

Guiding Principles for Victoria Barracks

File No: X121526

Summary

Victoria Barracks is an active military base and significant heritage site located in Paddington. Built between 1841 and 1848, the site was occupied by the British military until 1870 when it was then occupied by colonial forces and the Australian army. The site is listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List and is locally listed. Busby's Bore, which partly sits below the Victoria Barracks site, is state heritage listed. The site contains many buildings of high architectural interest, constructed from sandstone quarried onsite and nearby including the Soldier's Quarters, Officer's Quarters, Guard House, Garrison Hospital and Barracks Master's Quarters.

Victoria Barracks remains an active military site today, with many of its original buildings still in use and adapted for modern military administrative uses. The site currently accommodates the Forces Command as well as the Australian Army Band Sydney.

In December 2023, the findings of the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) Defence Estate Audit report, assessed whether Defence's high-density urban property holdings align with current military requirements and were presented to federal government. The findings of this audit report have not been made public.

In November 2024, Council resolved, via a Notice of Motion that the Chief Executive Officer be requested to establish a set of guiding principles for the potential use of the Victoria Barracks if the land was to be divested by the ADF.

In response, the City conducted community engagement from 8 August to 19 September 2025 to call for the public's ideas for Victoria Barracks if it became available for public use. The community's feedback highlighted desires for a publicly accessible place that celebrates its military heritage, provides open space, community and cultural uses and supports Sydney's housing needs. The findings from the community engagement are summarised in the Engagement Outcomes Report (Attachment B).

The Engagement Outcome Report reveals that the community envisions the future of Victoria Barracks as a vibrant, publicly accessible precinct that honours its military heritage, actively preserves and interprets its history, accommodates diverse activities and balances Sydney's housing needs with protecting this unique opportunity. The community's feedback and vision for Victoria Barracks is central to the formulation of the Guiding Principles.

In response to the community's feedback, a set of eight guiding principles are proposed to provide a framework for potential future decision-making on the use of the Victoria Barracks site, should the land be up for divestment. The Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles document outlines the City's proposed approach to balancing preservation with adaptation. It ensures any redevelopment is approached with careful consideration of the site's historical significance, community needs, and the potential to create a vibrant, mixed-use precinct that contributes positively to Sydney's urban fabric. The document details the following eight guiding principles:

1. Preserve and enhance heritage and military significance
2. Maximise public accessibility
3. Enhance and expand green open space
4. Incorporate housing, including diverse housing
5. Prioritise cultural and community use
6. Encourage compatible and viable commercial use
7. Encourage environmental sustainability and protect biodiversity
8. Robust planning, implementation and management

This report recommends Council endorse the Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles (the Guiding Principles) and request the Lord Mayor send the Guiding Principles to the Minister for Defence Richard Marles.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council note the findings of the Victoria Barracks Engagement Outcomes Report as shown at Attachment B to the subject report;
- (B) Council endorse the Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles as shown at Attachment A to the subject report and note that they will be sent to the Department of Defence with an invitation for City of Sydney staff to provide a briefing; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to send the Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles as shown at Attachment A to the subject report to the Minister for Defence Richard Marles with an invitation to further discuss should divestment be contemplated.

Attachments

Attachment A. Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles

Attachment B. Victoria Barracks Engagement Outcomes Report

Background

1. Victoria Barracks is one of Australia's most significant military heritage sites, containing buildings of unique architectural and cultural importance, located in Paddington, built between 1841 and 1848 under the supervision of Lieutenant Colonel George Barney of the Royal Engineers. Figure 1 shows the Victoria Barracks site in 1871, looking east.



Figure 1: Victoria Barracks, 1871. Source: Mitchell Library

2. Paddington was chosen as the new site for a military barracks in the 1830s as the original military barracks on George Street had become increasingly challenged due to deteriorating buildings and its prime location limiting Sydney's commercial growth as the colony and city developed.
3. Victoria Barracks housed the British soldiers until 1870 when it was occupied by colonial forces and the Australian army.
4. The Victoria Barracks site is listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List and is locally listed. It is the only surviving substantial military barracks complex built in Australia from the early Victorian period and contains important groups of late Georgian and Edwardian military buildings in Australia, including the soldiers Quarters building.



