development and pollution. Desire to preserve or restore the creek's natural state. Frustration with signs of degradation and poor management.
Cultural and historical connection	Long personal/family histories with the creek. Cultural significance, including indigenous heritage. Historical role in shaping the town's identity.
Community identity and social value	Seen as a community hub and a space for building friendships. It is central to local pride and identity and described as "the heart of Aireys Inlet."

### Question: Is there something important in the Painkalac Creek area we might not know about?

Responses show community think Painkalac Creek is not just a beautiful waterway — it is a culturally significant, ecologically sensitive, and socially central space. Locals deeply value it and are acutely aware of its fragility and the complexity of managing human impact.

*"The valley is ecologically significant and has flora and fauna of high State significance. It also has high cultural significance for First Nations. Work on Lot 2 on 23-79 Bambra Road is a powerful example of successful rehabilitation."*

*“The importance, oral histories and knowledge of the Painkalac Valley and Creek to the people of the Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung.”*

*“Overnight campers on the bank of the creek need to be monitored and by-laws enforced. Speed limit needs to be enforced at 20 km per hour or less, too many drivers disregard the locals and pedestrians, children can be at risk on the road.”*

<b>Key themes raised in community responses</b>	<b>Description</b>
Ecological and environmental significance	<p>Multiple respondents highlight that the area hosts flora and fauna of state significance.</p> <p>Mentions include the role of seagrass in reducing harmful bacteria, natural floodplain management, and the importance of letting the creek flow to the sea.</p> <p>Pollution from domestic animals, bait bags, and runoff from gravel roads.</p> <p>Artificial light (e.g. sports oval), temperature rise, and development pressures.</p> <p>Nutrient runoff from horses and cattle disrupting natural balance.</p>
Biodiversity and wildlife	<p>Frogs (especially audible at night), seagrass, birdlife, and broader aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity.</p> <p>A repeated emphasis on coexistence of humans and wildlife and the need to protect habitats.</p>
Indigenous and cultural significance	<p>The creek and valley hold cultural importance for the Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung peoples.</p> <p>Specific references to scar trees, midden sites, and the need for greater recognition of oral histories and knowledge.</p>
Community identity and use	<p>The creek is described as a gathering place, connecting people and building friendships. It is a vital part of Aireys Inlet and Fairhaven’s identity. A space for activities like walking dogs, canoeing, and horse riding.</p>
Management and infrastructure concerns	<p>Need for better control of overnight campers, dog access, and speeding vehicles.</p> <p>Requests for better access to the Painkalac dam. Suggested amenities such as walkways (like in Anglesea), clearer signage, and waste management.</p> <p>Frustration over past developments and artificially opening the estuary.</p>
Historical and scientific knowledge	<p>References that the Allen Noble Sanctuary as integral to the ecosystem.</p>

	<p>Past ecological studies and surveys since the 1970s.</p> <p>The historical rural character of the area needing recognition amid modernization.</p>
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**Question: Do you have specific concerns about climate change impacting Painkalac Creek?**

The community expresses a clear consensus that climate change is already impacting Painkalac Creek. However, there's also a call for measured, ecologically informed responses, rather than reactive infrastructure that may worsen long-term outcomes. Many advocate for letting the floodplain function naturally, even if it means confronting difficult truths about development choices.

*“I am concerned about the impact of flooding and damage to property and businesses.”*

*“I fear more frequent openings of the estuary.”*

*“I think there is an unrealistic emphasis placed on it.”*

*“Extreme weather events such as high winds are becoming more intense and with potential for damage increasing.”*

<b>Key themes raised in community responses</b>	<b>Description</b>
Flooding and sea level rise	<p>Most frequently mentioned concern.</p> <p>Respondents fear increased flooding of homes, businesses, and low-lying land due to heavier rainfall events, rising sea levels and inappropriate developments on the floodplain.</p> <p>Frustration that properties were built in flood-prone areas and are now driving pressure for artificial interventions.</p>
Extreme weather and climate variability	<p>Concerns raised about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More frequent storms, high winds, droughts</li> <li>• Increasingly erratic weather patterns</li> <li>• Long-term decline in rainfall and drying of the creek</li> </ul> <p>These changes are seen as harmful to ecosystems, infrastructure, and the estuary's natural functions.</p>
Ecological health and biodiversity loss	<p>Degradation of wetlands, native vegetation, and habitat for birds, frogs, and fish.</p> <p>Increased risk of invasive species, salination from sea level rise, water quality decline and reduced natural “flushing” of the creek.</p> <p>Fear that ecosystems will collapse under compounded stress.</p>
Artificial intervention & creek mouth openings	<p>Many responses strongly oppose the frequent mechanical opening of the creek mouth citing impacts of cliff and dune erosion, water quality loss, ecological disruption.</p>

