



Moreland
City Council

Food System Strategy

Outcomes of community engagement report

May 2024



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Executive summary

Community Engagement to develop the next Food System Strategy

Following high level stakeholder interviews between July and November 2023, Phase 2 Food System Strategy engagement was undertaken between mid-February and mid-April 2024.

The purpose of Phase 2 was to obtain insights to help determine the strategic priorities, programs and initiatives for the Food System Strategy 2024-27.

More than 275 people were engaged, through the following channels:

1. Individuals / households - 125 filled out a survey (on-line, hard copy and in-language formats)
2. Community groups and service providers – 29 engaged via a survey, direct contact or interviews
3. Community Food Forum, Merri Merri Wayi community day – 43 interactions
4. Presentations at reference, advisory, and service provider meetings – 80 participants

Summary of Feedback

Individuals / households

Merri-beks diverse range of local food stores and grocers are an important and valued source of food for residents. Many shop for food outside Merri-bek, which is consistent with our highly multicultural population traveling to find affordable outlets specialising in different cultural ingredients.

Over 30 per cent of the survey respondents (the majority of whom are middle income households) indicated they sometimes experience challenges accessing healthy food that meets their dietary needs and cultural preferences. The high cost of these foods is the main reason given, suggesting current cost-of-living pressures are limiting the food choices and options for more Merri-bek residents.

There is also a strong interest in participating in a range of local food activities and programs, including cultural food events / festivals, community gardening, fresh food boxes and bulk food cooperatives. Better promotion of services, programs and activities was seen as the most important way to increase participation, as well as diversifying their locations and providing free, low-cost or discounted options.

Community groups, service providers and key stakeholders

A strong common theme is that community groups and food security / food relief organisations are chronically under resourced, rely heavily on volunteers, including for critical / skilled positions, leading to burn-out and high staff turnover.

There is a critical need for more reliable, ongoing funding streams which cover base operating costs. Organisations want help to measure their impacts and benefits, to raise the profile of the work and attract more funding / resourcing.

Many groups recognised and valued the important role Council plays in tracking and sharing food system projects and initiatives, facilitating relationships, partnerships and networks.

There is a clear need and opportunity for Council to play a stronger role in facilitating collaboration between food relief organisations to better understand the service needs and gaps, and to improve the coordination of services.

Council could offer Community Food Enterprises (CFE's) more business skills training, financial and volunteer management support, as well as more flexible options to access Council funding and support. CFE's and community groups also want help to secure affordable long-term leases on buildings and associated infrastructure, such as commercial kitchens.

Introduction

The actions of the Food System Strategy aim to benefit all Merri-bek residents, with a particular focus on those at risk of or experiencing food insecurity. The Food System Strategy 2017-24 was created through the advocacy of a proactive and driven local food community, and we have stakeholders who have been invested in this work for many years. Actions have been primarily community-led rather than Council-led, with Council's role to support, facilitate collaboration and partnerships, and build community knowledge and capacity in Food Systems.

Engagement Objectives

The objective of the engagement was to:

- Identify the most effective food system interventions by Council and the community that have contributed to the objectives of the Strategy over the last three years and;
- Obtain insights to help determine the strategic priorities, programs and initiatives for the Food System Strategy 2024-27

Methodology

Phase 1 (July – November 2023) involved conducting targeted stakeholder interviews to obtain high-level feedback on what has been achieved in the last 3 years, the benefits, Council's role and future needs / priorities.

Phase 2 (February – April 2024) involved collecting ideas and feedback from community groups and residents through on-line surveys, a local food forum for community food groups and residents, Council reference and advisory group meetings, and one-on-one conversations.

Targeted stakeholder input

Stakeholders were interviewed to find out:

- how they are currently involved with the food system in Merri-bek
- the outcomes / benefits of the food system projects and initiatives they were involved in
- what they see as the most important / highest priority food system projects / programs for Merri-bek over the next 3-4 years
- what the barriers are to continuing or starting new local food initiatives / projects

Ten (10) representatives of stakeholders were interviewed during Phase 1, including representatives from:

- CERES environmental education centre
- Growing Farmers
- Community Information Services (CIS) Merri-bek
- Fawcner Food Bowls
- Reynard Street Neighbourhood House
- Newlands and East Coburg Neighbourhood Houses

- Ecological Justice Hub (Jesuit Social Services)
- Merri-bek (formerly Moreland) Community Gardening
- Merri-bek Food Leadership Action Group (FLAG)

Phase 1 stakeholders were contacted again during phase 2 to add to / expand on their previous feedback, and additional stakeholders invited to provide input.

