Rural City of Wangaratta

2026 local Business and Industry Survey Report

ABOUT THE SURVEY

In February 2026, Council delivered the second annual Business and Industry Survey to understand current business conditions, priorities and challenges across the Rural City of Wangaratta. Building on the baseline established in 2025, the survey provides an up-to-date snapshot of how local businesses are operating in the current economic environment.

The survey also allows Council to track changes over time, identifying where conditions have remained consistent, where pressures are intensifying, and where new issues are emerging. These insights support evidence-based decision-making and help ensure Council's business development activities, advocacy and programs are aligned with the needs of the local business community, in line with the Economic Development and Tourism Strategy 2024–2029.

The survey was launched at Council's Annual Business Forum on 20 February and remained open for eight weeks. During this period, Council engaged with businesses through direct visits, events, online promotion and workshops across the Rural City of Wangaratta to encourage broad participation from businesses across industries and locations.

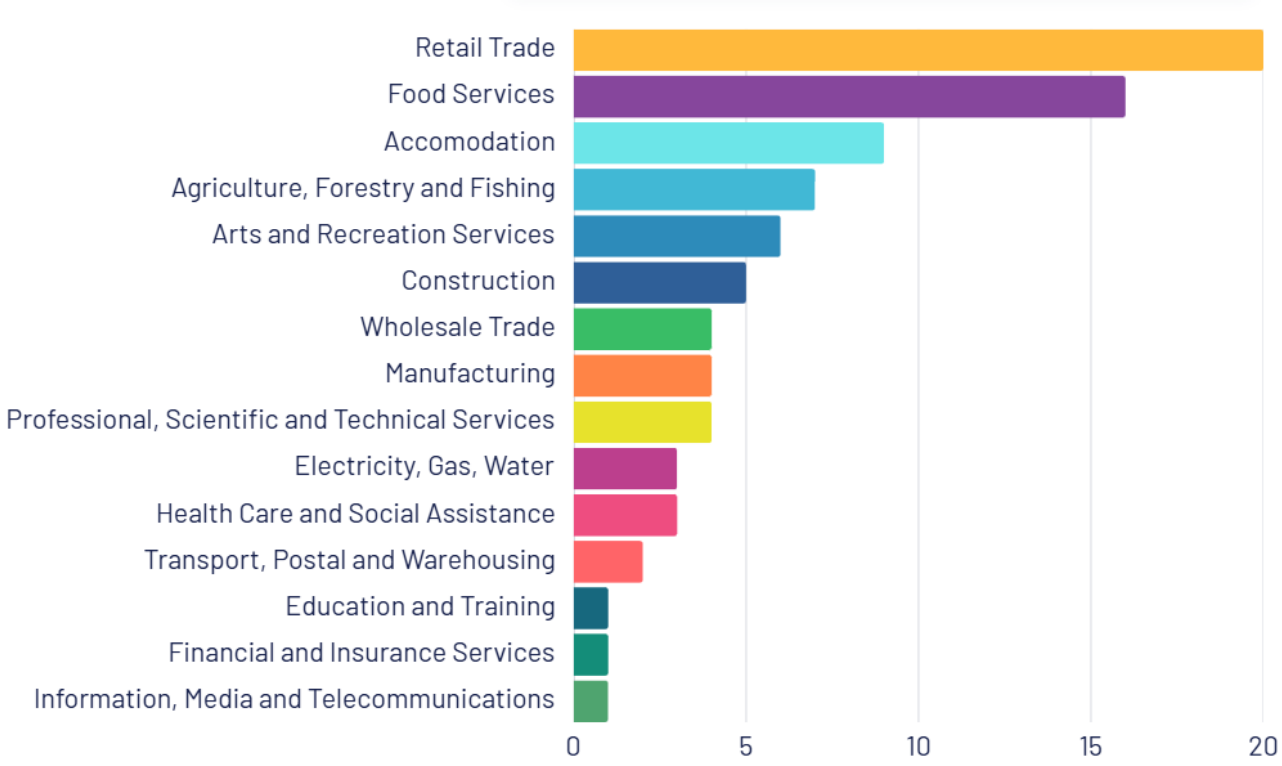
Key highlights

- Costs are rising faster than revenue
- Finding and keeping staff is still hard
- Businesses want connection and visibility
- Businesses want council advocacy, not just service delivery

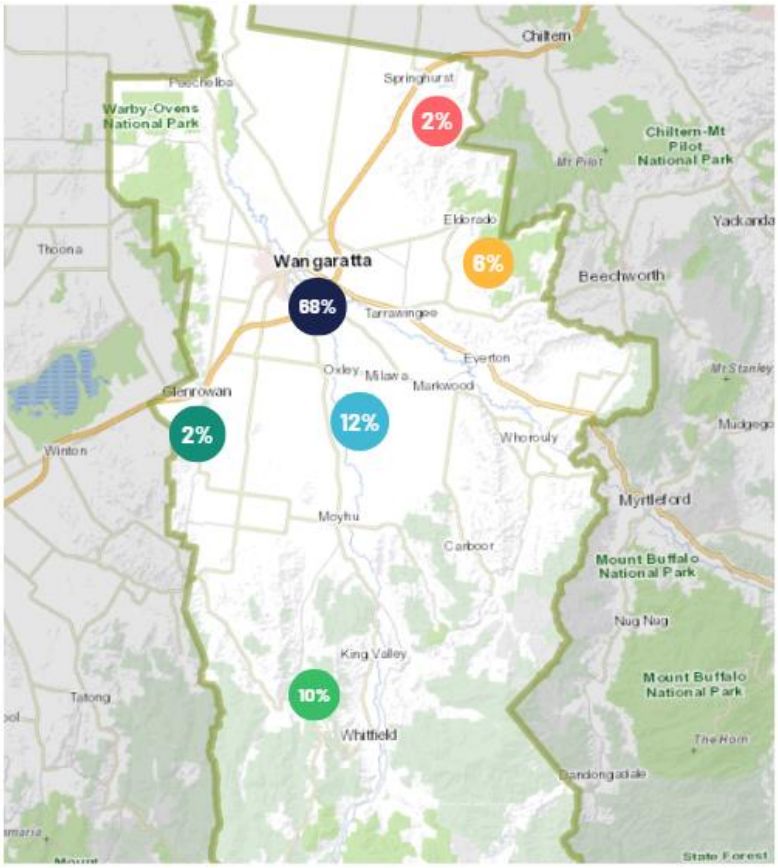
ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

The top five sectors for the Rural City of Wangaratta include Health Care and Social Services, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, Manufacturing, Retail Trade and Construction.

