



ECONOMIC GROWTH STRATEGY

Engagement Summary

**Phase 3 Community Consultation
25 May – 14 June 2026**

Introduction

The City of Whittlesea has developed the new Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36. The strategy will guide how our economy grows over the next ten years and will help plan for:

- local jobs
- investment
- business growth
- vibrant local places and centres.

Feedback from residents, businesses, investors, developers, government representatives and community members informed the draft Strategy.

The community engagement was undertaken in three phases:

- **Phase one** – pre-consultation to inform and develop a series of discussion papers, October/November 2025 **COMPLETED**
- **Phase two** - consultation on the discussion papers developed to guide the development of the draft Economic Growth Strategy, 12 November to 4 December **COMPLETED**
- **Phase three** - presented the draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36 for feedback, 25 May to 14 June 2026 **COMPLETED**.

How we engaged you

Council's community engagement approach to support the development of the final Economic Growth Strategy consisted of three phases. This report focuses on **phase three** of consultation for the project undertaken between 25 May and 14 June 2026.

We shared the draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36 with stakeholders previously consulted in phase one and phase two, as well as the wider community to understand if the draft strategy met community expectations and the current and future needs of community.

Community feedback was sought online through Council's *Engage Whittlesea* platform and through direct conversations and activities at six community-based pop-up stalls across the municipality.

The *Engage Whittlesea* platform utilises an accessibility add-on which allows users to easily switch to screen reader mode and adjust settings such as font size, colour contrast, and dyslexia friendly options, and enhancing overall site accessibility. The platform also has an in-built translation tool to mitigate language barriers to participation, allowing the page to be translated into the top fifteen languages spoken within the municipality. A QR code was included on all project collateral, directing the community to the project page as well as a URL for those unable to scan the QR code.

In-person community engagement

Council hosted six community-based pop-up stalls during this phase of consultation, as below:

- Whittlesea Services Hub, Tuesday 2 June, 10am-12pm
- Mernda Town Centre, Thursday 4 June, 11:30am-1.30pm
- Melbourne Polytechnic Epping, Wednesday 3 June, 10am – 1pm
- Thomastown Station, Wednesday 3 June, 1.30pm – 4.30pm
- Uni Hill, Thursday 4 June, 11.30am-1.30pm
- Westfield Plenty Valley, Tuesday 9 June, 11.30am -1.30pm.



Above: Economic Growth Strategy pop-ups in Epping, South Morang, Mernda and Bundoora

In-person consultation allowed community to discuss the draft Strategy in more detail with project team members as well as providing opportunity for them to share additional feedback. Activities presented at the community-based pop-up mirrored the online engagement activities, where community had a choice to participate in the two dot board activities seeking information on what matters most for the City of Whittlesea's economic future and how important the key directions highlighted in the strategy are to participants. A flyer with a QR code directing community to the online survey was distributed to community members who preferred to read the draft economic strategy and provide feedback at a more convenient time.



Let's talk  **ECONOMIC GROWTH STRATEGY 2026-36**

What matters most for the City of Whittlesea's economic future?
The Draft Strategy identifies opportunities to support local jobs, business growth, investment, skills and stronger communities.

Which ③ economic growth opportunities are most important to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	High quality employment opportunities	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea
Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	High quality employment opportunities	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea
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If you have another suggestion, please tell us more.

Let's talk  **ECONOMIC GROWTH STRATEGY 2026-36**

The Draft Strategy has four key directions. These will all be progressed over the life of the Strategy, but we would like to understand which areas matter most to you.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	High quality employment opportunities	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea	Attract investment to the City of Whittlesea
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Do you have any other comments?

Above: Dot boards used at Community based pop-up for Economic Growth Strategy consultation

As part of this phase of community engagement, we held a community focus group to allow us to delve deeper into community aspirations and thoughts. Recruitment for the focus group took place via an Expression of Interest (EOI) in May 2026 and a total of 15 community members participated on the day. The focus group was held on 11 June 2026 in the Great Hall, Council offices, South Morang. Participants worked on three activities in small table groups, generating ideas and feedback on the proposed key directions and priorities to inform the Draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36.



Above: Table activities at the Community Focus Group held as part of the community engagement on the Economic Growth Strategy development

Online community engagement

Community members were invited via the project's Engage page to complete an online survey and provide feedback on the draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026–2036. The survey sought input on opportunities to support local employment, business growth, investment, skills development, and stronger communities. Participants were also asked to identify which of the Strategy's four key directions were most important to them and provide feedback on the associated priorities for Council's economic future over the next decade, including any additional priorities or opportunities that may have been overlooked.