In addition to seeking input on the Strategy from organisations who service the needs of individuals, Council asked for their help to engage directly with clients or members who are disadvantaged and have a lived experience of the impact of food insecurity.

The following additional stakeholders were contacted through a phone, on-line or in person interview or organisations were directed to fill out the on-line survey for community groups and service providers:

- Open Table
- Coburg Farmers Market
- Merri Food Hub
- The Salvation Army, Asylum Seeker & Refugee Service
- Uniting Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre
- Sussex Neighbourhood House
- Fawkner Neighbourhood House
- Glenroy Neighbourhood House
- Brunswick Neighbourhood House
- Merri Health
- Co-Health
- Nourishing Neighbours
- Vincent Care
- Didi Bahini Samaj
- Alevi Community Council of Australia

Conversations Merri-bek Surveys

The Food System Strategy background and objectives were published on Conversations Merri-bek, together with on-line survey options for:

- **Individuals and households**

This survey asked about how and where people sourced their food, challenges they experience accessing the food they need and what food services and programs they would like to see in Merri-bek.

- **Community groups and service providers**

This survey asked about the food services and programs the groups provided or were involved in; which of these had the greatest benefit for their members / clients; the barriers they are experiencing in delivering their services / programs; and what they think we should be focusing on over the next 3-4 years.

Surveys were open from 21 February to the 19 April. The individual and household survey was translated in Merri-bek's top 5 languages and released on 27 March. The surveys were promoted through:

- Council publications and social media
- Local community / service provider networks
- Maternal and child health services
- Posters in English, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Urdu, distributed through Merri-bek customer service centres, libraries and neighbourhood houses.

Residents could also access hard copies of the English individual and household survey through the Coburg Civic Centre.

Community based forums / drop-in sessions

The **Merri-bek Local Food Forum** was held at the Reynard Street Neighbourhood House on Thursday 29 February, 2024 from 6 – 8pm.

Two Council officers presented the background and objectives of the Strategy engagement and invited participants to share their views, fill in the survey and distribute posters inviting their members and networks to have their say on the Strategy.

A Council officer also had a stand at the **Merri Merri Wayi Community Day** on April 20, 2024 at CERES where participants could drop-in to talk about the Strategy between 10am and 2pm.

Council reference and advisory group, service provider meetings

Council officers made presentations and invited community members of the following Merri-bek Council reference and advisory Groups and service provider network meetings to submit their ideas and feedback on the Strategy:

- Environmental Reference Group – 14 March
- Glenroy / Fawkner Service Provider network meeting – 26 March
- Childrens Reference Group – 27 March
- Multicultural and Settlement Services network meeting 10 April
- First Nations Advisory Group – 15 April
- Aged friendly reference group – 22 April
- Human Rights and Inclusion Advisory Group – 23 April

Participation

Over 275 people in total were engaged to provide input into the Food System Strategy. The following is a breakdown of contributions based on engagement channels and activities:

- Stakeholder organisations individually targeted – 24, with 13 of those interviewed
- Individual and Households surveys – 125
- Community groups and service provider surveys – 5
- Merri-bek Local Food Forum – 25 participants
- Merri Merri Wayi Community Day – 15 –20 enquiries

- Environmental Reference Group – 15 members
- Glenroy / Fawkner Service Provider network meeting – 10 participants
- Childrens Reference Group – 16 members
- Multicultural and Settlement Services network meeting –10 members
- First Nations Advisory Group – 9 members
- Aged friendly reference group – 10 members
- Human Rights and Inclusion Advisory Group – 10 members

Findings

Insights from Individual and Household surveys

Who participated

The top participating households were couples with no children at home (25%) and families with children between 6-17 years (21%). 29% were from Brunswick / Brunswick East / Brunswick West and 25% from Coburg.

