

Otago,

WHAT MATTERS MOST?

He aha te mea nui?

Community Engagement Data Report

August 2026

Contents

Background	3
Engagement Methods	4
Community Feedback	6
Feedback by District:	
• Central Otago	12
• Clutha District	16
• Greater Dunedin	20
• Waitaki District	24
• Upper Clutha	28
Priority Communities Feedback	32
Next Steps	32

Acknowledgements

Otago Community Trust recognises Kā Papatipu Rūnaka o Araiteuru – being Te Rūnanga o Moeraki, Kāti Huirapa Rūnaka ki Puketeraki, and Te Rūnanga o Ōtākou – and Hokonui Rūnanga within South Otago, as primary mana whenua within our funding boundary.

Otago Community Trust wishes to thank the Otago hapori for sharing their whakaaro, time and knowledge during this consultation. The Trust is honoured to support many community groups, volunteers and not for profits in Otago and greatly values your input. Nā tō rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi – with your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive.

This consultation was undertaken in collaboration with McElrea Consulting and Great Scott Communications, who we thank for their partnership in this mahi.

Background

Otago Community Trust is a philanthropic organisation which applies its Trust funds for charitable and other purposes which are of benefit to the community.

The Trust has its origins in the Dunedin Savings Bank, established in 1864 by public spirited citizens seeking to encourage thrift within the community, and distribute surplus profits to charitable causes.

In 1988 the Government restructured the ownership of regional savings banks and gifted the ownership of the Otago Savings Bank to the community through the establishment of the Trust Bank Otago Community Trust.

The amalgamation of the regional savings banks resulted in the establishment of Trust Bank New Zealand Ltd. In the mid 1990's the Otago Community Trust as it is now known sold its shares in Trust Bank New Zealand Ltd for \$131M and invested the proceeds.

The Trust now has \$318.8M invested and since inception has granted \$230.6M into the Otago Region as at 31st March 2025. The Trust aims to make wise investment decisions that preserve the original capital for future generations as well as having an impactful grants budget each year.

In late 2025, the Trust embarked on a community engagement exercise to help inform the development of its new strategy. The Trust asked Otago communities a simple but important question: he aha te mea nui — what matters most? The response was significant, with people right across Otago sharing their time, their whakaaro, and their voices.

This report summarises the responses we received during this consultation and is intended to serve as a resource for the community.



“People and their wellbeing within the environment is the most important consideration for Otago. He tangata!”

Engagement Methods

We used a range of engagement approaches to ensure we reached as many Otago communities as possible. Methods were selected to provide a balance of wide reach into the community, as well as allowing opportunity for deeper kōrero, while providing a variety of ways to participate.

Our engagement included:

- An online survey, open from October to December 2025
- Thirteen place-based hui across the rohe, running from October to December 2025
- Two online hui in November 2025
- Engagement activity and kōrero at community events across the rohe from September 2025 to March 2026
- Volunteering and kōrero at a community dinner
- Interviews and hui with stakeholders and people and groups representative of priority communities identified in our current strategic plan. These interview and hui were conducted from December 2025 to July 2026.
- Wānaka held with manawhenua representatives of papatipu rūnaka in May 2026

These engagement opportunities were promoted to the community through social media, newspapers, community newsletters, Otago Community Trust newsletters, radio advertising and word of mouth.



Figure 1. Hui and survey advertising

The engagement generated a strong response, with broad participation across the full range of engagement channels.

Engagement Activity	Approximate number of participants
Online survey	802
Place-based and online hui	130
Community events	370
Stakeholder and priority community interviews and hui	15
Community dinner kōrero	20
TOTAL	1,337

We have also engaged with mana whenua on the development of our new strategy, including in a wānaka with representatives from Kā Papatipu Rūnaka o Araiteuru in May 2026.

For each engagement activity, our interactions were based on the following pātai:

- What feels most important to your community right now?
- Looking ahead, what opportunities do you see for your community? What challenges do you think you might face along the way?
- What support would help your community reach its goals?

In surveys and at events, respondents could select up to three responses for multiple-choice questions and identify more than one theme in open-ended responses.

Hui and interviews involved deeper kōrero; priorities, challenges and opportunities were captured from discussion and group workshops.