Figure 2: Soldiers Quarters building, 1989. Source: City of Sydney Archives

5. Victoria Barracks remains an active military site today, housing the Forces Command and the Australian Army Band Sydney. Many original buildings continue to serve historic functions, while others have been adapted for modern military administrative use.
6. The site occupies around 15 hectares bounded by Oxford Street to the north, Greens Road to the west, Moore Park Road to the south and Oatley Road to the east, see Figure 3. The site's elevated position on a ridgeline provides expansive views, originally selected for defensive purposes but now offering remarkable vistas across Sydney's eastern suburbs to Botany Bay and north towards the harbour.



Figure 3: Victoria Barracks location map. Source: City of Sydney

7. In December 2023, the findings of the Defence Estate Audit report, commissioned as part of the Government's response to the recommendations of the Defence Strategic Review, were presented to federal government. The audit assesses whether Defence's urban property holdings align with the military's current requirements. The findings of this audit report have not been made public.
8. In November 2024, Council unanimously resolved, via a Notice of Motion to request several actions. These included that the Lord Mayor to write to the Minister for Defence and that City staff establish a set of guiding principles for the potential use of the Victoria Barracks site should the land be proposed for divestment.
9. The Lord Mayor wrote to the Minister for Defence Richard Marles to request a briefing for the City of Sydney Council on future plans for the Victoria Barracks site and to consult with the City and the local community about future plans for the site. A briefing between City of Sydney staff and Department of Defence staff was held 28 March 2025. The Defence estate team gave an update of their responsibilities and the status of the audit at that time (under review). We provided a briefing of our project purpose and goals and extended an invitation to collaborate which was declined.

10. As part of the Council resolution it was recommended that the guiding principles consider the high heritage value of the site and community needs, including public greenspace, cultural uses and affordable housing. Meaningful community engagement in decision making processes was also recommended.

Community Engagement

11. Community engagement was undertaken for 6 weeks from 8 August to 19 September 2025, with a Sydney Your Say webpage including map, survey and additional background.
12. The purpose of the community engagement was to:
 - (a) explain to the public that although no decision has been made by the Department of Defence to divest the Victoria Barracks site, the City wants to know what the community would like to see and do on site if it was to become available for public use in the future
 - (b) involve the community in the creation of guiding principles to shape potential future use of Victoria Barracks for maximum public benefit, should it be divested
 - (c) explain what divestment means and generally what the process involves
13. The consultation invited residents, workers, visitors and community members to give feedback on what they would like to see and do at Victoria Barracks to help shape the vision for the site, should it be divested.
14. Due to the site's restricted access and acknowledgement that there may be limited public awareness of the site spatially or historically, the consultation was online only. The consultation described the site's historical, built and cultural significance and uses to ensure community could provide informed feedback despite restricted access.

15. An interactive map provided information on significant buildings and features of interest, describing their date of construction, architectural description and former and current uses. An example is seen in Figure 4.

Officers's Quarters and Kitchens: Built 1841-1846.



Description: Officer's Quarters building. Source: National Library, 1930.

The first building to be built on the barracks site in 1841. It's a large sandstone building for housing married and single officers, accommodating 10 resident officers, 9 of them with wives and children. In the 1930s the Royal Military College was temporarily accommodated in the Officer's Quarter's, but the building is still used for its original function, accommodation.

Figure 4: Social pinpoint map - building information. Source: City of Sydney

16. Community members could add comments to the map under the themes of heritage, housing, open space, community and culture, and 'other' for any comments which did not address the preselected themes.

