

COUNCIL BUDGET 2026-27

Community Panel Insights Report

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In The Game Pty Ltd for
City of Greater Geelong

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01

PART ONE

Background & Purpose

Background & Purpose

Council faces the challenge of balancing rising costs with community needs and expectations. This has become more difficult in recent years as the cost of delivering services and maintaining assets continues to increase, while revenue has not increased at a similar rate.

The Panel process was designed to:

- Give residents a deep understanding of Council's financial context before asking for their input
- Create space for genuine deliberation about difficult trade-offs
- Surface the conditions under which residents would support different budget approaches
- Identify what matters most to the community when funding is limited

Scope

This year Council agreed to redesign its approach by introducing a community panel as a central part of the process. This approach enabled deeper, more informed input from the community during the development of the budget - ensuring community priorities were considered earlier and more meaningfully.

The community panel comprised 38 members, which aligns with best practice guidance recommending panels of 30–50 participants to ensure representation while remaining manageable for deliberation.

The Panel was asked to respond to the following challenge:

The City is working to create a fair budget that supports the community, even though money is tight.

What trade-offs and priorities should guide how Council manages its resources, and which types of projects or investments deliver the greatest benefit to the community when funding allows?

Engagement Approach and Role

This engagement sits at the *Involve* level of the IAP2 Spectrum (developed by the International Association for Public Participation). Participants worked directly with Council over two days to deliberate on budget trade-offs and develop informed recommendations, going beyond *Consult* (simple feedback gathering).

This report captures what the Panel heard, discussed, and recommended. It provides Council with:

- Community sentiment on key budget levers (fees, service levels, asset management, revenue opportunities)
- Trade-off principles the Panel developed for making difficult resource decisions
- Conditions for support that shift community comfort with various approaches
- Key priorities and considerations about what matters most when funding is constrained

The Panel's recommendations will inform Council's decision-making as it develops the Council Budget 2026-27, alongside broader community consultation, financial modelling, and the strategic planning processes.

The Panel's recommendations are not strict instructions or limitations, but rather a considered set of community perspectives on some of the toughest challenges Council faces this budget cycle.

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PART TWO

Executive Summary: Community Panel Decision- Making Guidelines

Executive Summary: Council Budget 2026-27 Community Panel Decision-Making Guidelines

The following five guidelines distil the Panel's recommendations into practical decision-making principles for Councillors and the organisation. Each guideline includes key considerations and questions to ask, and red flags that signal where decisions may not be aligned to community sentiment. These guidelines should be referenced any time important strategic financial decisions are being made to ensure the process and the decisions align with community needs and expectations.

Guideline 1: Evidence and Equity Considerations

When considering service reductions or fee increases, ask:

- **Is there evidence this decision will achieve the intended outcome?** Participants rejected decisions being based on assumptions, favouring a more nuanced approach.
- **Have we considered those without alternatives?** Vulnerable groups should not be disproportionately affected. Participants supported differentiated pricing and service models with protections built in for those that are particularly vulnerable to cost-of-living pressures.
- **Can this be reversed if it doesn't work?** Selling a community asset, closing a unique service, or removing specialist capability should face higher scrutiny than temporary adjustments.

Red flags: Decisions justified without usage data; cuts hitting those already disadvantaged; permanent elimination of services without considering future needs.

Guideline 2: Maintenance Over New Projects

When allocating capital or operational budgets, ask:

- **Are safety-critical infrastructure repairs addressed first?** Safety is core concern for panel members. Participants prioritised safety-critical repairs above other spending.
- **Have we maintained existing assets before building new ones?** Maintenance of existing infrastructure serving current residents should be prioritised over new facilities.
- **Does this address infrastructure equity across the region?** Older suburbs need to receive comparable service standards in line with growth areas. Participants identified geographic inequality as a key concern.

Red flags: New capital projects before addressing backlogs; expansion in growth areas while older suburbs lack basic infrastructure; aspirational projects before maintaining existing assets.

Guideline 3: Efficiency and Alternative Revenue First

When budget pressure requires more funding, ask:

- **Have we addressed operational inefficiencies first?** Participants were hesitant to pay increased fees before efficiency improvements have been demonstrated.
- **Have we explored alternative revenue streams?** Tourism, commercialising assets, advertising rights, and partnerships should be pursued before fee or rate increases.
- **Will developer contributions cover the true cost of the infrastructure required to support the growth?** Participants identified developer contributions as "not keeping pace with inflation" and were concerned that existing residents were subsidising new development.

Red flags: Fee increases without demonstrating efficiency; not exploring more commercial revenue opportunities; insufficient DCPs.

Guideline 4: Strategic Planning and Implementation

When making budget decisions, ask:

- **Does this align with the Council's long-term direction/vision?** Participants wanted to see genuine long-term thinking in investments.
- **Does this prevent future costs or just defer them?** Participants preferred decisions that prevent problems down the track versus temporary short-term fixes.
- **do we have the means to deliver?** Participants cited examples where "nothing has happened" after previous consultations, eroding confidence in strategic planning.

Red flags: Deferring maintenance to fund new projects; decisions without implementation capacity; repeating consultation without delivering on previous commitments.

Guideline 5: Transparency and Communication

When communicating budget decisions, ask:

- **Have we shared financial information clearly?** Participants requested clearer disclosure of "budgets, spending, gains, losses." Transparency alone may be insufficient without accompanying education or interpretation to build community financial literacy.
- **Has community consultation preceded the decision?** Participants felt "decisions should always be preceded by community consultation," specifically requesting input on service levels and budget allocation.
- **Have we communicated the rationale and maintained accountability?** Participants reported communication gaps, noting "there is no paper trail" in Council interactions. They observed "we may be more accepting of decisions if we have full knowledge of why."

Red flags: Decisions announced without prior consultation; financial information disclosed without explanation; communication gaps that leave no record of interactions; service provision that many residents don't know exists.

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PART THREE

Panel Design

Panel Design

Five principles guided the Panel design:

- **Informed deliberation** - Participants received financial and organisational context before deliberating on trade-offs
- **Trade-off focus** - Activities required participants to weigh competing priorities, avoiding a long list of preferences
- **Small group discussion** - Facilitated tables enabled detailed conversation
- **Individual and collective input** - Combined individual reflection with group deliberation
- **Transparency** - All materials and data was shared with participants

Overview of the Sessions

The Panel met over two full days:

Day 1 (21st March): Understanding the Landscape

The first day focused on building a shared understanding before asking for input.