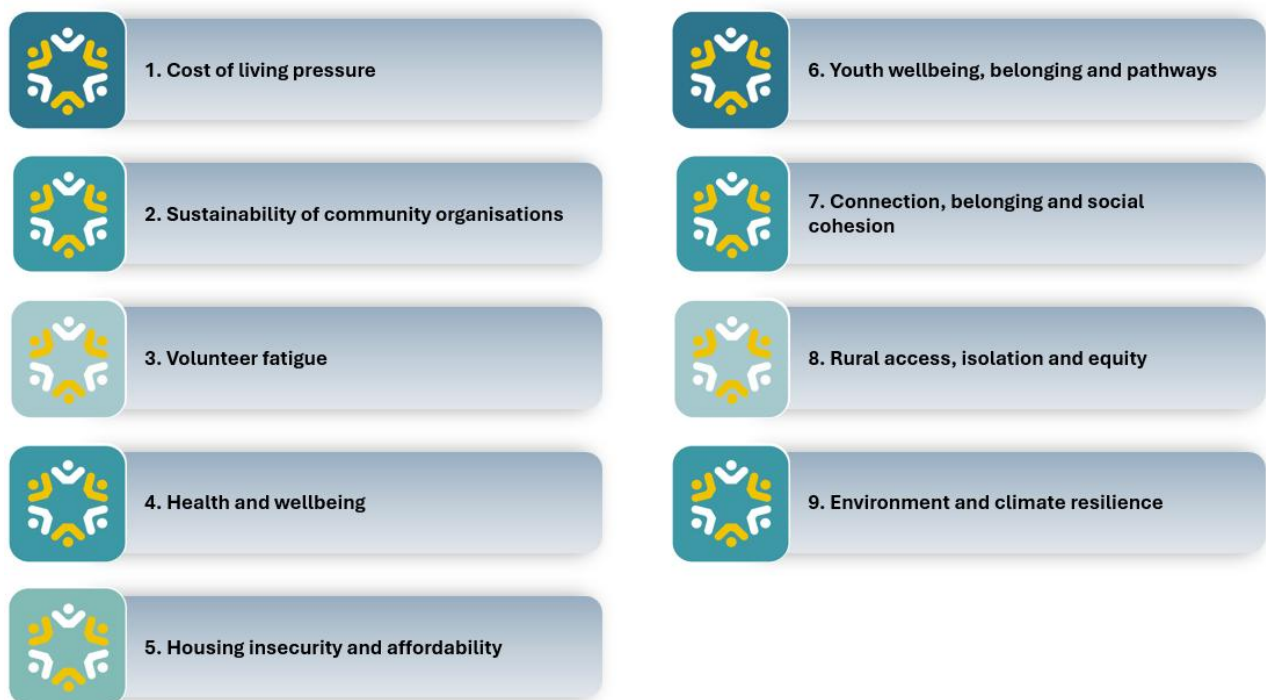
Figure 2. Survey home page and community event engagement activity

Community Feedback

Right across the rohe, we observed clear and consistent themes from the engagement data. Each district described the interconnected issues of high inflation, housing insecurity, limited access to services and the effects of these on the community. As a sector, community organisations noted concerns about sustainability due to rising operating costs and volunteer fatigue.

Despite these challenges, we also heard strong themes of opportunity and community strengths coming through our engagement. There was a strong and shared commitment to supporting tamariki and rangatahi to thrive, recognising them as a key priority for the future. Equally evident was the theme of connection: a strong desire to come together and connect as a community, and a shared pride of place.

Across Otago, respondents identified the following themes as the region's key priorities:



1. Cost of living pressure

Cost of living was consistently chosen as the top concern facing our community right now, in every district and method of engagement. Cost of living pressures have been identified as having a knock-on effect, where the impacts of high living costs reduce the ability for individuals and whānau to participate fully in community life. More specifically, respondents identified the effects of high living costs as:

- Limited ability to volunteer, due to whānau requiring two full-time incomes to keep up with household costs
- Inability to afford costs associated with participation in community activities, such as sport
- Rising inflation outpacing funding for community organisations
- Financial stress affecting mental health and wellbeing

“The cost of living is putting pressure on people so they can't afford to eat well or see a doctor when they need to. People can't afford to participate in community events if they cost money, so they aren't connecting with others as much as they would like to, which in turn affects their health and wellbeing.”