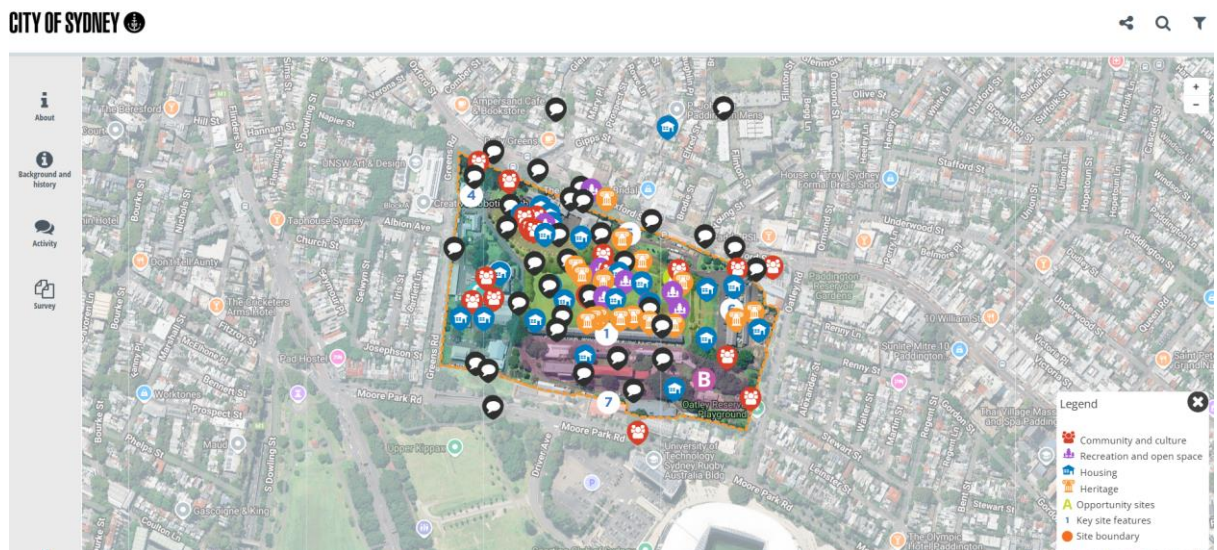


Figure 5: Social pinpoint map - community feedback markers. Source: City of Sydney

17. Additional information about the history of the site was provided on the Sydney Your Say website. The website also included local and international examples of former military heritage sites that had been transformed for other uses and public spaces.
18. Community feedback was collected via comments on the interactive map, an online survey, and written submissions via email.
19. The consultation was promoted by the following methods to achieve meaningful community engagement:
 - (a) Sydney Your Say project page which provided the opportunity to provide feedback via an interactive map and/or survey
 - (b) direct email to 1,257 stakeholders inviting them to participate in the engagement
 - (c) promotion through Sydney Your Say e-newsletter, Sydney City News and community centre newsletters
 - (d) promotion via Woollahra Council through their website and e-newsletters

Engagement Outcomes Report

20. The Engagement Outcomes Report at Attachment B describes the consultation and feedback from the community.
21. In total, the City received 1,092 pieces of feedback, including 102 comments posted on the interactive map, 876 up/down votes on the interactive map comments, 30 survey responses and 84 email submissions.

22. The themes of responses received across all consultation sources, including the online map comments, survey comments and email submissions, are seen in Figure 6. The strongest themes are:

- (a) Preservation of heritage structures and character, and respect for military history (21% of responses)
- (b) Housing supply (19% of responses)
- (c) Provision of community and cultural facilities (17% of responses)
- (d) Public accessibility and increased site permeability (9% of responses)
- (e) Governance and ownership (8% of responses)
- (f) Preservation and enhancement of public green open space (8% of responses)
- (g) Provision of commercial uses and retail activation (6% of responses)