Participants heard from Council officers about:

- How Council budgets work and where the constraints come from
- The current financial reality and pressures ahead
- Trade-offs around strategic and sustainable design (single-use v multi-use facilities)
- Trade-offs around revenue (fees and charges)

Day 2 (28th March): Making Choices

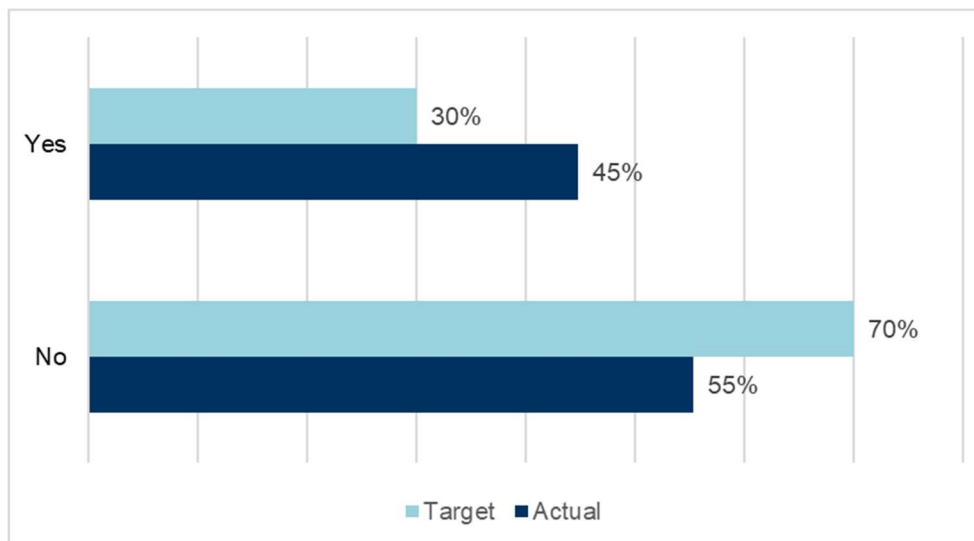
The second day shifted to deeper engagement on the toughest budget decisions:

- New revenue streams to explore
- Strategic efficiencies & service levels (reducing service levels, stopping service delivery and outsourcing/partnering)
- Asset management
- Community submissions
- Synthesising priorities across all topics

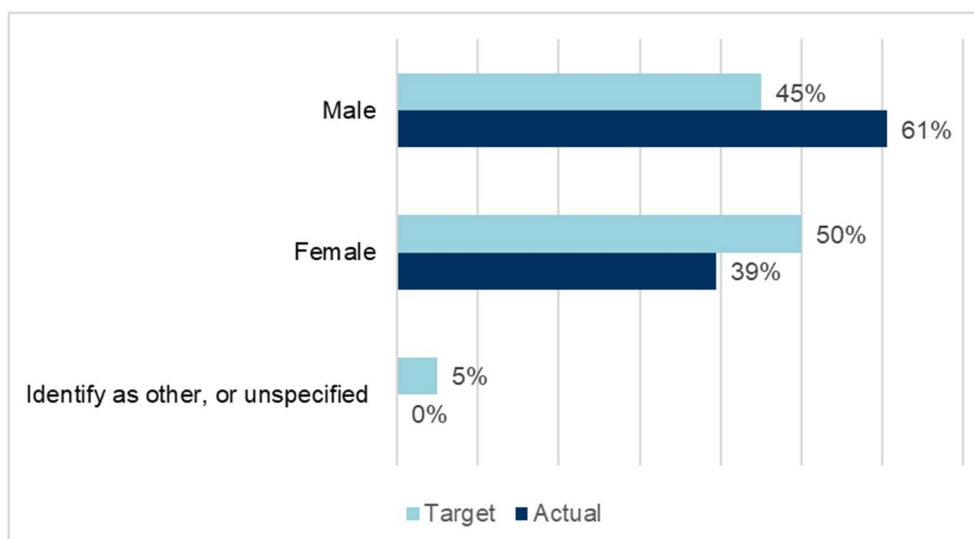
Who Participated

Community panels are a recognised best-practice approach, designed to reflect the demographic profile of the municipality and enable participants to consider complex issues, test trade-offs, and reach an informed consensus. This approach allows Council to reasonably extrapolate panel insights to the broader Greater Geelong community and incorporate a community lens into budget decision-making. To mitigate selection bias and protect the integrity of the process, participants were randomly selected within defined demographic cohorts. The final Budget Panel comprised 38 community members, consistent with best-practice panel size.