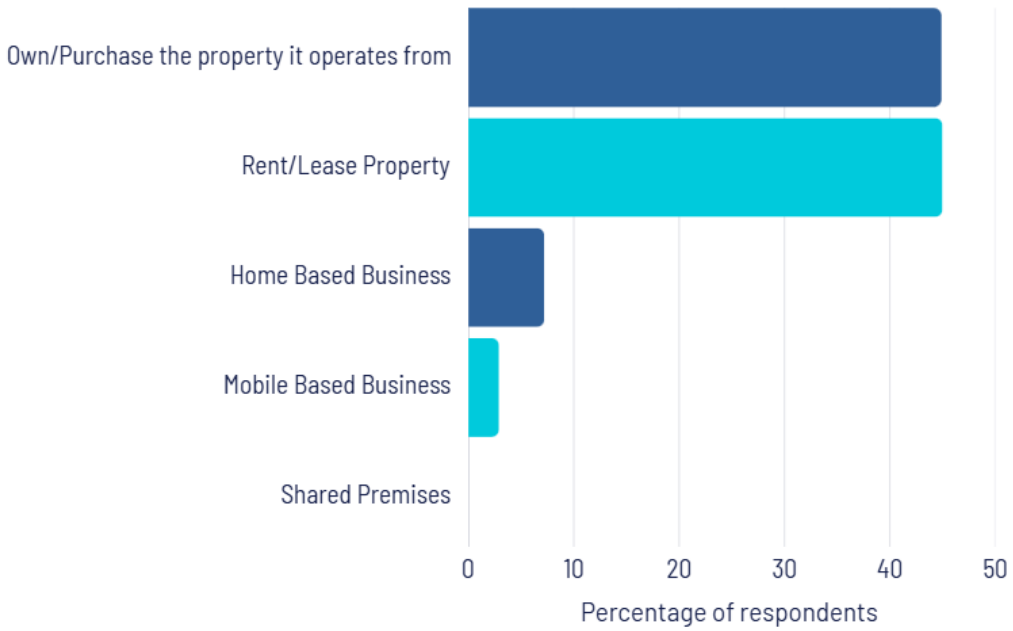
All of these sectors were represented in the survey. These were based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZIC) divisions. Those that did not engage include Mining, Real Estate and Public Administration and Safety.



Operating business from across the Rural City of Wangaratta



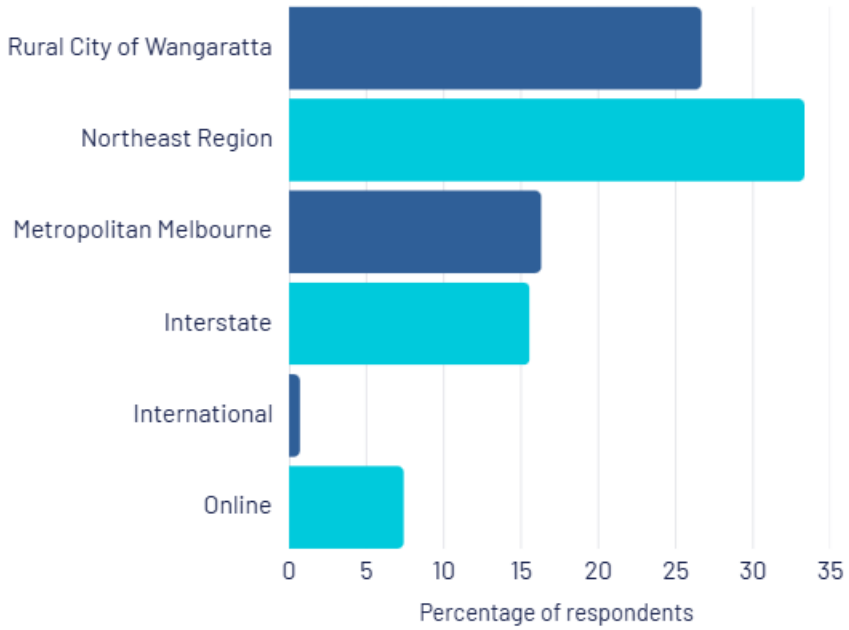
Type of business premises



Retail businesses mostly lease their premises, while farming and tourism operators tend to own. Other sectors show a mix of leasing and ownership, reflecting factors like business stage, investment preferences, and property availability.

SALES AND MARKETING

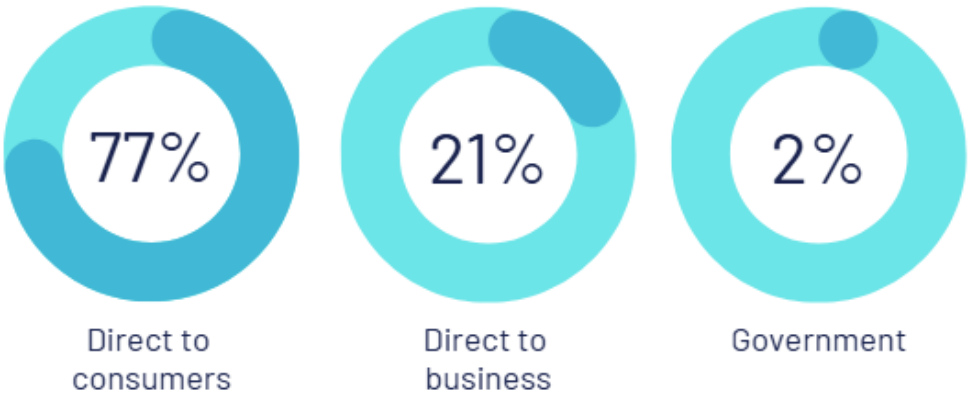
% businesses are primarily selling to customers in



Most businesses are selling primarily to local and regional customers, with around 60% of respondents relying on customers within the Rural City of Wangaratta and the broader North East. This highlights the strength and importance of the local economy in supporting business activity.

