

Towards an Economic Development Strategy for the West of Melbourne 2025

Consultation Paper

19 December 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

WoMEDA acknowledges the Wurundjeri, Bunurong and Wadawurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we live and work. We honour and deeply respect their Ancestors, Elders, and families past, present and emerging. We recognise the rich ongoing cultural, social and spiritual connections that First Nations peoples have with the lands and waters of the West of Melbourne and beyond.

About WoMEDA

WoMEDA is an alliance of significant institutions operating across the West of Melbourne, working in tandem with local government and engaging with industry. WoMEDA aims to develop and champion strategies that foster regional collaboration, sustainable economic development, greater local job opportunities and increased wellbeing for community members, and to promote synergistic and innovative employment precincts.

Disclaimer

This is a paper of WoMEDA and does not necessarily reflect the views of all its members.

This is a Consultation paper

This is a consultation paper as part of a process to develop WoMEDA's proposed economic development strategy for the West of Melbourne. It includes a number of questions for feedback. Details of how to make a submission are provided at the end of the Executive Summary.

Executive summary

Background

In 2017 WoMEDA published its West of Melbourne Economic Development Strategy, focusing on three major employment precincts - Footscray, Sunshine and Werribee. All three became officially endorsed precincts by the State Government. And significant investments have been made, for example, in the new Footscray Hospital co-located with Victoria University (VU), in the Footscray precinct.

With the population of Melbourne's West expanding rapidly, other important investments have also been made, for example: in the construction of the Wyndham Law Courts; in transport infrastructure with the Westgate Tunnel; and in expanding the number of government schools across the region.

But population growth continues unabated, and it is becoming increasingly clear that state and federal governments need to re-conceptualise the West of Melbourne as a major, state and national priority for city-building. By 2026 it will have a population of over a million and by 2036, 1.3 million. It will be larger than Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT combined.

Feedback is sought on key priorities

This WoMEDA consultation paper seeks to gain feedback from key West of Melbourne stakeholders about priorities for the region over the decade ahead.

Important questions about priorities raised in this Consultation Paper are:

- How can we best communicate to the private sector the huge investment opportunities in the region, for example to take advantage of the growing stock of skilled professionals? And reduce the amount of commuting they have to do to secure employment outside the region? What public investments need to happen to complement this effort?
- Should Melton be added as a priority employment precinct?
- How can VU's presence in Werribee be leveraged to create a modern technologically based tertiary education presence in the growing outer West of Melbourne?
- Should the West of Melbourne become a major priority for some key infrastructure investments? Including, for example:
 - the Airport Rail Link (ARL) with Sunshine as a super-hub?
 - the Outer Metropolitan Ring (OMR) road?
 - electrification of existing regional rail lines to Melton and Wyndham Vale?
 - the western sections of the proposed Suburban Rail Loop (SRL)?
 - a Western Interstate Freight Terminal (WIFT) in Melton's Truganina?
- What can be done to grow a larger and more diverse housing stock for the West of Melbourne? And would a regional housing authority working closely with all councils of the West help to achieve that?

- What amenities will ensure a vibrant and thriving future for the region? Should they include for example:
 - greatly enhanced early childhood education and care facilities as part of an integrated early childhood, school and other family service hubs?
 - Disneyland or something similar in Werribee to complement the Werribee Zoo and make it a major tourist attraction?
 - a branch of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Sunshine?
- The West of Melbourne will be Greater Melbourne's most populated region by the next Census and is warmer and drier than Melbourne's other regions. How can the West of Melbourne become a more circular and greener economy, building on achievements already made in this area?
- Significant progress has been made in health in the region with significant investments in public hospitals. How can this momentum be maintained? And what should the West of Melbourne become famous for in health? Promising possibilities include a community focussed health system prioritising chronic disease, women's health and Indigenous health.

How to make a submission

WoMEDA would value your insights on these questions by 31 March 2025. Submissions can be made by emailing secretary@womeda.com.au. Your submissions will be analysed by WoMEDA and will form a key contribution to the WoMEDA's 2025 Strategy. WoMEDA may contact submission authors to invite additional information or views.

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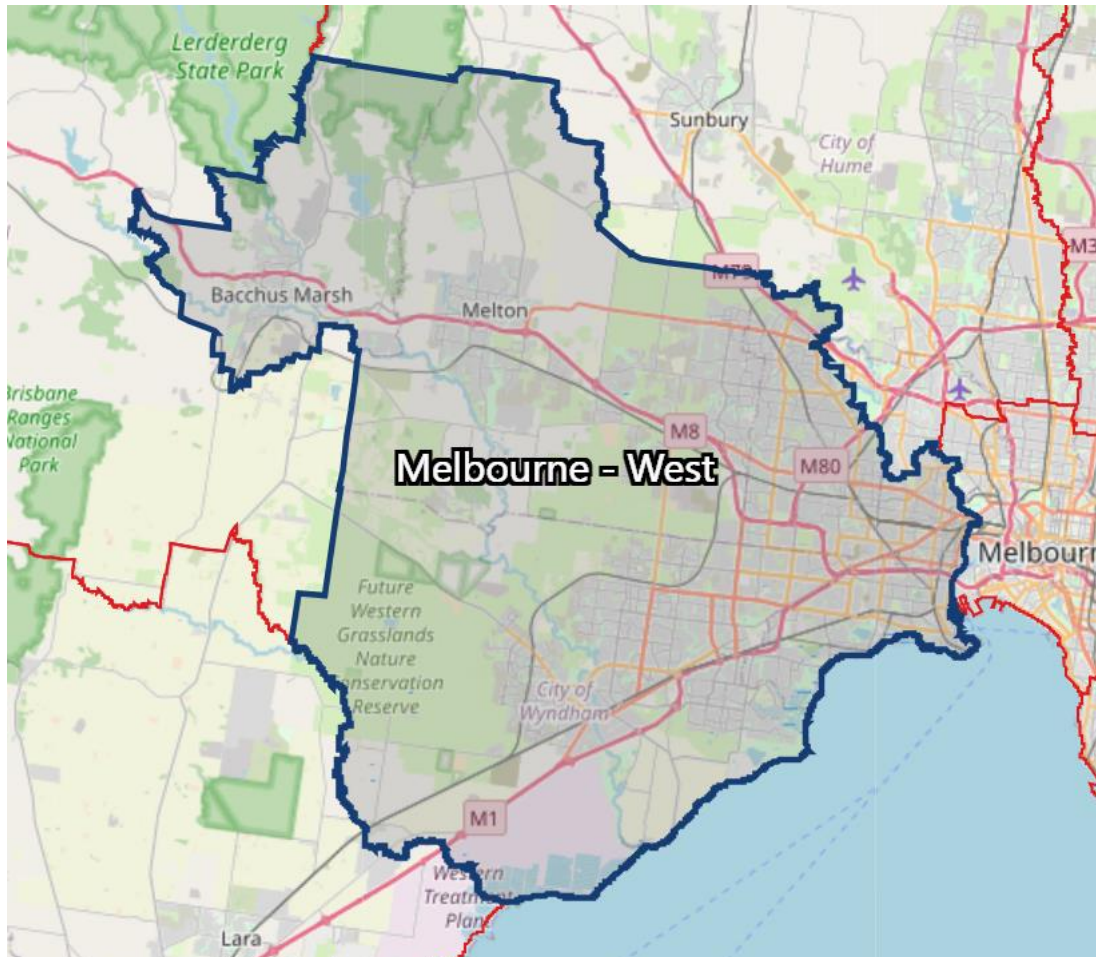
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Note on the definition of West of Melbourne

For the purposes of this Consultation Paper 'West of Melbourne' is treated as synonymous with what the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classifies as 'Melbourne's West'. Here the terms are used interchangeably. Melbourne's West is an area of 1410 square kilometres covering the entirety of the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Hobsons Bay, Wyndham and Maribyrnong, the greater majority of Brimbank and Melton, and a small portion of Moorabool.

Figure 1 Melbourne's West



Source: ABS website (<https://dbr.abs.gov.au/region.html?lyr=sa4&rgn=213>).

1. Introduction

In 2017, WoMEDA produced its first report, entitled an Economic Development Strategy for the West of Melbourne (2017 Strategy). As outlined in the joint message from the Chair and Deputy Chair:

“Our focus in this Strategy is very explicitly on strengthening employment in the West. We believe jobs growth is not matching population growth in the West of Melbourne, and absent the strategy the West will become a dormitory. Alongside population growth, the West has declining industries and persistent shortfalls in health service provision, community amenity and poor social outcomes.

However, there are strengths to build on, in order to expand the quantum of good quality suburban jobs ...

In order to encourage the development of local jobs, we have focussed on three major employment hubs - Footscray, Werribee and Sunshine... Clearly the West is much more than those three hubs. Nevertheless, we believe that building these three strong local hubs of employment will generate widespread benefits for the region”

Source: WoMEDA (2017) Economic Development Strategy for the West of Melbourne 2017, p 4.

The 2017 Strategy included recommendations designed to catch the West of Melbourne up to city averages, particularly in the areas of health and education, and to achieve national significance in industry clusters concentrated in the three major employment precincts (referred to above as ‘hubs’). The Appendix to the Consultation Paper takes stock of progress in the precincts since 2017. It shares the successes that should be built upon, and initiatives previously floated that should be started or hastened.

While building on the strengths of and successes in the employment precincts continues to be important, this Consultation Paper is focused on the priority issues central to the success of all of Melbourne’s West. Its purpose is to solicit your input on key matters for inclusion in the Strategy for 2025. It does this by:

- In Section 2, profiling the West of Melbourne, including its population, workers of the West, and the industries that employ them. We look at where we are now, how this has changed since the 2017 Strategy, and share predictions on where we are heading.
- In Section 3, making the case for a more polycentric city that includes the West of Melbourne employment precincts. We traverse the travel, congestion and other spatial socio-economic challenges of the current monocentric approach. We contrast this with the social, economic and environmental benefits of greater polycentricity.
- In Section 4, discussing the priority issues of building on the successes in the precincts; fast tracking transport and logistic initiatives, growing and diversifying the housing stock, investing in amenities; offering integrated childcare, education and other family services; becoming a greener and more circular economy; and maintaining the momentum in health.

This paper is a WoMEDA Consultation Paper and does not necessarily reflect the views of all its members.

How to make a submission

Summarised upfront and throughout this Consultation Paper we raise questions on matters we would value your insights on. WoMEDA is inviting submissions on these questions until 31 March 2025. Submissions can be made by emailing secretary@womeda.com.au. Your submissions will be analysed by WoMEDA and will form a key contribution to the WoMEDA’s 2025 Strategy. WoMEDA may contact submission authors to invite additional information or views.