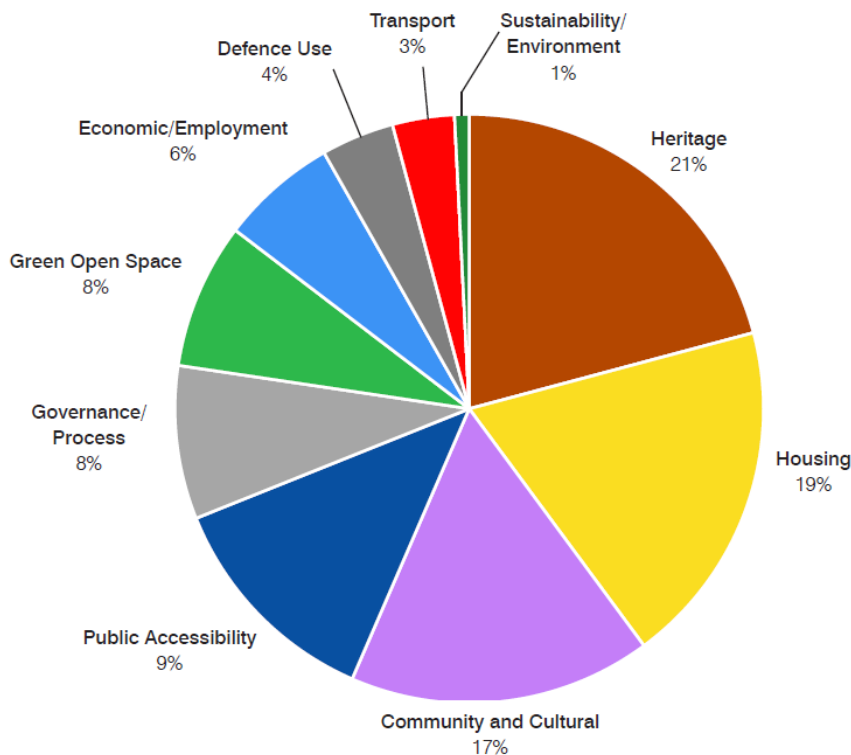


Figure 6: Consultation summary graph

23. Consensus showed that heritage conservation must be the foundation of any future use of the site. Responses consistently emphasised that Victoria Barracks represents irreplaceable colonial and military history that must be conserved. Many expressed strong opposition to any development that would compromise the site's heritage character, with particular concern about high-rise buildings.

24. Public accessibility and green open space emerged as priorities. Submissions strongly advocated for opening the site up for public access and retaining and enhancing all existing green spaces, with many suggesting the parade ground should become public parkland. Ideas ranged from community gardens and urban farms to recreation areas, outdoor performance spaces and weekly markets.
25. Housing generated the most diverse responses. While some participants recognised the housing challenges and supported low-cost/affordable high-density housing, others strongly opposed any residential development, arguing it would "destroy one of Sydney's most important colonial-era landmarks". Those supporting housing emphasised it must include affordable options for key workers, with several suggesting veterans should receive priority given the site's military heritage.
26. Cultural and community uses featured prominently, with strong support for museums, galleries, performance spaces and artist studios. Many envisioned an arts precinct, others suggested educational facilities or expansion of the existing Army Museum. The proximity to the University of NSW and University of Technology, Sydney sparked suggestions for tertiary facilities or a new public high school to address the shortage in the eastern suburbs.
27. The Engagement Outcomes Report reveals that the community envisions the future of Victoria Barracks as a vibrant, publicly accessible precinct that honours its military heritage, actively preserves and interprets its history, accommodates diverse activities, and balances Sydney's housing needs with protecting this irreplaceable place. The community's feedback and collective vision for Victoria Barracks is central to the formation of the draft Guiding Principles.

Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles

28. Using the community's input and supported by the City's strategic directions, a set of guiding principles for the potential future use of Victoria Barracks are at Attachment A.
29. The Guiding Principles honour the past while addressing contemporary urban challenges including housing affordability, access to green space and community connection. By establishing these guiding principles now, the City of Sydney aims to include community voices in future decision-making and that the site's transformation, should it occur, provides lasting benefits for current and future generations.
30. The Principles include:
 - (a) Conserve and enhance heritage and military significance. Goals include:
 - (i) Maintain and conserve heritage-listed structures including the perimeter wall, recognising their status as surviving examples of military architecture in Australia.
 - (ii) Respect the original architectural integrity of heritage buildings including the Officers' Quarters, Soldiers Barracks, Guard House, Garrison Hospital/Officers Mess and Barracks Master's Quarters.