At the same time, it shows that many businesses are closely linked to local conditions, including seasonal demand, population changes and cost-of-living pressures. Only a relatively small share of businesses is selling beyond the region, indicating that market reach remains more locally focused for many operators.

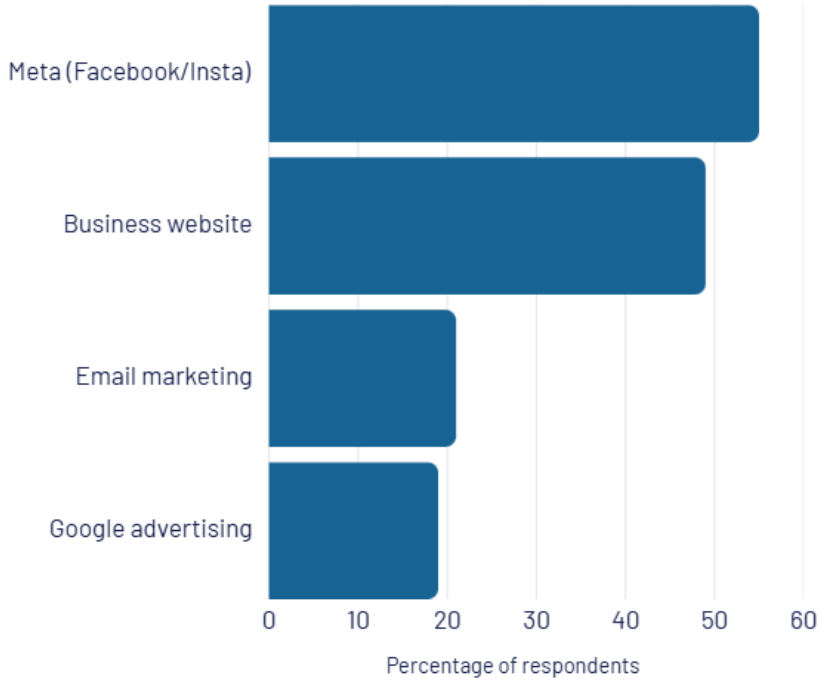
While this local focus is expected and appropriate for many businesses, the results also point to an opportunity to support those that wish to diversify their customer base and explore metropolitan, interstate or online markets.



Most businesses are selling directly to consumers, with around 77% operating primarily on a direct-to-customer basis. This is a common and well-established approach in regional economies, where many sectors rely on strong relationships with customers and local demand.

A smaller proportion of businesses sell to other businesses (around 21%), with very few selling primarily to government clients. While this sales mix is appropriate for many business models, it also means that revenue for many operators is closely linked to local spending patterns. The results highlight an opportunity to support businesses that are interested in exploring additional pathways, such as business-to-business sales, procurement or supply chain opportunities, as part of their future growth.

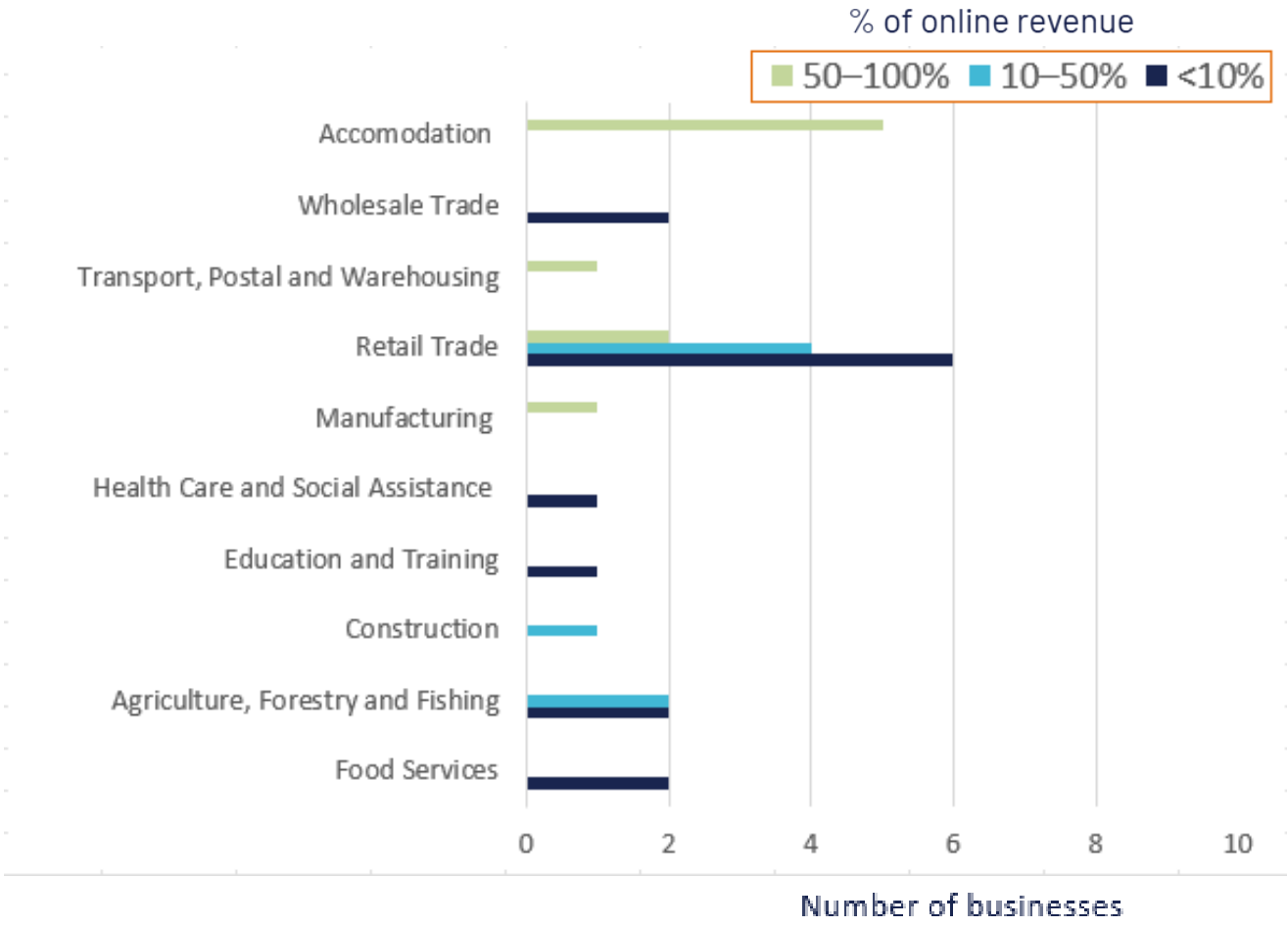
Most common platforms used by business to market products



The results indicate that local businesses continue to rely heavily on familiar and well-established marketing platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram and business websites. This is consistent with last year's findings, which also showed these channels as the dominant tools used to promote products and services.

