



Submission on the Draft Waikato Regional Economic Development Strategy (May 2026)

3 June 2026

1. Introduction

Ma te whakaatu, ka mohio *By discussion, comes understanding*

Ma te mohio, ka marama *By understanding, comes light*

Ma te marama, ka matau *By light, comes wisdom*

Ma te matau, ka ora *By wisdom, comes wellbeing*

The Wellbeing Waikato Charitable Trust (Wellbeing Waikato) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Waikato Regional Economic Development Strategy.

Wellbeing Waikato undertakes research, knowledge and storytelling projects focused on community and social equity in the Waikato. The Trust was incorporated in February 2026 and continues the work started by the Waikato Wellbeing Project.

Our Vision: Our mokopuna are thriving.

Our Mission: To hear our people and transcend their lives through positive impact.

Our work illuminates the deeper stories of our regional wellbeing challenges, to awhi the real-life initiatives, people and projects imagining, creating and leading positive alternatives to the status quo. Wellbeing Waikato is a suite of integrated focus areas and projects across the region, with the common theme of listening deeply and facilitating impact.

Our focus is on understanding what it takes for Waikato whanau and households to live affordable lives of abundance. We focus on those things which are at the heart of wellbeing including affordable housing, food and energy. Those basics are only affordable when we have a thriving economy- from the sole trader to the small business to the big export firm.

They're also only affordable when the benefits of growth are available right across the region, based on the differentiated geographic, social and sectoral attributes of sub-regions, districts and communities. And they're only available when the core infrastructure needed for businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive are present- the roads, rail, water, energy, broadband, education, health, finance, port/airport and safety assets. These are the things we look to a regional economic development strategy to lead on.

We strongly support the intent to develop a shared regional direction for economic development and congratulate the council on the work done so far. Done well, such a strategy should translate economic opportunity into tangible improvements in the daily lives of people across the Waikato Region—including higher household incomes, more secure employment, stronger small businesses, and improved wellbeing outcomes for whānau and communities.

We offer our thoughts on the draft strategy in the spirit of support and encouragement, understanding the reality of taking on enormous challenges while only modestly resourced.

We are willing to discuss these thoughts further with staff, in workshops with other submitters and with your elected representatives if appropriate. We have provided a summarised set of our recommendations in **Attachment 1**.

2. Economic Development Strategies: International Best Practice

Globally, effective economic development strategies share several characteristics:

- a) Relentless focus on outcomes**
Leading regions (e.g. parts of Scandinavia, Ireland, Singapore) anchor strategies in measurable improvements in income, productivity, and inclusion—not just sector growth.
- b) Clear delivery architecture**
Successful strategies specify who does what, with real authority and accountability. Delivery units or cross-agency mechanisms are common.
- c) Fewer, sharper priorities**
High-performing regions focus on a small number of areas where they can win, rather than broad, descriptive coverage.
- d) Strong public–private alignment**
Business, iwi, and institutional actors are not stakeholders—they are co-deliverers.
- e) Explicit investment logic**
Strategies clearly state where capital (public and private) should flow and why.
- f) Continuous measurement and iteration**
Regular reporting, transparency, and willingness to adjust are standard practice.

Our feedback below is reflective of these attributes.

3. Strategy or Discussion Document?

Economic development is a challenging space from a strategic perspective. No agency “owns” economic development or has substantial command over the economy, so economic strategies constantly battle with challenges of:

- a) How will the strategy be implemented?
- b) What role does the authoring agency have in its implementation- is it significant, minor or mainly symbolic?
- c) Is there coherent and mandated implementation machinery in place to ensure that the aspirations of the strategy can be achieved?
- d) How would we know if it has made a difference (i.e. can a change in the economy be attributed to the strategy or is the environment too complex to tell)?

It is not uncommon for even well written economic strategies to lack implementation machinery and mandate, lingering on the shelf for many years, before another round of strategy development repeats the cycle. WRC should work hard to avoid this risk. The draft EDS should make clear how it positions itself in relation to these important questions, so that expectations about its relevance and effectiveness are clearly addressed up front. By doing this, a clear pathway from economic analysis to improved real-world outcomes can be articulated.

The draft contains elements of an evidence base and reflects significant analytical effort. Data around sectors and their relative strength is excellent background information, but might be best located either in an appendix or a separate technical document. For example, the location quotient charts are interesting technical information, but for most readers are unnecessarily

complex and distracting. The current structure of the document, which is analysis heavy, but somewhat lighter on direction, is more indicative of a discussion document than a fully formed strategy.

Recommendation:

1. Remove technical data into an appendix or a separate document
2. Clarify the mandating and implementation pathway for the strategy
3. Clarify how the Council's economic development governance group will link with other important economic and business leadership groups such as the Regional Public Service Commissioner and government agency regional leads, Waikato Chambers of Commerce, the Mayoral Forum, Futureproof, other local government economic development committees, Post Treaty Settlement Entities and other anchor institutions.

At its core, we believe the strategy might be strengthened by addressing two fundamental questions:

- **Audience:** who is this strategy for?
- **Action:** what are people—households, businesses, communities, and institutions—encouraged to do differently because of it?

Items 3 and 4 below discuss these further.

4. Who is this Strategy for?

The draft reads primarily as a technical document, with an implied audience of people who view economic development from an academic and institutional perspective. It is not clear who the primary audience is intended to be. For a strategy of this kind, clarity of audience is critical. Different groups need to see themselves in the strategy and understand its relevance:

- **Households and whānau:** How will this strategy improve incomes, reduce hardship, or expand opportunity?
- **Small and medium-sized businesses:** What support, opportunities, or changes should they expect?
- **Iwi and Māori economic actors:** How does this strategy enable tino rangatiratanga and economic development aspirations?
- **Infrastructure funders, providers and operators** – how are their plans going to be prioritised and facilitated?
- **Local government and agencies:** What are they expected to do differently?
- **Investors and employers:** Where should they focus effort and capital?

