



Merri-bek
City Council

Merri-bek Economic Development Action Plan 2024 – 2027

Consultation Summary Report



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Executive Summary

Merri-bek City Council has worked closely with the business community and other key stakeholders to develop a new Economic Development Action Plan to cover the work of the Economic Development Unit for a three-year period from mid-2024 to mid-2027.

As part of this process, a business community and stakeholder consultation process was undertaken in early 2024, complementing internal engagement undertaken within Council in late 2023. The consultation process involved a variety of participation methods and approaches. This enabled Council's Economic Development Unit to acquire a significant range of inputs, suggestions and comments from businesses, First Nations representatives, internal Merri-bek colleagues that regularly provide services to and engage with Merri-bek's businesses (e.g. permits, arts & cultural services, etc.), and other key stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the participation method and the findings from each consultation and engagement exercise or event.

The information and learnings from this consultation and engagement has helped to critically inform the development of Economic Development Action Plan 2024 – 2027. This has resulted in an Action Plan that is more tailored and responsive to the prevailing opportunities and challenges in the local economy and the identified needs of local businesses and other relevant stakeholders.

Introduction and Purpose

Merri-bek City Council, principally through its Economic Development Unit, has developed a new Economic Development Action Plan to cover the work of the Economic Development Unit from over a three-year period from mid-2024 to mid-2027.

As part of this process, a business community and stakeholder engagement and consultation process was undertaken. The results of this process are detailed below.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business community and other key stakeholder feedback and comments received during the consultation process.

Consultation and Engagement Approach

Consultation Approach

Consultation involved a variety of participation methods and approaches, undertaken in two stages:

- Stage 1 – A preliminary investigation stage to collect information from local business owners and operators and other key stakeholders to inform the development of a draft Action Plan
- Stage 2 – A secondary stage to sense check the draft Action Plan.

The engagement approach was developed with input from Council's Community Engagement Unit and in accord with Merri-bek's Community Engagement Policy 2023.

Consultation was undertaken to capture the perspectives and opinions of a broad range of business owners, operators, First Nations people including Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders and business owners, internal Merri-bek staff, and other key stakeholders. This enabled the Economic Development Unit project team to gain a broad range of inputs, suggestions and comments from the community. It also allowed Merri-bek's businesses to share their experiences as business owners and operators and their thoughts on the type of economic development and business support services that Council should deliver.

A summary of the participation methods and quantitative outcomes (e.g., number of people engaged) during both stages 1 and 2 are provided in Table 1 and 2 respectively.

Summary of Participation Methods & Outcomes

Stage 1

Table 1 – Summary of Engagement Participation during Stage 1

Event / Engagement	How were participants engaged?	Outcome
Businesses and External Stakeholders		
Conversations Merri-bek web page: 'A new Economic Development Action Plan for Merri-bek'	A project business community and stakeholder engagement web page (A new Economic Development Action Plan for Merri-bek Conversations Merri-bek) was established on Council's primary online engagement platform, Conversations Merri-bek. Enabled the business community to complete an online Business Survey and enabled people to view and download information including the 2023 Merri-bek Economic Health Check.	Overall engagement statistics for the web page from 15 Feb 2024 to 26 Mar 2024: • 992 page views • 887 visits • 681 page visitors • 250 contributions • 21 followers
Business Survey	A Business Survey could be completed online, either on desktop or mobile. To incentivise businesses to complete the survey, local business owners and operators were eligible to win one of five \$200 prizes (T&Cs applied). Surveys were distributed via email to: – 15,413 local businesses, with 6,179 (40%) emails opened – 21 local First Nations businesses – 31 coworking and maker space businesses, and – 326 businesses registered on Merri-bek's Local Supplier Register In addition, the survey was promoted via: – Council's 'Business Merri-bek' fortnightly newsletter (over three separate newsletters), – Council's social media platforms (principally Instagram and Facebook); including the Merri-bek Business Women's Network Facebook group page (900+ members). – A QR code enabled flyer, distributed at Business Merri-bek events in February and March 2024. It was also hand delivered to 200 businesses in Glenroy, Hadfield, Fawkner and Oak Park to encourage participation in areas that typically respond less enthusiastically.	250 business surveys completed. <u>Quick Facts:</u> Of the respondents completing a survey: • 18 were social enterprises • 122 women & 114 men • 2 First Peoples • 19 LGBTIQ+ run • 14 people living with a disability, and • 58 who speak a language other than English at home

Event / Engagement	How were participants engaged?	Outcome
Business Interviews	Key local business contacts were interviewed by an ED staff member. 20 contacts were invited, based on their business success and acumen. The interview provided an opportunity to gain honest and more detailed feedback. General business survey questions were used to elicit responses that were recorded. The interviewer explored the answers to gain more detailed feedback and suggestions. The qualitative feedback was documented.	• 9 business interviews completed
Engagement with First Nations representatives and businesses	– Meetings, discussions and engagement with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders, Project Managers, and a Merri-bek First Nations Advisory Committee Member – Special efforts made to identify and directly e-mail Merri-bek First Nations businesses using Kinaway, Supply Nation and Council's ED databases.	• 1 meeting with 2 First Nations Elders • 1 meeting with a First Nations Advisory Committee member • E-mail engagement with a Special Project Officer • ca. 18 emails sent directly to local First Nations businesses
Merri-bek Staff and Internal Stakeholders		
Internal Staff Workshop	Economic Development hosted an off-site workshop to engage staff members from teams that regularly provide services to Merri-bek's business community (e.g., Customer Service, Amenity and Compliance, Urban Planning, Urban Design, Building and Environmental Health).	50+ Merri-bek staff attended
Staff Survey	A survey was sent to over 50 Council staff who provide information and/or services to businesses. The survey sought to elicit information about what and how each Unit provided services to local business. There were also questions to determine the challenges these teams have supporting business and any suggestions for improvement.	24 surveys were completed

After initial desktop research and stage 1 engagement, Council's Economic Development Unit drafted a preliminary Economic Development Action Plan, which was used as the basis for a further round of consultation with businesses and other key stakeholders during Stage 2 of engagement.