As in the previous year, the comparatively lower use of channels such as email marketing and Google advertising suggests there is an opportunity to strengthen marketing effectiveness and broaden the mix of tools businesses use to reach customers.

Revenue generated from online sales



Responses continue to show wide variation in the level of revenue businesses generate through online channels. Retail businesses remain the most active, with some generating meaningful digital revenue, while others in the same sector report no online sales at all. Accommodation and food services also show mixed results, ranging from minimal online contributions to cases where digital channels account for a significant share of revenue.

This pattern is largely consistent with last year's results, which found that online sales were still developing across most sectors, with many businesses reporting low digital revenue or uncertainty about how much income was generated online. As in the previous year, most other industries report little or no online revenue, or limited visibility over their digital performance.

Overall, the findings suggest that the ongoing challenge is less about the absence of opportunity and more about capability, confidence and performance tracking. The results indicate continued potential to support businesses to better understand, measure and strengthen their use of online sales channels.

International trade



China



India



Vietnam



Malaysia



New Zealand



England

Around 13% of survey respondents reported trading internationally, representing a similar level of engagement to last year, when approximately 15% of businesses reported international trade activity. This indicates that international trade continues to involve a relatively small but stable proportion of local businesses.

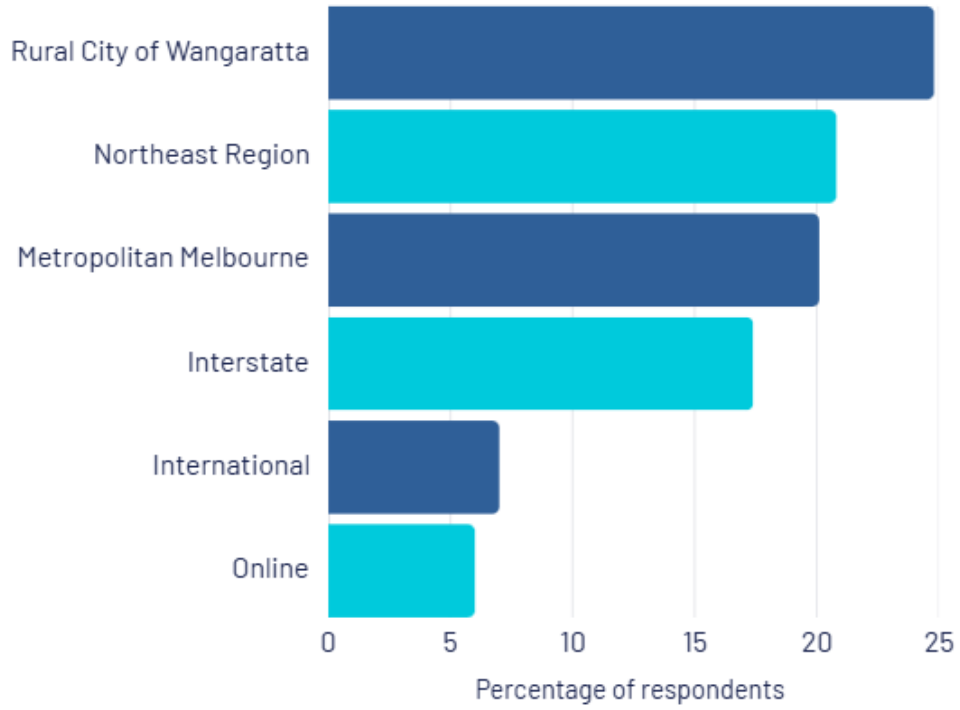
As in the previous year, manufacturing and agriculture businesses remain the most active exporters, while some retail businesses import products from countries such as China, Vietnam, India and Malaysia. Export activity is again largely focused on markets across the Asia-Pacific region, reflecting ongoing demand for Victorian food and fibre products in countries such as India, Vietnam and Japan.

While overall participation in international trade remains limited, the results reinforce the ongoing potential to build export capability and confidence within the local business community. This opportunity is particularly evident in agriculture, food and manufacturing, where targeted support such as export readiness programs, market insights and trade networks could assist more businesses to explore high-growth international markets over time.

SUPPLY CHAINS

Localities of Suppliers

"Pricing is usually higher in regional areas using smaller suppliers, rather than larger companies and suppliers who are able to be more competitive."