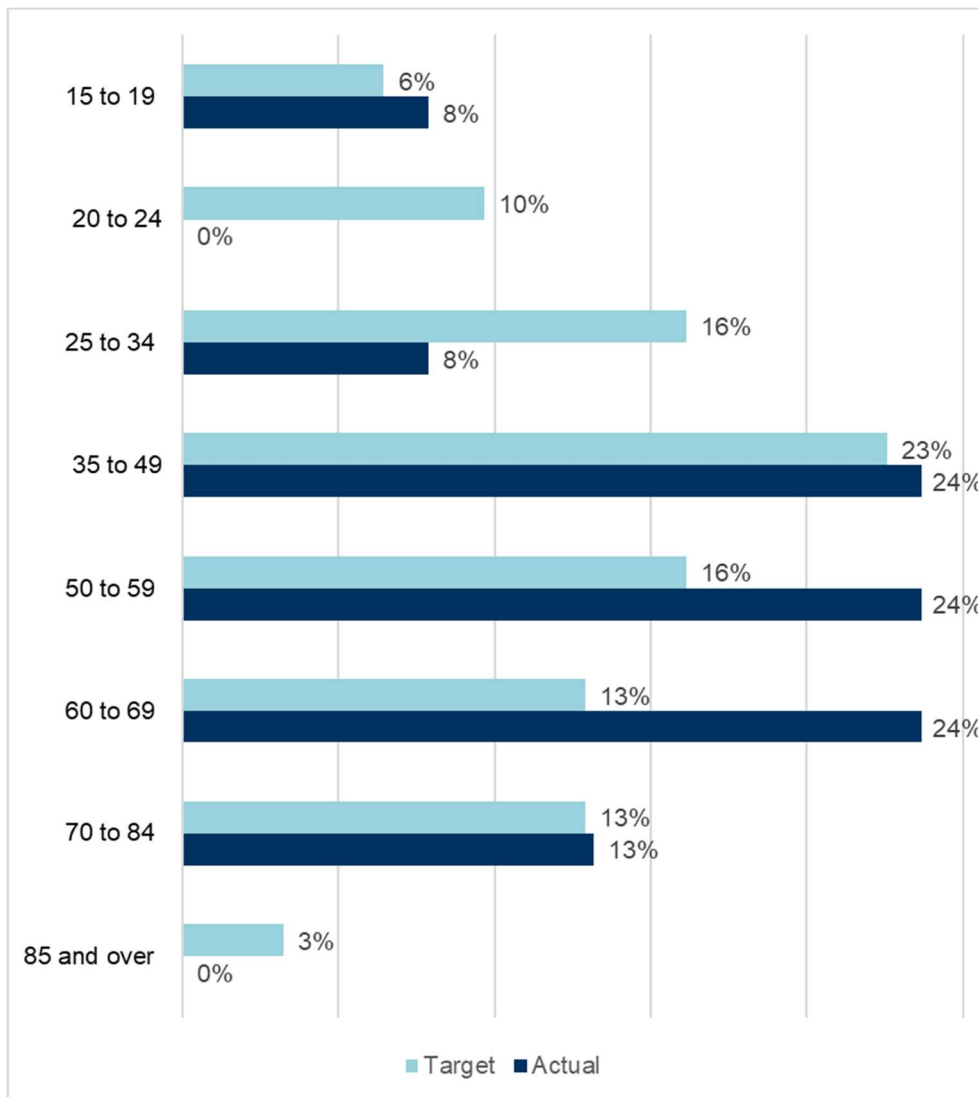
Previous Participation



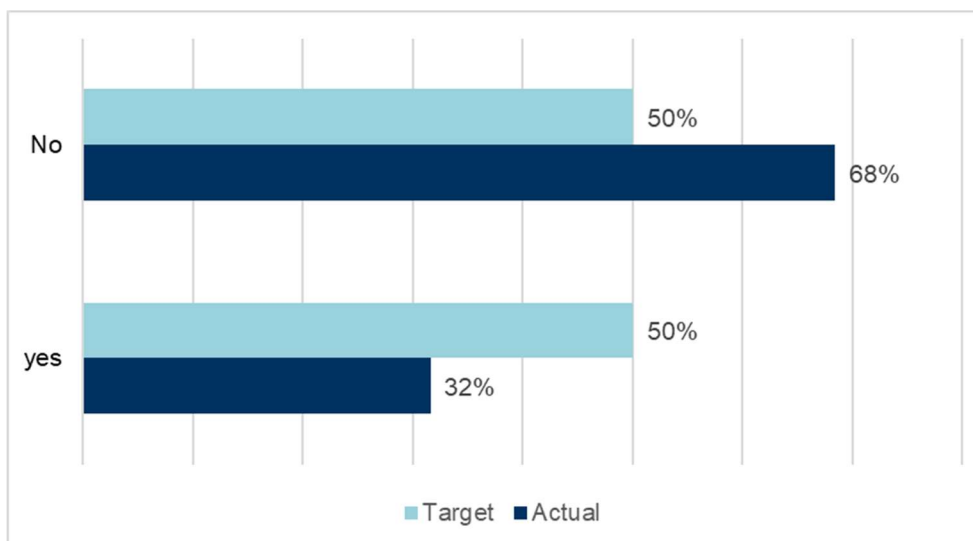
Gender



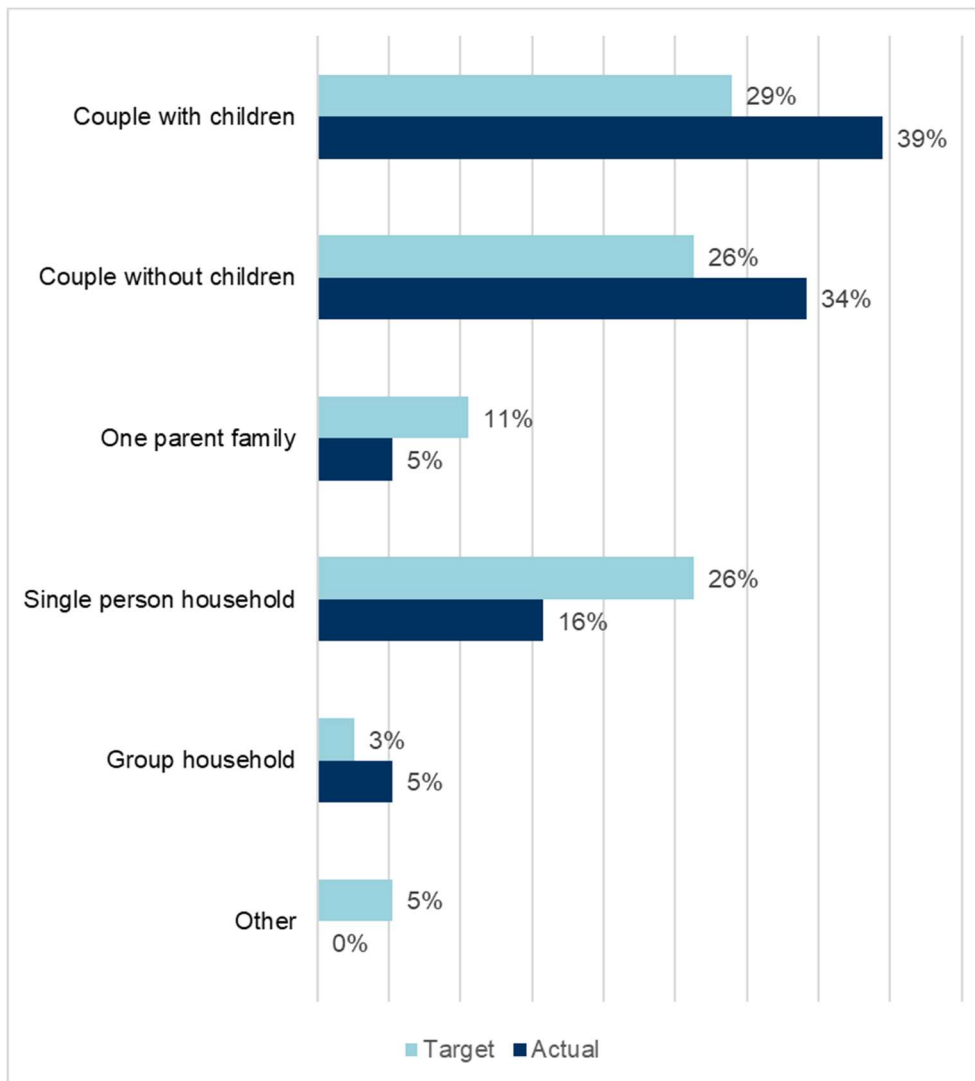
Age



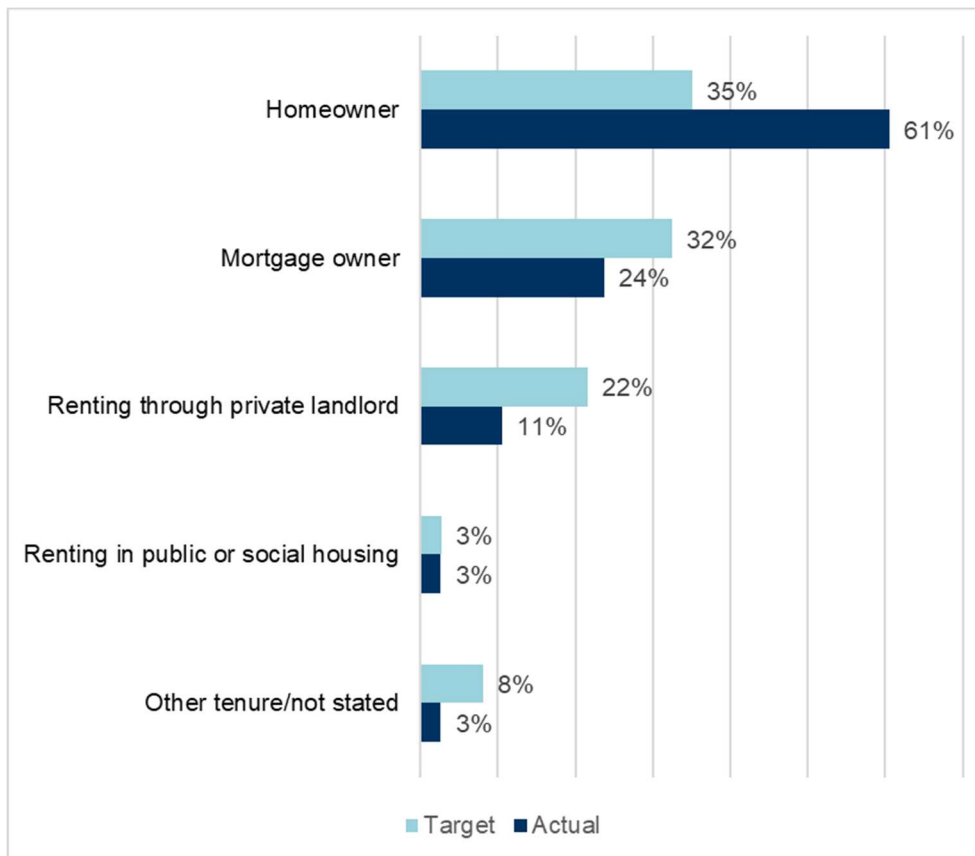
Concession Card Holders



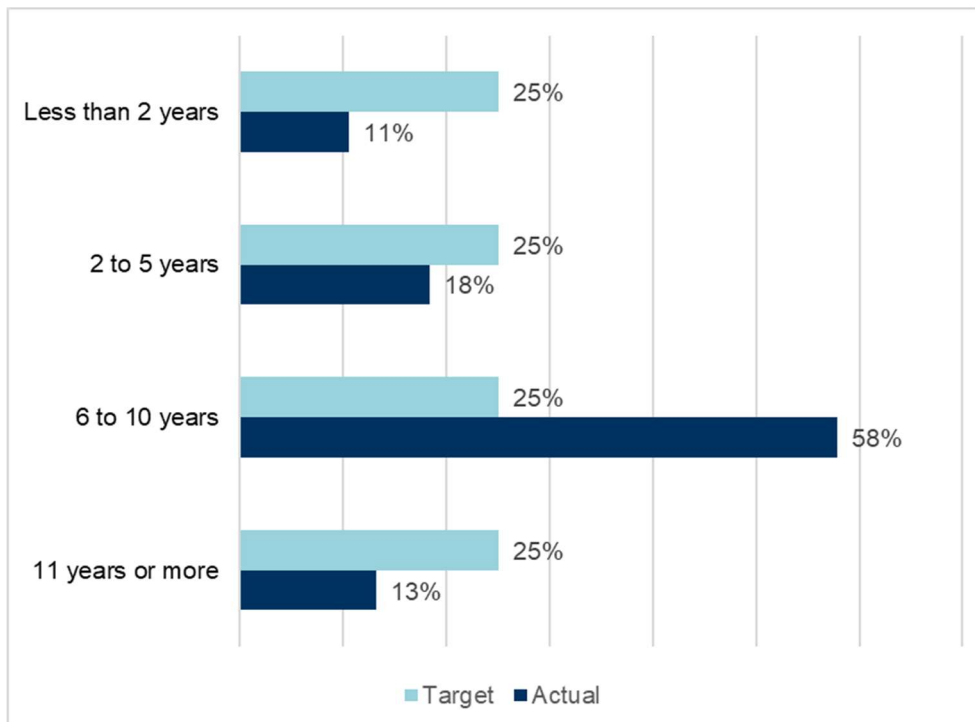
Household Type



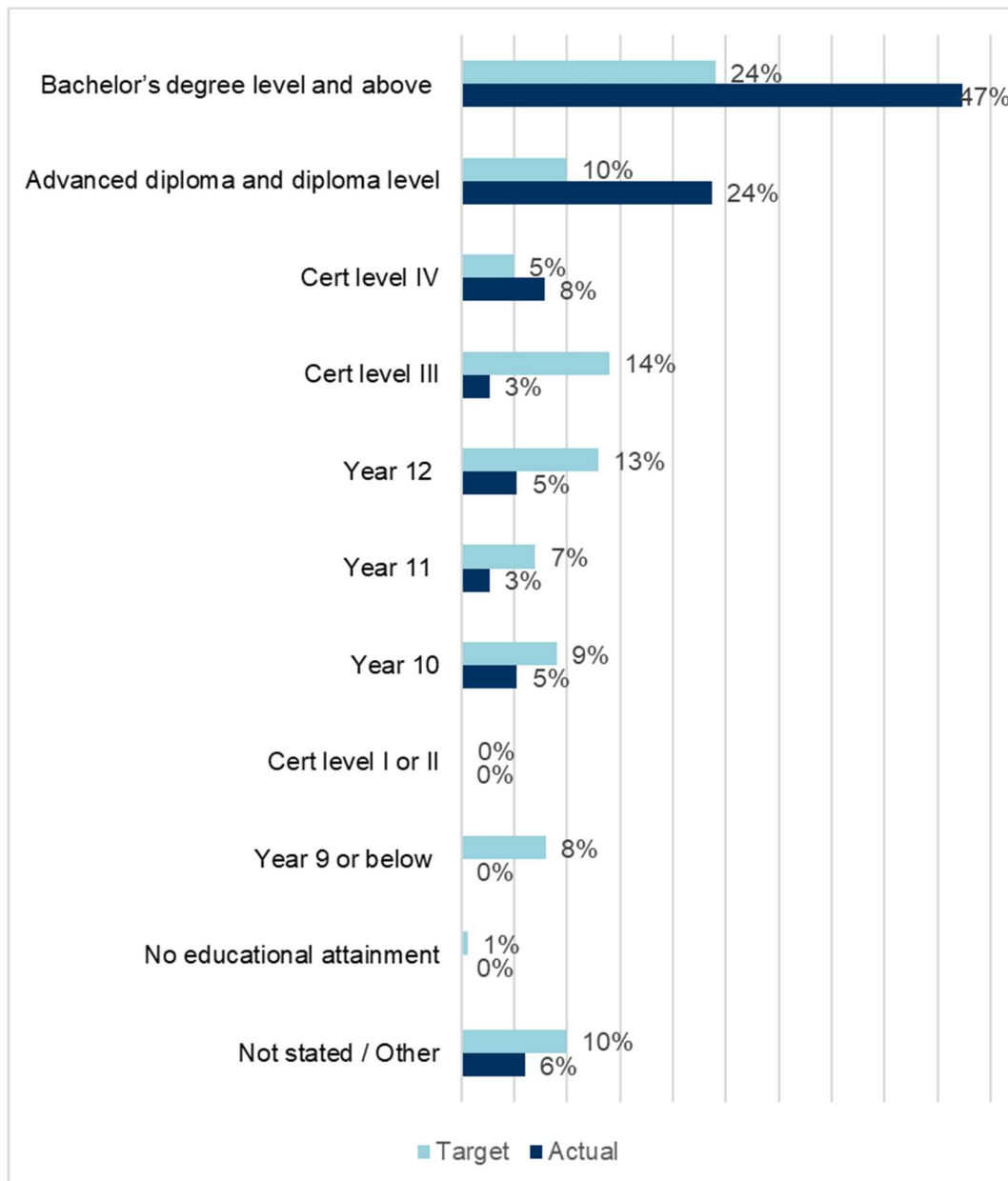
Housing Tenure



Years in City of Greater Geelong



Educational Attainment



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PART FOUR

Analysis Methodology

Analysis

The analysis drew on multiple data sources captured across the two-day Panel.

Quantitative data

- Voting results and dot allocation exercises
- Prioritisation rankings
- Traffic light assessments

Qualitative data

- Table facilitator notes from small group discussions
- Written comments on activities
- Anonymous feedback cards

Thematic Analysis Process

The qualitative data was analysed using a structured four-step thematic analysis:

1. **Identifying themes from panel discussions** - Reviewing facilitator notes, transcripts, and written materials to identify key topics, questions, and concerns raised by participants
2. **Forming initial categories from cross-cutting themes** - Grouping related themes into a manageable set of high-level categories based on the patterns emerging across different sessions and activities
3. **Extracting insights within each category** - Systematically reviewing all data sources to identify specific insights, quotes, and perspectives related to each thematic category
4. **Creating subcategories based on the insights** - Further refining each category into subcategories based on the nuances and variations in participant perspectives

This approach allowed us to move from hundreds of individual comments and observations to a structured set of findings while preserving the diversity of views expressed.

What We Heard

Each "What We Heard" section in this report follows a consistent structure:

- **What We Did:** The key questions posed to the Panel for the topic in question
- **Sentiment overview:** Quantitative snapshot of comfort levels, votes, or rankings
- **Common Themes:** What participants said, organised by theme

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PART FIVE

What We Heard

Current Revenue Streams

What We Did

We presented participants with pricing scenarios for fee-based services to explore what principles and considerations should guide Council's pricing decisions. The scenarios were designed to draw out discussion about trade-offs between revenue generation, service accessibility, economic development, and equity.

Sentiment Overview

Participants demonstrated sophisticated thinking about pricing, consistently rejecting simple "increase fees" or "keep fees low" positions. Instead, they emphasised context-dependent pricing that responds to demand, protects vulnerable users, and aligns with broader strategic objectives.

Common Themes

1. Demand-Responsive Pricing Over Uniform Pricing

The strongest consensus was that one-size-fits-all pricing fails to optimise either revenue or community outcomes. What participants want Council to consider:

- Premium pricing for high-demand services and locations
- Time-based pricing to manage capacity and maximise utilisation
- Facility-specific pricing reflecting local demand and capacity constraints
- Seasonal pricing aligned with usage patterns

2. Strategic Objectives Must Drive Pricing Decisions

Participants consistently asked "what are we trying to achieve?" before considering fee levels. What participants want Council to consider:

- **Economic development impacts** - how pricing affects business viability, visitor attraction, and economic activity, particularly in areas already under pressure
- **Health and community benefit** - recognition that some services deliver genuine value that private alternatives can't replicate