2. Sustainability of community organisations

Sustainability of community organisations was a repeated concern, across different community sectors and districts. The viability of the sector and organisations are impacted by:

- Increasing operational costs
- Difficulty accessing operational funding
- Reliance on an ageing volunteer workforce
- Decreased capacity for service delivery due to increased time spent on administrative tasks and fundraising
- Difficulty retaining or employing skilled staff

“Our community sector contributes significantly to community wellbeing yet pressures are rising as funding stalls or declines, both nationally and locally. Burnout is increasing, volunteer workloads are heavier, and some organisations may close or scale back, leaving much potential work unrealised due to limited resources.”

3. Volunteer fatigue

The issue of volunteer fatigue or burnout was more prevalent in smaller communities, due to a small pool of available volunteers and reduced access to services. The causes of volunteer fatigue are captured as:

- Reliance on a small workforce of ageing volunteers
- Difficulty recruiting new volunteers to take on day to day tasks, and volunteers with governance, finance and compliance skills

- Increasing compliance and liability burdens being placed on volunteers in leadership and governance roles
- Volunteers increasingly bearing the cost of fuel, travel and logistics

“Our community in the Waitaki is awesome but stretched. Lots of vibrant things happening in arts, culture, sports, recreation, education, heritage and more. Passionate groups, lots of volunteers but often the same people assisting multiple groups.”

4. Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing was recognised as an issue that is strongly influenced by other pressures in the community. Across the rohe, participants described:

- Long distances and high travel costs to access healthcare
- Access barriers such as GP shortages, gaps in after hours care and mental health services
- Growing demand for services linked to ageing population, increased need for mental health support and population growth outpacing infrastructure
- Lack of preventative services, and community groups increasingly filling the gaps where services are falling short
- Isolation and lack of connection contributing to poorer wellbeing

“Access to healthcare is an issue from Central Otago. Almost all treatments must now be paid for privately. Each time we hear of new medical facilities coming its private only.”

5. Housing insecurity and affordability

Similar to cost of living, housing is seen as an issue that underpins overall wellbeing. While specific housing pressures varied between districts around the region, housing insecurity was a persistent theme across all methods of engagement. Specific feedback related to housing included:

- Severe housing shortages across the board, particularly for rural and seasonal workers
- Poor quality of housing, or available housing stock is not suited to community needs
- Unaffordable, for both purchasing a home and renting
- Rising homelessness, hidden homelessness and overcrowding

“People are becoming unwell because of not having affordable, safe, healthy housing, and they are not able to get well because of the same reasons.”

6. Youth wellbeing, belonging and pathways

Tamariki and rangatahi were consistently recognised as a key demographic across the rohe, with many respondents describing the challenges our young people are facing. Supporting youth was seen as having a good social return on investment, with specific opportunities often related to helping rangatahi stay connected to place:

- Affordable housing for young families
- Pathways for employment and training for rangatahi
- Youth mental health and wellbeing support, particularly focused on prevention
- Opportunities for connection, such as participation in sports, arts and other community activities
- Safe spaces for youth to connect, such as community hubs

“Rangatahi need our acceptance and support to be healthy, strong, educated and at the core of our community. We should do what we do for them in the first instance, listen to their voices, step back and support them to lead.”

7. Connection, belonging and social cohesion

Community connections and social cohesion were repeatedly identified as a cornerstone of community wellbeing. Respondents described activities and opportunities that would provide community connection but noted that challenges such as high living costs and housing insecurity were barriers to connection. The key opportunities for supporting connection are captured as follows:

- Supporting participation in community activities that encourage connection, such as sports, arts and cultural events
- Investment in community facilities; both new facilities and improving the quality of existing facilities
- Paid administration roles to manage community facilities; to improve coordination and reduce volunteer fatigue
- Connecting community organisations to share resources and learnings

“Connection through community groups (sporting, cultural etc). We know if people feel connected then they have better mental health, if they have better mental health, they have better physical health, can learn, can work, can give back to their community. But lack of volunteers, user pays in the cost of living crisis, mean people don’t connect with their community.”