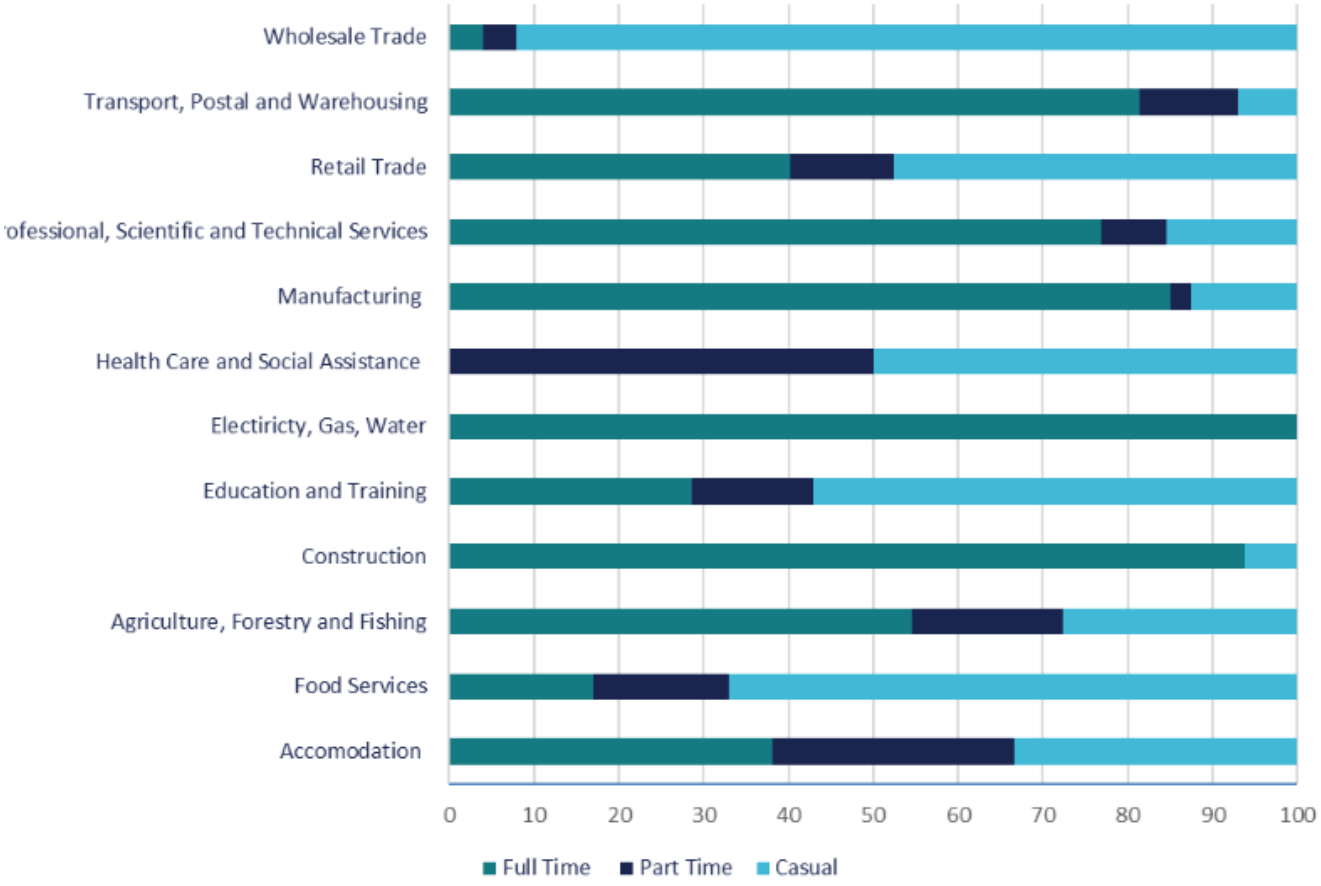
Challenges highlighted for using local suppliers include:

Many businesses continue to source suppliers locally and across the North East, but similar challenges to last year remain. Businesses report ongoing difficulty accessing the right products and services locally, particularly where specialised goods, consistent supply or year-round availability are required. Cost also remains a key factor, with local suppliers often seen as more expensive than metropolitan or interstate alternatives.

This year's feedback provides a clearer picture of where the gaps are. Businesses highlighted shortages in trades and specialist services, freight and delivery limitations, and sector-specific supply issues. Hospitality and food businesses noted limited product choice and pricing options, accommodation providers identified gaps in linen and cleaning services, and tourism operators reported limited local transport hire options.

WORKFORCE

Employee mix in the Rural City of Wangaratta



The survey results show that employment mix varies significantly across industries, reflecting the operational requirements and workforce models of different sectors.

Industries such as construction, manufacturing, professional services, and utilities rely predominantly on full-time employment, reflecting the need for stable, skilled and specialist roles. In contrast, retail, accommodation, and food services have a much higher reliance on casual and part-time staff, consistent with fluctuating demand, extended trading hours and seasonal activity.

Agriculture and education show a more balanced mix of employment types, likely influenced by seasonal workloads, project-based roles, and variable staffing needs. Health care and social assistance also show a strong mix of part-time and casual employment, reflecting flexible roster requirements and workforce structure within the sector.

These differences highlight that workforce challenges and solutions are sector-specific and reinforce the need for flexible approaches to workforce planning, skills development and recruitment support that reflect the realities of different industries.

24% Businesses are looking to increase their staffing numbers in the coming 12 months.

49% Employ apprentices, trainees, school based trainees or support school based experience.

Top recruiting channels

Social media, seek and word of mouth were noted as most effective ways to recruit.

Barriers to recruiting and retaining staff



Across all industries, skills shortages remain the most commonly cited barrier to recruiting and retaining staff, consistent with last year's results. However, salary expectations have emerged more strongly this year as a key challenge, reflecting increasing pressure on wages.

Industry patterns also remain broadly consistent. Retail and food services businesses continue to report strong competition in the labour market, particularly in fast-paced, customer-facing roles. Agriculture and manufacturing again place greater emphasis on reliability, training and technical skills, though reliability appears less prominent than in the previous year.

Other barriers, including employee benefits expectations, housing and transport, were noted by fewer respondents, similar to last year.

BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Cost of running a business over the past 12 months