2. The West of Melbourne in Profile

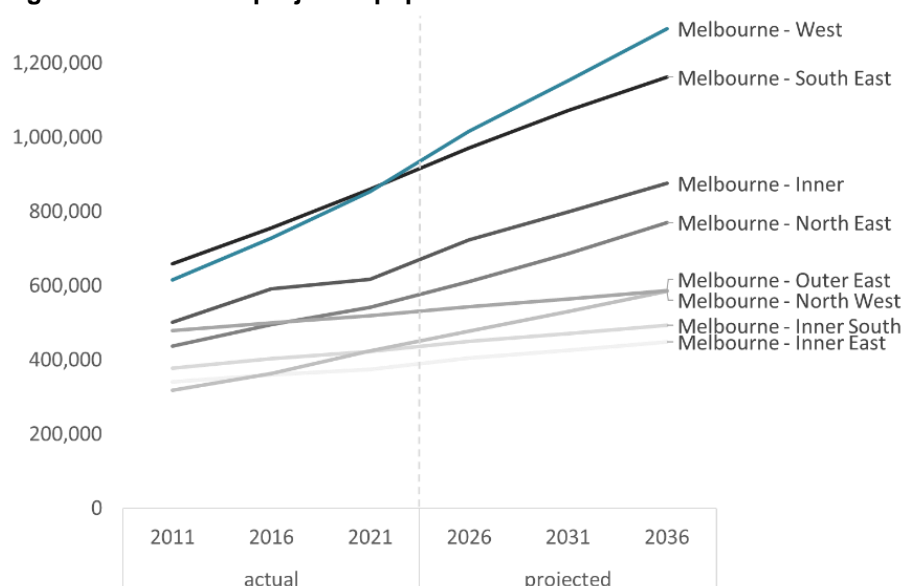
Population

Growth

Since the turn of the century, the population of Melbourne's West has been the fastest growing in Australia.¹ At the last Census, it had a population of 853,054. To provide a sense of perspective, this is greater than the combined populations of Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Melbourne's West is just behind the largest region within Greater Melbourne - the South East.

Expectations are that by the next Census it will have zoomed into first place, with the gap widening over subsequent Censuses. Between the 15 years from 2021 to 2036, Melbourne's West is projected to grow at an annual average rate of 2.8 percent - significantly ahead of the comparative rate of 1.9 percent for Greater Melbourne. By 2026 it will have tipped over one million. By 2036 it is projected to reach 1.3 million. That is bigger than the Census night populations of not just Tasmania and the Northern Territory, but of the Australian Central Territory as well.

Figure 2 Actual and projected population in Greater Melbourne

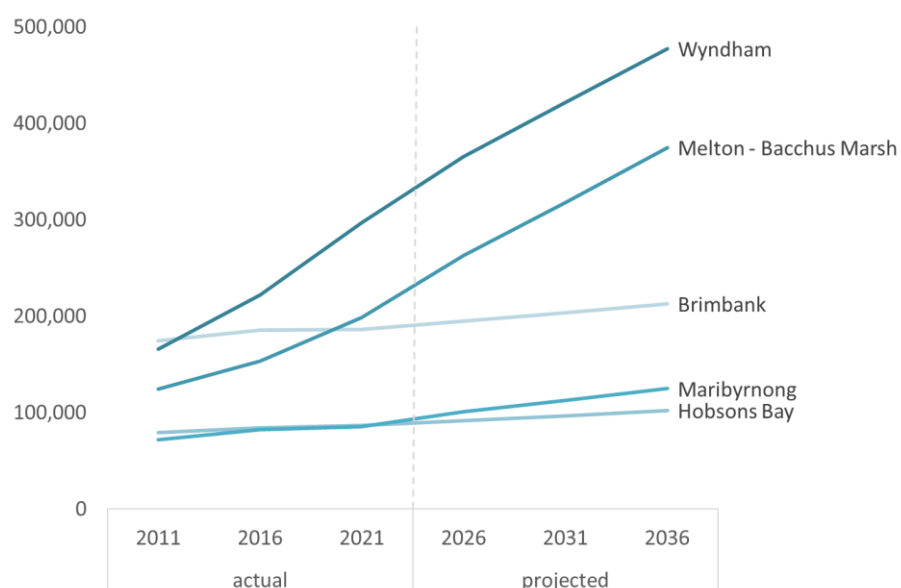


Sources: Actual – ABS Census of Population and Housing; Projected – Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) (2023) Victoria in Future (VIF) population and household projections, second release, December.

If we delve a statistical level down, as is done in Figure 3 over the page, we find that growth is unevenly distributed across Melbourne's West. The fast growing areas, not merely in Melbourne's West but in Greater Melbourne,² lie in the outer West. Wyndham and Melton - Bacchus Marsh are large and are projected to keep on growing at a rate of knots. Wyndham grew at an annual average rate of 6 percent over the decade to 2021, and is projected to keep on growing each year over the next 15 at the average rate of 3.2 percent. The equivalent rates for Melton - Bacchus Marsh are 4.8 percent and 4.3 percent.

¹ Centre of Policy Studies (COPS) (2024) WoMEDA Economic Briefing 2024.1, 30 May, p 1.

² DTP (2023) Victoria in Future 2023, p 5.

Figure 3 Actual and projected population in Melbourne's West

Sources: Actual – ABS Census of Population and Housing; Projected – DTP (2023) VIF population and household projections, second release, December.

Delving even deeper into the data, as is done in Table 1, the expectation is that there will be pockets of population growth that will be greater than the average expected for Melbourne's West. These encompass, but are more than, the current employment precincts of Footscray, Sunshine, and Werribee.

Table 1 Pockets of greater than expected average growth in Melbourne's West

Statistical Area 3	Statistical Area 2
Brimbank	Sunshine
Maribyrnong	Footscray
Melton - Bacchus Marsh	Bacchus Marsh
	Rockbank - Mount Cottrell
	Cobblebank - Strathulloh
	Fraser Rise - Plumpton
	Melton South - Weir Views
Wyndham	Werribee - West
	Manor Lakes - Quandong
	Tarneit (West) - Mount Cottrell
	Tarneit - North
	Truganina - North
	Wyndham Vale - North

Sources: DTP (2023) VIF population and household projections, second release, December.

In Section 4 your insights on a reconceptualisation of the employment precincts is invited.

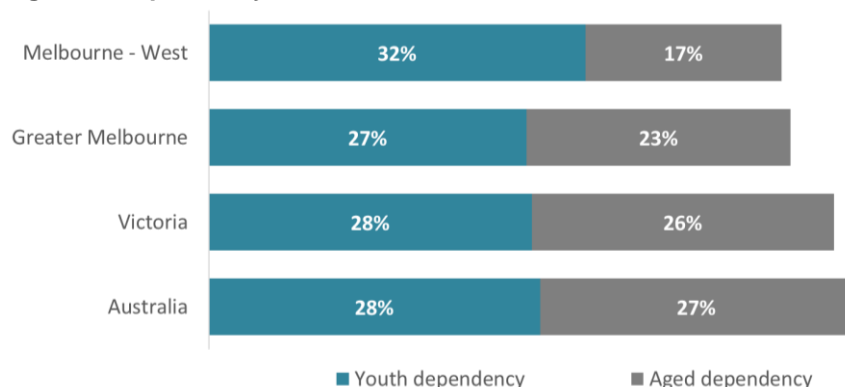
Age

The age structure of Melbourne's West is relatively young. Its median age of 34 is three years less than the same for Greater Melbourne and four years less than that for Victoria and Australia. A relatively high proportion (67.2 percent) of the population of Melbourne's West are of working age (aged between 15 and 64 years).

This makes for a low overall dependency ratio: the ratio of people of working age to the young and old who depend on them in Melbourne's West is 49 percent. This compares favourably against the dependency ratios of 50 percent, 53 percent and 55 percent respectively for Greater Melbourne, Victoria and all of Australia.

It is not just the West of Melbourne's relatively low dependency ratio that sets it apart - it is its composition. It has high youth dependency and low aged dependency. That is, while the economic burden of providing and caring for the old is low, the West of Melbourne has a particularly large burden to bear when it comes to taking care of its young. This is a point we will return to in Section 4.

Figure 4 Dependency ratios



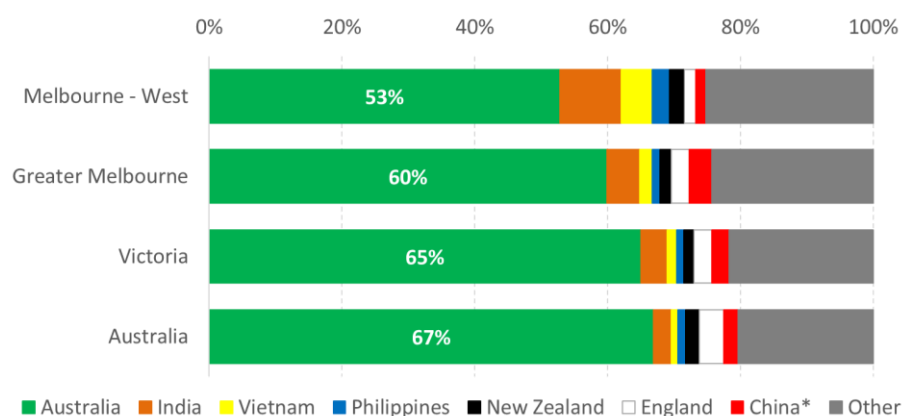
Source: Derived from ABS Census for Population and Housing data for 2021.

Cultural diversity

The population of the West of Melbourne is also more ethnically diverse than Greater Melbourne, Victoria and Australia. This is because it continues to be a popular place for migrants to settle. Melbourne's West is home to relatively large numbers of people from India, Vietnam, the Philippines and New Zealand. The opportunity is to celebrate its diversity and play to the strengths arising.

Figure 5 Cultural diversity

Country of birth



Source: Derived from ABS Census for Population and Housing data for 2021.

Workers of the West

Labour force outcomes

The West of Melbourne's favourable age structure bodes well for its residents' labour market outcomes. As of October 2024, 525,663 residents were employed – 154,473 more than in the same month in 2017. Growth has been rapid. At an annual average rate of 5.1 percent, it outpaces growth in all other regions within the Greater Melbourne area. Not to mention all of Victoria and Australia.

After a long period of relatively poor employment outcomes,³ the residents of Melbourne's West now enjoy comparatively favourable outcomes. It has a high employment to population rate and labour force participation rate, exceeding that of Greater Melbourne, Victoria and Australia. It also has an unemployment rate that is lower than that for Greater Melbourne and Victoria.