8. Rural access, isolation and equity

The centralisation of services and urban based decision making were identified as key drivers of rural inequity. The impacts of centralisation can be seen in reduced or inconsistent access to services, social and service gaps and increased isolation. For community organisations, difficulty recruiting staff and the logistics of providing services rurally further exacerbates rising operational costs. Opportunities for reducing rural inequity were identified by respondents below:

- Low cost transport options to reduce isolation
- Support for community organisations with costs related to service delivery across rural communities
- Investing in facilities and opportunities that support mental wellbeing and connection
- Disaster preparedness, to support communities who may become isolated or without services during natural disasters

“Our biggest barriers continue to be isolation and distance. Rural living means long travel times for essential services, which disproportionately affects our elderly, young families, and those facing financial or transport constraints. Recruiting and retaining health, social service, and wellbeing providers is an ongoing difficulty. Ageing infrastructure, increasing climate and weather pressures, and limited local services all add to vulnerability.”

9. Environment and climate resilience

Environmental stewardship was a key theme, with many respondents recognising the fragility of our natural environment and expressing a desire to protect the environment for future generations. The link between environment and wellbeing was noted, with suggestions for support encompassing a range of community initiatives:

- Biodiversity and protecting our natural environment
- Pest management, such as predator trapping and invasive plant species eradication

- Food resilience, such as community gardens
- Waste minimisation and sustainability initiatives
- Disaster preparedness

“As a community we need to work together to bring back environmental biodiversity, sustainability and health. When we have a healthy environment, our own health improves.”

What support would help your community reach its goals?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, funding came up a lot! Participants often identified operational and/or multi-year funding as funding solutions that would support the sustainability of community organisations.

In addition to funding, there was strong appetite for assistance with promoting community activities, aiding collaboration between groups and supporting organisational capability. More specifically, the ability of the Trust to act as a connector was recognised; to facilitate bringing together groups of similar kaupapa and/or organisations across sectors to share learnings. Capability was also named as an area for support, with many groups describing the need for assistance with upskilling, long term planning and volunteer support.

“Funding is always going to be the first response. But public awareness can also be very useful to organisations - can help them connect into others doing similar work or connect to people who believe in their cause and can help support them (financially or otherwise). We don't know about the good things happening in our communities if we haven't heard about them. I think hearing success stories can also give others hope and possibly the motivation they need to do something great or contribute in some way.”

In the next section of this report, we look more closely at each of the six districts in the Trust’s funding region: Central Otago, Clutha, Greater Dunedin, South Otago, Upper Clutha and Waitaki.

Central Otago



Place-based hui in Central Otago were held in Alexandra, Roxburgh, Cromwell and Maniototo.

Across the district, communities described an increasingly diverse population, a unique natural environment and capable volunteer-led organisations. These strengths continue to support communities as they respond to shared challenges, including the cost of living, housing, access to health services, volunteer capacity, and infrastructure keeping pace with the growing population.

“The challenges we face will increase as our population grows. Strain on infrastructure, accessible/affordable housing, greater demand on the environment, greater pressure on our already struggling health system, schools and elderly care facilities.”