At present, these audiences are not clearly identified, and the expectations of each are not articulated.

Recommendation:

4. Explicitly define the intended audiences of the strategy
5. Clearly state what success looks like for each group, their role and the contribution to this strategy's success

5. What are People Being Invited to Do?

A central test of any strategy is whether it leads to changed behaviour. At present, it is not fully clear:

- What WRC and other councils will do differently
- What businesses should invest in or prioritise
- What skills or pathways individuals should pursue
- How agencies and partners should align their efforts

Without this clarity, the strategy risks having limited practical impact.

Recommendation:

6. Translate strategic priorities into clear actions for key actors:

- a) Councils
- b) Central government partners
- c) Businesses (especially SMEs)
- d) Iwi and Post Treaty Settlement Entities
- e) Infrastructure funders and providers
- f) Education and training providers
- g) Community organisations

7. Clearly identify lead roles, responsibilities, and expectations

6. From Economic Analysis to Real-World Outcomes

From a wellbeing perspective, an economic development strategy should ultimately be judged not by the sophistication of its analysis, but by its impact on:

- Household incomes and cost of living pressures
- Job quality, stability, and accessibility
- Opportunities for small and local businesses
- Inclusion and social cohesion—particularly for Māori, young people, and communities currently excluded from economic opportunity

The draft could benefit from a clearer connection between its economic analysis and these lived outcomes.

For example:

- How will identified sector strengths lead to **higher wages**?
- How will growth translate into **more secure or accessible jobs**?
- How will economic development reduce **inequality or regional disparities**?

At present, these links are implicit rather than explicit.

Recommendation:

8. Clearly connect each strategic priority to:

- Household-level outcomes (income, employment, cost of living)
- Business-level outcomes (growth, resilience, productivity)

9. Refocus the core document on these outcomes, with detailed analysis moved to an appendix

7. Absence of Measurable Wellbeing-Oriented Targets

The draft does not include clear, measurable targets. From a wellbeing perspective, this is a critical gap. Without targets, there is no way to assess whether the strategy is improving outcomes for people. While there is always risk that targets become beyond even the biggest achievable stretch, some sense of an ambitious future could help to galvanise further support for the strategy.

Recommendation:

10. Include a small number of measurable indicators and medium-term goals (e.g. 10 years) such as:
 - Median household income growth
 - Employment rates (including for priority groups)
 - Growth in small business activity
 - Productivity improvements in key sectors
 - Reduction in regional or sub-regional disparities/inequality
11. Include baselines and timeframes to be reported publicly.

8. Recognising Sub-Regional Differences

The Waikato Region is not a single, uniform community, geography or economy. Different communities face very different challenges and opportunities. A strategy that does not recognise this risks reinforcing existing inequalities and imposing unrealistic ambitions.

Recommendation:

12. Identify distinct sub-regional priorities and challenges based on economic geography
13. Ensure that interventions are tailored to local contexts
14. Explicitly consider how benefits will be distributed across communities

9. Clear Interventions and Additionality

While the draft references several projects, many appear to be already underway or committed.

This raises a key question: what is the marginal value of this strategy beyond being descriptive of existing work and what will be done differently because of this strategy? From a wellbeing perspective, this is essential. Without clear additional actions, it is difficult to see how outcomes for households and businesses will materially change.

Recommendation:

15. Work with partners and stakeholders to identify a small number of new, high net benefit and high impact interventions focused on:
 - Creating the economic infrastructure needed to grow incomes and businesses
 - Lifting incomes and productivity
 - Supporting small and local businesses
 - Strengthening workforce pathways
 - Enabling inclusive growth
16. Clearly outline:
 - Who will lead each intervention?
 - How it will be resourced?
 - What outcomes it is expected to deliver?

10. Conclusion

Wellbeing Waikato supports the development of a strong, regionally aligned economic development strategy, because that is what will make a positive and real difference to real people, whanau, hapori and businesses. Ultimately the best test of that will be how our rangatagi and mokopuna respond to our ambitions and our actions- and whether they make the Waikato their home.

The current draft provides a useful analytical foundation and WRC is to be congratulated on the considerable work and engagement undertaken to date. However, the work so far is more background than final result, requiring further development to become an effective, action-oriented strategy that improves real-life outcomes for people across the region. This does not mean the document needs to be bigger/more complex. The aim should be short and high impact.

We encourage a stronger focus on:

- Clear articulation of priorities with a minimum of technical distraction
- Clearly defining who the strategy is for
- Articulating what different actors are expected to do, in addition to the things already committed
- Linking economic priorities to tangible wellbeing outcomes in a coherent intervention logic/ theory of change
- Establishing measurable targets
- Identifying new, additional interventions that will drive change

With these improvements, the strategy has the potential to become a widely supported and meaningful tool for lifting wellbeing, strengthening communities, and supporting the long-term prosperity of the Waikato.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback. We would welcome continued engagement as the strategy is refined.



Harvey Brookes

Executive Director

Wellbeing Waikato

Attachment 1. Summary Table of Recommendations.

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7. Clearly identify lead roles, responsibilities, and expectations

From Economic Analysis to Real-World Outcomes

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11. Include baselines and timeframes to be reported publicly.

Recognising Sub-Regional Differences

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Clear Interventions and Additionality

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16. Clearly outline:

- a)** Who will lead each intervention?
- b)** How it will be resourced?
- c)** What outcomes it is expected to deliver?