Project promotion

The opportunity to participate in this phase of community engagement was promoted through a range of channels to have a widespread reach across the municipality including:

- Council's digital engagement platform [Engage Whittlesea](#)
- social media – we shared two posts across Council's social media channels (Facebook and Instagram)
- [CoW Business E News](#)
- [CoW E news](#)
- Rural News
- media articles
 - [Whittlesea seeks growth feedback - Whittlesea Review](#)
 - [Whittlesea Seeks Growth Feedback 09/06/2026 - The North Central Review](#)
 - [Have your say on growing the local economy | Northern.](#)



Above: Sample promotional materials for the project

Participation

A total of 182 community members participated in phase three of the community engagement on the draft Economic Growth Strategy. Participants were given the opportunity to contribute in three ways; 89 attended in person at community-based pop-ups, 15 people attended a Focus Group and 78 people contributed online via *the Engage Whittlesea* platform by submitting an online survey.



Have your say on the Draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026–2036

Your feedback will help refine the final Strategy and guide future priorities, partnerships and advocacy.

[**Start**](#)

A snapshot of community participation and social interaction

Gender Identity



A total of 47% identified as female, 51% as male and 2% preferred not to say.

Age



The most represented age bracket being 35-44 years (24%), followed by 45-54 years of age (18%). Youth represented 15% of participants.

Suburb



Suburbs most represented included Doreen (15%), Mernda (14%), South Morang (13%) and Wollert (13%).

LGBTIQA+ Community



3% of participants identified as a member of LGBTIQA+ community.

People with Disabilities



7% of participants identified as a person with a disability, unpaid carer of an older person or unpaid carer of a person with a disability.

Aboriginal /Torres Strait Islander People



A total of 2% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Digital Engagement



853 views of the project Engage page with 78 people participating in the online survey, 165 downloads of the strategy and 11 followers subscribed for project updates.

In person Engagement



89 people participated at one of six community-based pop-ups across the municipality.

Socials Engagement



Two social media posts with 18.8k views, 126 interactions and 36 link clicks, generating 21% of traffic to the online Engage page.

What we heard

Participants were asked to identify the three opportunities they considered most important for Council's economic future from a list of ten possible options. The highest-ranked priority was improving roads, transport services, and connections to support business growth, selected by 60% of participants. This was followed by creating vibrant centres, events, and creative industries that encourage local spending (46%), and attracting businesses that generate employment opportunities for residents (42%). The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all ten opportunities.