Stage 2

During Stage 2 - the following was undertaken to inform, engage and consult with the community

Table 2 – Summary of Engagement Participation during Stage 2

Event / Engagement	How were participants engaged?	Outcome
Businesses and External Stakeholders		
Business Feedback Forum (a business and stakeholder engagement workshop)	A Business Feedback Forum was held at Adina Pentridge from 9am to 12pm on Wed 8 May 2024. The Forum included a series of short presentations about work undertaken on the EDAP to date, three World Café style breakout round table discussions sessions, a feedback and summing up session and time throughout the Forum was provided for networking and informal discussion between attendees.	• 400+ invitations issued • 78 registrations • 48 business attendees • 5 key stakeholder attendees
Engagement with First Nations representatives	Presentation to the Merri-bek First Nations Advisory Committee, focusing on draft Priority 7.1.	• 1 Presentation and Q&A-style discussion
Merri-bek Staff / Internal Stakeholders		
Internal Staff Meetings	Internal branch meetings to present, review, discuss and seek feedback on draft Economic Development Action themes, priorities and actions. Branches and Units engaged included: – Advocacy – Amenity & Compliance/Open Space & Environment – City Development – Community Engagement – Community Wellbeing – Cultural Development – Property, Place and Design – Sustainability and Climate	8 meetings and/or discussions with key branches and teams
Councillor Briefings	Two Councillor Briefings were held to provide Councillors an opportunity to comment on and ask questions about the development and progress of the Economic Development Action Plan. These occurred in April and June respectively. The three Economic Development Portfolio Councillors were also kept up to date regularly through the scheduled monthly meetings.	2 Councillors briefing sessions (April & June 2024) 5 Portfolio Councillor Briefings (February to June 2024)

Key Findings – Stage 1 Consultation & Engagement

Business Survey

Introduction

A comprehensive survey was available online for five weeks from Friday 16 February 2024 to Sunday 24 March 2024. The survey was distributed and promoted widely via various methods:

- Direct e-mails to all businesses on the Merri-bek City Council Economic Development Unit business database
- Follow up direct emails to selected groups of businesses known to Council including social enterprises and local First Nations business owners and operators
- Posts on Council's Business Merri-bek social media channels
- Distribution of QR code enabled flyers, handed out at business events (e.g. Merri-bek Business Women's Network Coffee Conversation) and hand delivered door to door to numerous businesses in Glenroy, Hadfield, Fawkner, and Oak Park; and
- Direct e-mails to businesses registered on Council's Local Supplier Register.

The survey sought feedback from business owners and operators and their views on current business challenges and potential initiatives that Council could implement to support them.

The survey contained a variety of multiple-choice questions (some with short-form 'Other – please explain' response options), together with two fully open-ended questions (Questions 13 and 14) that allowed free text answers and opinions.

Business Survey Responses

In total, 250 respondents (business owners and operators) completed a survey. The following provides a summary of the results overall, and a summary of the response provide to the above two open ended questions. Please note: Not all questions were answered by all respondents. The total number of responses is provided for each question. The percentage of responses for each question is rounded to one decimal point.

Business Characteristics

The first three questions asked respondents for details about their business.

Question 1 – Industry type

Results are given in a table, and also shown on a graph following.

Q1: What industry is your business in? (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	45	18.0%
Arts and Recreation Services	28	11.2%
Retail	26	10.4%
Accommodation and Food Services (i.e., hospitality)	24	9.6%
Manufacturing	17	6.8%
Financial and Insurance Services	15	6.0%
Health Care and Social Assistance	14	5.6%
Construction	12	4.8%

Information Media and Telecommunications	9	3.6%
Wholesale Trading	7	2.8%
Automotive, Personal and Household Services	4	1.6%
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	3	1.2%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	2	0.8%
Other (see Question 2 results below for more detail)	44	17.6%