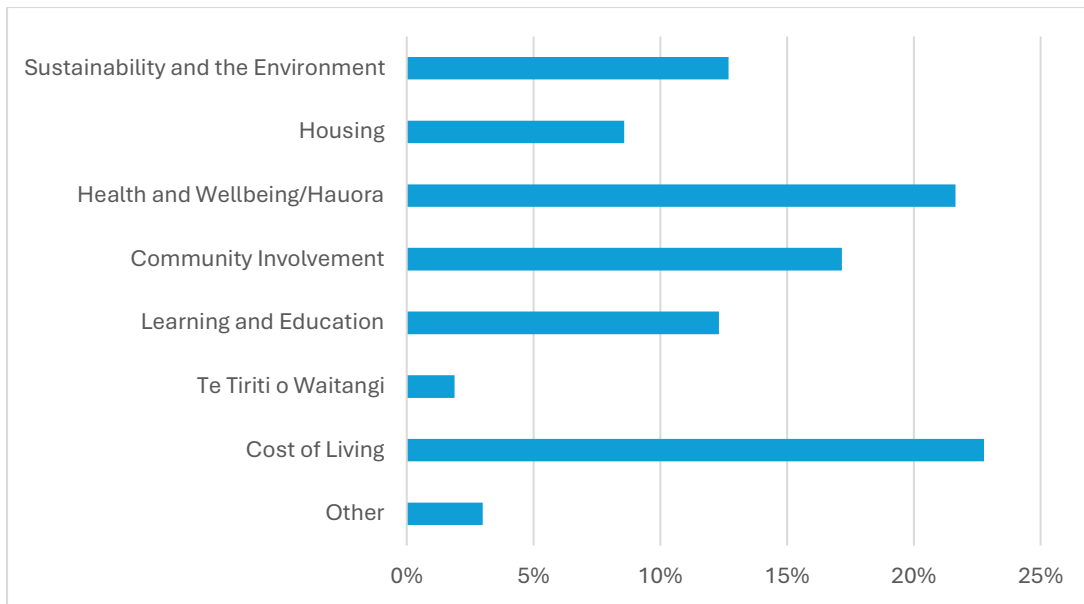
Overall, the top priorities in Central Otago were identified as follows:



Cost of living pressure and high housing costs were identified as key issues, reducing the capacity of whānau to volunteer and participate in community life.

What feels most important for your community right now?

Respondents identified the connections between the cost of living, healthcare access, housing affordability, and community wellbeing. They also demonstrated a strong commitment to protecting the environment, planning for sustainable growth, and providing opportunities for community connection.

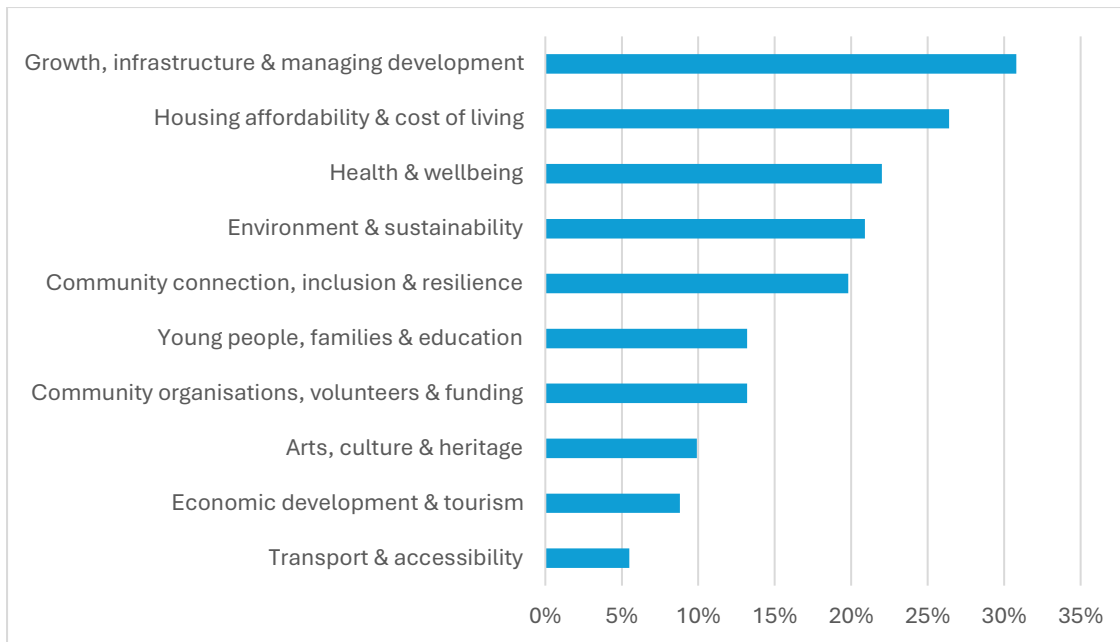


"I feel the cost of living explosion is causing real damage to our community. People are struggling out there, with rent costs, mortgage rates, council rates - and even if they have work they have the costs associated with fuel to get there, day care costs and all the other little things that add up. People are so busy trying to survive that they have no time or funding to participate in furthering their community."