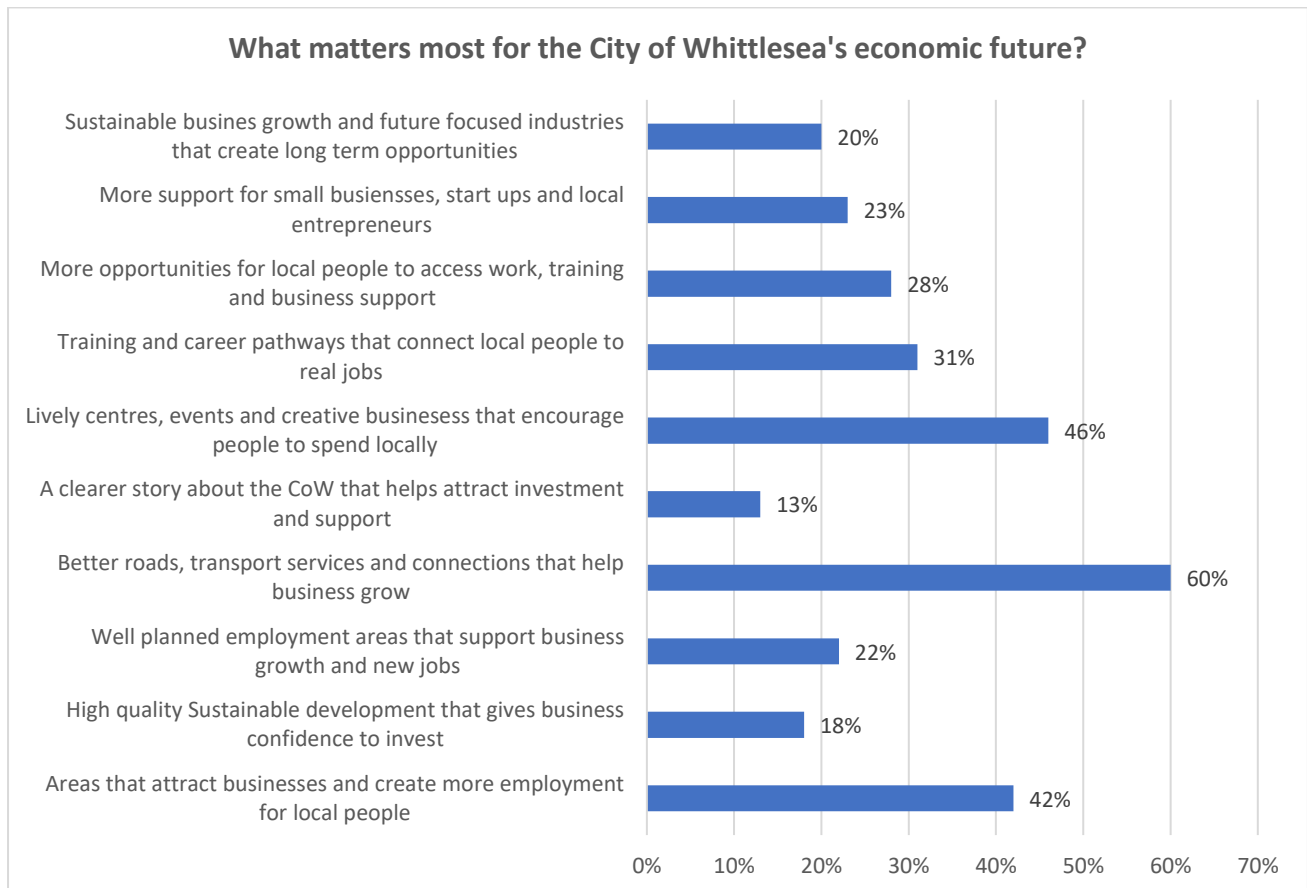


Figure 5: Breakdown of what community feel means more to the City of Whittlesea's economic growth

"I believe that the city of Whittlesea needs to authentically integrate sustainable practices that respectfully embed the views and beliefs of the Aboriginal community. It's important through this vast growing society which the local people are worried about to ensure the natural land, Australian wildlife and local small farmers in these areas are well looked after, not forgotten about and acknowledged in decision making of everything we do as a community. I understand it's important to think of money and what new infrastructure is going to bring growth and development in our community but we NEED to think of the bigger picture, the amount of growth in the future is hurting our natural environment around us and it's imperative to work in conjunction with the Aboriginal community to discuss Country's needs in terms of taking care of the animals, wildlife and natural environment"

"I think the economic future should be more people focused then business, almost every answer above is solely business related for our future & this concerns me people, children, elderly, community's, animals, wildlife should be more important than just making money & having investments"

"Creative industries should be recognised as part of the City of Whittlesea's economic future. PRACC, festivals, local artists, creative businesses and cultural events can support local spend, nighttime activity, skills pathways, employment, tourism and stronger town centres"

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the four key directions outlined in the draft Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36 using a scale ranging from very important to unsure. Overall, all four directions received strong support, with Investment and Infrastructure for Industry Growth emerging as the highest-ranked priority, receiving 161 very important or important responses. This was closely followed by Skills and Knowledge for the Future (158 responses) and Business Growth and Innovation (146 responses). Vibrant Inclusive Economy also received considerable support, with 115 participants rating it as very important or important.



Skills and knowledge for the future

Building stronger pathways into jobs, lifting workforce capability and helping residents and businesses adapt and succeed in a changing economy.



Investment and infrastructure for industry growth

Supporting precincts ready for investment, clearer pathways for development and the infrastructure needed to unlock jobs and industry growth.



Business growth and innovation

Backing local businesses through better navigation, stronger networks, capability uplift and support for innovation, productivity and adaptation.