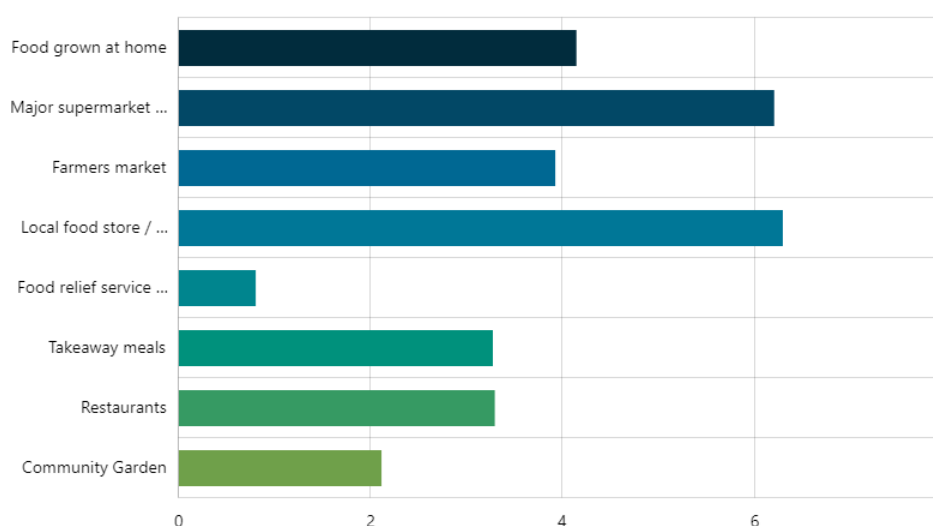
88% were employed either full or part time and 54% earned between \$800 - \$3000 per week, which is in the 2-4 (or middle) income quintiles¹

78% spoke English and 22% spoke over 6 other languages fluently.

How and where residents source their food:

The local food store / grocer was equal to the major supermarkets as the top places where residents source their food. Growing food at home and farmers markets were also closely ranked third and fourth. Food relief was the lowest ranked.

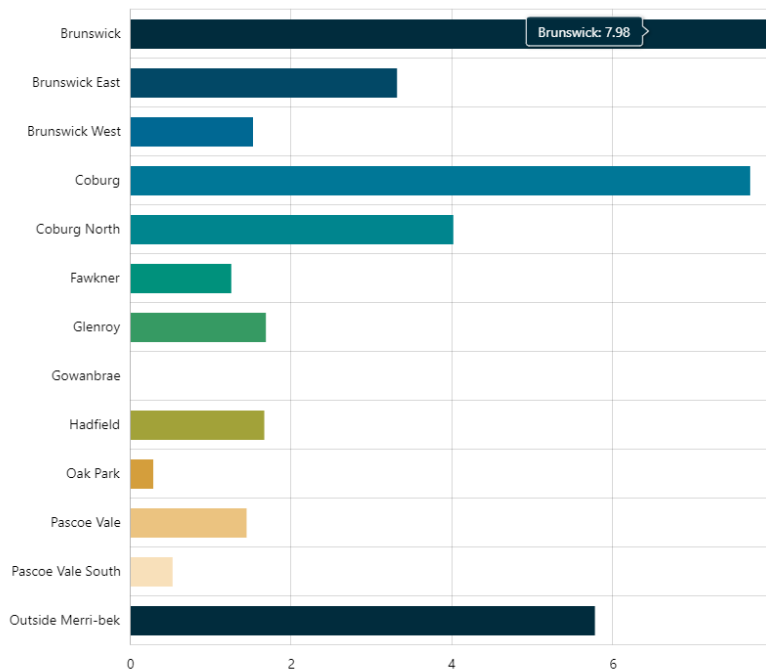
Figure 1: Where do you currently source your food? Rank from most to least



Brunswick and Coburg were the top suburbs where food was sourced / procured followed by outside of Merri-bek

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/national-accounts/australian-national-accounts-distribution-household-income-consumption-and-wealth/latest-release>

Figure 2: Which locations do you source your food from? Rank from the most visited to least visited locations.



Challenges accessing food

While 30% of respondents indicated they never experienced challenges accessing healthy food that meets their dietary needs and cultural preferences, nearly 33% indicated they sometimes did.

The top barrier or challenge to accessing the food they need was that 'nutritious and culturally relevant foods are too expensive' (60%), which was nominated nearly twice as much as the next biggest barriers which were:

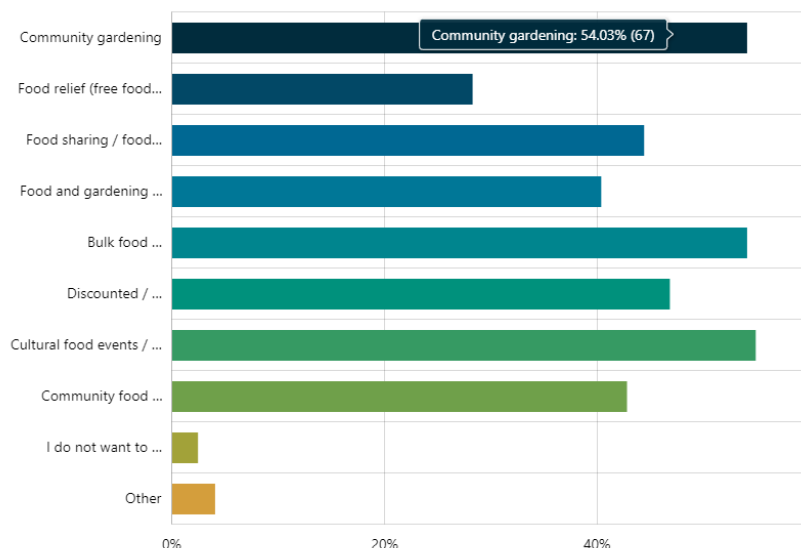
- Lack of food outlets within easy walking distance from home (500m)(35%)
- The food outlets / services I use don't have enough of the foods that meet my needs (33%)
- I don't drive or have a car (33%)

Desired food system activities and programs

The top activities currently participated in are: community food centres like CERES, community gardening, food sharing / food swaps, cultural food events and bulk food cooperatives. However, 34% do not participate in any of the food system activities listed.

There was a strong indication that residents would like to participate in more food system activities, with the most preferred / popular being cultural food events / festivals, community gardening, fresh food boxes and bulk food cooperatives. This was followed by discounted / low-cost food programs, food sharing / swaps and community food centres like CERES.

Figure 3 What food services or activities would you like to participate in if they were offered?



Better promotion of services, programs and activities was seen as the most important way to increase participation (65%), followed by having services or activities located closer to where people live (50%) and providing free, low-cost or discounted services and programs (48%)

Council Reference and Advisory Group input

Presentations were made at Council's reference and advisory groups and members were invited to consider Food System issues and impacts from the perspective of the groups they represent. They were also asked to share the opportunity with their networks to provide feedback. Feedback received during the meetings include:

Childrens Reference Group

A workshop for 12 members of the reference group explored:

- How and where they consume food now
- If they experience challenges accessing food at home or at school and;
- What they think a better food system could and should look like

The children represent diverse cultures and are from schools located in Glenroy, Fawkner, Coburg and Brunswick.

They source food from all over Merri-bek, with particular concentrations in Glenroy and Coburg. Food also came from Broadmeadows and Campbellfield, outside of Merri-bek. The children enjoy foods from their own and other cultures that come from a range of outlets including supermarkets, markets, speciality food stores, home food gardens, school food garden and canteen.

No particular challenges accessing food were raised. The children showed a good understanding of the benefits of linking food system steps together in a local, circular food system. Their ideas for what this looks like fall under these themes:

- Have a variety of food types / cultures available close to home
- Grow more food and compost more at home and school
- Reduce food waste by eating everything you buy
- Return food waste via compost to farmers
- Redistribute food through swaps to increase variety for everyone and avoid waste
- Access food directly from local farms to reduce energy / fuel use and save time / cost driving to get food
- Have enough options and back up for when food supplies are disrupted

Findings from stakeholder interviews and surveys

Common themes

Community grant funding and other project / seed funding was valued and important, as was support for external funding opportunities.

However, access to more reliable and ongoing funding streams was a commonly cited barrier for all stakeholder groups to continuing food system work, as was an overreliance on volunteers, including for critical / skilled positions. Community-based local food groups are chronically under resourced leading to burn-out and high volunteer turnover.

The role Council plays in tracking and sharing food system projects and initiatives with the local food system network is important, as is facilitating relationships and partnerships.

Organisations need / want help to measure their impacts so they can improve and attract more funding.

Feedback based on stakeholder type

1. Food relief / food security groups

Significant rise in people experiencing food insecurity due to cost-of-living pressures (affordability is the biggest issue – aligns with household survey results)

Access to food needs to be viewed as a fundamental human right, alongside other rights recognised in the human rights charter and Councils Human Rights policy.

Additional barriers providing services include:

- Aside from a lack of funding for staff and other operational costs, there's not enough money to procure sufficient food to meet the need
- Lack of a reliable, good quality / fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate food supply
- Lack of a supply of affordable, sustainably grown produce
- Forced to procure from food recovery organisations that offer limited variety of produce that is free or much cheaper and often not very fresh
- They are not resourced to collaborate / coordinate with other organisations
- Lack of food supply logistics and warehouse infrastructure
- Lack of suitable fit-for-purpose premises and associated infrastructure like cool rooms, storage

Food relief agencies were conscious of and strived to provide a dignified approach and supplying nutritious, culturally appropriate food but were limited by the barriers they faced.