Future opportunities and challenges

Respondents saw opportunities to strengthen community connections, invest in youth, protect the environment and build on the district's unique strengths. The challenges identified were focused on concerns around housing affordability, infrastructure, access to health services, organisational sustainability and the rising cost of living.

"Challenges are the growing epidemic of mental health for our young people. We see an opportunity for more support for our rural rangatahi."



What support is needed

Respondents identified opportunities to support sustainable local organisations through operational funding, investing in community capability, and strengthening community connections. Feedback highlighted the importance of community facilities, environmental stewardship, accessible services, and using a relationship-based approach that fosters collaboration, local leadership, and thriving communities.



“Invest in long-term, relationship-based work, recognising that trust-building and wraparound support take time but yield lasting impact.”

Clutha District



Place-based hui were held in Balclutha, Milton and Lawrence.

Across Clutha District, communities described themselves as proud, resilient, and deeply connected to place, with strong social capital, a long tradition of volunteering, and a willingness to work together to achieve local outcomes. Alongside these strengths, respondents identified capacity as a key challenge, with rising costs, volunteer fatigue, and the unique realities of rural and provincial communities placing growing demands on people and organisations.

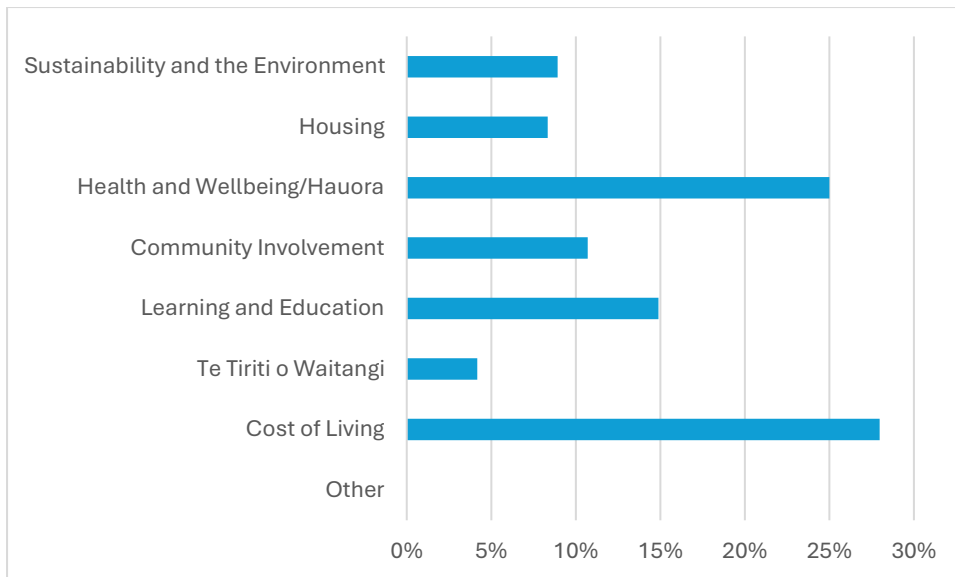
The top priorities in the Clutha District were identified as follows:



Community organisations described difficulty to keep pace with inflation and rising operating costs, coupled with an ageing volunteer workforce and fewer new volunteers. Paid coordination roles and capability building were seen as solutions for supporting the sustainability of community organisations. Isolation, transport barriers, centralisation of services and urban based decision making were identified as challenges affecting rural communities in the district.