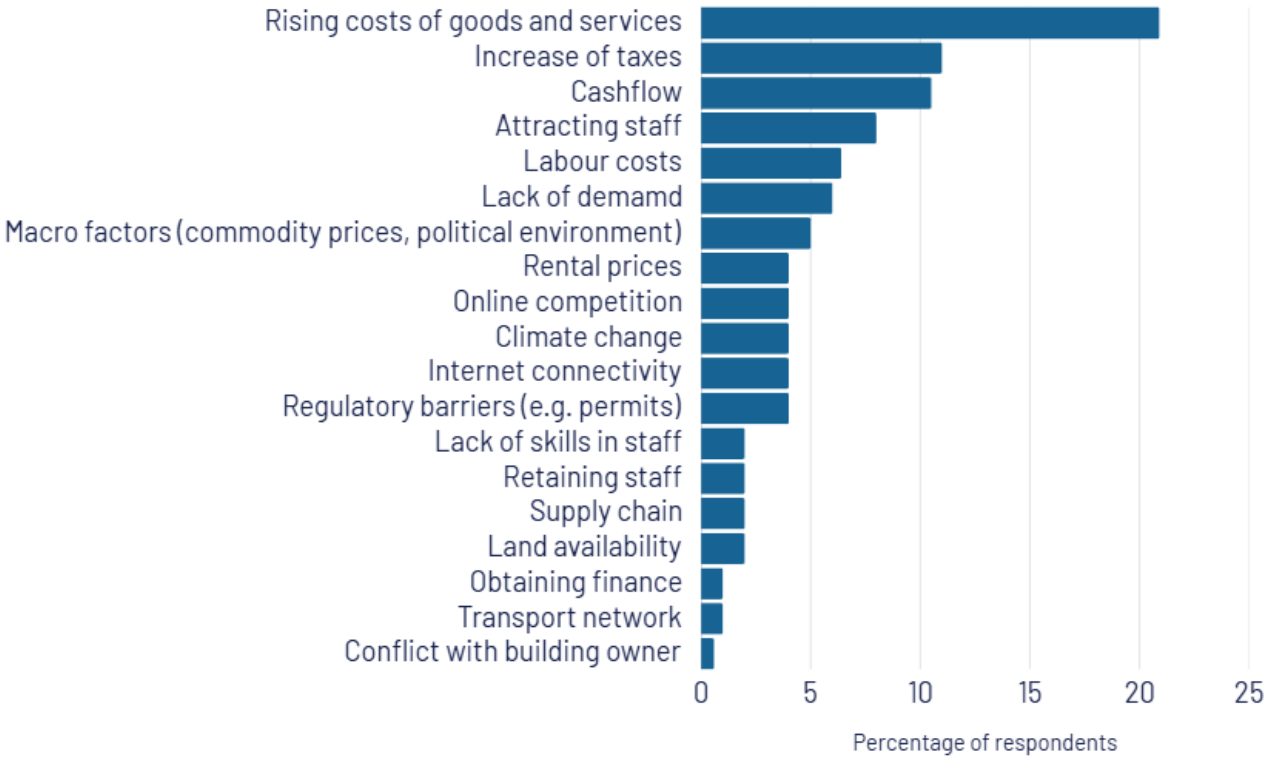


Operating costs continue to rise for the vast majority of businesses, with 88% reporting higher net costs over the past 12 months. While 43% of businesses have experienced revenue growth, the same proportion expect profits to increase, indicating that cost pressures are continuing to absorb much of this additional income rather than translating into stronger margins.

Compared to last year, this suggests that businesses are still operating in a challenging cost environment, with little easing in pressure. While some businesses are adapting through pricing changes, diversification or efficiency improvements, others continue to face ongoing margin pressure. Sector results reflect this pattern, with retail and accommodation businesses again more likely to report profits remaining unchanged, reflecting tight margins and customer sensitivity to price increases.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

Challenges faced by business in the Rural City of Wangaratta



Cost pressures remain the most significant challenge facing businesses across the Rural City of Wangaratta, consistent with last year's results. Businesses continue to report difficulty balancing profitability against rising operating expenses and broader cost-of-living pressures. Increased input costs, taxes and cash-flow constraints were again the most frequently identified issues, confirming that cost-related pressures remain the dominant concern across industries.

Workforce challenges also continue to feature prominently, with businesses reporting ongoing difficulties attracting and retaining staff, managing labour costs and maintaining skills. As in the previous year, retail and other customer-facing businesses were more likely to highlight competitive pressures, including the impact of online competition, while businesses in other sectors emphasised staffing availability, cost pressures and broader economic conditions.

BUSINESS TRAINING NEEDS

Business Continuity and Emergency Planning



Most businesses do not currently have an emergency management or business continuity plan in place. However, many expressed interest in learning more, indicating an opportunity to improve preparedness across the local business community.

A small number of businesses reported that emergency planning was not relevant to their operations, suggesting varying levels of awareness and perceived risk.