Table 2 Labour force status

Percent, October 2024

	Employment to population rate	Unemployment rate	Participation rate
Melbourne - West	68.9	4.2	71.9
Male	75.5	3.2	78.0
Female	62.2	5.3	65.7
Youth (15-24 years)	54.9	9.8	60.8
Mature aged (25 and over)	71.4	3.3	73.9
Greater Melbourne	67.0	4.5	70.1
Victoria	65.2	4.3	68.1
Australia	64.3	3.9	66.9

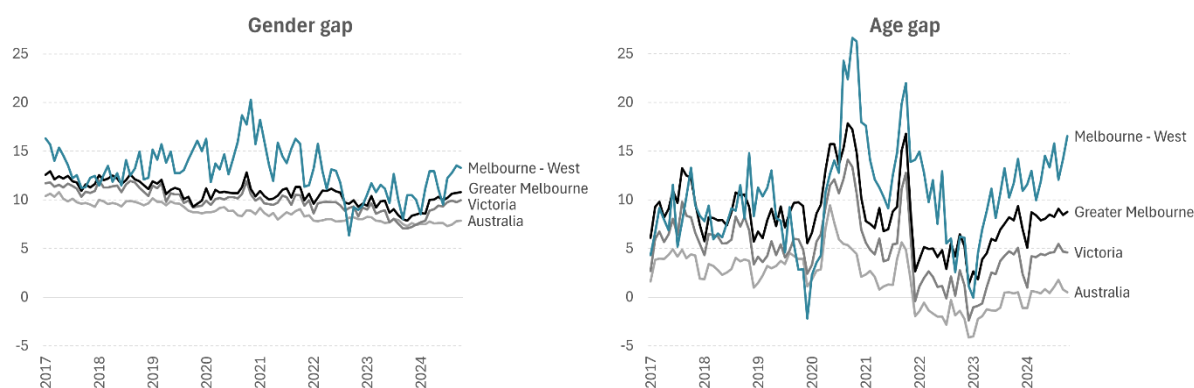
Source: ABS (2024) Detailed Labour Force Statistics, November.

Nonetheless, there are pockets of concern. Notably the gender gap – the gap between the labour market outcomes of males and females – and what we are calling here the 'age gap' – the gap between the labour market outcomes of youth (aged between 15 and 24 years) and their more mature aged peers (aged 25 years and older). Charted below are the differences for the employment to population ratios. The closer the outcome is to zero the smaller the gap.

Figure 6 'Gaps' in the employment to population ratio

Chart on left: percentage point difference between males and females

Chart on right: percentage point difference between mature aged and youth workers



Source: ABS (2024) Detailed Labour Force Statistics, November.

³ COPS *op cit*, p 3.

The gender gap in Melbourne's West is volatile. It blew out over the period of COVID-19 restrictions. This is likely reflective of the region's high youth dependency and the odds that it was mum rather than dad who stepped out of the workforce to focus on the children. Following the easing of restrictions the gap narrowed, but remains volatile, with the gap opening up again in more recent months.

The age-gap is a concern. The gap for the West of Melbourne is larger than all the comparators and is getting larger. This is suggestive of the vulnerability of younger workers. In tight labour market conditions employers are more willing to look to them to address their shortages. As conditions ease, younger aged workers are some of the first to be let go. The high rate of youth unemployment evident in Table 2 on the previous page, is responsible for pulling up the overall rate to above the city, state and country norms.

Section 4 identifies integrated childcare, education, and other family services as an area for future action in Melbourne's West. The data on the gaps conveys why this is a priority. The availability of local childcare helps safeguard against future career-damaging long breaks from employment. Education and training are a critical means of overcoming the vulnerability of young workers and narrowing the gap between them and their more mature aged peers.

Employment by industry and occupation

The 2017 Strategy anticipated that employment growth of West of Melbourne's residents would be largest in health care, retail trade, logistics, construction, accommodation and food, professional and technical services, and education and training. Much of that has proved true. However, the intervention of a global pandemic meant that growth in the retail trade and food and accommodation sectors has only now recovered sufficiently to surpass 2017 employment levels. Working in the other direction, employment in financial and insurance services has proven to be greater than anticipated.

Figure 7 Employment of West of Melbourne residents by industry



Source: ABS (2024) Detailed Labour Force Statistics, November.

How this growth translates at the occupation level is that there has been a significant increase in workers in Melbourne's West who are professionals. The associated positive is that professional roles typically employ highly educated people and pay above average salaries. The downside, which we pick up on again in the next section, is that these professional roles tend not to be local. Employment in the lesser skilled occupations has either eked backwards (labourers) or stagnated (sales workers).

Figure 8 Employment of West of Melbourne residents by major occupation



Source: ABS (2024) Detailed Labour Force Statistics, November.

Future employment of workers from the West

Employment of workers from Melbourne's West is projected to continue to grow. The latest WoMEDA Economic Briefing forecasts growth at 1.75 percent per annum over the next decade. While this outstrips the national forecast growth rate of 1.4 percent,⁴ it is not nearly fast enough given the forecast rate of population growth just discussed.

Figure 9 illustrates the industry sectors where growth is expected to occur. More than three in ten new jobs will be in health and social services, making it easily the largest growth sector. Add to this the new jobs workers from Melbourne's West are expected to take in business services,⁵ education, construction, and other services, then the ratio comes to more than four in five new jobs to be held by workers from Melbourne's West.

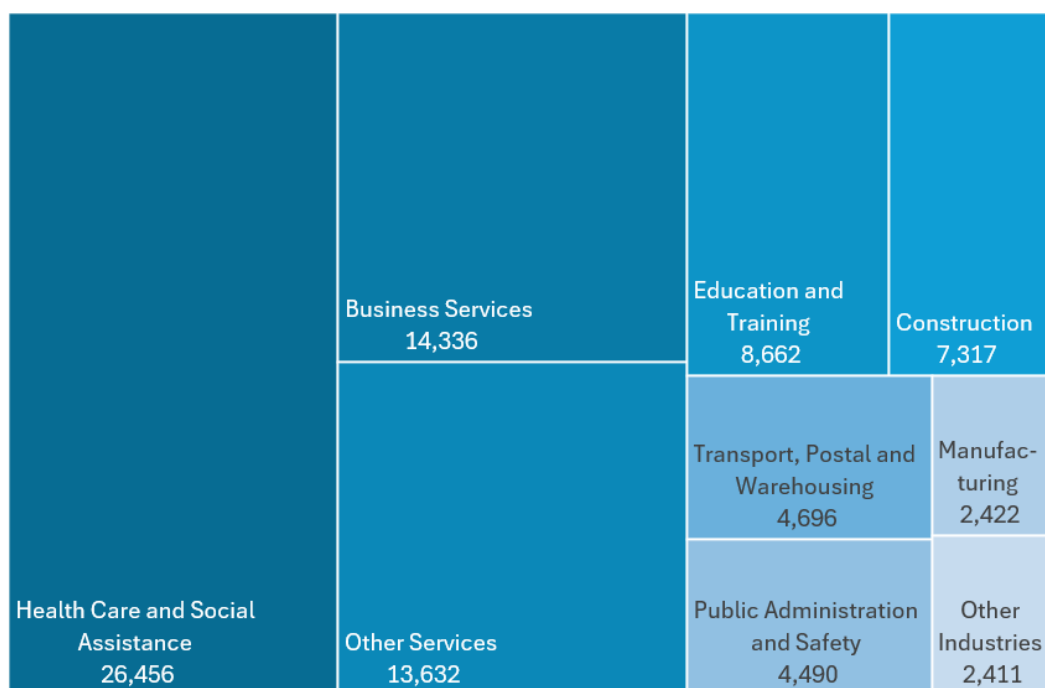
As some of the forecast growth is expected to occur in sectors with a high share of local employment – notably in the health, education and construction sectors (refer discussion in the next section and Figure 10) – this will reduce the burden of commuting for some. The modest growth expected in manufacturing and logistics also bodes well from a commuting perspective, as these are traditional sectors of the West.

For others who take jobs in the growing business services sector, unless players within the sector, such as providers of professional services and finance, relocate to the West, or grow, it will not.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 8.

⁵ Where Business Services includes Financial and Insurance Services, Information, Media and Telecommunications, Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services, Professional Services, and Administrative and Support Services.

Figure 9 Forecast employment growth in Melbourne's West
By industry 2024-2033



Source: COPS (2024) WoMEDA Economic Briefing 2024.1, 30 May, p 8.

To make full and best use of the West of Melbourne's rapidly growing talent pool there needs to be a game changing transformation, starting with planning for and investing in a more polycentric Melbourne, with employment precincts in the West.

3. Case for a More Polycentric City

Cities are large, complex dynamic systems, the evolution of which is important as policy makers seek to satisfy multiple constraints across different interest groups, including residents and the industries that employ them. Cities have the infrastructure, transport and other services necessary to support the commutes of their residents to their places of work. Investments, developments and other decisions concerning cities must take into account the quality of life of residents and other social, economic and environmental considerations.

The metropolitan area of Greater Melbourne has a choice. It can remain a monocentric city where the focus of investment is on supporting the concentration of work in its Central Business District (CBD). Or it can choose to focus its investments on supporting Greater Melbourne to become more polycentric, with multiple more spatially diverse employment precincts or clusters of economic activity.

Prior to the pandemic, motivated by the observation that most jobs growth was in Melbourne's CBD while most of the population growth lies outside of there, public discussion about planning for Greater Melbourne as a more polycentric city had gained traction. The aspiration was the need to balance population and jobs growth to achieve better social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The previous section made clear the continued rapid population growth forecast for Melbourne's West, particularly in the current employment precincts, plus in the outer West LGAs of Wyndham and Melton. Given this, together with the strong growth expected in the traditionally CBD-based industries, such as professional services and finance, discussion backed by action about turning Greater Melbourne into a more polycentric city, with employment precincts in Melbourne's West, needs to be continued as a matter of urgency.

Challenges of a monocentric city

There are social, economic, and environmental challenges associated with being a monocentric city.