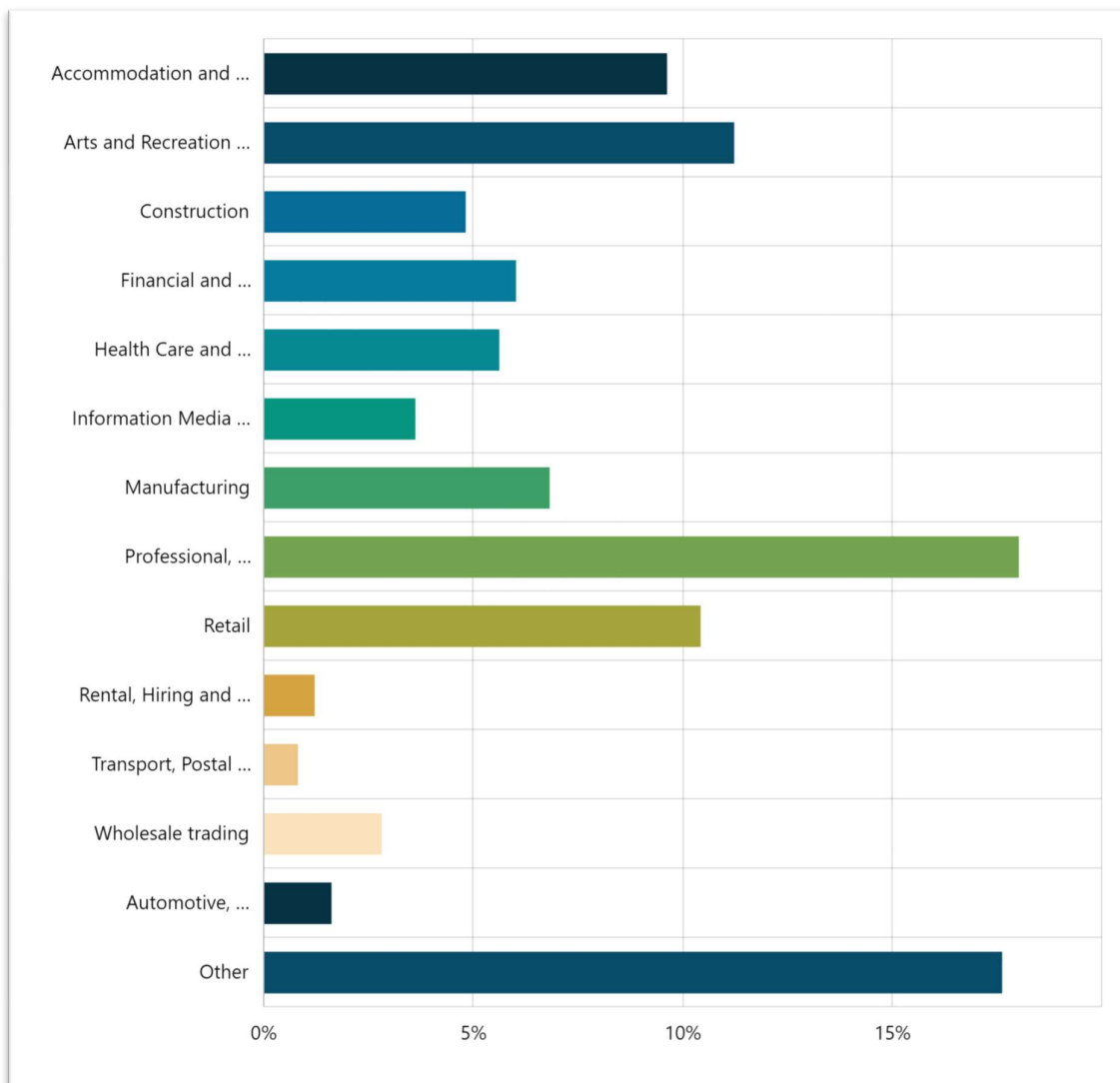


Figure 1: Business respondents by industry type

Question 2 – What kind of business if selecting 'Other' to Question 1

Responses to Question 1 stating 'Other', were subsequently asked to state what type of business. The responses have been grouped into themes. The four most common themes are in the table below.

Q2: Most common type of business cited by the 44 businesses responding 'Other' to Question 1 (2 of the 44 did not respond)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Photography film, and media & marketing	6	14.3%
Education, training and professional development	6	14.3%
Design related businesses	5	11.9%
Beauty and wellness	4	9.5%

Question 3 – Business staff numbers

Q3: How many staff do you have? (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
0 (i.e., you are a sole trader)	83	33.2%
1 – 4 (i.e. a micro business)	91	36.4%
5 – 19 (i.e. a small business)	48	19.2%
20 – 49 (i.e. a medium size business)	21	8.4%
50 – 99	6	2.4%
100 – 199	1	0.4%
200+ employees	0	0.0%

Question 4 – Social enterprise status

Q4: Is your business a social enterprise? (NB. A definition was provided) (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
No	208	83.2%
Yes	18	7.2%
Other	24	9.6%

People who responded 'Other' were prompted to provide further detail. 45.8% of the 24 (i.e. 11) respondents that chose 'other' were not certified by Social Traders as social enterprise but:

- they were a Not for Profit,
- Registered Charity; or
- Operated as a business that incorporated social practices through employment or training or worked to achieve environmental outcomes.

Accessing and satisfaction with Council service provision

The next three questions asked businesses about their experience of recently seeking Council services (if applicable), and where they had – enquiring about the type of service and their satisfaction, or otherwise, with the service received.

Question 5 – Recent contact and engagement with Council services

Q5: Have you contacted Council about any services(s) in the past 2 years? (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Yes (see Question 5 & 6)	103	41.2%
No (see Question 6)	147	58.8%

If people answered yes to the above question, they were prompted to answer the following question. If they answered no to the above question, they were prompted to skip the following question.

Question 6 – Type of service

Q6: Which service(s) have you contacted Council about? Select all that apply. (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Applying for a business-related permit, licence or registration	44	43.1%
Business support services	35	34.3%
Parking or transport issues	28	27.5%
Payment of rates, charges or fees	27	26.5%
In response to Council public consultation process (e.g. Transport Strategy, Open Space Strategy, proposed planning control changes, etc.)	16	15.7%
Health registration	7	6.9%
Other	28	27.5%

If people responded 'Other' – they were prompted to describe the service or reason they had contacted Council. Of the 28 who selected other, the top four themes (as coded by Council based on the literal responses provided) were as follows:

- Bins and waste services (7 responses)
- Other business-related support service (property and landlord advice, networking, etc.) (6 responses)
- Other permit matters for their business (3 responses)
- Social enterprise business-related support (3 responses)

Question 7 – Could Council have provided a better experience?

With respect to those who answered Yes to Question 5, results are presented in the following table.

Q7: Was there anything we could have done better to improve the experience when you contacted Council?	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Of the 103 that answered Yes to Question 5:		
No	58	56.3%
Yes	45	43.7%
Sub-Total	103	100.0%

With regard to the 103 survey responders that answered Yes to Question 5 (Have you contacted Council about a service anytime in the past 2 years?), the 45 responders which subsequently answered Yes to Question 7 (i.e., 'Yes – there was something Council could have done better to improve the experience they had when they contacted Council') – equate to 43.7% of those that had contacted Council to receive a service.

People responding Yes to Question 7 were also prompted and provided with space to briefly describe what Council could have done to better. Broadly, of those who responded Yes – the top five themes (as coded by Council based on the literal responses provided) were as follows:

- 20 (44%) related to issues of communication, engagement and responsiveness,
- 5 (11%) related to matters of timeliness and clarity in relation to planning and other permit matters,
- 4 (9%) related to parking matters,
- 3 (7%) related to desiring greater support for procurement from, and support of, social enterprise and sustainable businesses,
- 3 (7%) related to challenges faced when accessing Council services online (e.g. via the website and permit application portals)
- 2 (4%) related to a desire for business support, and
- 2 (4%) related to bins and waste collection matters, and
- A further three (7%) related to a multiple number of challenges and concerns which cannot be singularly coded – but which relate variously to other issues described above.

The remainder related to other matters including bike racks, affordability of space, grants, lease negotiation support, and trees.

Business Support

The next four questions in the survey asked questions that relate to the kind of business support that Council could and/or already does provide.

(Please note that the number of total responses is given for each question, and that the percentage may not always add up precisely to 100% due to rounding. Not all questions were answered by all respondents.)

Question 8 – Preferred ways for Council to support local businesses

Results are given in a table, and also shown on a graph following.

Q8: How would you like to see Council support local businesses? Select all that apply. (250 respondents selected at least one or more answers)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Information about grants and other business support services available through local, state and federal governments	163	65.2%
Business networking opportunities	111	44.4%
Specific business sector/industry support initiatives and programs	99	39.6%
Seminars and workshops to help businesses develop business skills and capabilities	98	39.2%
Improving the look and feel of Merri-bek's shopping precincts and/or industrial/business estates	91	36.4%
Operate a business directory on Council's website	91	36.4%
Environmental sustainability advice to help you make your business sustainable	69	27.6%
Local consumer market research and information (e.g., data and statistics) to support business planning	67	26.8%
Events and promotion activities to boost tourism and visitation to Merri-bek	62	24.8%
Identify funding, support and/or other opportunities for social enterprises	55	22.0%
Help and guidance applying for business permits	53	21.2%
Help finding a place to operate a business	51	20.4%
Other	50	20.0%