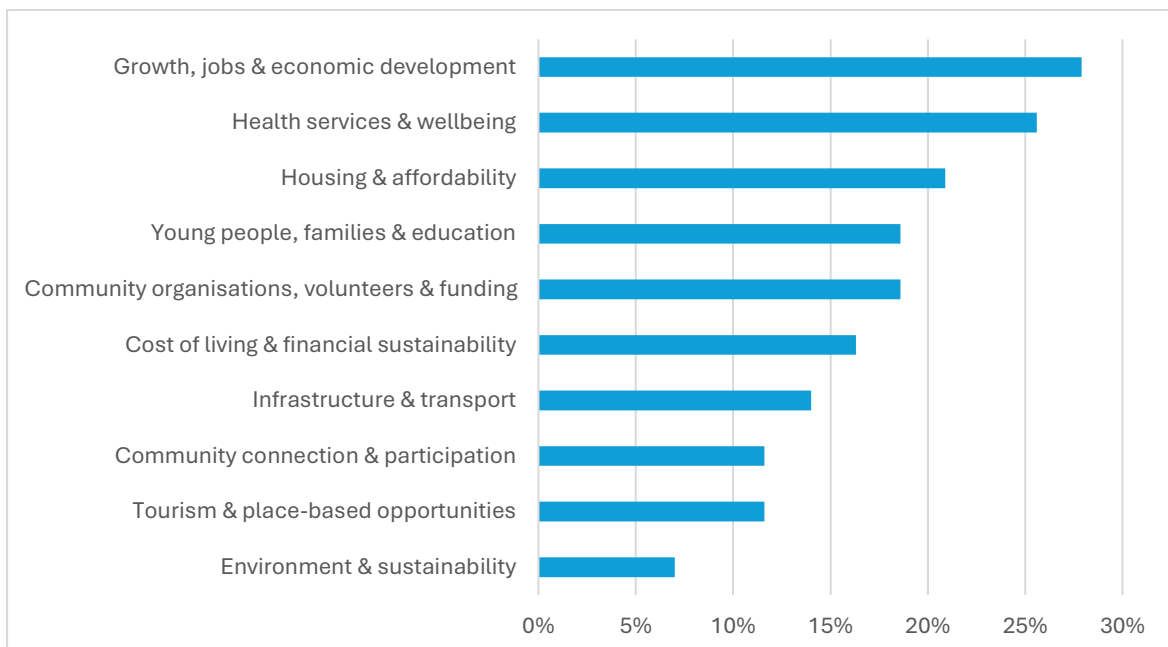
What feels most important for your community right now?

Participants most frequently highlighted the impacts of cost of living pressures on vulnerable communities and organisations, along with access to health services, affordable rental housing, and learning support for neurodiversity.



Future opportunities and challenges

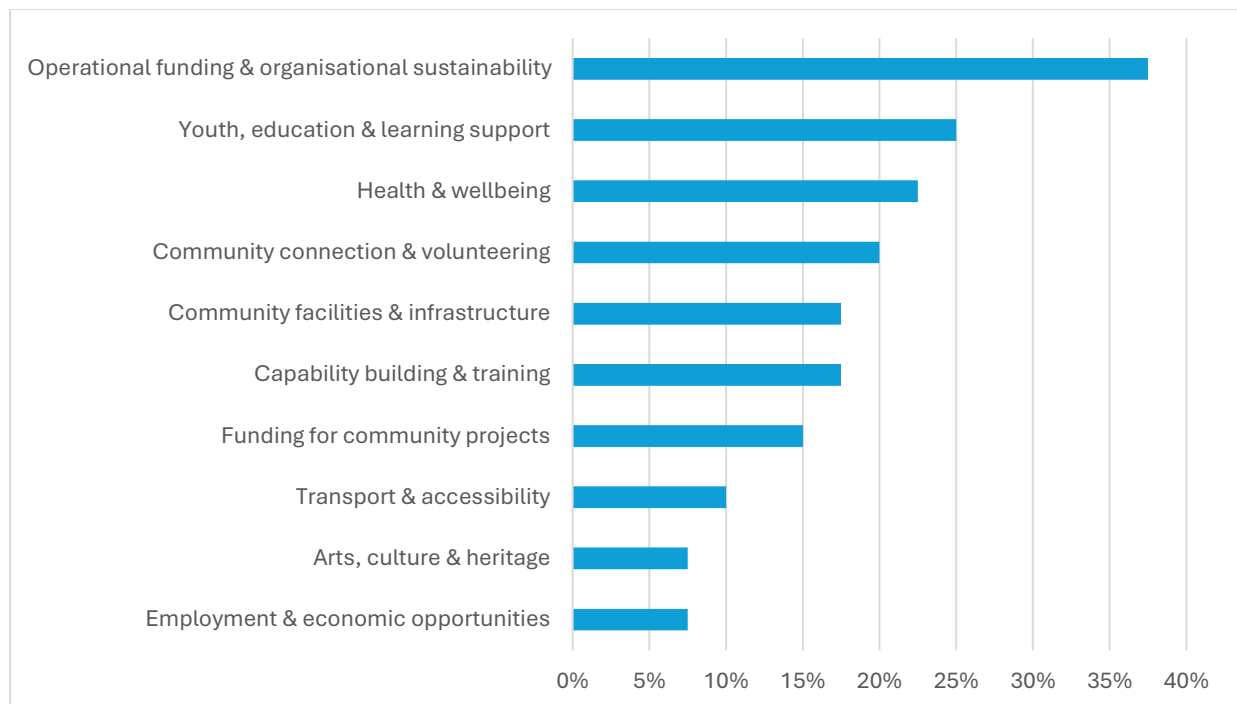
Respondents shared a strong focus on building Clutha's long-term resilience while planning for growth and change. Key themes included supporting economic development, increasing access to health services and wellbeing, and improving housing affordability. Respondents also highlighted the value of investing in community organisations, volunteers and young people and families to help ensure Clutha remains a vibrant, sustainable place to live.