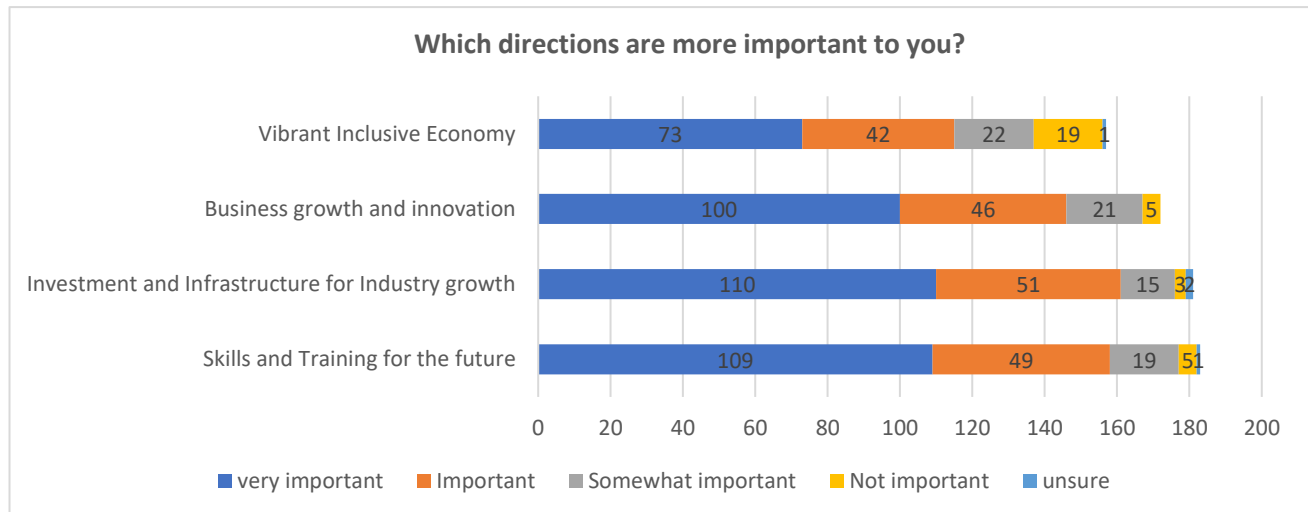


A vibrant and inclusive economy

Strengthening centres, local destinations and participation so more people and businesses can share in economic growth.

Above: Key Directions highlighted in the Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36

The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all four key directions.



Above: Breakdown of importance of key directions to community

Survey participants were invited to provide additional feedback on one or more of the four key directions and their proposed actions. While 29% of participants chose not to provide further comments, many took the opportunity to share more detailed feedback. The key direction that received the most feedback was Investment and Infrastructure for Industry Growth (35%), followed by Skills and Knowledge for the Future (32%) and Business Growth and Innovation (32%). Feedback on the Vibrant and Inclusive Economy direction was provided by 23% of participants.

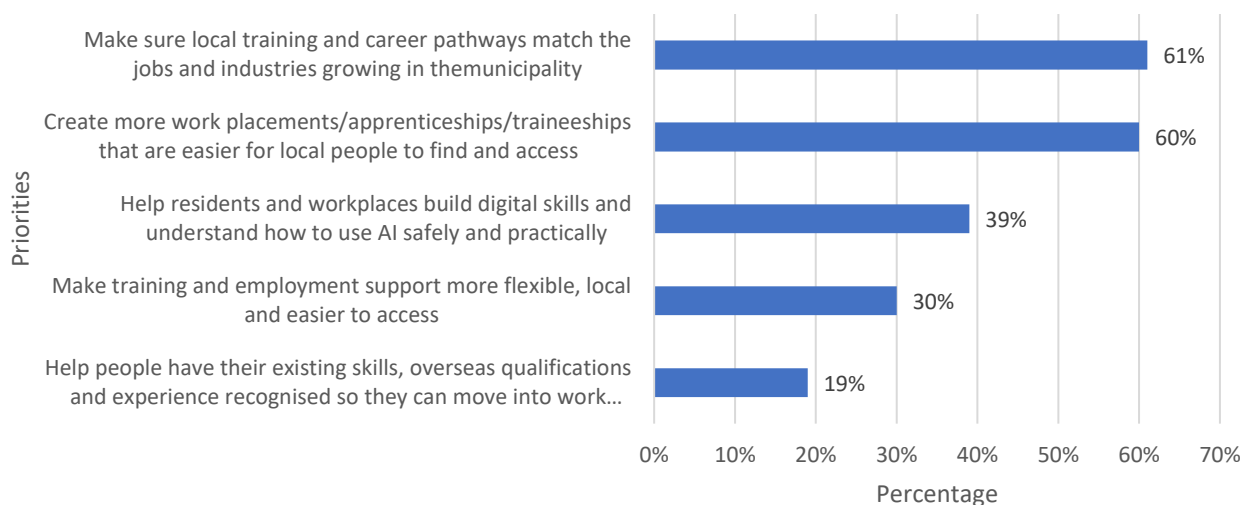
Key Direction: Skills and Knowledge for the Future