- **Unintended consequences** - pricing changes could reduce visitation, undermining the services fees we are meant to sustain
- **Essential versus discretionary services** - pricing should reflect whether services are core Council responsibilities or nice-to-haves

3. Equity Protections Are Non-Negotiable

Support for any fee changes was conditional on protecting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. What participants want Council to consider:

- Concession pricing as non-negotiable
- Targeted support for those who struggle to afford services
- Cost-of-living impacts on low-income households
- Specific vulnerable groups who rely most heavily on Council services

4. Operational Efficiency Before Price Increases

Participants wanted Council to exhaust efficiency opportunities before raising fees.

What participants want Council to consider:

- **Infrastructure cost alignment** - if a service operates one way, ensure infrastructure costs match that model
- **Seasonal operations** - whether year-round provision makes sense or if seasonal closures would be more efficient
- **Marketing and utilisation** - whether demand issues stem from awareness and accessibility rather than lack of interest
- **Alternative revenue streams** - commercial advertising, outsourcing arrangements, tiered memberships, permit systems

New Revenue Streams

What We Did

Participants brainstormed potential new revenue streams for Council, working in small groups to generate and prioritise ideas. After the brainstorming session, participants voted on which revenue streams they believed had the most potential. This was an exploratory, idea-generation activity rather than detailed feasibility assessment. It should also be noted that some of the ideas raised by the panel are not necessarily actionable by the Council due to aspects such as legislation or planning processes.