High on this list is commuting. The 2017 Strategy aired concern that commuting is excessive in Melbourne's West. In 2021 just over half (52 percent) of West of Melbourne residents worked in the region,⁶ meaning that just under half commuted to locations outside of it. Melbourne's CBD is the place of employment for a significant 32 percent of West of Melbourne workers, while the remainder commute to North-West Melbourne and other parts of Victoria and Australia.⁷

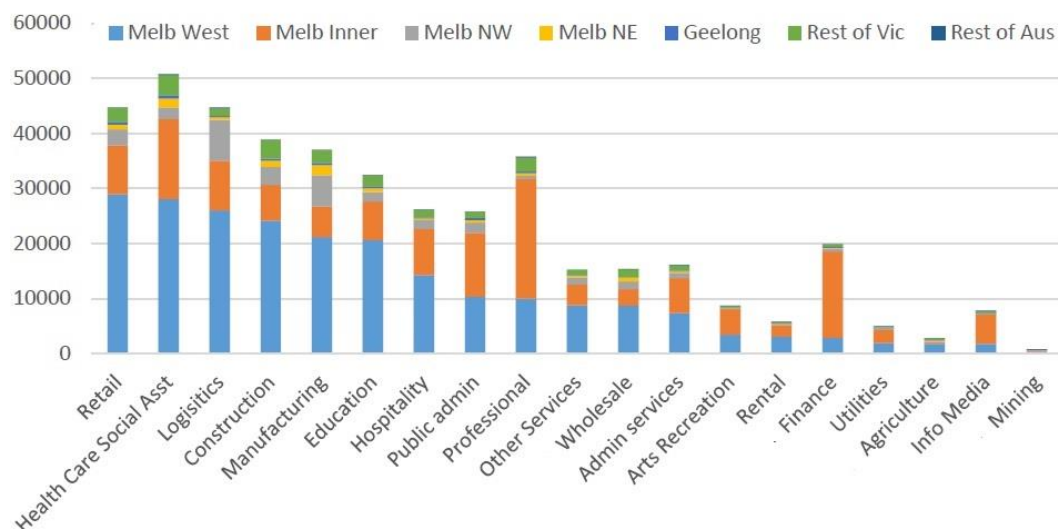
The propensity of workers of the West to travel outside of the region to their workplaces differs by industry. As is starkly evident in the chart (Figure 10) shown over the page, it is particularly high for workers in the professional services and finance industries.

The growth in employment anticipated in these industries, discussed in the previous section, suggests the likelihood that commuting to work in locations outside of Melbourne's West has increased since the Census. A countervailing force is the potential of many to work from home. However, to the extent that employers are increasingly asking or requiring workers to come into the office, there may be a weakening of this force.

⁶ Wade, Knight, Tham, Gao, Dixon, Williams, Walker and Newman (2022) *op cit*, p 8.

⁷ COPS *op cit*, p 6.

Figure 10 West of Melbourne's residents by place of work
Persons employed in 2021



Source: COPS (2024) WoMEDA Economic Briefing 2024.1, 30 May, p 7.

The flipside is that the anticipated growing need for new workers in health care and social assistance, education and training, manufacturing and logistics (as discussed in the previous section) will naturally provide more local jobs in the West.

However, even after adjusting for the opportunity to work from home and the growth in jobs in some industries in Melbourne's West, the net effect is that by 2031 the percentage of West of Melbourne residents working within the region is expected to decline to 48 per cent⁸ of a larger number and that commuting will rise.

Creating a travel plan on Google maps⁹ reveals that a worker leaving in the morning at 7.30am and driving by car from Werribee to his or her place of work in the Melbourne CBD will travel between 31 and 49 kilometres, depending on the route taken, and, depending on the traffic, take between 45 minutes and one hour and 50 minutes. Multiply that by two to account for the return journey home at the end of the day, that is up to three hours and 40 minutes a day spent on the road. It sums to 18 hours and 20 minutes if repeated five days a week. The more people travelling, the greater the congestion for workers commuting from both near and far, and the longer the time they are all spending in their cars.

This has an obvious negative impact on workers' quality of life. It also comes at a significant opportunity cost. It is time that could alternatively be spent working, with family or on other leisure time activities. Add to this the energy consumption, emissions, associated climate impacts and noise pollution, the cost is clearly high. One recent study estimates that the annual cost of congestion in Melbourne is expected to double from around \$5 billion to \$10 billion between 2020 and 2030.¹⁰

In addition to the downsides of a long commute, monocentric cities can create spatial socio-economic disadvantage. Many communities living further out from the CBD lack access to jobs that make best use of their skills, amenities and services compared to those who can afford to live closer to the city

⁸ Wade, Knight, Tham, Gao, Dixon, Williams, Walker and Newman (2022) *op cit*, p 8.

⁹ Accessed on 11 September 2024.

¹⁰ Boadle, Spiller and Perera (2023) Making Melbourne more polycentric: an economic case, Insights, SGS Economics and Planning, December.

centre.¹¹ The situation in Melbourne's West regarding the latter is discussed in greater length in the final section of this Consultation Paper.

With regards to the former, analysis by VU finds that a paradox exists in the West of Melbourne where local industry is seeking skills, but many residents commute out of the region to work.¹² And for those who, for whatever reason, do not make the commute, many wind up in jobs they are overqualified for due to the relative ease of access. They, thereby, fail to make best use of their skills and knowledge simply because there are too few suitable jobs in their area of expertise.

This suggests the wisdom of doing more to address the skills mismatch within the West, including skill development and pursuing policies and initiatives designed to attract employers to the West in industries that are aligned to residents' skills

The benefits of a polycentric city

There would be major benefits if Greater Melbourne was more polycentric.

A more polycentric city makes good economic sense. For instance, if players from the professional services and finance industries were enticed to relocate to Melbourne's West, for those who had settled for roles in the West that they were overqualified for, it would mean that more of the local residents would have better access to jobs that make more effective use of their skills. In addition to the economic stimulus this would provide, decentralisation could promote equity outcomes by improving wellbeing, inclusion, and upward mobility, and decrease marginalisation.

For those who would have otherwise travelled from the West to the CBD, it would provide them with the option of working closer to home. It would avoid the long commute and give them back time for work, family or leisure.

It would also mean shorter, faster, and safer commutes, with traffic being more evenly distributed across Greater Melbourne rather than commuters converging in the city centre.

Polycentric cities can be more resilient. Having a diverse industry base at the local level can increase a community's self-sufficiency and resilience. In the previous section we saw how the pandemic negatively impacted the labour force outcomes of females and youth in the West of Melbourne. By diversifying the industry base, the region would be less dependent on a small number of industries to generate income and wealth.

Investing in greater polycentricity

One study estimated that the transport benefits alone of the shift to a more polycentric Greater Melbourne would be approximately \$3.94 billion over the next 30 years.¹³ When you add to this the other economic and social positives just discussed, it is not hard to conclude that the total benefit of greater polycentricity would be large.

Policies and initiatives designed to support greater polycentricity, including those discussed in the next section, necessitate spending and effort by all levels of government and business. These, however, should not be seen as a cost, but rather as an investment in a more productive and sustainable future for Greater Melbourne and the West.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wade, Williams, Knight, Tham, Gao, (2022) Strategies for Skills and Jobs in Melbourne's West: Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, p 1.

¹³ Boadle, Spiller and Perera (2023) *op cit.*

Further, it should be assessed against the counterfactual, which is not doing nothing. Greater Melbourne is growing, and means will need to be found to accommodate this growth. The counterfactual is to become even more monocentric by densifying the Melbourne CBD. This would require large investments in building more housing close to the CBD so people can be closer to jobs and services. It would also necessitate considerable sums to be invested in expanding and improving inner Melbourne's public transport network. And inner Melbourne's amenities and services would need to be grown and upgraded.

This counterfactual would address aspects of the current predicament, but it is unlikely to solve the problems of a monocentric Greater Melbourne over the longer term.

The better and more sustainable approach that would yield greater returns would be to redirect funds and efforts that would otherwise be spent on reacting to densification to proactively facilitating a polycentric Greater Melbourne, with employment precincts in the West of Melbourne.

Questions:

- How can we best communicate to the private sector the huge investment opportunities in the region, for example to take advantage of the growing stock of skilled professionals? And reduce the amount of commuting they have to do to secure employment outside the region?
- What public investments need to happen to complement this effort?

4. Priority Areas

Seven priority areas for focus and action in the West of Melbourne are to:

- build on the successes in, and strengths of, the employment precincts;
- fast track transport and logistics;
- grow and diversify the housing stock;
- invest in amenities for liveability and tourism;
- offer integrated childcare, education and other family services;
- become a greener and more circular economy; and
- maintain the momentum in health.

The following addresses each in turn.

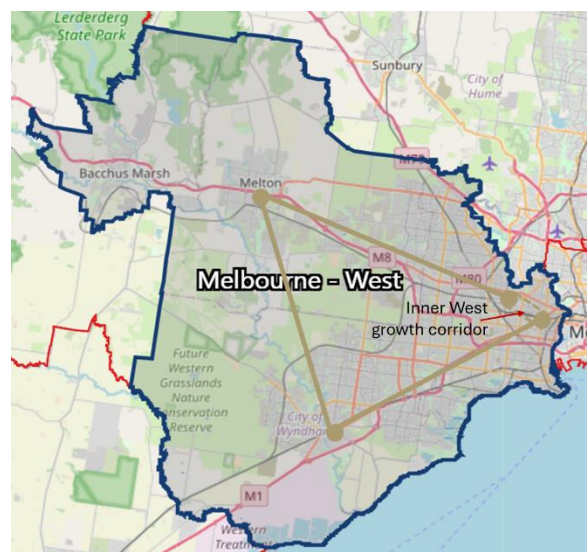
Build on the successes in, and strengths of, the employment precincts

The previous section discussed the reality where employers are concentrated in Greater Melbourne's CBD while most population growth lies outside the CBD, particularly in the West, and how this underscores the triple bottom line sense of shifting away from a monocentric city towards polycentricity. Employment precincts in Melbourne's West would avoid the long and slow commute that almost of third of residents currently make into the CBD to their places of employment, giving them back time for work, family or leisure. It would take cars off roads, reducing energy consumption, emissions and the associated climate impacts and noise pollution.

The successes in the original three employment precincts of Footscray, Sunshine and Werribee, discussed in the Appendix, are a teaser for what more could be achieved, provided momentum is maintained and new initiatives play to the strengths of each. In Footscray, the new hospital, due to open its doors in 2025, will not merely meet the needs of the West's growing population, it will create local jobs and a precinct of health and learning that is physically linked by a footbridge between the new hospital to the adjacent Victoria University. Sunshine station is flagged to become a superhub for transfers from suburban and regional services to the Melbourne Airport Rail Link (ARL) (see also below). It is anticipated to become a hive of activity and civic life, increasing Sunshine's attractiveness as a place to live work and invest. And in Werribee, the Wyndham Law Courts are on track for completion later this year and to become the largest court complex outside of the CBD. The Courts will cater to the growing communities and complexities of need in the West, and create new jobs for legal and justice professionals.

There is a logic to reconceptualising the employment precincts, where the original three employment precincts are retained, the Inner West growth corridor connecting the precincts of Footscray and Sunshine become a focus, and a new fourth precinct is added – Melton.