Participants were asked to rank the following priorities in order from one being the most important to five being the least important:

- *make sure local training and career pathways match the jobs and industries growing in the City of Whittlesea*
- *create more work placements, apprenticeships and traineeships that are easier for local people to find and access*
- *help residents and workplaces build digital skills and understand how to use AI safely and practically*
- *make training and employment support more flexible, local and easier to access*
- *help people have their existing skills, overseas qualifications and experience recognised so they can move into work sooner.*

Participants identified aligning local training opportunities with jobs available in the municipality as the highest priority within the Skills and Knowledge for the Future direction, selected by 61% of respondents. This was closely followed by increasing workplace training and apprenticeship opportunities for residents (60%). In contrast, supporting the recognition of existing skills, overseas qualifications and work experience was the lowest-ranked priority, selected by 19% of participants. The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all priorities.

Top Priorities for skills and knowledge for the future



Above: Priorities for Key Direction: Skills and training for the future

“More practical pathways that connect local people directly into local jobs through paid work experience, flexible training, mentoring, apprenticeships and partnerships between local businesses, councils and education providers. I would also like to see stronger support for people returning to work after long-term caring responsibilities, including confidence-building programs, career guidance and flexible learning options”

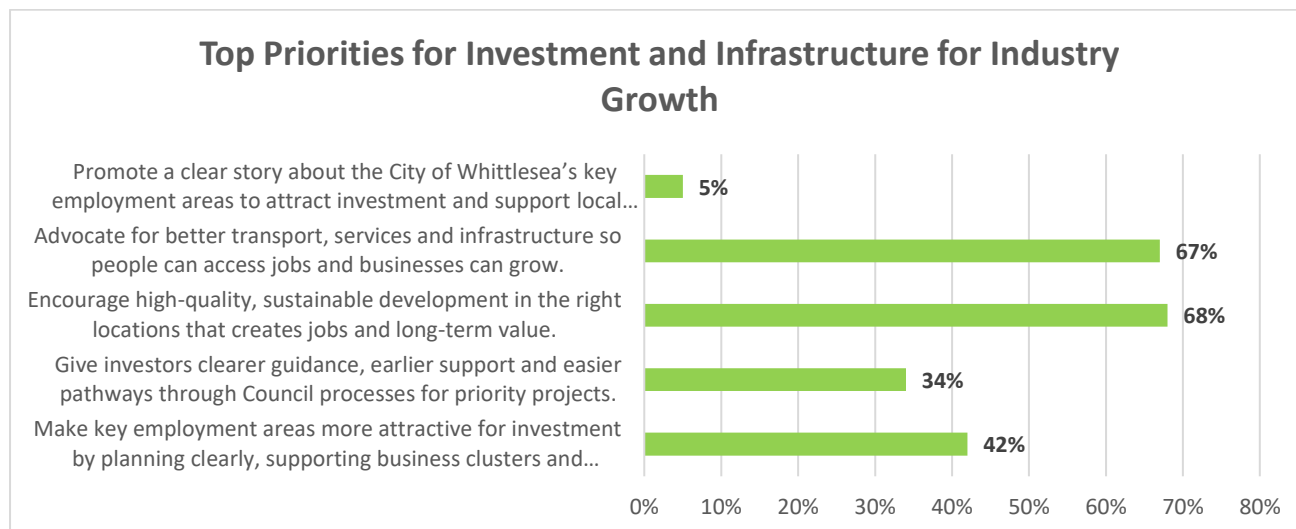
Key Direction: Investment and Infrastructure for Industry Growth

Participants were asked to rank the following priorities in order from one being the most important to five being the least:

- *make key employment areas more attractive for investment by planning clearly, supporting business clusters and attracting major opportunities*
- *give investors clearer guidance, earlier support and easier pathways through Council processes for priority projects*
- *encourage high-quality, sustainable development in the right locations that creates jobs and long-term value*
- *advocate for better transport, services and infrastructure so people can access jobs and businesses can grow*
- *promote a clear story about the City of Whittlesea’s key employment areas to attract investment and support local outcomes.*

Within the Investment and Infrastructure for Industry Growth direction, participants identified encouraging high-quality, sustainable development in appropriate locations that creates jobs and delivers long-term community benefits as the highest priority (68%). This was closely followed by advocating for improved transport, services and infrastructure to support access to employment and enable business growth (67%). In contrast, promoting a clear investment narrative for the municipality’s key employment areas to attract

investment and support local outcomes was the lowest-ranked priority, selected by just 5% of participants. The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all priorities.