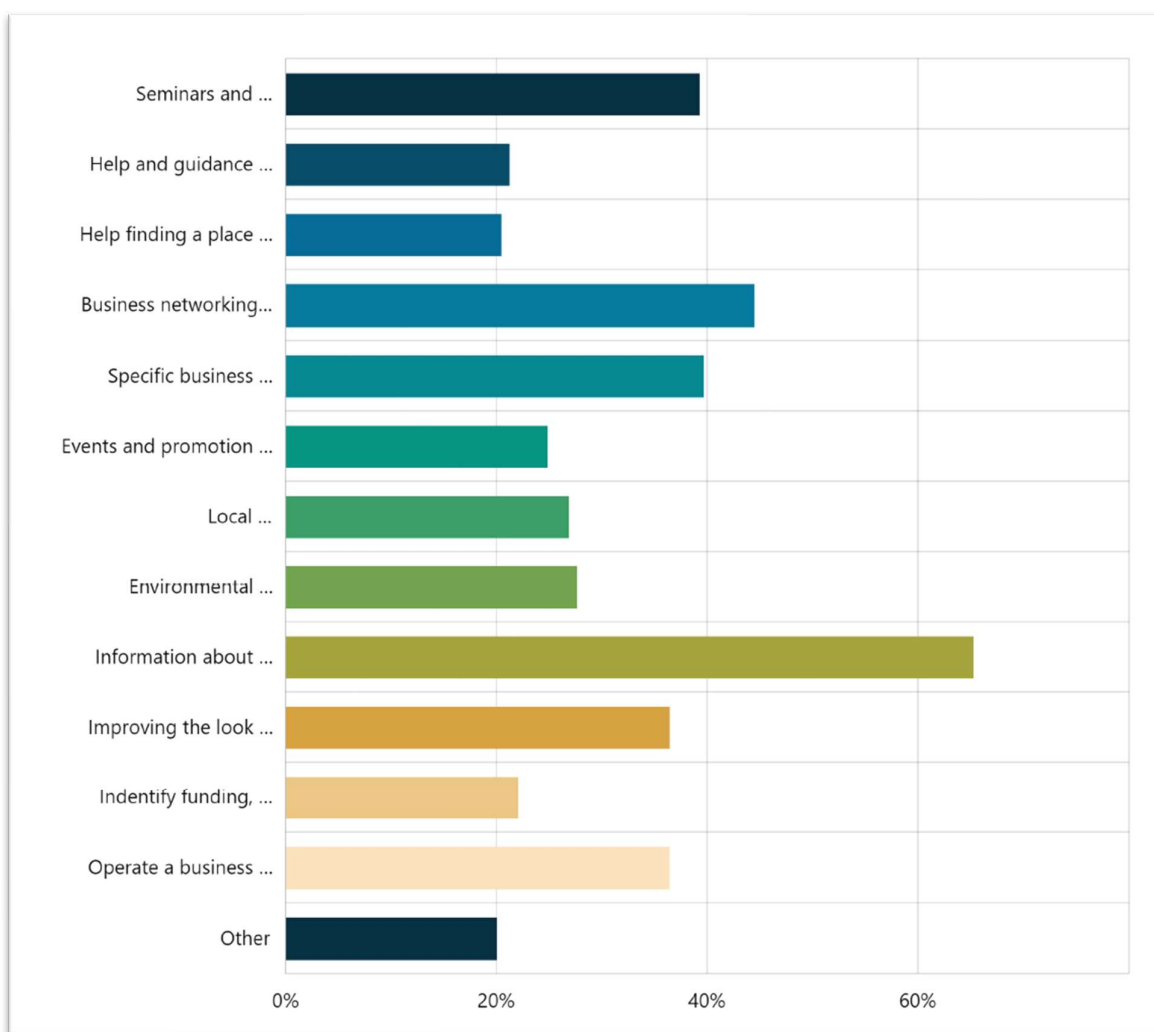


Figure 2: Responses to Question 8 - Preferred ways for Council to support local businesses

The response explanations from respondents who chose 'Other' in Question 8 were varied. Types of support suggested, categorised by broad theme, were support with parking (7 respondents), supporting businesses through reduced fees and grants (6 respondents), cleaning and improving the look of public areas (4 respondents) and provision of co-working space and meeting rooms (3 respondents).

Question 9 – Preferred topics for business skill training workshops

Results are given in a table, and also shown on a graph following.

Q9: Council runs business-skills training workshops. What topics would you like training on? Select as many as you like. (250 respondents selected at least one or more answers)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Winning government grants and tenders	133	53.2%
Marketing/ promotion and reaching new customers	129	51.6%
Using AI in business (e.g. using services such as Chat GPT)	91	36.4%
Business planning (incl. market research)	85	34.0%
Cash flow and business finance management	75	30.0%
Environmental sustainability and the circular economy	74	29.6%
Creating an online presence and using social media	74	29.6%
Business leadership skills	68	27.2%
Cybersecurity for business	60	24.0%
Tax compliance	52	20.8%
Using IT Systems to help your business	36	14.4 %
Other	20	8.0 %

NB. Percentages do not add up to 100%, as businesses were able to select as many as they liked and as such, numerous businesses will have selected numerous topics.