Construction of the Melbourne Metro 1 rail line, linking Sunshine and Footscray to the CBD, facilitates growth opportunities in the two precincts and along the corridor. For instance, if employers of professional, business and financial services located within the precincts, they would have ease of access to the growing pool of workers in the West who are skilled and experienced in the provision of these services. The same holds true for the growing health services in the two precincts.



To exploit these and other opportunities necessitates deferred transport infrastructure plans to be fast tracked, notably the Sunshine station superhub (refer next). To build on opportunities requires vision backed by action. Such as by locating within the employment precinct a branch of the NGV or something of a similar nature. As revealed in the Appendix, this is not a new idea. But it is a good idea. Particularly if the Sunshine branch plays to and celebrates the West's multicultural community, for example, by featuring artwork by overseas artists.

As the employment precinct with the largest surrounding population, it makes sense to maintain a distinctive focus on Werribee. There the priority is to finish what was started by encouraging the State Government to find the money necessary to open the Wyndham Law Courts in March 2025 as originally planned. Also high on the priority list is to extend the employment precinct's current focus on high tech education from school aged students to those motivated to continuing their learning post school. For example, VU has been scoping the establishment of an Electrotechnology Super Hub on the Werribee campus. Both are priority areas for action and are developed further in the Appendix.

As home to the iconic Werribee Mansion and an open range zoo, the precinct's attractiveness as a place to visit for work or leisure is a feature that can be built upon. New opportunities are to grow the employment precinct's capacity to host conferences, and to locate the next Disneyland or equivalent. With regard to the former, a conference centre could service more than a business purpose; it could become a focal point for cultural celebrations. Wyndham comes a close second, behind Brimbank, as the West of Melbourne LGA with the largest overseas born population share. When measured in absolute terms, it is the clear winner. With regards to the latter, in 2023 The Walt Disney Company announced plans to boost and broaden its parks and experiences, committing \$60 billion over the next decade to fund international expansion. Werribee is one of a number of contenders for a new Disneyland Australia.¹⁴ There are lots of points in its favour: it has large open spaces; it has the workforce; it has the families; and it could have the convenience.

That is, key to the success of all these opportunities is that Werribee is connected by transport links internally and to the rest of the West and the CBD. As discussed further below, the Sunshine to Werribee leg of the SRL should be one of the first to be developed.

The rapidly growing and young population of surrounding suburbs, affordability, and distance from the other employment precincts, makes the suburb of Melton an easy choice for a new fourth employment precinct. Already it is to become home to a new hospital due to open its doors in 2029. The hospital will provide closer to home care for Melbourne's outer West, create an estimated 375 new jobs during its construction, and some 2250 ongoing roles by 2035.

While State and local governments are and should continue to lead the way and capitalise on opportunities in the employment precincts, realising the employment potential within each necessitates that the barriers to private sector investment are addressed. These include many of the matters discussed below, particularly the transport infrastructure. Making progress on these matters will be necessary but not sufficient. There is an information gap and, worse still, a negative reputation that needs to be overcome.

¹⁴ Royce, H (2024) "Could Disneyland Australia Finally Be Coming Down Under?" ellaslist, 23 August (<https://www.ellaslist.com.au/articles/there-s-a-serious-plan-cooking-to-bring-disneyland-to-australia>).

Question:

- Should Melton be added as a priority employment precinct?
- Should amenities in the region (discussed further below) include for example:
 - Disneyland or something similar in Werribee to complement the Werribee Zoo and make it a major tourist attraction?
 - a branch of the NGV in Sunshine?
- How can VU's presence in Werribee be leveraged to create a modern technologically based tertiary education presence in the growing outer West of Melbourne?

Fast track transport infrastructure and logistics

Transport and logistics are central to improving conditions in Melbourne's West.

Better transport networks are needed to get the West of Melbourne's large and rapidly growing population quickly and safely to and from work, between the employment precincts, the CBD and the airport. This is essential to enabling the greater polycentricity envisaged in Section 3, supporting a better quality of life, and minimising the triple bottom line costs of congested commutes.

As home to Melbourne's airports, its port, the Western Ring Road and regional rail, it makes good economic sense to locate key logistics hubs in Melbourne's West. It has the location, the workers, the warehouses and the demand. The major missing piece of the jigsaw is freight handling.

WoMEDA's view is that with significant population growth forecast to continue for decades, the right investments early in the economic cycle will afford strong economic uplift and jobs growth. To date these opportunities have been unrealised but strong strategic intent from policy makers will enable Melbourne's West to drive economic growth across metropolitan Melbourne.

There are several projects that stand ready for delivery, and these can have a scale of economic impact beyond the West of Melbourne:

- Overcome the current stalemate in negotiations with the airport operator. State and Federal policy makers could push forward a planned delivery of the ARL by 2030, to coincide with the operation of the planned third runway and the Tullamarine airport reaching capacity.
- Prioritise a western leg of the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL); one that commenced in Point Cook through to Werribee, and then, on to Sunshine. The western leg of the SRL will create jobs growth between economic hubs, complement the ARL and support projected growth in people travelling to work across and outside the region.
- Establish timing and funding sources for the Outer Metropolitan Ring Road (OMR) - a 100 kilometre long high-speed road transport link for people and freight in Melbourne's north and west. The OMR will serve to clearly articulate medium term road transport objectives. It would stimulate business to make resource and financial resource allocations and facilitate major investment in the West.
- The proposed Western Intermodal Freight Terminal (WIFT) in Melton's Truganina has been identified by the Victorian Transport Association, as having the strongest economic uplift for Victoria in this sector, and should be a priority for the outer West. As noted, logistics is a major growth sector for the West of Melbourne and a new freight terminal is critical for continued jobs growth. The WIFT will form a key infrastructure plank for the sector across Victoria.
- Population growth in the outer West is booming and the State Government is to be congratulated for the investment in Melton Hospital. However, this community remains isolated relative to similar suburbs in major capital cities around the world. The Western Rail Plan includes the electrification of existing regional lines to Melton and Wyndham Vale, and other network capacity upgrades to deal with the significant demand on the growing western corridor. Connecting Melton to the rest of Melbourne by rail is an exciting project whose time has come.

These are practical and exciting opportunities to realise significant economic growth for the West of Melbourne; shining a spotlight on the potential of what will be Melbourne's most heavily populated region over coming decades. While WoMEDA is alert to the State and Federal Government's fiscal pressures, the cost of deferral is not zero. It is large. It is congested roads, lost time, emissions and climate impacts, inefficiencies, lost development and other private capital investment opportunities and even further delays if planning is put on ice. Time typically adds to rather than eases expenses that must ultimately be incurred.

Questions:

- Should the West of Melbourne become a major priority for some key infrastructure investments? Including, for example:
 - ARL with Sunshine as a super-hub?
 - the OMR road?
 - electrification of existing regional rail lines to Melton and Wyndham Vale?
 - the western sections of the proposed SRL?
 - a WIFT in Melton's Truganina?

Grow and diversify the housing stock

More houses are needed to accommodate the West of Melbourne's expanding population. Roughly 153,000 more houses between 2021 and 2036. That is over 10,000 a year. Almost 8,000 of that number are needed to cater for the rapidly growing populations of Melton – Bacchus Marsh and Wyndham (refer Section 2).

Table 3 Projected occupied private dwellings in Melbourne's West

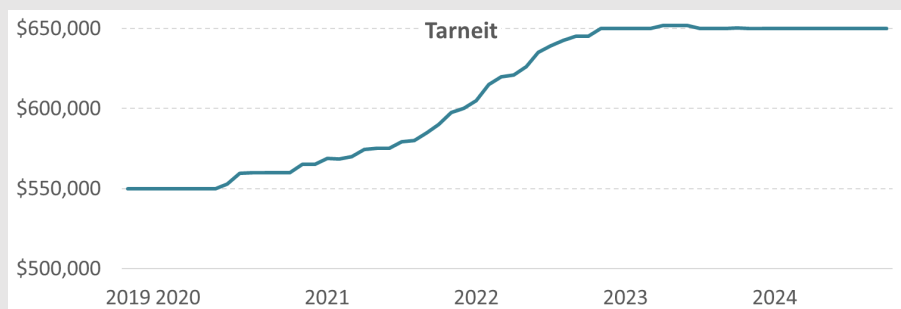
	2021	2036	Change over 15 years	Annual average
Brimbank	65,189	74,705	9,516	634
Hobsons Bay	35,161	42,478	7,317	488
Maribyrnong	36,486	53,815	17,329	1,155
Melton - Bacchus Marsh	66,183	126,681	60,498	4,033
Wyndham	97,883	156,176	58,292	3,886
West of Melbourne	300,902	453,855	152,954	10,197

Source: DTP (2023) VIF population and household projections, second release, December.

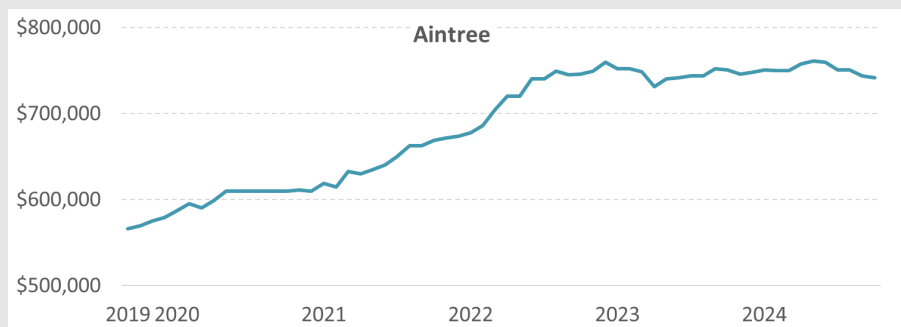
Traditionally, one of the attractions of the outer West has been its affordability, particularly to young families. However, in more recent years, the sudden population explosions in some suburbs have had the effect of driving prices up and keeping them there. Box 1 over the page shares case studies on the median house prices in two suburbs, Tarneit and Aintree, which are respectively in Wyndham and Melton.

Box 1 Median house prices in two growth suburbs in Melbourne's West

Settlement of Tarneit dates to the 1830s when the suburb was used as agricultural grazing land. Today, its classification as an Urban Growth Zone has made it a magnet for young families looking to build their first homes. The classification reduces the number of development approvals needed where an agreed plan is in place. However, high demand saw median house prices jump by \$100,000 over the period charted.



By way of contrast, Aintree was one of eleven new suburbs established in Melton in 2017 in the growth corridor between the Melton township and Caroline Springs. The promise of State Government investment in key infrastructure and transport services (discussed above), together with what was previously affordable housing, has proven to be a powerful lure to the suburb. So powerful that this young suburb's median house prices have increased at an annual average rate of close to six percent over the period charted.