Above: Priorities for Key Direction: Investment and Infrastructure for Industry Growth

"Better public transport, more additional services. Train to Whittlesea"

"If the goal is to attract investment and encourage business development, transport infrastructure needs to be a priority. Reliable road networks, improved public transport options, and better connectivity are essential for enabling people to access employment and for businesses to operate efficiently"

"Improved public transport service and access"

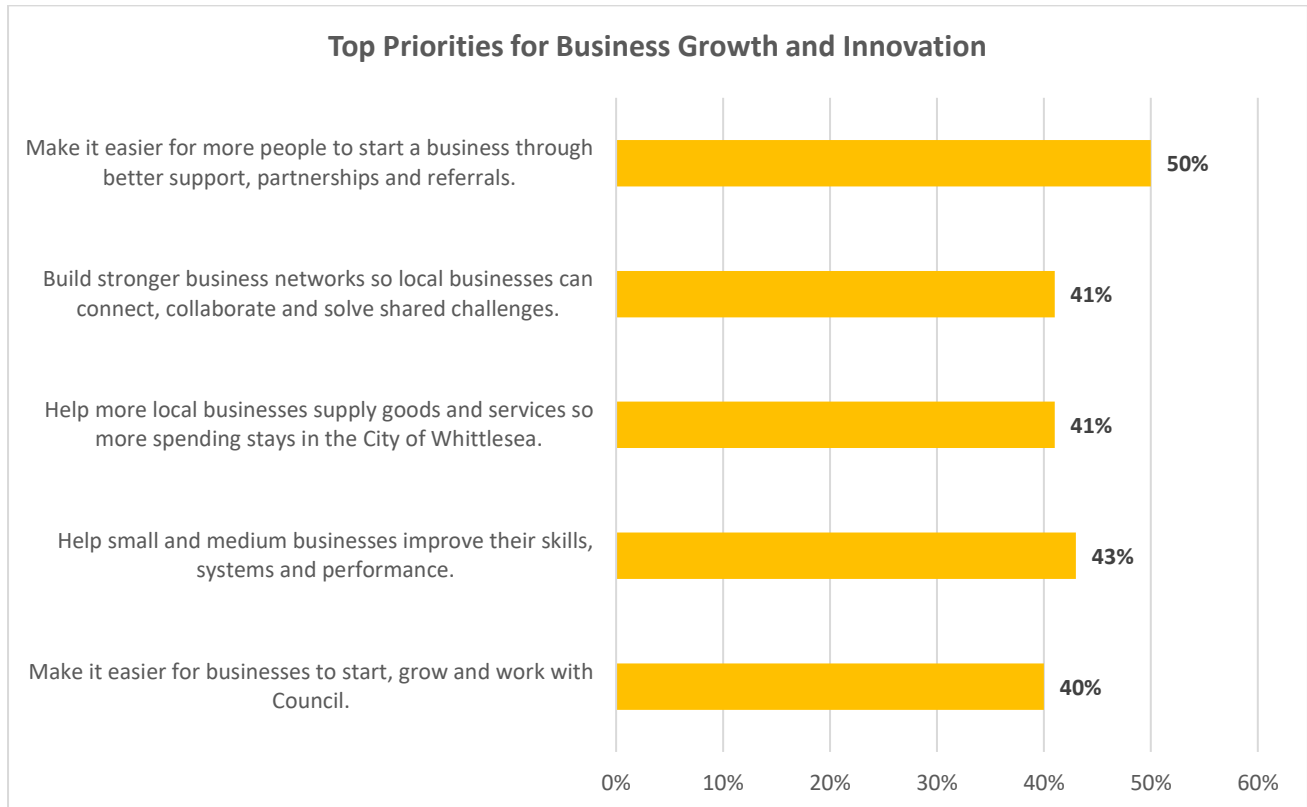
Key Direction: Business Growth and Innovation

Participants were asked to rank the following priorities in order from the most important to the least important:

- *make it easier for businesses to start, grow and work with Council*
- *help small and medium businesses improve their skills, systems and performance*
- *help more local businesses supply goods and services so more spending stays in the City of Whittlesea*
- *build stronger business networks so local businesses can connect, collaborate and solve shared challenges it easier for more people to start a business through better support, partnerships and referrals.*

Feedback on the Business Growth and Innovation direction indicated broad support across all proposed priorities, with participants rating them as similarly important. The highest-ranked priorities were making it easier to start a business and providing improved business support, partnerships and referral

pathways, each selected by 50% of participants. This suggests that reducing barriers to business establishment and strengthening support networks are key areas of focus for the community. The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all priorities.



Above: Priorities for Key Direction: Business growth and innovation

“More support to local business by providing council-based advertising. Regular updates thru e-channel platforms”

“Set up a portal/group for local business to connect and share on a regular and ongoing business”

“Initiatives by Council in partnership with Schools and local businesses to create opportunities for employment and promoting “patronise local services and businesses”

“Council permits are the hardest and most incredible gruelling process to get through - as small business this puts off so many people from starting not to mention the investment to make a business work. There can be permits in place, but the cost and process are such a turn off. Council should also offer one to one support with permit application process prior, the delivery of information is withheld, there's only so much an officer is allowed to say to help support the business it shouldn't be like this”

Key Direction: Vibrant Inclusive Community

Participants were asked to rank the following priorities in order from the most important to the least important:

- *create lively, attractive centres with better spaces, activities and local experience*
- *make places safer and more welcoming so more people feel confident visiting after hours*
- *better connect and promote the City of Whittlesea's culture, nature, food and events for residents and visitors*
- *make it easier for businesses, creatives and makers to use local spaces and create new experiences.*

Participants indicated that Council should prioritise creating lively and attractive centres that offer improved public spaces, activities, and local experiences (58%). This was closely followed by the development of safer and more welcoming spaces that support after-hours activation (54%). The chart below provides a detailed breakdown of responses across all priorities.



Above: Priorities for Key Direction: Vibrant inclusive community

"A local farmers market precinct would enable people to connect and encourage small businesses to develop in the area. A centre similar to other markets in the state such as the Preston market and the Queen Vic market would encourage not only local producers but also local small businesses to establish themselves and develop connections within the local community"

"Celebrate and promote the food and cultural small businesses around Lalor & Thomastown, make it cleaner and more appealing to visit. Ensure people who work and live there determine how to do this"

"Public space hub which is easy to get to for all, has businesses and council services around it e.g. library and has space for a stage for live music and performances"

The themes we heard

All community verbatim comments received through the consultation (survey and in-person conversations) have been themed. Please note that while not all comments captured are featured in this report, all comments will be considered by Council when finalising the strategy. The comments captured in this report are a snapshot of those provided. All comments will be provided to Council to assist in finalising the Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36.

Growth needs to be balanced with liveability, wellbeing and environmental protection

Community feedback consistently called for economic growth to be considered alongside health, mental wellbeing, community safety, housing choice for older residents, protection of the Green Wedge, conservation areas and sustainable practices. Many comments emphasised that growth should not come at the expense of people, Country, local amenity or the natural environment.

“A more balanced approach that integrates economic growth with health and wellbeing would strengthen the long-term sustainability and attractiveness of the area”

“Environmental and wildlife protection priority whilst improving on infrastructure”

“Local residents should be one the important stakeholder of this strategy. Without them, its not possible to achieve its outcome”

“Sustainability and circular economy: how do we achieve our goals whilst looking after our environment: environmental stewardship”

“Nature and conservation. Make Whittlesea a place for families”.

Council response:

The final Strategy recognises that economic growth should support community wellbeing, local amenity and long-term resilience. It also aligns with other Council plans that guide environmental protection, climate resilience, housing choice, community safety and liveable neighbourhoods. Actions will be considered alongside these broader Council priorities, so growth is planned in a way that supports people, places and the environment.

Transport, roads and infrastructure are seen as critical barriers to economic growth

Roads, public transport, freight movement, east-west connections, safer stations, bus routes, walking and cycling paths, lighting, parking and infrastructure timing were raised repeatedly. The feedback suggests the community sees investment in transport and enabling infrastructure as essential to attracting business, supporting local jobs, reducing congestion and improving everyday access.