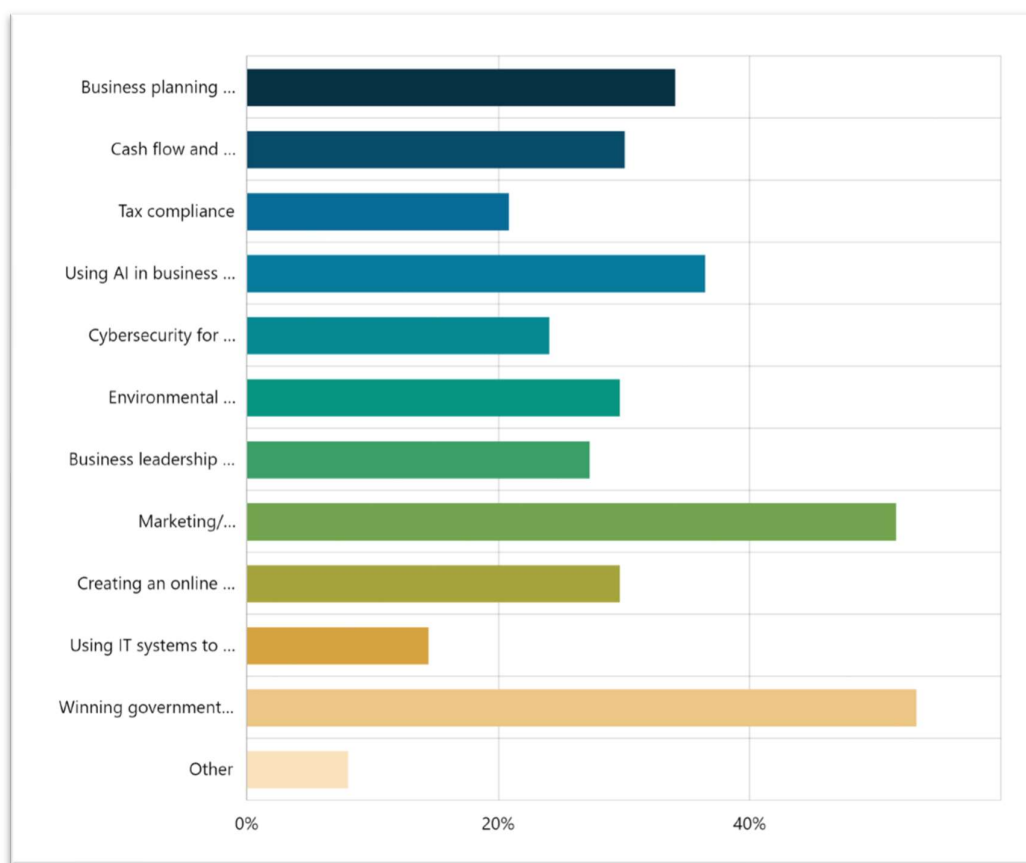


Figure 3: Responses to Question 9 – Preferred business skills training topics

Respondents to Question 9 were able to choose multiple topics and provide details of 'other' topics they would like business skills training on. The majority of respondents used this opportunity to provide suggestions about the delivery of training rather than topics.

The additional topics suggested included –

- *How to improve productivity and provide best service practices*
- *A guide to legal situations and when to use the services of lawyer, and*
- *Navigating planning and council processes.*

Question 10 – Interest in a free mentoring program

Q10: Would you be interested in participating in a free mentoring program? (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
No	122	48.8 %
Yes	128	51.2 %

If people answered yes to the above question, they were prompted to answer the following question. If they answered no to the above question, they were prompted to skip the following question.

Question 11 – Interest in a free mentoring program - mentor or mentee

Q11: If you answered Yes to previous question – please identify how you would be interested in participating: (123 responses, by those that had answered yes to Q. 10)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
As a mentee – an experienced business professional would help you grow your business, develop skills or plan and implement a new project	99	80.5 %
As a mentor – you will help other business owners/ leaders	24	19.5 %
Total Responses to this Question	123	100 %

Business and sector challenges

The next two questions asked businesses about the challenges that they were facing or saw facing their sector.

Question 12 – Main challenges or issues facing respondents' businesses

Q12: What are the main three challenges or issues you or your business currently face? Select your top three. (250 respondents selected, in order, their top 3)	Number of times selected	Score	Average rank (position 1 – 3)
Inflation & increasing input costs	151	7.43	1.49
Marketing and promotion/ finding customers	110	5.21	1.92
Slow or reduced demand from customers	106	5.00	1.96
Personal challenges	90	4.10	2.33
Rising interest rates on business loans	52	2.43	2.06
Market competition	50	2.29	2.26
Staff recruitment and retention	41	1.89	2.20

Regulatory compliance	29	1.31	2.45
Cyber security threats	25	1.15	2.24
Operating in a more environmentally sustainable way	22	0.99	2.50
Technology adoption	16	0.74	2.25
Supply chain issues	10	0.46	2.20

Definitions:

- **Score** – This is the sum of the weight of each ranked position, multiplied by the response count for the position choice, divided by the total contributions. Weights are inverse to ranked positions.
- **Average Rank** – This is the sum of the ranked position of the choice, multiplied by the response count for the position choice, divided by the total 'Count' of the choice. In other words, on average, was it selected as a business' first, second, or third most significant challenge.