	There is a preference to let nature take its course, allowing the creek to flow and flood naturally.
Development and planning	Clear criticism of past planning decisions allowing development on floodplains and prioritising property protection over ecological integrity.  Several respondents suggest relocation or buyouts of at-risk properties as a long-term solution.
Water flow and catchment changes	Concerns raised about reduced catchment runoff due to lower rainfall, lack of flushing leads to brackish water buildup and dam operations upstream altering natural flow dynamics.
Need for better data, planning and coordination	Requests for longitudinal environmental monitoring, integrated climate adaptation planning and coordination between Council, Catchment Authorities, and Indigenous Custodians.
Cultural and natural values at risk	Threats to Aboriginal cultural sites, such as scar trees and Moonah woodlands.  Fears that human responses to climate change will further damage what remains of the natural landscape.
Tensions between stakeholders	Ongoing tension between residents wanting protection of property, conservationists wanting minimal interference.

### Question: Looking ahead to the year 2100, what do you choose to protect?

The dominant theme raised in community responses is protection of the environment first and foremost, with an increasing recognition that retreat from vulnerable areas may be necessary. While some advocate for balanced protection of homes and infrastructure, many assert that climate adaptation must prioritise ecosystem health if we are to maintain a liveable and resilient Painkalac Creek area by 2100.

The responses reveal a deeply engaged and often divided community, grappling with the realities of climate change, historical planning failures, and the long-term sustainability of the Painkalac Creek area.

*“I would hope that local businesses and homes are protected - many of which have been there for hundreds of years.”*

*“The ecosystem, other things can adapt!”*

Key themes raised in community responses	Description
Ecosystem and natural environment	Strong feelings that the ecosystem must come first - including flora, fauna, wetlands, dunes, estuary, floodplain, and cultural heritage.  Strong support for letting nature take its course, resisting artificial interventions like sandbar openings or shoreline hardening.

	<p>Climate resilience through ecosystem health is seen as the best long-term protection strategy.</p> <p>Examples: “Always protect the environment first.” “We should not interfere with eco processes.” “Protect the valuable ecosystem.”</p>
Infrastructure and property	<p>Many respondents oppose protecting low-lying homes and businesses that were “never meant to be built” on a floodplain.</p> <p>Others emphasize a moral and legal obligation to safeguard existing infrastructure and acknowledge residents' personal investments and risks.</p> <p>Examples: “Council has an obligation to mitigate flood risk.” “I want to protect the environment <i>and</i> my property.”</p>
Manage retreat and land buyback	<p>Recurrent suggestions to buy back properties, relocate development, and restore natural floodplains as long-term solutions.</p> <p>Several see retreat as inevitable and more cost-effective than maintaining artificial defences.</p> <p>Examples: “Buy out properties to protect the creek.” “Retreat is the only option.”</p>
Engineering solutions	<p>There is widespread distrust of artificial interventions like sandbar openings, levees, or concrete seawalls. They are seen by community as short-sighted and potentially more damaging to the natural system than beneficial.</p> <p>Examples: “Human intervention is a waste of time.” “Avoid excessive vegetation clearing and engineered fixes.”</p>
Long term ecological planning	<p>Calls for future-proofed, science-informed planning, including wetland restoration, sustainable infrastructure and cultural heritage preservation.</p> <p>Recognition of interdependence between natural systems and human wellbeing.</p> <p>Examples: “Environment first – as this will help mitigate climate change.” “We need a broad and considered conversation.” “What we protect should support a sustainable way of living.”</p>
Infrastructure protection	<p>There is support for protecting key public infrastructure like roads, bridges, and recreational access (e.g. paths, boardwalks).</p> <p>Responses suggest priority should be placed on community benefit, not private gain.</p> <p>Examples: “Basic infrastructure that provides access.” “Raised platforms and walkways to protect habitat.”</p>
Cultural and moral responsibility	<p>Strong voices calling for respect for First Nations cultural sites and recognition of the moral obligation to future generations.</p> <p>Respondents suggest listening to traditional custodians and ecological science.</p>

	Examples: “Nature has inherent rights.” “Cultural sites and the Moonah woodlands must be protected.” “We are part of nature.”
Frustration	<p>Some respondents express distrust of government and planners. Respondents are frustrated with ongoing mistakes and lack of accountability. Some are resigned to climate change and its unstoppable impacts.</p> <p>Examples: “Who approved building on the floodplains in the first place?” “We do stupid things to avoid climate impacts.” “Let nature do its job.”</p>

**Question: Are there any other comments you would like to make about Painkalac Creek?**

*“The newest unit and shop development should never have been given approval. Bad town planning still happens and this is one of them that increases the need to open the mouth of the creek.”*

*“Keep the creek as natural as possible and minimal effects by properties it runs through.”*