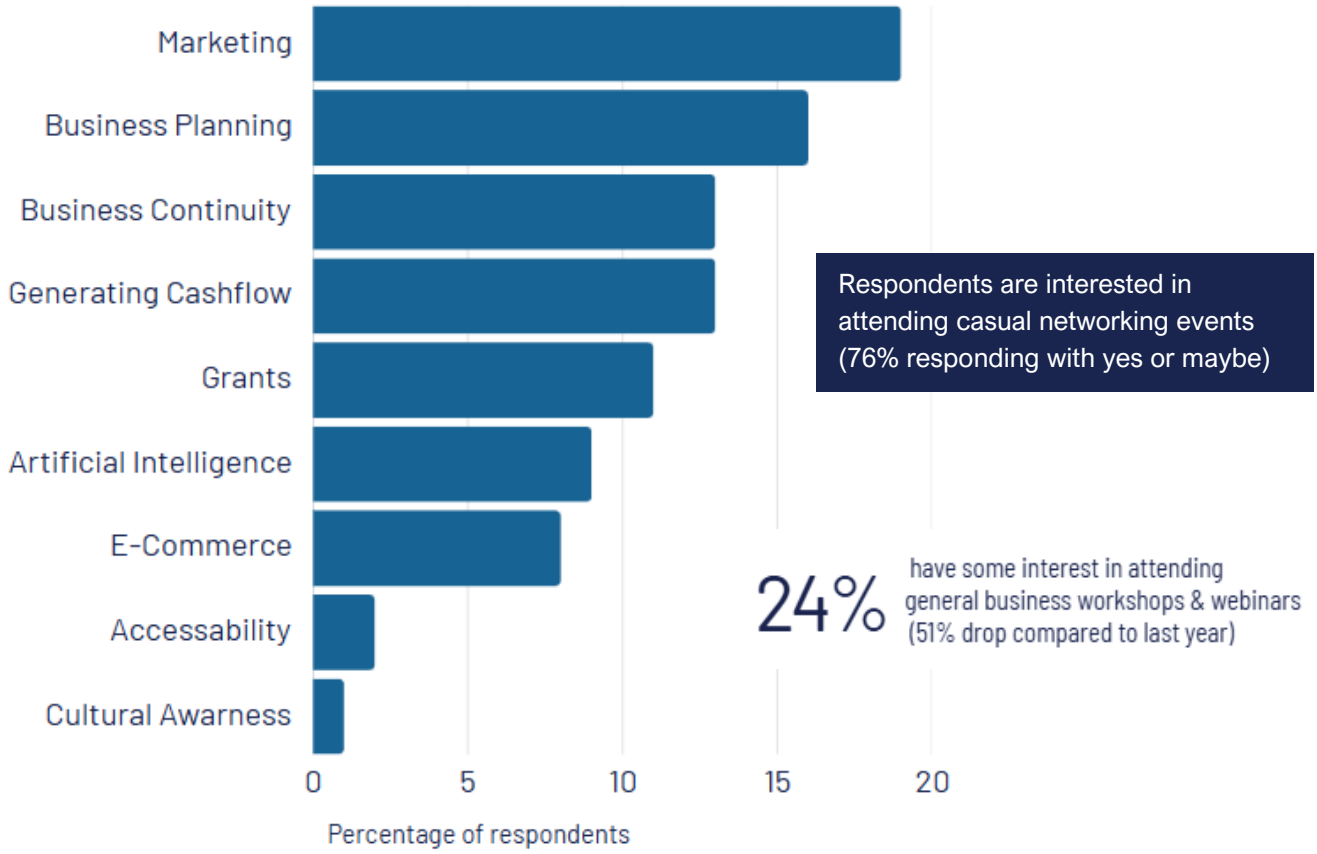
Energy planning



Most businesses do not currently have an energy plan in place, though many showed interest in learning more. This presents an opportunity to support improved energy efficiency, cost management and sustainability.

A small number of businesses felt energy planning was not applicable to their operations.

Chosen subjects for future workshops and webinars

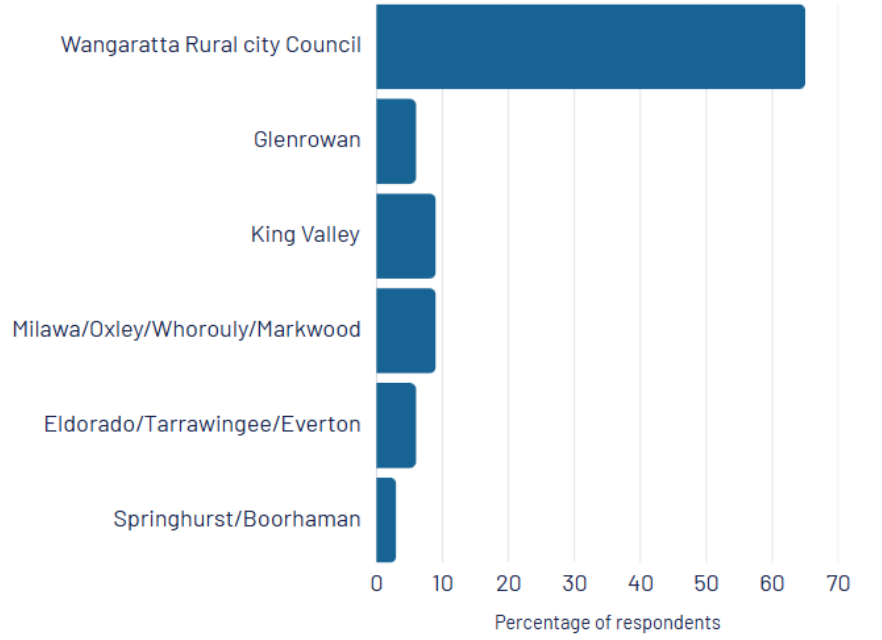




Compared to last year, business training interests have shifted from a strong focus on marketing and business planning toward more practical and immediate needs, including grants, business continuity and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

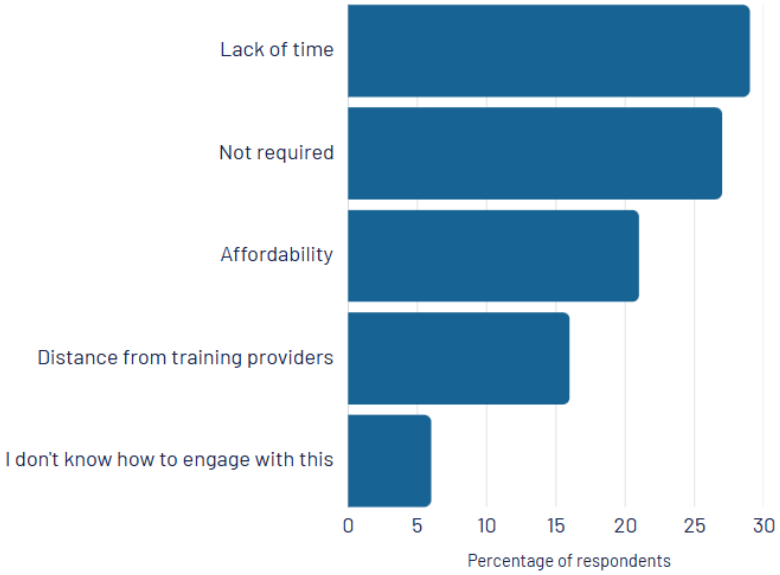
While core topics like marketing and cashflow remain important, the results suggest businesses are increasingly seeking targeted support that improves resilience, access to funding and operational efficiency. Interest in business continuity remains consistently high across both years.