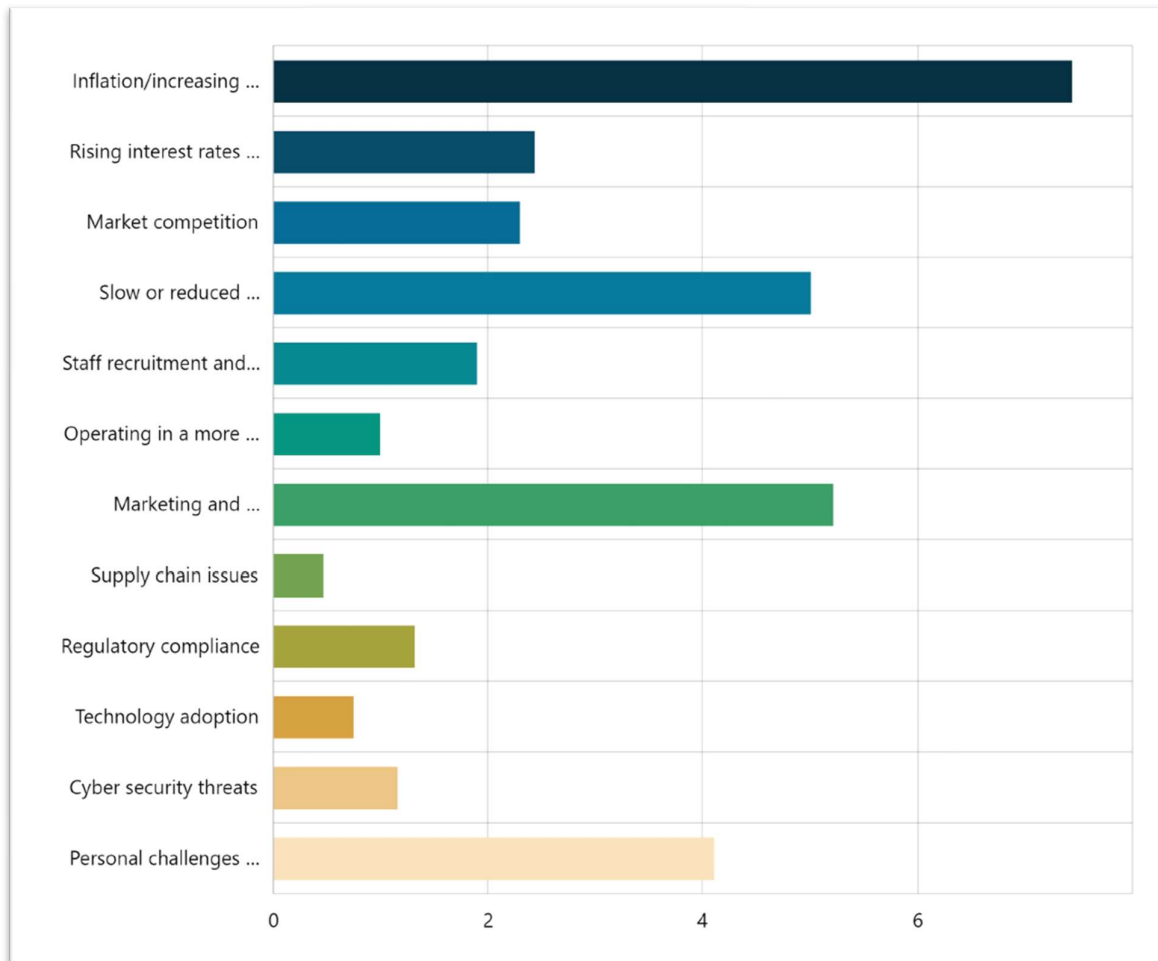


Figure 4: Responses to Question 12 – Top 3 Challenges / Issues

Question 13 – Other challenges or issues facing respondents' businesses

Question 13 was an open ended / free text response question, allowing businesses provide a response in their own words.

105 respondents answered this question. To report on the issues currently being faced by businesses, the responses to this question were categorised into themes. Two thirds of the responses were within the following 3 categories:

Q13: Are there any other challenges or issues you and your business currently face, that are not listed above? Survey respondents were asked to choose their top 3 challenges and had the option to provide additional challenges not included in the list.	Number of times described	Percentage of responses
<i>Rising costs and finance problems related to rent, land tax and cash flow</i>	46	43.8%
Parking	12	11.4%
Reduced demand for product or services	11	10.47%

Question 14 -Long term challenge for local businesses?

Question 14 was an opened ended / free text response question, allowing businesses provide a response in their own words. 249 respondents answered this question.

To report the responses to this question, the answers have been grouped into categories/themes and the top four categories have been summarised in the following table.

Q14: What is the greatest challenge facing your industry/sector in the next 5 years? Survey respondents had free text to respond	Number of times described	Percentage of responses
Economic challenges	115	46.0%
Artificial intelligence (Ai)	30	12.0%
Labour and skills shortages	14	5.6%
Government regulations and processes	9	3.6%

Locational and demographic questions

The remaining questions asked about the location of the business and other questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the business owner or operator completing the survey. The below chart includes two columns (right hand side) providing the actual number of businesses by suburb (total numbers and percentage) to aid comparison.

Question 15 – Business' primary location by suburb

Q15: What is the primary location of your business? Select one answer only.	Number of responses	Percentage	Actual number of businesses	Percentage actual number by suburb
Brunswick	78	31.2%	3,147	19.6%
Coburg	40	16.0%	2,431	15.1%
Coburg North	30	12.0%	1,363	8.5%
Brunswick East	26	10.4%	1,187	7.4%
Glenroy	22	8.8%	2,075	12.9%
Pascoe Vale	17	6.8%	1,297	8.1%
Brunswick West	10	4.0%	1,023	6.4%
Pascoe Vale South	8	3.2 %	806	5.0%
Hadfield	7	2.8%	475	3.0%
Fawkner	6	2.4%	1,431	8.9%
Gowanbrae	3	1.2 %	207	1.3%
Fitzroy North (within Merri-bek)	2	0.8%	76	0.5%
Oak Park	1	0.4%	545	3.4%

NB. Actual number of businesses obtained from: ABS, Dec 2023, Counts of Australian Businesses; Available at website: [Counts of Australian Businesses, Entries and Exits, 2022-23 \(abs.gov.au\)](https://abs.gov.au/counts-of-australian-businesses-entries-and-exits-2022-23).

Question 16 – Survey Respondents' Role within the Business

Q: What is your role within the business? Select one answer only. (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
The business owner	221	88.4 %
The business manager	24	5.6 %
An employee of the business	9	.3.6%
Other	6	2.4%

Survey respondents who responded 'Other' (i.e. their role was not included in the table above) reported that their role within the business was as a committee or board member,

Question 17 – Self-described Gender of Respondents

Q: My gender is... Select one answer only. (249 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Woman	122	48.8 %
Man	112	45.2 %
Prefer not to say	11	4.4%
Prefer to self-identify I identify as... (provision for free text completion by survey respondent).	4	1.6%

Of the 4 responses that chose 'prefer not to self-identify', in the free text option one wrote 'non-binary – assigned female at birth'. Of the remaining 3 responses, the responses didn't answer the question as set out in the survey.

Question 18 – Other socio-demographic characteristics of interest

Q: Are you... Select all that apply. (249 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responders
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	2	0.8%
A member of the LGBTQIA+ community	18	7.2%
A person living with a disability	14	5.6%
None of the above	226	90.4%

NB. Note that people were able to select more than one option.

Question 19 – Linguistic Diversity of Respondents

Q: Do you speak a language other than English at home? Select one answer only. (250 responses)	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
No	193	76.8%
Yes – If so, what is the main language you speak at home? (A free text field was provided for the respondent to respond.)	58	23.2%

Of those stating that they spoke a language other than English at home, the top responses by order of frequency were:

- Hindi (7; noting 2 Hindi-speakers also said they speak Marathi at home as well, as Sanskrit in 1 case)
- Italian (7)
- Arabic (6)
- Greek (6)
- English (5; noting that:
 - 2 respondents also noted that they speak Italian at home in addition to English, and
 - That the phrasing of the original question means that it is possible that some business owners speak a Language other than English at home, but that English is still the main language that they do speak at home)

- Mandarin; and Spanish (each with 3 speakers)
- French; German; Gujarati; Sinhalese; Telugu; and Urdu (each with 2 speakers), and
- Assyrian; Auslan; Cantonese; Croatian; Gujarati/Fijian; Hungarian; Polish/Ukrainian; Russian; and Turkish (each with 1 speaker).

Note that in some cases, some respondents nominated more than 1 main language that they spoke at home.

Overall, the survey provided a highly informative insight into the challenges of operating a business and the preferences and needs of business in relation to Council's business support and other services.

In particular, the raw data can be filtered by question-response categories such as business size, industry sector or business location (suburb); and will be further consulted during the implementation of the plan as projects and programs are developed to help target Council's business support services to the needs of different types of business.