Key themes raised in community responses	Description
Environment protection and restoration	<p>High value placed on the natural environment, its beauty, biodiversity, and ecological function.</p> <p>Strong calls for revegetation, weed control, and restoration of wetlands and floodplains.</p> <p>Concern about degradation from grazing animals (horses, cattle) and inappropriate land use.</p> <p>Advocacy for limiting or reversing development in sensitive areas.</p>
Flood mitigation and water management	<p>Divided opinions on estuary openings. Some support them for water quality and flood prevention, others oppose frequent openings due to environmental impact.</p> <p>Suggestions for integrated flood planning that includes upstream (e.g. dam use, stormwater management) and downstream areas.</p> <p>Desire for greater transparency and community input on flood risk, land zoning, and mitigation measures.</p>
Community access and recreation	<p>Painkalac Creek is seen as a cherished community space, with stories of swimming, fishing, canoeing, and walking.</p> <p>Support for boardwalks, walking trails, and improved access — but always within the context of low-impact, respectful use.</p> <p>Mixed views on dogs in the area. Some support on-leash access, others raise concerns about enforcement and ecological impact.</p>

<p>Development and land use</p>	<p>Widespread concern was raised about poor planning decisions, especially about development in flood-prone areas and near the estuary.</p> <p>Criticism of new commercial and residential developments that undermine the area's low-key character.</p> <p>Some support for property buy-backs or compensation for homes at risk due to past planning errors.</p>
<p>Long term stewardship versus immediate action</p>	<p>Recognition of the importance of long-term vision for conservation and climate resilience.</p> <p>Frustration from some that short-term problems (e.g., pollution, tourism impact, poor maintenance) are being ignored.</p> <p>Calls for stronger enforcement, better regulation, and action now to prevent future degradation.</p>
<p>Governance, communication and transparency</p>	<p>Calls for clear roles and accountability among managing authorities (Council, GORCAPA, etc.).</p> <p>Concerns about lack of communication and follow-up on past consultations.</p> <p>Need for better public access to data, such as creek level monitoring and meeting minutes.</p>

**Question: What are your favourite spots along Painkalac Creek? Map markers**

We had 183 markers placed on the map in and around Painkalac Creek estuary. The responses reveal a deep appreciation for the natural, recreational, ecological, and social values of the Painkalac Creek and Valley area.



*“I would love to be able to walk all the way along the Painkalac!”*

*“I spend a lot of recreational time at this location with my family- swimming, canoeing, paddle-boarding, walking, bike riding.”*

*“Bushfire refuge.”*

<b>Key themes raised in community responses</b>	<b>Description</b>
Walking and passive recreation	<p>Walking is the most frequently mentioned activity, often linked with nature observation and contemplation.</p> <p>People value tranquil trails and accessible walking paths along the creek, estuary, and dam.</p>
Birdlife and wildlife observation	<p>Birdwatching is a dominant theme—especially waterbirds like swans.</p> <p>Kangaroo sightings, echidnas, platypuses, and frogs also contribute to the area's biodiversity appeal.</p> <p>Observers enjoy seasonal changes and the interaction between wildlife and water.</p>
Water based recreation	<p>Activities such as kayaking, swimming, stand-up paddleboarding (SUP), and fishing are popular.</p> <p>The creek mouth and estuary are favoured spots for family-friendly water activities.</p>
Views and aesthetic appreciation	<p>Scenic views, visual beauty, and peaceful surroundings are consistently celebrated.</p> <p>Locations like Butler’s Bend and the dam wall are appreciated for panoramic views and serene environments.</p>
Ecological restoration and biodiversity	<p>Many comments highlight rewilding efforts, revegetation, and habitat renewal—especially around Lot 2 and other rehabilitated sites.</p> <p>There's a strong recognition of ecosystem interdependence and support for native flora and fauna.</p>
Community and social interaction	<p>Picnics, family outings, and meeting others while walking are frequent social activities.</p> <p>Some comments mention community building through shared use of the space.</p>
Environmental concerns and management	<p>Respondents express concern about flooding, drainage, berm opening, and pollution (e.g., E. coli).</p>

	Suggestions include better water management and sensitive development to protect the creek's health.
Cultural and educational significance	References to Aboriginal cultural heritage sites and eel migration indicate cultural and ecological learning opportunities. Some see the area as an outdoor classroom for understanding natural processes.

## Onsite visit

The project team visited the top shops, bottom shops and primary school on Thursday 27 March 2025.

Community members were able to speak with Emergency Management staff, Environment staff, Engagement staff and with the Mayor.

We had long conversations with around 50 community members about the project and gave out roughly 30 project postcards outside the Community Hall at school pick up for parents' easy access to the survey.

Conversations with community covered a range of themes we saw come through in the Your Say survey including governance arrangements with GORCAPA, swimability, water quality and sampling. Community also took the opportunity to raise other Council issues like road condition, safety at local intersections, the top shops redevelopment, tourism, and the market taking business from local cafes,

## Social media results

We posted on Council's Facebook and Instagram pages at the start of engagement (18 March), and towards the end of engagement (16 April). Community were encouraged to visit our Your Say page for information and to provide feedback via a survey.

We had six reactions across our Facebook and Instagram posts including shares to other Facebook pages.