“Road infrastructure is very important especially rural areas. Better public transport and safety at stations”

“Better roads, transport had no or little mention, which is key to everything, saves everyone heaps of time, everyone remains happy, spend time with family and visiting local places more which in turn is a win of council and locals”

“In a growing community it requires more bus routes and sustainable bus shelters better lighting use eco-friendly materials not glass) increased frequency, evening services, Good public transport can shape how fast a community grows and how connected people feel”.

Council response:

Transport, roads, freight access and public transport are recognised as important to local jobs, business confidence and everyday access. The Action Plan will include advocacy and partnership actions with other levels of government and key agencies, as many major transport and infrastructure decisions sit outside Council’s direct control.

The strategy should be more practical, local and action-focused

A recurring issue raised by participants was the need for clear implementation, long-term roadmaps, infrastructure timing, better communication with community, and visible actions. Suggestions included clearer planning for essential services, support for AI readiness, local employment advice, skills pathways, business support, easier access to training, and practical programs that residents and businesses can use immediately.

“For the council to focus on what matters locally and to the majority of residents, eg: safety, cleaner streets, crackdown on graffiti, illegal use of motorbikes”

“Council should consider a Whittlesea AI Readiness and Enablement Program focused on practical training, education and applied learning. The aim should be to help local operators understand how to use AI safely and productively in everyday work”.

Council response:

The Strategy sets the long-term direction for economic growth and identifies the priorities most relevant to the City of Whittlesea. While the Strategy itself is not intended to be a detailed action plan, it will be supported by rolling two-year Action Plans that outline the specific projects, partnerships and advocacy needed to deliver on its goals. This approach keeps the Strategy clear and forward-looking, while making sure implementation remains practical, responsive and visible to the community.

Local jobs, skills and business support should be easier to access and more inclusive

Feedback strongly supported local training pathways, apprenticeships, work experience, school-business partnerships, support for young people, workforce re-entry support, and clearer information about future skills needs. For businesses, comments called for reduced red tape, simpler permits, local procurement, incentives, support for independent retailers, creative businesses, home-based businesses and small operators.

“More support is needed to help people with mental health challenges and long-term unpaid carer responsibilities access employment opportunities. Many people in these situations face barriers returning to work, including reduced confidence, gaps in employment history, stress and limited flexible opportunities. Greater support through flexible training, mentoring, mental health-informed employment programs and pathways into local jobs would help many people rebuild independence, confidence and financial stability”

“Supporting young people to embrace and acquire skills for service and future industries”

“More school-based programs leading into apprenticeships and traineeships as youth today seem to not want to even work or get off the video games. So, if we can get them into a PAID program young, they will want to continue and hopefully skill up even further”.

Council response:

The final Strategy includes stronger emphasis on local training pathways, work placements, apprenticeships, recognition of existing skills and support for people to access jobs closer to home. It also responds to business feedback through actions that aim to make Council processes easier to navigate, strengthen business networks, improve access to practical advice and support small and emerging businesses.

People want stronger, safer and more vibrant local places

Comments highlighted the importance of town centres, markets, events, festivals, creative spaces, cultural activity, food businesses, local heritage, tourism, PRACC, the Mernda aquatic centre, public space hubs and community storytelling. Safety, cleanliness, graffiti, crime, lighting and public realm quality were also raised as essential to creating places where people want to live, visit, work, invest and spend locally.

“Creative industries places and jobs should be named more clearly. They are not just fun extras. They bring people into town, support local shops and food businesses, create jobs, and help people feel proud of where they live”

“Public space hub which is easy to get to for all, has businesses and council services around it e.g. library and has space for a stage for live music and performances”

“Spaces need to be increased across the municipality that enable a variety of new and innovative pop-up businesses that include and incorporate diverse products and services. Funding for these businesses should be based on the creative and innovative sustainability they bring, and not poor business models lacking diversity and the innovation to pivot”.

Council response:

The final Strategy recognises that town centres, local businesses, events, culture, creative activity and safe public spaces all help encourage local spending, visitation and community connection. The Action Plan will support a place-based approach to centre activation, destination appeal and local participation, while working with other Council areas on issues such as amenity, safety, cleanliness and public realm improvements.

Next steps

The information captured through phase three consultation will inform the finalisation of the Economic Growth Strategy 2026-36.

Thank you to everyone who participated in community engagement by participating in an online survey or community-based pop-up sessions. The community will be updated on further developments via the [Economic Growth Strategy 2026-2036](#)