Engagement with First Nations Representatives

Engagement with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders, Project Managers, a Merri-bek First Nations Advisory Committee Member, and the First Nations Advisory Council

During Stage 1, in February 2024, Council's City Strategy & Economy Manager and Economic Development Unit Manager presented to and held a discussion with two Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders to discuss the work that was underway to prepare an Economic Development Action Plan and to seek their advice and suggestions.

Also in Stage 1, in March 2024, Council's Economic Development Unit Manager further engaged with the Special Projects Manager at Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation and also spoke with a business owner and member of Merri-bek's First Nations Advisory Committee, about the plan.

A summary of the key topics of discussion and the advice received is outlined below:

- The scope of work typically undertaken by Merri-bek's Economic Development Unit and the new Economic Development Action Plan
- Relevant data and completed research into First Nations people and businesses in Merri-bek
- Advice on which organisations and people to engage with to help in identifying and reaching First Nations Businesses
- Advice on the potential needs of First Nations business owners, how First Nations business owners and operators might like to be engaged and supported.

The Special Projects Manager was also able to assist with distributing information to their networks inviting First Nations business owners/operators to complete the Economic Development Action Plan Business Survey.

These discussions have helped inform the drafting of priorities and actions within the Action Plan, in particular in Theme 7. They have also provided further insight which will be applied throughout the implementation of the Plan in a way that seeks to ensure that for all relevant actions, steps are taken to ensure that First Nations people can best be engaged and fully participate in and benefit from the implementation of any relevant actions.

Interviews with Local Businesses

Interviews with nine local business owners and operators

From January to April 2024, Economic Development staff sought to gain qualitative feedback from one-to-one interviews with 8 key business contacts and two traders association. The interviews found:

- Although those businesspeople interviewed did not personally feel they wanted training, they responded that it would be very useful for many smaller businesses and business owners. One business suggested a financial literacy course for new business owners would be useful.
- Attracting staff with particular technical skills needed for industries is difficult in various fields including: Accommodation & food service; Health science, Food manufacturing (e.g. bakers), Construction; and Manufacturing (e.g. foundries).
- Concern around the challenges and solutions to making technical jobs attractive to young people to encourage them into those industries
- Proximity to the Parkville biomedical and education precinct is a big help.
- Information about grants is often useful for businesses.
- Increased government and business costs can be a significant burden for businesses.
- Businesses leasing properties are at the mercy of landlords often waiting to (re)develop. Negotiating longer term, affordable leases is becoming more difficult. This is especially difficult for Merri-bek's co-working businesses who have found success in former warehousing and industrial sites.
- Networking events and providing a sense of community (e.g. CEO Roundtable type events) is really helpful for business owners. Knowledge of other businesses in the municipality, what they are doing and their business experiences and challenges, would be good.

Interviews with Trader Association Committees

Face to face discussions with the Committees of Sydney Road Brunswick Association (SRBA) and Central Coburg Business Association (CCBA)

In March and April 2024, Council officers presented to and held discussions with the elected Committees of SRBA and CCBA respectively. A summary of the key topics of discussion and feedback is outlined below:

- Committee members believe that their retail precincts hold significant appeal, in part due to the variety of the retail offer, the high proportion of independent retailers and hospitality businesses, the accessibility of Brunswick and Coburg via various transport modes, the affordability and value provided by many businesses, the affinity that businesses have with their customers, and the presence of many destination businesses. The committees also noted the strength of the multi-cultural business community.
- Committee members wish to see improvements to the amount of greenery (i.e., trees and landscaping) along Sydney Road, the general amenity of the area including graffiti and rubbish, consolidation of street infrastructure (e.g., lighting poles, signage, bins, etc.).

- SRBA Committee members believe that a future LXR project could assist with securing improvements to Sydney Road.
- Local businesses often seek support with topics such as visual merchandising; marketing and promotion – including social media. Committee members believe that traders would also potentially benefit from additional face-to-face networking events.
- Traders within the areas covered by the committee are particularly concerned with graffiti, crime and anti-social behaviour along Sydney Road affecting their businesses and their customers.

Business Merri-bek Staff Event

Internal staff three hour workshop: ‘Working together to Support Business’

On 26 October 2023, 50+ staff who regularly engage with Merri-bek’s business community took part in a three hour workshop ‘Working Together to Support Business’. The workshop was held at a local business located in the Newlands Road Food and Beverage manufacturing hub, Coburg North to provide businesses with a valuable insight into the operations of a manufacturing business.

The event highlighted the significant value that our business community brings to Merri-bek and how business growth and economic prosperity are vital in meeting the needs of our local community. Numerous teams across Council play an important role in assisting business, and by streamlining our approval processes, we aim to ensure that decision making is efficient and effective, helping businesses to thrive, expand and employ more local people.

Participants collectively shared insights and explored how we can better support our business community. It was also an opportunity to reaffirm our Council’s 2019 commitment to being a [Business Friendly Council](#) and to inform early thinking about opportunities for the Economic Development Action Plan.

The main themes and takeaways from the staff workshop were:

- Merri-bek’s business information on Council’s website can be confusing to navigate.
- Make business information on Council’s website more accessible, using plain English and a user-friendly format.
- Website information must be regularly updated.
- E-services is not always user friendly.
- Explore IT enhancements to facilitate easier communication and enquiries from businesses, such as implementing a Chat bot.
- Challenging for business owners to interpret relevant legislation.
- Improve internal communication by increasing awareness and collaboration between teams.
- Explore ways to deliver a more efficient service to our businesses and strengthen connections.
- Communicate expected timelines and requirements more clearly
- Provide an easy-to-update online business directory
- Share more Merri-bek business success stories
- Streamline the process for end-of-construction inspections

- Expedite pre-application meetings
- Expand induction process for new staff
- Explore a Council supported business committee to engage with and support businesses.

Staff Survey

Survey completed by 24 internal Merri-bek staff members

An internal staff survey was sent to teams within Council that provide services to business customers. The survey was sent to colleagues via email and followed up by a personal phone call from an Economic Development team member.

The survey requested information on what Council was currently doing and planning to do with, and for businesses. The questions also sought to identify pain points for Council and businesses and glean opportunities and ideas from staff on how to improve Council's service delivery. The questions sought qualitative feedback.

Twenty-two surveys were completed by staff from Transport, Amenity and Compliance, Urban Design, Strategic Planning, Building Services, Sustainable Built Environment, Amenity & Compliance, Urban Planning, Community Development & Social Policy, Community Engagement, within Community Development, Sustainability and Climate, Place Revitalisation, Place Activation, Open Space Design & Development, Community and Places and Arts & Culture.