Best location for workshops

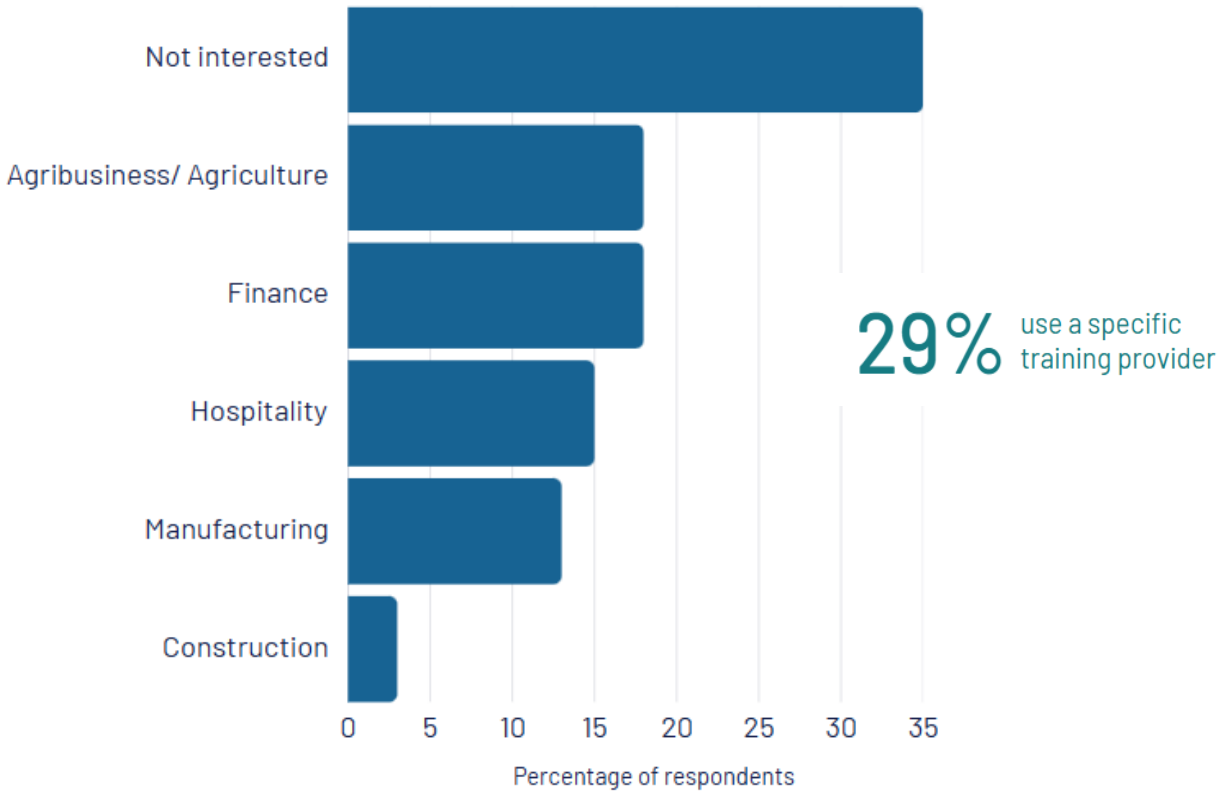


TRAINING PROVIDERS

Barriers to utilising specific training providers



Industry specific training interest areas



While there was some interest in industry-specific workshops, particularly in agribusiness, finance and manufacturing, a significant number of businesses indicated they were not interested. This may reflect earlier feedback around limited time or financial capacity for additional training. It may also indicate a stronger preference for general business topics such as marketing, cashflow and planning which are seen as more immediately relevant across sectors.

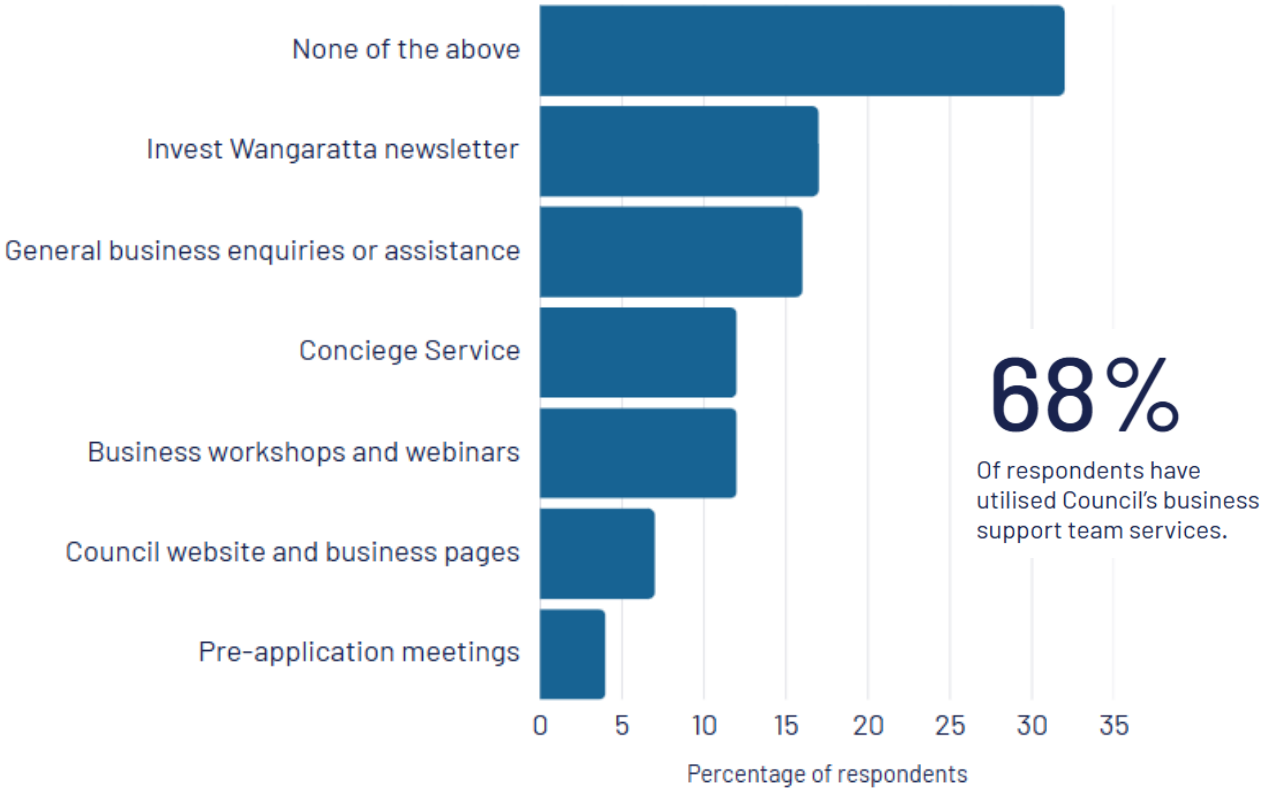
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS



Engagement with industry associations appears low, with many businesses indicating the question was not applicable or providing no response.

The results suggest scope to further explore how industry associations could complement local business support and training initiatives.

CONNECTING WIH COUNCIL SERVICES



Engagement with Council business support services remains similar to last year. Nearly half of respondents reported that they had not engaged with any of the listed services, while those who had most commonly connected through the business newsletter or general enquiries.

This suggests that, while some services are being used, there remains an ongoing opportunity to improve awareness and accessibility of available support, particularly for time-poor businesses.

What support they want from council



Responses indicate that businesses are seeking practical, targeted support from Council. While priorities vary by business type and sector, the feedback highlights a clear expectation that Council can play a role in enabling business growth, resilience and connectivity.

Overall, the results suggest an opportunity for Council to continue refining its business support offer to align with identified needs and ensure services are accessible and clearly communicated.