Due to the pressure of meeting the high demand for food relief, agencies tend to operate in isolation. If assessments and referrals were better coordinated between agencies, including non-traditional food relief organisations like Neighbourhood Houses, there would be better matching of clients need to different services. A strong food and material relief network would better enable agencies to find common ground, share the load, and foster a sense of working together.

2. Community and Market Gardens

Communal food growing sites provide multiple social, environmental and economic benefits – These groups highlighted the need for better awareness, recognition and promotion to help expand / amplify the benefits for community.

The benefits include building farming / food growing skills, increasing access to fresh food, building community connections and wellbeing, supporting shared learning and respect for different cultures / cultural identity.

Community gardens are not just a niche activity for the middle class, as some members felt they can be perceived by some people. They can provide a safe and inclusive space for vulnerable community members. These organisations would like to see communal food growing spaces elevated to the same level in terms of priority and support as other uses of Council land (e.g organised sport)

There are opportunities to unlock public and private land for food production which are constrained by regulations such as public health and insurance restrictions. These preventing Growing Farmers selling produce grown on private property.

3. Neighbourhood Houses

Some houses have a range of food programs – Reynard Street Neighbourhood House for example offers food relief, pop up markets, food swaps, community lunches, community composting and community gardens which provides opportunities for community to build food system skills, literacy and self-determination in an inclusive supportive learning environment encompassing various age groups, cultures, language groups, and individuals with disabilities.

Juggling competing community needs and budget commitments is a constraint for Neighbourhood Houses to implement and expand food-based programs.

Neighbourhood Houses recognise the importance and challenge of managing expectations while addressing current community needs, and ensuring a balanced approach that caters to both long-term goals and more immediate, pressing requirements.

Reynard Street Neighbourhood House and Newlands Neighbourhood Houses also nominated the limited representation of First Nations people and their food culture / knowledge as a gap in the Merri-bek food system, which could be addressed through the Strategy.

4. Community food enterprises (CFE)²

Enterprises like Wholefoods Unwrapped Collective which are founded on delivering positive environmental and social outcomes who don't currently qualify for community grants would like more flexible options to access Council funding and support.

A greater range of more affordable / subsidised and secure / long term leases on buildings and associated infrastructure, like commercial kitchens, is a need and gap for CFE's.

CERES have skills and experience in running small scale food wholesale and retail enterprises. There is an opportunity for Council to partner with CERES to offer education and support to people who want to set up and run a CFE in Merri-bek.

² CFE's are locally-owned/-controlled food businesses or ventures / not-for-profits founded around a desire to create positive environmental and/ or social outcomes for the communities they serve. Merri-bek examples are CERES grocery, bakery, nursery and Joes market garden, Wholefoods Unwrapped Collective, Pascoe Vale Wholefoods Collective

Council support

- Reduce regulatory barriers and the governance burden for community-based organisations, including exploring cheaper insurance options
- Reduce complexity of dealing with Council to get support (e.g. grant application processes, access to Council buildings). There is a perceived lack of transparency and equity in how the community access Council's support and communication can be difficult.
- Provide more organisational support for governance, strategic and business planning and volunteer management.

Evaluation and next steps

Engaging extensively with Merri-bek residents and community organisations in early 2024 has confirmed the value of and support for the strategic focus areas and food system programs and initiatives already in progress. It also highlighted that Merri-bek has a diverse range of independent food businesses, a good foundation from which the new strategic direction - strong local food economy – was created. There were some clear common issues and potential solutions which emerged that have been prioritised in the 2024-27 Strategy.

Council also engaged comprehensively with organisations who have clients or members who are disadvantaged and have a lived experience of being food insecure. This has given a good understanding the number and types of services provided and the challenges that need to be addressed to enable these organisations to meet their clients' needs.

The objective to work with these organisations to engage their clients directly on their experience of food insecurity was limited by the time and resource constraints. Further collaboration with food security/food relief organisations will take place through the Community Food Hub project and the Food and Material Relief network to engage these cohorts and guide our response to reduce food insecurity in Merri-bek.

The community will be kept informed via updates to the Conversations Merri-bek pages., including the release of the draft strategy for comment and feedback. Specific updates on relevant strategic direction and priorities will be given to Council reference and advisory groups, service provider networks, as well as at the Merri-bek Local Food Forum due to be held in late 2024.