Source: www.realestate.com.au/vic/

As some communities gentrify, there are growing pockets of disadvantage and homelessness. The Brimbank municipality has the highest incidence of homelessness in Greater Melbourne, with over 3,800 residents without housing, who are rough sleeping or couch surfing.¹⁵ This reflects a lack of diversity in the housing stock across Melbourne's West. That is, the West has low stocks of not merely affordable houses but insufficient social housing. Regarding the former, an estimated 1,500 to 2,500 new affordable houses are needed in Melbourne's West.

With regards to the latter, social housing, the distribution of community and public housing across Greater Melbourne is out of sync with both population growth (refer Section 2) and need. For instance, the West of Melbourne's total stock of 8,318 social houses is less than half that of Inner Melbourne. Research conducted by the Community Housing Industry Association in conjunction with the UNSW City Futures Research Centre, finds that Melbourne's West has the lowest proportion of social housing in the country.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ireland, A and Whelan, P (2023) "Melbourne's Western Suburbs on of Australia's Homeless Hotspots," The Westsider, 15 November.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Table 4 Distribution of social housing in Greater Melbourne in 2023

	Public housing	Community housing	Total social housing
Melbourne - Inner	14,824	4,306	19,130
Melbourne - Inner East	1,453	739	2,192
Melbourne - Inner South	2,501	763	3,264
Melbourne - North East	4,931	1,163	6,094
Melbourne - North West	2,960	558	3,518
Melbourne - Outer East	3,078	869	3,948
Melbourne - South East	5,782	1,026	6,808
Melbourne - West	6,107	2,211	8,318

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2024) Housing assistance in Australia 2024.

The same barriers that plague the rest of the nation impact housing availability in Melbourne's West, including high construction costs, tax and other disincentives to downsizing, unused or vacant properties, and planning constraints including zoning. Barriers that are particular to the West of Melbourne include:

- Public funding for housing projects that has favoured areas outside of Melbourne's West. The State Government has allocated \$6.3 billion to build over 13,300 affordable and social houses across Victoria under its Big Build Housing project. Around half a billion of that spend has been flagged for projects in the LGAs of Melbourne's West, covering the costs of 1,121 homes.¹⁷ When you compare this number against the estimated annual need, it falls a long way short.
- Landbanking. That is, the practice of buying land, holding on to it, and making no specific plans for its use. This has been driven sometimes by anticompetitive behaviours, sometimes by profit. It is preventing the release and rezoning of land for residential purposes.
- Lack of infrastructure and amenities.
- The cost of remediating contaminated land that could then accommodate significant housing development e.g. Maribyrnong Defence site.

With regards to the first of these barriers, an option that warrants further exploration is the establishment of an independent regional housing authority that could work with councils to develop a housing strategy for Melbourne's West and coordinate housing approvals. The second requires further research to determine the extent of the problem and whether a carrot or a stick, such as a tax, is the best way to overcome it. The third is dealt with in the discussion under the next header. The last raises questions of fiscal cost and responsibility.

Questions:

- What can be done to grow a larger and more diverse housing stock across Melbourne's West?
- Would a regional housing authority working closely with all councils of the West help to achieve that?

Invest in amenities for liveability and tourism

Planning for the burgeoning housing needs of Melbourne's West should not be done in isolation from ensuring the necessary amenities are put in place. The two go hand-in-hand. Amenities are the desirable features or facilities of an area that help provide comfort, convenience or enjoyment. They include catering for residents' transport requirements (discussed above); the childcare, education, other family and health service needs of local communities; and the aesthetic and other values of

¹⁷ Derived based on funding commitments indicated in the Homes Victoria website (<https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/whats-happening-my-area#>)

green spaces (discussed under separate headers below). These are the bare minimums for liveability.

Failure to plan for these, or uncoordinated planning across multiple levels of government, and sensitivity to political whim are plans for failure, risking dormitory suburbs and/or costly catch up. The two examples of Footscray's Joseph Road precinct and Melton's Mt Atkinson, shared in Box 2 and Box 3 illustrate what can go wrong and the less than optimal necessity of playing catch up.

Box 2 Joseph Road precinct – a brutal paddock

At the gateway to Melbourne's West, about a dozen high-rises of up to 30 storeys tower over Footscray. Footscray's Joseph Road precinct is a 15-hectare parcel bordered by the Maribyrnong River, Hopkins Street and the Footscray railway. It is devoid of trees, some of its roads remain unsealed and footpaths unfinished, the ground levels are largely lifeless, and several blocks still sit idle. In a submission to the State Government's Plan for Victoria's development road map, the Maribyrnong Council has put the precinct forward as a case study of how not to plan. It is scathing of the absence of early planning for the precinct's liveability. The Council is now doing what it can to right the wrongs: a developer levy was introduced in 2019 to fund basic infrastructure including footpaths, better roads, landscaping and street furniture.

Source: Adapted from Aubrey, S (2024) "Quiet, windswept, devoid of trees: The 'disaster' neighbourhood created by too much housing," The Age, 25 September.

Box 3 Mt Atkinson – in search of its own identity

Announced as a new precinct by the State Government in 2017, Mt Atkinson is an area favoured by young families for its abundance of relatively affordable housing lots and, unlike the Joseph Road precinct, playing fields. However, it is failing to live up to the promise of future development that had provided an added lure to families, and it does not have a separate identity.

Dealing with the latter first, Mt Atkinson is not a standalone suburb. And, because it shares a postcode with the very large Truganina, which stretches from Wyndham to Melton, uber drivers get lost, the post may get diverted to a lottery of locations, and locals may be directed to use health services that are not the closest to home.

Turning to the former, Mt Atkinson's planned future has failed to materialise. A precinct structure plan published by the Victorian Planning Authority, in addition to plans for a big housing build, pitched two new schools, a town centre and a train station. All have yet to eventuate.

The hopeful news is that in August 2024 the Melton Council requested that a report be prepared outlining the process for creating Mt Atkinson as a suburb. Residents hope this will not only clear up confusion about its location, but also increase the area's recognition so that it receives more infrastructure investment. And its mail.

Source: Adapted from Wong, L and Chwasta, M (2024) "How big is too big for a suburb? In Melbourne's outer west, Truganina is feeling growing pains," ABC News, 16 September.

Ensuring that the basic amenities are in place is not a costless exercise and local councils are fiscally constrained. Reform of the development contribution system is long overdue and should be a priority.

Beyond the basics are amenities that put Melbourne's West on the map, providing enjoyment for locals and tourists. Two opportunities have already been floated in the discussion above: a branch of the NGV in Sunshine, and a Disneyland or equivalent in Werribee. A third opportunity is to ease access to the hands-on experiences, immersive spaces and sensory learning provided by Spotwood's Scienceworks Museum. A simple way to do this might be to run shuttle buses from Williamstown's popular Commonwealth Reserve to the Museum.

Question:

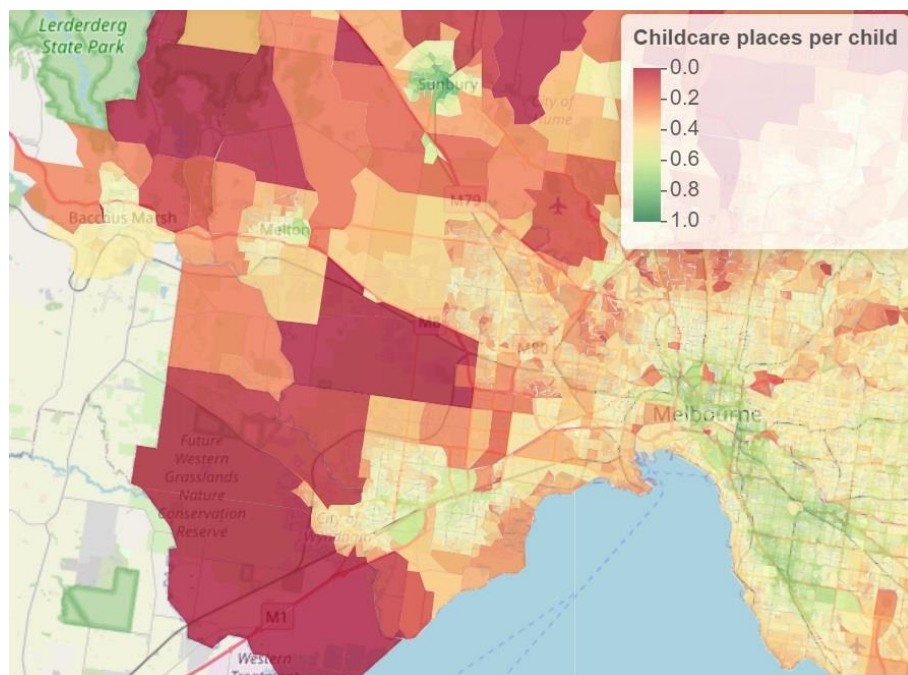
- What amenities will ensure a vibrant and thriving future for the region?

Offer integrated childcare, education and other family services

The age-structure of Melbourne's West is young. As we discovered in Section 2, at the last Census, the ratio of its population who are younger than 15 years old relative to the regions working aged population was 32 percent - a significant five percentage points ahead of the same ratio for Greater Melbourne, which includes the West.

Yet the outer West is characterised by childcare deserts.¹⁸ The heat map shared in Figure 11 finds that there is a pitiful 0.0 to 0.2 childcare places per child in Werribee, Wyndham Vale, Tarneit, Rockbank-Mount Cottrell and Bacchus Marsh.

Figure 11 Childcare deserts in Melbourne's West



Source: Mitchell Institute website (<https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/early-learning/childcare-deserts-oases-interactive-maps>).

In addition to the paucity of childcare services, young families, enticed by affordable house prices, are discovering they are stranded in dormitory suburbs, with little by way of schools and other family services.

Access to high quality, culturally respectful, affordable childcare, education and other family services is a basic right that should not be dependent on postcode. Likewise, parents' choice to work should not be constrained by the absence of these services. Yet the West of Melbourne suffers from a volatile gendered participation gap.

There is an imperative for State and local governments to work together on initiatives designed to increase the provision of integrated childcare, education and other family services.

Question:

- Should amenities in the region include greatly enhanced early childhood education and care facilities as part of an integrated early childhood, school and other family service hubs?