The main themes and takeaways from the survey were:

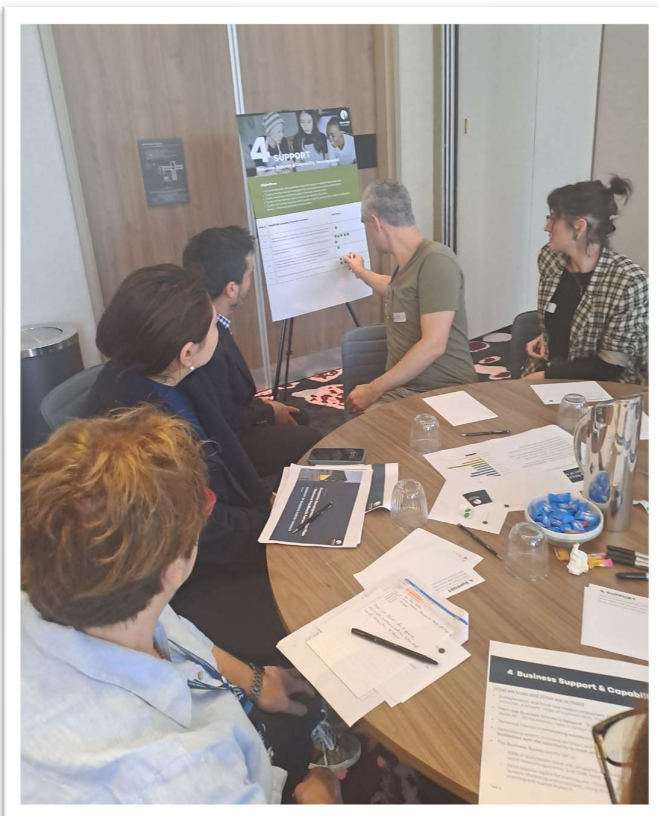
- Many businesses don't know what Council teams do – Council needs to inform and educate, provide forums, promotion of services, and determine local business connectors.
- There is a perception that Council is a hinderance to development – this needs to change.
- Council teams find it challenging to engage with businesses to get their input and feedback for projects – urban design, open spaces, transport.
- Council's website should be improved to provide a better user experience for businesses. Add FAQs, flyers, shorter internet links.
- Advocacy to State Government to remove red tape is needed.

Key Findings – Stage 2 Consultation & Engagement

Business Feedback Forum

Business Feedback Forum held 8 May 2024 in Coburg, attended by 48 business owners and 5 key stakeholders.

The forum started with a brief mayoral address and a brief presentation on the results of Stage 1 Engagement, in particular outcomes from the Business Survey, and the emerging Action Plan.



The seven draft EDAP themes and associated priorities were explored and voted on through a World Café format that provided one station per theme.

Attendees visited at least 3 stations to explore and vote on the themes and priorities that were most important to them. They also provided feedback and suggestions they considered important to business.

The priorities voted as most important by participants under each theme were:

#	Theme	Priority receiving the highest number of votes
1	Advocating for our business community	Advocate for the better use of vacant and under-utilised government owned infrastructure to deliver local economic and community benefits.
2	Emerging industries & clusters	Facilitate the development of networks between businesses that can benefit from working collaboratively.
3	Business attraction & investment facilitation	Further develop and strengthen Council's relationship with potential investors and other key partners to explore investment opportunities that achieve positive local economic and social outcomes.
4	Business support & capability development	Promote local businesses to increase customer reach and revenue.
5	Activity centres & employment precincts	Facilitate the development and improvement of key, local commercial and industrial precincts to encourage new business investment.
6	Visitor & experience economy	Support local businesses to attract visitors to Merri-bek and encourage increased visitor spending.
7	Social and environmental sustainability	Support businesses to adopt positive social and environmental business practices.

A snapshot of additional feedback and insights include:

- Ensure businesses are included in the Council conversations that affect them – major infrastructure & development or parking impact accessibility
- Make more Council processes easier and online
- Make Council's organisational structure and who to contact easier for business. Businesses need broad internal Council contacts
- Stronger focus on attracting business investment.
- Contact new businesses that setup in Merri-bek.
- How can Council improve safety in the broader area and support a continued feeling of safety and security?
- Arts and entertainment should be a key industry.
- Industry sector or 'like' business networking events
- Revitalisation of Sydney Road Coburg as the 'face' of Coburg a priority.
- Vacant buildings and shops - change of use would help, cost of rent driving up vacancies, discourage shoppers from visiting

The Business Feedback Forum provided a measure of the acceptance of themes and priorities by the business community, through attendees voting for the 3 priorities under each theme that were most important to them. There were no themes or objectives that received criticism from the attendees. More detailed feedback and insights provided the attendees provided additional actions and further refinement of the EDAP.

Engagement with First Nations representatives

Engagement with Merri-bek First Nations Advisory Committee

During Stage 2, in June 2024, Council's City Strategy & Economy manager and Economic Development Unit Manager presented to and held a discussion with the Merri-bek First Nations Advisory Committee. Advice was taken in relation to considering Ballarrt Mooroop and supporting the development of that project with respect to matters of potential business venture viability and economic development.

Internal Staff Meetings and Workshops

Meetings and discussion with eight key internal branches and teams including: Advocacy; Amenity & Compliance/Street Cleansing; City Development; Community Engagement; Community Wellbeing; Cultural Development; Property, Place and Design; and Sustainability and Climate.

The meetings with eight internal Council branches and business units/teams involved a review of the findings of the economic analysis, business survey and business forum and a discussion of these.

The meetings also included a detailed review of the draft Action Plan – in particular focusing on the priorities and actions that related to each branch and/or unit – and discussion around the merits of the actions, their relationship to the relevant teams, and how the Economic Development and other branches and units of Council could work together to ensure that businesses and the local Merri-bek economy were well supported.

The main themes and takeaways from the survey were:

- The Economic Development Unit can serve as a conduit to help other teams reach, engage with and hear from the business community. This will ensure that Council teams are better able to understand and take account of the needs of businesses.
- The Economic Development Unit can assist the Community Wellbeing branch and Sustainability and Climate branch to reach and engage with the business community in order to assist businesses to operate in more socially and environmentally sustainable ways.
- That there is much to be gained, in terms of the various objectives and priorities of the Economic Development Action Plan, from Economic Development continuing to work proactively and collaboratively with various units across Council and that collaborative working should be undertaken throughout the implementation of the Action Plan.

The meetings also helped to inform a series of refinements to Priorities and Actions.