Sentiment Overview

Participants emphasised extracting value from existing assets and capabilities rather than acquiring new revenue sources requiring capital investment. Participants repeatedly emphasised "milk what we have", to leverage what Council already owns or controls before seeking new investments.

Common Themes

1. Tourism and Events as Economic Development

Participants identified tourism as economic development opportunity, not discretionary spending. What participants want Council to consider:

- Attracting visitors generates business activity, creates employment, and grows the rate base
- Waterfront activation and events that showcase Geelong
- Improving connectivity to Avalon Airport
- Tourism as investment in long-term financial sustainability

2. Commercialising Existing Assets and Facilities

Council owns substantial assets that could generate more revenue. What participants want Council to consider:

- Rental revenue from underutilised spaces in sports facilities and community halls
- Commercial partnerships that extract value from Council property
- Advertising on Council property and facilities
- Strategic use of assets for revenue generation before acquiring new assets

3. Advertising, Signage, and Media Rights

Geelong has visibility opportunities Council currently doesn't monetise. What participants want Council to consider:

- Sporting facility naming rights
- Digital signage and advertising on Council property
- Media partnerships
- Private sector routinely leverages these opportunities while Council leaves revenue on the table

4. Partnerships and Developer Contributions

Participants noted contributions "not keeping pace with inflation" and questioned why infill development generates no contributions despite representing 70% of future housing. What participants want Council to consider:

- Corporate partnerships to share costs while maintaining service quality
- Shared service arrangements with neighbouring councils for operational efficiency
- Indexing developer contributions to inflation to prevent them falling behind costs
- Extending developer contribution requirements to infill development
- Ensuring growth funds its own infrastructure rather than existing residents subsidising expansion

Strategic & Sustainable Design

What We Did

Participants examined two approaches to building and maintaining community facilities: single-use facilities (dedicated to one service) and multi-use facilities (housing multiple services under one roof). For each model, we asked participants to identify benefits and concerns, then explored what would make them more comfortable with multi-use facilities and what their deal-breakers would be.

Sentiment Overview

Participants recognised multi-use facilities as "the way of the future" and financially inevitable, but they rejected ideological preference for either single-use or multi-use facilities. The primary question is whether a facility enables intended activities at appropriate quality. Design decisions should be driven by fitness for purpose, not ideology about facility type.

Common Themes: Both Facility Types

Three themes emerged across both single-use and multi-use approaches:

- **Fit-for-purpose design is non-negotiable.** Design must enable intended use. A facility poorly suited to its purpose serves no one well, regardless of whether it's single or multi-use. Acoustics, floor surfaces, lighting, storage, and other specifications must suit activities.
- **Infrastructure must come first.** Parking, access, storage, and amenities must be adequate for intended users. Infrastructure investment must precede or accompany facility development. Infrastructure deficits create conflicts that undermine facility value.
- **Community character must be reflected.** Buildings should reflect local identity and context. Generic designs disconnected from community character were seen as less appealing.

Common Themes: Single-Use Facilities

Participants valued single-use facilities for maintaining quality standards, enabling community connection, and avoiding compromises, but worried about inefficient use of community assets and capital costs. What participants want Council to consider:

- Specialist facilities enable optimal conditions for specific activities and prevent design compromises that make spaces unsuitable for anyone
- Community connection through local identity, nostalgia, and heritage preservation matters to residents, though community value claims are contested when facilities are underutilised
- Underutilisation and higher capital costs are genuine concerns when weighed against the flexibility of adaptable spaces

Common Themes: Multi-Use Facilities

Participants valued multi-use facilities for efficient asset use and community access, but worried about quality compromises, user conflicts, and losing personalised connection. What participants want Council to consider:

- Efficient asset use and flexibility to respond to changing demographics without new capital investment
- Community connection requires intentional design. Cross-pollination of services can strengthen engagement, but risk feeling impersonal without deliberate planning for the specific needs for how spaces will be used.
- Quality compromises are acceptable only when users participate in design, compromises are understood upfront, and minimum standards are met for all uses, with specific consideration for vulnerable users
- Infrastructure adequacy (parking, storage, public transport) and centralised management are essential to prevent conflicts between competing user groups

Strategic Efficiencies & Service Levels

What We Did

Participants explored three potential approaches to managing service costs: stopping services entirely, reducing service levels, and outsourcing service delivery. For each approach, we asked participants to identify what Council should consider before making these decisions, and what concerns or hesitations they had about each approach.

Sentiment Overview

Across all three approaches, participants consistently emphasised the need for systematic evaluation rather than reactive cost-cutting. The strongest concerns centred on impacts to community relationships, support networks, and vulnerable populations.

Common Themes: Across Approaches

- **Evidence-based evaluation required.** Participants want systematic assessment using usage data, cost-benefit analysis, and community impact measures before any service changes. Decisions should not be driven by cost alone.
- **Equity concerns are paramount.** Repeated worry about disproportionate impacts on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. The question "Who is impacted most?" appeared across stopping, reducing, and outsourcing discussions.
- **Irreversibility concerns.** Decisions characterised as "short term gain long term pain" with concerns about restoring services, relationships, and community capacity once lost. Hard to restart services once stopped, difficult to bring outsourced services back in-house.

Common Themes: Reducing Service Levels

Participants would accept reductions if they protect essentials services (which should be determined in consultation with the community) and target low-impact areas, but worry about community dissatisfaction and equity impacts. What participants want Council to consider:

- Distinguish essential versus discretionary services - protect core services while trimming "nice to haves", finding sustainable levels that balance financial constraints with genuine community needs
- Target low-impact reductions where harm to community outcomes is minimal
- Community dissatisfaction is inevitable regardless of justification
- Equity impacts – reductions disproportionately affect those with fewer alternatives and create service gaps

Common Themes: Stopping Services

Participants would accept stopping services under specific conditions but worry about losing community fabric that cannot be rebuilt. What participants want Council to consider:

- **Multi-criteria evaluation before stopping** - usage levels, cost-benefit ratios, service duplication, and alignment with Council's core role, followed by structured transition management with clear communication and adequate timelines
- **Explore alternatives first** - alternative providers, community or private sector delivery, or scaling down rather than stopping entirely
- **Loss of community capacity, connections, and support networks** that extend beyond the immediate service impact, plus what happens to people who rely on the service
- **Difficulty restarting services once stopped** and erosion of trust in Council

Common Themes: Outsourcing Services

Participants would accept outsourcing if external providers genuinely deliver better value with strong accountability, but are sceptical based on past experiences. What participants want Council to consider:

- Can they actually do it better - not assumptions that outsourcing always works, but genuine evidence of higher quality or value
- Cost reality check - past experiences where outsourcing "ended up costing more than providing the service directly" plus contract lock-in concerns
- Strong accountability frameworks with Council retaining ultimate responsibility, while managing loss of control and profit-over-service conflicts
- Loss of local knowledge and community relationships that cannot be replaced by contract specifications
- Transition is managed - Adequate notice, structured planning, transparent communication about why changes are necessary and what alternatives were considered

Asset Management

What We Did

Participants reviewed asset condition data and discussed approaches to asset renewal. The data presented explored the City's asset portfolio, the age and lifecycle of different asset types, and the percentage of assets in poor/very poor condition across the different asset categories. Participants were asked to explore their view on the information presented, and how well it matches their lived experience. They also discussed the opportunities they see in the renewal of assets.