¹⁸ Hurley, P, Matthews, H and Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

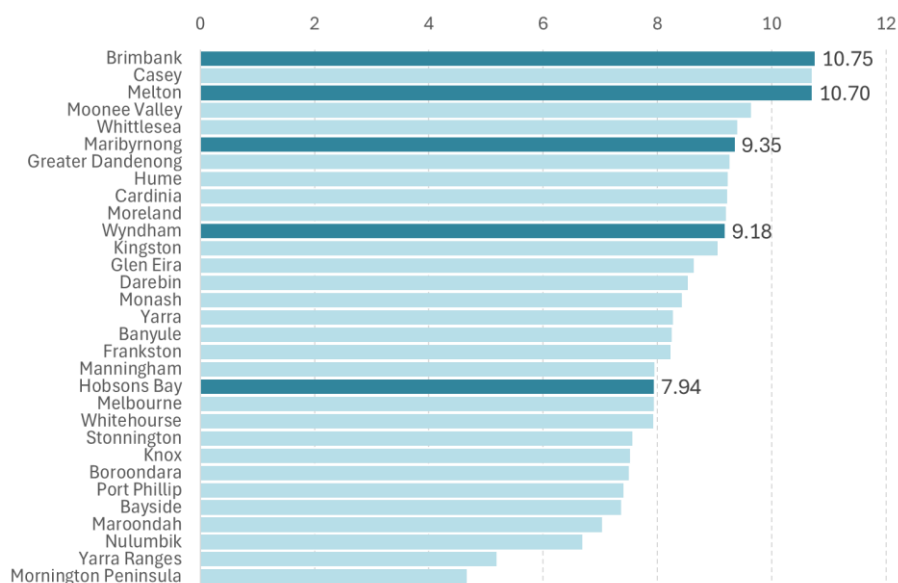
Become a more circular and greener economy

The West of Melbourne's two big claims to fame are that rapid growth means that it is destined to become Greater Melbourne's most populated region by the next Census, and that it is warmer and drier than the other regions in the area.

LGAs in the West of Melbourne rank amongst the hottest in the Greater Melbourne area. Urban heat island (UHI) readings, shared in Figure 12, indicate that the deviation of temperatures in the West lie well above non-urban baseline temperatures.

Figure 12 UHI reading by LGA

°C in 2018



Source: DTP website (<https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/Data-spatial-and-insights/melbournes-vegetation-heat-and-land-use-data#heading-6>).

Rainfall in Melbourne's West (approximately 500 mm/year) can be less than half of that in Melbourne's east (over 1000 mm/year in some suburbs).¹⁹

In the absence of change, more people means more demand for water, more energy usage, more emissions, more sewerage, more waste. While hotter and drier conditions means less water, more energy usage, more emissions and suggests the imperative of having more shade. In the absence of change, demand for water in Melbourne's West will exceed supply.

Change is clearly imperative - change to become a more circular and greener economy that aspires to zero waste and net zero emissions.

The West of Melbourne is already leading the way on some fronts. Altona North in Hobsons Bay is home to the largest plastics recycling plant in Victoria. The plant is a cross-industry initiative between the Pact Group, Cleanaway, Asahi Beverages and Coca-Cola Europacific Partners, and was established with the support of State Government funding.²⁰ It is capable of processing the equivalent of around one billion plastic bottles a year, collected from container deposit schemes and kerbside recycling. These are converted to more than 20,000 tonnes of recycled bottles and food packaging. In addition to increasing the State's recycling capacity, the facility is importantly boosting local jobs.

¹⁹ Greening The West Steering Committee (2020) Strategic plan 2020-2025.

²⁰ Pact Group (2022) "New Recycling Plant To Be Built In Melbourne's West", 18 January (<https://pactgroup.com/news/game-changing-recycling-plant-to-be-built-in-melbournes-west/>).

For water, a more circular and greener economy means looking beyond catchment dams for supply. It includes encouraging households' use of rainwater tanks, and harvesting and treating more stormwater for residential and commercial use. It also means recovering and treating used water for suitable non-drinking purposes, such as flushing toilets, washing clothes and irrigation. Treatment may involve the removal of biogases and biosolids for industrial and agricultural purposes. The iconic Western Treatment Plant in Werribee is a world leader in environmentally friendly sewage treatment, water recycling and waste minimisation. It is a strategic resource that can be leveraged.

The particular challenges of Melbourne's West together with these opportunities to augment supply suggest the sense of a regionally-focused strategy involving all levels of government and the Greater Western Water. The risk is that the urgency for action and particular needs in Melbourne's West gets lost in the current more broadly focussed strategy.²¹

Hot and dry conditions in Melbourne's West are in part due to the region's low tree canopy: its cover of just 5.5 percent starkly contrasts with the 25.9 percent cover enjoyed in Melbourne's East.²² There is a dire need to green Melbourne's West to support amenity values, help mitigate and adapt to climate change, and serve other environmental ends. Trees transform and beautify landscapes, provide shade, bring temperatures down, are carbon sinks and, through their root systems, prevent land becoming compacted.

There is already a solid basis for strategic and coordinated action in the form of the Greening the West initiative.²³ More need to come to the party. And more needs to be done. Potential areas for further exploration and action include education and awareness initiatives, planning controls, green roofs and requirements for developers to plant out streetscapes.

Question:

- The West of Melbourne will be Greater Melbourne's most populated region by the next Census and is warmer and drier than Melbourne's other regions. How can the West of Melbourne become a more circular and greener economy, building on achievements already made in this area?

Maintain the momentum in health

Sufficient, quality, integrated, accessible care, suited to the complexities of needs, and rapidly growing demands of Melbourne's West, provided locally by locals, is an unambiguous priority. Four areas of focus are to employ local, continue to provide more integrated services, strengthen care for priority populations, and continue to uplift capability and capacity in the West to provide care closer to home.

Starting from the top, the ambition should be, to the extent possible, employ local. Reasons why include the desirability that the health care workforce reflects the population it serves; that it means less people having to travel outside of the region for work (refer Section 3); and because, as we learned in Section 2, Health Care and Social Assistance is the biggest employer of workers from the West and is where most of the future growth is projected to come from.

But it is not automatic that there are sufficient people with the right skillsets. Anecdotal evidence is that the reality is that more nurses and support staff reside in the region, but less doctors. This is in part a reflection of the perceived attractiveness and affordability of residing in Melbourne's West. It is also partly due to the preference of doctors to work in both private and public care when the

²¹ Greater Melbourne Urban Water & System Strategy: Water for Life

²² DTP website (<https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/Data-spatial-and-insights/melbournes-vegetation-heat-and-land-use-data#heading-5>)

²³ Visit <https://greeningthewest.org.au/>

availability of the latter is in scarcer supply in the West of Melbourne. The hope is that as new hospitals open and health services expand this will become more of a magnet.

The huge population growth (discussed in Section 2) together with the complexities of the health care needs of residents in Melbourne's West underscore the critical importance of meeting and managing demand. This includes better connected and more integrated services – the second area of priority. There is much goodwill and engagement from hospitals, health care service providers and other players to strengthen existing partnerships.

Two important foci are the integration between health and education, and the integration with community providers to support patients to better manage their conditions at home. With regards to the first, the Sunshine Health Wellbeing and Education Precinct (SHWEP) provides a model example to build upon and mimic. The SHWEP is an established and growing location for medical, health, community, education and research services. It is centred around Sunshine Hospital and includes the Western Centre for Health Research and Education, the Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital, and other community and business healthcare and social assistance service providers. With foresight, planning and investment, best use can be made of land within the precinct, the anticipated growth in traffic volumes can be accommodated, access improved, and more than 7200 jobs by 2051 realised.²⁴

Integration with community providers to support patients to better manage their conditions at home is key to meeting the health care needs of priority populations in Melbourne's West - people with chronic disease, women and Indigenous Australians. All three are key areas of focus for governments. All benefit from tailored, accessible care close to home provided in an integrated way.

The West of Melbourne is characterised with a high level of chronic disease, rich cultural diversity and patches of low socio-economic status, which combined contribute to a higher burden of disease and complex needs. The Western Health Chronic Disease Alliance works to address chronic disease in the region through targeted research across a number of clinical disciplines designed to lead to practical improvements in models of care. Beyond the Alliance, much work is being undertaken, involving Western Health, primary and community care providers, to provide quality care in the community and in the home.

Women's health includes, but is bigger than, sexual and reproductive care. Melbourne's West is well positioned to grow and strengthen the integrated care for this priority population. The Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital in Sunshine, as well as a range of services for mental health, sexual health, custodial health, drug health and reproductive health are provided across the Western suburbs, by health and community providers. There is an opportunity to connect and build upon all these services.

While the West of Melbourne has a relatively small Indigenous population share – 0.8 percent compared to one percent for Victoria – Indigenous Australian's are over-represented in the region's health care usage metrics. For instance, Indigenous Australian's account for 1.6 percent of Western Health's Emergency Department presentations, and 1.3 percent of inpatients and outpatients.²⁵ Further, despite the overall sparseness throughout the region, there is a relatively large and fast growing Indigenous population in Melton - Bacchus Marsh: its Indigenous population share is 1.2 percent and growing on average each year by 9.9 percent.²⁶ High usage plus areas where the Indigenous population is more concentrated suggests the importance of culturally safe and accessible care. William Berrbang offers cultural support and assistance to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that attend Western Health. The healthcare provider's Aboriginal Health Cultural

²⁴ Western Health (2018) Sunshine Health Wellbeing and Education (https://www.westernhealth.org.au/AboutUs/News/Pages/Sunshine_Hospital_Health_Wellbeing_Education_Precinct.aspx).

²⁵ Western Health (2022) Aboriginal Health Cultural Safety Plan 2022-2025.

²⁶ Derived using ABS Tablebuilder.

Safety Plan reflects the wisdom of, and the intent to do more - to provide culturally safe care environments and by partnering with Indigenous agencies.²⁷

Preventative care plus more integrated care can go some, but not all the way towards easing expected demand for health services in Melbourne's West. Western Health estimates that it is serving only around 60 percent of people within its catchment, meaning that the rest need to go elsewhere. This is most often to Melbourne's CBD which, quite apart from the personal inconvenience and the pressure on health service providers in the CBD, means more cars on roads with all the attendant consequences previously discussed (above and in Section 3). Services must continue to expand.

Melton's new hospital is the first phase of what needs to be a multi-phased development. But it is in and around Brimbank and Wyndham where the demand and burden of disease continue to be high, which requires an ongoing focus on capability and capacity uplift over time.

Questions:

- Significant progress has been made in health in the region with significant investments in public hospitals. How can this momentum be maintained?
- What should the West of Melbourne become famous for in health? Promising possibilities include a community focussed health system prioritising chronic disease, women's health and Indigenous health.

²⁷ Western Health (2022) *op cit.*

Appendix: Progress in the Precincts

In order to encourage the development of local jobs, the 2017 Strategy focussed on three major hubs – Footscray, Sunshine and Werribee – and clusters of industries within each. The Table below summarises what was recommended.