- (iii) Protect archaeology within the site, prioritising comprehensive investigation and recording to uncover undocumented historical evidence as part of any redevelopment.
 - (iv) Develop a comprehensive conservation management plan to guide all future development decisions, identifying elements of high, moderate and low tolerance for change.
 - (v) Incorporate interpretive displays and educational elements that communicate the site's First Nations history, military history from British occupation through to its role for Australia's military and significance in Sydney's colonial development.
- (b) Maximise public accessibility. Goals include:
- (i) Encourage universal public access across the site, including green spaces and community/cultural facilities, removing barriers while respecting heritage constraints.
 - (ii) Prioritise and improve walking connections through the site.
 - (iii) Explore new openings for walking access to the site which are legible, respect heritage constraints and successfully integrate with the existing street network of Oxford Street, Moore Park and Oatley and Greens Road.
 - (iv) Reduce vehicle movements into the site by limiting private vehicle circulation to the land south and east of the Barracks building and encourage private vehicle access from Moore Park Road.
- (c) Enhance and expand green open space. Goals include:
- (i) Retain the central landscaped open space and conserve the site's historical layout (including key visual connections/sightlines within the precinct) while providing flexible community orientated uses.
 - (ii) Dedicate existing and new portions of the site to accessible and flexible public open space uses, drawing on its historical uses as a parade ground.
 - (iii) Ensure the greenspace connects the site to its surroundings, serving as a link between the high-density suburban development of Paddington and the open space of Moore Park.
- (d) Prioritise cultural and community use. Goals include:
- (i) Public facilities and services:
 - a. Encourage the adaptive reuse of existing buildings for cultural and community orientated purposes, exploring opportunities for spaces that serve communities, such as museums, art galleries, educational centres or public event spaces.
 - b. Consider temporary cultural and creative events and installations that enliven the site's publicly accessible spaces throughout the year, including those reflective of the site's military history.

- c. Ensure any space allocated for community facilities address identified local needs at the time of development, complementing and enhancing the programs and activities of Paddington Town Hall and investigate providing vehicle service access to the rear of Paddington Town Hall.
 - d. Maintain the existing Army Museum of NSW as a cultural anchor that preserves the site's military heritage while providing educational opportunities.
- (ii) Accessibility and inclusion:
 - a. Incorporate First Nations perspectives and recognition of the land's significance to Aboriginal peoples prior to colonial settlement.
 - b. Design and program spaces that welcome diverse community groups and promote intergenerational interaction.
- (e) Incorporate diverse housing. Goals include:
 - (i) Integration and design:
 - a. Incorporate a mix of housing types including typologies to meet diverse housing demands, respecting the site's history through sensitive design and siting [or location] of new buildings and/or adaptive reuse of existing buildings.
 - b. Ensure any housing development is sensitively designed to maintain key sightlines and exhibit design excellence.
 - (ii) Affordable housing:
 - a. Encourage a socially diverse community by providing a significant proportion of affordable housing owned and operated permanently by registered community housing provider(s).
 - b. Prioritise affordable housing for key workers, such as those in essential services, health and education.
 - c. Consider specialised affordable housing for specific groups such as veterans, recognising the site's military heritage.
 - d. Explore diverse housing typologies that accommodate different household sizes and life stages.
- (f) Encourage compatible and viable commercial uses. Goals include:
 - (i) Economic viability:
 - a. Prioritise commercial uses that complement rather than dominate the site's heritage character and community functions.
 - b. Develop a sustainable economic model without compromising heritage values.
 - c. Consider a mix of long-term leases and shorter-term activations to provide economic resilience and adaptability.