Sentiment Overview

Participants expressed scepticism about the asset condition data reflecting their own experiences. Some questioned whether "condition" ratings capture "fit-for-purpose" rather than just surface-level metrics. They also see opportunity not in chasing percentage targets but in strategic flexibility: "lifting the asset renewal % will give the allowance to spend the money on what is required".

Common Themes

What participants want Council to consider:

- Renewal as a strategic tool to unlock spending flexibility, not a target in itself - higher percentages enable Council to direct resources where needed rather than being locked into predetermined patterns
- Safety as the non-negotiable floor - "can't change the % to impact on the safety of the community" and "delaying renewal doesn't help"
- "Sweating assets" where safe and functional - footpaths, parks, playgrounds, and plant can be used beyond typical renewal cycles if fit-for-purpose, "putting that money into upgrading other assets or for future major renewals"
- Continue to exploring differing strategies for different assets – including broadening eligible asset categories rather than pursuing uniform percentage increases across all types (recognising that "can't have 10% of roads")
- Structural revenue constraints - fuel tax goes to State government, not Council, limiting capacity to fund road maintenance despite Council maintaining the roads
- Condition ratings don't always capture fit-for-purpose - drainage can be "too small" and parks can lack seating despite good condition ratings; aggregated data may mask location-specific discrepancies

06

PART SIX

Prioritisation of Community Submissions

What We Heard: Community Submissions

What We Did

Prior to the session, 128 Community Submissions were reviewed by the Council and clustered into nine thematic categories. Participants then ranked each category from 1 (highest priority) to 5 (lowest priority) and discussed what Council should consider when responding to submissions in each area.

Priority Ranking

Weighted ranking (based on participant votes):

1. Core Infrastructure & Asset Renewal - 133 points
2. Community Facilities & Sporting Infrastructure - 74 points
3. Planning, Strategy & Business Case Development - 61 points
4. Economic Development, Business & Employment - 59 points
5. Public Realm, Open Space & Place Activation - 55 points
6. Social Inclusion & Wellbeing - 47 points
7. Environment & Sustainability - 45 points
8. Arts, Culture & Creative Life - 39 points
9. Governance, Rating & Advocacy - 28 points

What Council Should Consider by Category

1. Core Infrastructure & Asset Renewal (133 points)

Participants felt core infrastructure is the non-negotiable foundation that enables everything else. The emphasis was on basics first: "very crucial ensuring basic needs for the number of increasing residents" and "focus on basics first." Infrastructure wasn't framed as the most exciting priority, but as the prerequisite for economic development, social inclusion, and community wellbeing. What participants want Council to consider:

- Infrastructure investment must scale with population growth, not lag behind it - "infrastructure backlog issues" suggest catch-up is required before new commitments
- Essential services and critical maintenance should be protected from cuts regardless of budget pressures, recognising infrastructure decisions have decades-long consequences
- Core infrastructure supports both economy and community, not just physical assets - it's the platform that enables other community aspirations

2. Community Facilities & Sporting Infrastructure (74 points)

Participants recognised existing facilities are "under pressure" and "ageing," requiring both maintenance and upgrade. However, they also questioned whether new facilities should be prioritised over maintaining existing ones, noting "cost of maintaining facilities high" and the need to "balance between new + maintaining existing." What participants want Council to consider:

- Equity in access across all demographics and locations, with better utilisation of existing spaces before building new ones
- Facilities must be accessible - community infrastructure contributes to wellbeing, and is about more than recreation
- Investment should support future community growth while maintaining current assets and maximising community use through programming

3. Planning, Strategy & Business Case Development (61 points)

Participants elevated planning beyond a technical function to a foundational principle. "Planning drives outcomes," "good planning reduces issues," and "planning must be evidence-based" suggesting that strategic planning is the mechanism for coordinating infrastructure, managing growth, and ensuring submissions align with long-term vision. What participants want Council to consider:

- Business cases should precede major commitments, not justify predetermined decisions - evidence-based planning reduces future issues and costs
- Coordinated planning across infrastructure, land use, and services needed, with strategic thinking to align individual submissions with integrated vision

4. Economic Development, Business & Employment (59 points)

Participants identified a tension between rate pressures on businesses ("local businesses shutting down / big rates") and the need for economic growth. They felt Council's role as enabler and supporter rather than direct provider, calling for Council to "reduce barriers for business" and "support business growth." What participants want Council to consider:

- Rate impacts on business viability matter - Council's role is creating conditions for business success
- Economic growth connects to community wellbeing through jobs and local employment - business sustainability matters for community resilience
- Council should view businesses as community stakeholders whose success contributes to broader wellbeing

5. Public Realm, Open Space & Place Activation (55 points)

Participants framed public spaces as infrastructure for community connection and social interaction, not optional amenity. "Public space supports community," "encourage community interaction," and "improve liveability" suggests that well-designed, accessible public realm as foundational to community life. What participants want Council to consider:

- Public space investment is community infrastructure - activation brings people together through programming and use, not just building
- Safety and accessibility determine whether spaces serve all community members, with vibrant public spaces contributing to economic activity and community identity
- Amenity improvements can transform underutilised spaces without major capital works - events and programming maximise value from existing public realm

6. Social Inclusion & Wellbeing (47 points)

Participants described wellbeing as multifaceted - encompassing mental health, social connection, quality of life, and reduced disadvantage. They emphasised "equity + inclusion," "support vulnerable people," and "access to services important" as principles for evaluating social programs. What participants want Council to consider:

- Wellbeing encompasses more than health outcomes - includes quality of life and social connection, with mental health support increasingly important
- Vulnerable populations require targeted support - inclusion requires proactive effort to reach disadvantaged groups
- Access to services must be equitable across all demographics and locations, with community programs fostering social connection contributing to broader outcomes

7. Environment & Sustainability (45 points)

Participants valued environmental protection and climate resilience but provided limited detail on specific priorities or trade-offs. Commentary emphasised long-term thinking ("consider long term environmental impact"), balancing development with protection, and embedding sustainability across Council decisions rather than treating it as standalone category. What participants want Council to consider:

- Sustainability should be embedded in all decisions, not siloed as environmental programs - climate resilience increasingly important for infrastructure planning
- Balance between environmental protection and development required, with natural assets and green space warranting protection
- Long-term environmental impact should inform near-term decisions - environmental outcomes matter alongside economic and social outcomes

8. Arts, Culture & Creative Life (39 points)

Participants recognised that "art creates vibrancy" and creative industries "bring economic benefit," positioning arts as contributing to both community identity and economic activity. However, they also noted arts as "important but not core vs infrastructure," suggesting it's valued but lower priority when resources are constrained. What participants want Council to consider:

- Creative industries contribute to economic development - infrastructure for creative work matters (artists need accessible, affordable spaces)
- Arts contribute to community identity and neighbourhood vibrancy, with cultural activity supporting wellbeing alongside economic benefit
- Balance between infrastructure basics and creative investment required - events and activation can leverage creative industries for community benefit

9. Governance, Rating & Advocacy (28 points)

Participants emphasised Council's advocacy role to State Government ("advocacy to state is important," "council should advocate for funding") alongside transparency, accountability, and community trust. Rate concerns appeared repeatedly, with tension between funding needs and ratepayer capacity. What participants want Council to consider:

- Advocacy to State Government can secure external funding and reduce rate pressure - Council's role extends beyond local service delivery to representing community interests in broader funding discussions
- Transparency in decision-making builds community trust - better engagement and communication needed alongside accountability for maintaining public trust
- Rate increases concern both households and businesses - rate fairness encompasses both level and distribution across different ratepayer groups

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PART SEVEN

Conclusion

Conclusion

The City of Greater Geelong thanks the 38 residents who gave two full days to understanding Council's budget challenges and developing informed recommendations.

Participants engaged with complex financial trade-offs, worked through competing priorities, and delivered practical guidance that will inform the Council Budget 2026-27 decisions. Their willingness to grapple with difficult choices, rather than simply state preference, demonstrates the value of genuine deliberation.

What stood out was participants' nuanced understanding of the challenges ahead. They recognised that fiscal discipline means more than cost-cutting - it's about demonstrating value through efficiency improvements, and tackling operational waste.

There was a strong call for "strategic long-term thinking", asking Council to monitor changes proactively, make tough decisions before pressures arrive, and think about future generations rather than relying on short-term solutions. And they emphasised that transparency enables acceptance of difficult decisions: *"We may be more accepting of decisions if we have full knowledge of why."*

This Panel represents a step toward more open budget processes. Participants asked for greater transparency as the foundation for working together on tough decisions. The five guidelines in this report translate their deliberations into practical questions Council can use when allocating resources, and is something that will be further developed and evolved through subsequent budget cycles.

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PART EIGHT

Appendix

Appendix

Appendix A: Current Revenue Streams Scenario 1

Parking fees in Central Geelong

Note: This is an illustrative example only and does not represent an actual Council proposal.

Council currently charges parking fees in Central Geelong on weekdays during business hours, excluding areas with free '2P' parking.

Parking fees are not linked to a specific service; they are an unrestricted own source revenue stream that can help Council keep subsidising some services, lift service levels, or invest in community infrastructure.

At the same time, parking prices influence the economy of activity centres (shopping strips and Central Geelong), so changes could affect visitation and local business trade.

Private parking operators in Central Geelong charge higher fees than Council, which raises questions about price competitiveness and what “fair” looks like.

Options & Vote Distribution

Option A			Option B		
Maintain or reduce parking fees to support economic activity			Increase parking fees to generate additional revenue		
What it means: Keep fees as they are or reduce them to encourage more people to visit and stay in commercial areas.			What it means: Increase fees to create a larger revenue stream to help subsidise user-pay services and/or contribute to future capital projects.		
Rating			Rating		
Green	Orange	Red	Green	Orange	Red
21	4	5	8	9	7

Key

Green (Acceptable)

Orange (Maybe)

Red (No Way)

Appendix B: Current Revenue Streams Scenario 2

Swim fees at Council Aquatic Centres

Note: This is an illustrative example only and does not represent an actual Council proposal.

Council operates aquatic facilities that provide casual swimming and membership access for the community.

Current pricing includes a \$9.10 casual swim and a \$16.80 weekly membership for unlimited pool use (paid by direct debit).

Use of pools varies across the year, with higher attendance during spring and summer and lower use in cooler months.

Like many leisure services, aquatic facilities are partially subsidised, with rates revenue helping cover the gap between the real cost of delivery and what users pay.

Decisions about swim fees influence access, affordability, health and wellbeing outcomes, as well as how much rates funding is available for other services or infrastructure.

Options & Vote Distribution

Option A			Option B			Option C		
Increase swim fees to optimise revenue			Maintain current fee structure (CPI increase only)			Reduce swim fees to improve access		
What it means: Increase casual and/or membership fees so users cover a greater share of the cost of providing swimming facilities.			What it means: Increase fees to create a larger revenue stream to help subsidise user-pay services and/or contribute to future capital projects.			What it means: Lower casual and/or membership fees to encourage greater use of pools and improve access for the community.		
Rating			Rating			Rating		
Green	Orange	Red	Green	Orange	Red	Green	Orange	Red
17	5	8	15	5	3	1	10	10

Key

Green (Acceptable)

Orange (Maybe)

Red (No Way)

Appendix C: Community Submission Category Prioritisation

Submission Category	1 st Ranking	2 nd Ranking	3 rd Ranking	4 th Ranking	5 th Ranking
Arts, Culture & Creative Life	0	1	6	5	7
Community Facilities & Sporting Infrastructure	4	7	3	7	3
Core Infrastructure & Asset Renewal	19	4	5	2	3
Economic Development, Business & Employment	3	7	2	4	2
Environment & Sustainability	1	5	3	5	1
Governance, Rating & Advocacy	3	1	1	1	4
Planning, Strategy & Business Case Development	1	7	5	4	5
Public Realm, Open Space & Place Activation	2	4	4	6	5
Social Inclusion & Wellbeing	2	2	7	2	4