Clusters in the hubs recommended in 2017

Clusters \ Hubs	Footscray	Sunshine	Werribee
Health	Use the opportunity availed by the redevelopment of the Footscray Hospital to extend the community driven	Take advantage of land adjacent to Sunshine Hospital to co-locate activities, potentially in the growth areas of lifelong care, ageing and disability	
Education	Footscray Learning Precinct to create a citywide Health, Sport and Active Living Precinct		Create an Australian Education City (AEC), co-located with VU's Werribee Campus, with a focus on technology firms at the cutting edge
Professional Services	Encourage the growth of professional services by expanding the West's light rail/tram infrastructure to better connect Footscray to the CBD		
Construction		Leverage Victoria Polytechnic to help firms upskill to scale up or adopt new technologies	
Justice		Become a hub for justice training for prison and protective services staff, social workers and paralegal	
Food Processing			Encourage food manufacturers to relocate to Werribee
Logistics			Invest in the development of higher level skills modern logistics management to support Werribee's potential to become a focal point for the local freight and logistics industry

Subsequent to the 2017 Strategy, the State Government officially classified all three locations as priority employment precincts for focused and coordinated whole of government effort.²⁸ Both WoMEDA and the State Government have revised their thinking about the opportunities within each to turn them into vibrant communities and that make best use of local skills.

The purpose of this Appendix is not to go over all the ground that has been covered before. Rather it is to suggest matters of emphasis - the successes that should be built upon and initiatives previously floated that should be started or hastened. The main body of the paper floats new initiatives not previously identified.

²⁸ Visit <https://www.vic.gov.au/priority-precincts>

Footscray

With regards to the Footscray hub, below we have elected to share one success story in the making - the new hospital, linking health and learning.

The new hospital, linking health and learning

The 2017 Strategy foresaw the need for a new Footscray Hospital to not just meet the needs of a its growing population, but to take the pressure off other hospitals catering to the community's growing demand not able to be met locally, and to create local jobs. It foresaw the opportunity to create a precinct of health and learning, by physically locating it adjacent to VU.

Modelling by COP on behalf of WoMEDA in the same year quantified the employment benefits that could be expected during the construction and operational phases and identified the benefits beyond the modelling, including better access, reduced congestion, and an improved learning experience.²⁹ The evidence was compelling.

In 2018, the State Government commenced extensive consultation on the proposed new hospital. Three years later, in 2021, it announced it had signed a contract to commence construction of a new Footscray Hospital timed for delivery in 2025. The \$1.5 billion price tag made it at the time the largest health investment in the State's history.

The new hospital will be an elective and emergency hospital with more than 500 beds catering to approximately 15,000 additional patients each year. It will become increasingly expert in the provision of treatment for patients with chronic disease and complex medical conditions. With an increase in surgical capacity and modernised operating room facilities, the hospital will be equipped to offer complicated surgical services and a range of surgical subspecialties for patients across Melbourne's West.

Importantly, the hospital will be physically linked to VU by a public footbridge across Ballarat Road. There will be a dedicated research and education space at VU, fostering opportunities for collaboration on research, education and training initiatives.

A precinct of health and learning in Footscray



Source: Victorian Health Building Authority (VHBA) (2024) New Footscray Hospital Project newsletter #9, 28 May.

The new hospital is expected to improve economic growth in Melbourne's West, including through increased productivity and employment. It will employ more than 2,000 people at peak construction,

²⁹ COPS and WoMEDA (2017) Investing in a Health Cluster in Footscray.

creating an estimated 177 new jobs, including 70 apprenticeships, traineeships and cadetships.³⁰ The new hospital is also expected to directly create over 250 new jobs once in operation and attract new investment through ancillary and specialist health services relocating to the area.³¹ Additional employment opportunities are also expected to be created with the significant expansion of clinical services at the new hospital.

Section 4 shares the opportunities to build upon this success through better integration of the health services in the West and specialisation.

Sunshine

The big opportunities in Sunshine raised in one or more of the 2017 Strategy, the 2019 WoMEDA precinct strategy,³² and the State Government's 2021 precinct opportunity statement³³ were for Sunshine to:

- differentiate itself in health;
- become a transport super-hub; and
- house a new branch of the NGV.

The following addresses each in turn.

Differentiate itself in health

In 2017, points of differentiation in health suggested as a focus for development in Sunshine were in lifelong care, ageing and disability. Two years later, it was cancer, chronic conditions and mental health issues. Section 4 develops the thinking and explores the opportunities for specialisation and necessity for growth further. Sunshine has a large health care workforce, a hospital, and land adjacent to the hospital. In other words, factors ideal to support future growth and specialisation.

Become a transport super-hub

WoMEDA's 2019 precinct strategy referred to Sunshine as the Gateway precinct, envisioning a future where the area is a superhub for transport - a vision grounded in three State Government announcements made the year prior on the ARL, SRL and the Western Rail Plan. Having examined the options for an airport link, the State Government landed on a preferred option for the link to be a branch of Melbourne's metropolitan rail network, running express from Sunshine station to a new station at Melbourne Airport. It determined that the design of the ARL would be accommodated within the proposed future SRL. Sunshine station would become a superhub for transfers from suburban and regional services to the ARL. That is, Sunshine would become a key connection point not just to the airport, but to Melbourne's CBD, and to the regions. Its connection to the regions would be strengthened by the Western Rail Plan, which includes proposals for a high capacity rail network servicing growing outer suburbs and the Geelong fast rail. This would bring more train services through Sunshine.

The State Government's precinct opportunity statement anticipates that the Sunshine station will become a hive of activity and civic life and Sunshine will become an attractive place to live, work and invest.

³⁰ VHBA (2021) New Footscray Hospital Project, Project Summary, May. Note that this projection is in line with what COPS forecast four years earlier.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² WoMEDA (2019) Sunshine Daring to be Great, Economic Development and Jobs Strategy for the Sunshine Gateway Precinct.

³³ Department of Transport (2021b) Sunshine Precinct, Precinct Opportunity Statement, November.

The promise is great. But progress has been stalled. In addition to the benefits of hastened development covered in Section 4, here the additional point of emphasis is the opportunity created for new home builds and public and private sector investments and initiatives, including establishing a branch of the NGV.

House a new branch of the National Gallery of Victoria

WoMEDA's 2019 strategy advocated locating a branch of the NGV in Sunshine, providing a stimulus to tourism and jobs within the area. Better connecting Sunshine to the airport, Melbourne CBD and its regions would give this proposition legs. But in order to give it wings there is a need to differentiate what art is displayed in the Sunshine branch from what is on show in St Kilda and Federation Square. One way to do this is to reflect what sets the area apart. With more than half (55 percent) of Brimbank's population born overseas – proportionally more than any other LGA in Melbourne's West – this provides a point of distinction worthy of celebration. The Sunshine Branch of the NGV could feature artworks by overseas artists.

If located in Sunshine's metropolitan activity centre, it could help make real the State Government's vision, articulated in its precinct opportunity statement, for the centre to become a thriving and diverse civic hub – the centre of Melbourne's West.

Werribee

For the Werribee hub, below we cover in turn, one story of stalled success - development of a legal precinct – and one item of unfinished business - investment in a higher education technological operation.

Development of a legal precinct

The prospect of a legal precinct was first recognised by WoMEDA in 2021 in its strategy to position Werribee as a satellite city,³⁴ following the State Government's \$271 million budget commitment for the development of the Wyndham Law Courts.

The Wyndham Law Courts are under construction and are on track for completion by the end of 2024.³⁵ Once finished, they will form the largest court complex outside of the CBD, bringing together the Magistrates' Court of Victoria, the Children's Court of Victoria and the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal with specialist courts and services. This includes specialist courts to hear family violence cases, which would give effect to a recommendation of the State's Royal Commission in Family Violence.³⁶ The new courts will feature 13 courtrooms, four hearing rooms, three mediation suites and 26 holding cells. They are located adjacent to a new \$45 million police complex.

The development has run to schedule. The promise is great. The Courts will cater to the growing communities and complexity of needs in the West. And they will create local jobs for legal and other justice professionals and administrative staff, advancing the State Government's aspirations for job growth in East Werribee.³⁷

³⁴ WoMEDA (2021) Werribee Precinct, A Vibrant Satellite City for Melbourne.

³⁵ <https://courts.vic.gov.au/projects/wyndham-law-courts-development>

³⁶ Recommendation 061: All family violence matters are heard and determined in specialist family violence courts.

³⁷ Department of Transport (2024) East Werribee Opportunity Statement.

This should be a success story. But it is not, yet. The plan was that the Courts would open in March 2025. However, operational funding was deferred in the State Government's 2024-25 Budget and it is unclear when Courts will be staffed and opened.³⁸

The benefits of opening the Courts are great. Locals will have an alternative to the CBD's overburdened court system for recourse, where there is already a large backlog of cases. Legal and justice professionals may be enticed to work in East Werribee. And developers may look to capitalise on the prospects of increased activity.

Investment in a higher education technological operation

The prospect of creating an Australian Education City (AEC), co-located with VU's Werribee Campus, with a focus on technology firms at the cutting edge, floated in the 2017 Strategy has not come to pass. The proposal was to attract cutting-edge international and domestic technology companies to reside within the AEC alongside VU, businesses, arts and culture and residential facilities. The distraction of a pandemic, the hesitations of potential partners, and other reasons have meant little traction has been made on a plan to turn this proposal into a reality.

Which is not the same as saying the proposal lacked merit. The underlying idea, that a significant technological university operation is needed to develop Werribee as a technological driver for Wyndham and the South-West, remains relevant.

WoMEDA's satellite city strategy determined that for this to succeed, a very significant investment of public funds in building a technology campus is required. This could involve funding to support the planned further development of VU's Werribee campus, but with the focus on STEM and on building the professional and technological capabilities of the region. On that note, over the last year, VU has been scoping the establishment of an Electrotechnology Super Hub on the Werribee Campus. Round-tables with local government, the Electrical Trade Union, state government, the Committee for Wyndham, the Gordon Institute and local Members of Parliament, have already been held and productive progress has been made.

VU's Werribee campus is already host to the Wyndham Tech School - a high-tech learning environment targeted to students from partner schools in the LGA, delivering education programs that link with local industry to deliver real world learning.

A higher education technology operation is a natural extension, recognising VU as an anchor institution, and providing students the opportunity to further their learnings post-school. It would prepare tomorrow's local workforce for the State Government's vision of a future where technological innovation drives new industries in Werribee that create opportunities for more jobs.³⁹

³⁸ Lucas, C (2024) "Court opening delayed," Star Weekly, 4 June.

³⁹ Department of Transport (2024) *op cit*.