- (ii) Compatible commercial activities:
 - a. Encourage creative industries, innovation hubs and educational institutions that can adaptively reuse heritage buildings while contributing to the local economy.
 - b. Support small-scale retail, food and beverage outlets that serve site visitors and the broader community.
 - c. Explore opportunities for heritage tourism that celebrates the site's historical significance and generates revenue for ongoing conservation.
 - d. Consider allocating spaces for cultural production and presentation, including galleries, studios, performance venues and creative workspaces.
- (g) Encourage environmental sustainability. Goals include:
 - (i) Resilience:
 - a. Embed resilience principles in spaces, buildings and infrastructure (and their ongoing management) to withstand social, economic and environmental shocks and stresses, and build community resilience.
 - (ii) Biodiversity:
 - a. Retain and protect significant plantings made over the course of the site's use as a military barracks. Protect original plantings at the Barrack Master's garden and significant plantings at the Garrison Hospital/Officers Mess gardens.
 - b. Where appropriate, increase urban tree canopy and biodiversity through new plantings and garden features that enhance ecological value while honouring the site's history.
 - (iii) Environmental sustainability:
 - a. Incorporate water-sensitive urban design principles, including stormwater harvesting and reuse systems, acknowledging the site's historical connection to water infrastructure.
- (h) Robust planning, implementation and management. Goals include:
 - (i) Planning and development:
 - a. Establish transparent and participatory planning processes that involve the community, given historical public interest and debate regarding the site's use and reuse.
 - (ii) Governance and management:
 - a. Set up an advisory forum that includes representation from heritage experts, community members and relevant government agencies.
 - b. Develop a phased approach that, where possible, allows for adaptive management and responds to changing community needs over time.

- c. Create transparent decision-making processes that include the community.
- (iii) Financial sustainability:
 - a. Balance commercial returns with public benefit to ensure long-term financial sustainability without compromising heritage values.
 - b. Explore innovative funding mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, to support heritage conservation and public facilities.
 - c. Develop a long-term maintenance and conservation fund to ensure care of heritage assets.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision

31. Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision renews the communities' vision for the sustainable development of the city to 2050. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the city, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. The Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles document is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
- (a) Direction 1 - Responsible governance and stewardship - Guiding principle 8 addresses transparent and participatory governance, and responsible financial management of the precinct.
 - (b) Direction 2 - A leading environmental performer - Guiding principle 7 advocates for environmentally responsive and sustainable development as part of a transformation of the site.
 - (c) Direction 3 - Public places for all - Guiding principles 2, 5 and 6 ensure the site is accessible to all, enhances green open space and encourages a variety of cultural, community and commercial uses.
 - (d) Direction 4 - Design excellence and sustainable development - Guiding principles 1 and 4 promote the preservation and celebration of existing architecture and ensure any new development exhibits design excellence.
 - (e) Direction 6 - An equitable and inclusive city - The guiding principles have been underpinned by community consultation. Guiding principle 2 prioritises public accessibility of site. Principle 4 seeks to ensure diverse housing to accommodate a range of household sizes and incomes.
 - (f) Direction 7 - Resilient and diverse communities - Guiding principle 7 promotes an environmentally resilient site that responds to climate change and enhances ecological values. Guiding principle 5 promotes inclusion for all community groups.
 - (g) Direction 8 - A thriving cultural life - Guiding Principle 5 supports the opportunity to contribute to Sydney's cultural, creative and community infrastructure.

- (h) Direction 9 - A transformed and innovative economy - Guiding principles 5 and 6 encourage compatible commercial uses, community infrastructure and cultural facilities that welcome activation and sustainable economic growth.
- (i) Direction 10 - Housing for all - Principle 4 encourages the provision of high quality, sensitively designed housing that meet diverse needs and includes provision of an affordable component of housing.

Risks

- 32. Risks associated with the public release of the Victoria Barracks have been considered. Noting alignment with the City's strategic vision and objectives and incorporation community views the Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles is categorised as moderate to open risk tolerance.

Critical Dates / Time Frames

- 33. It is proposed to publish the Victoria Barracks Guiding Principles on the City's website following endorsement by Council.
- 34. The City will write to the Department of Defence providing a copy of the document and offer to provide a briefing on the engagement outcomes and the Guiding Principles.

GRAHAM JAHN AM

Chief Planner/Executive Director City Planning, Development and Transport

Joe Burraston, Senior Strategic Planner

Lily Gibson, Cadet Planner