“Opportunities to provide better facilities for the community to use for a variety of purposes. Challenge is staying financially sustainable and being able to pay for the facilities operation and upkeep.”

What support is needed

Respondents described opportunities to build on Clutha's strong community foundations by supporting sustainable community organisations, investing in young people, and strengthening community capability and local leadership. Feedback also highlighted the importance of working in a collaborative, relationship-based approach that supports participation, resilience, and connected communities across the district, including rural areas.



“Giving our people support, in the form of alternative solutions to fulfilling basic needs. Creating ways for people to connect and grow a sense of belonging. And, of course funding for projects and initiatives which enhance the quality of living for our community members.”

Greater Dunedin



Place-based hui were held in Dunedin city and Mosgiel.

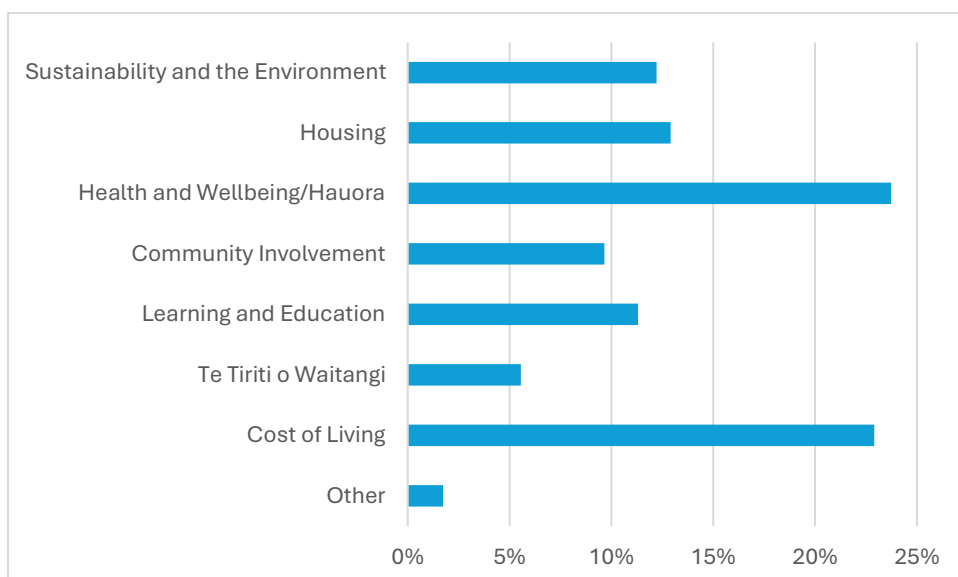
Many respondents recognised the vital role of community organisations and volunteers and emphasised the importance of investing in their long-term sustainability as demand for services continues to grow. There was also strong support for strengthening community connection, investing in young people, celebrating arts, sport and culture, and protecting the environment as key foundations for resilient, vibrant communities.

The top priorities for the Greater Dunedin community were identified as follows:



What feels most important to your community right now?

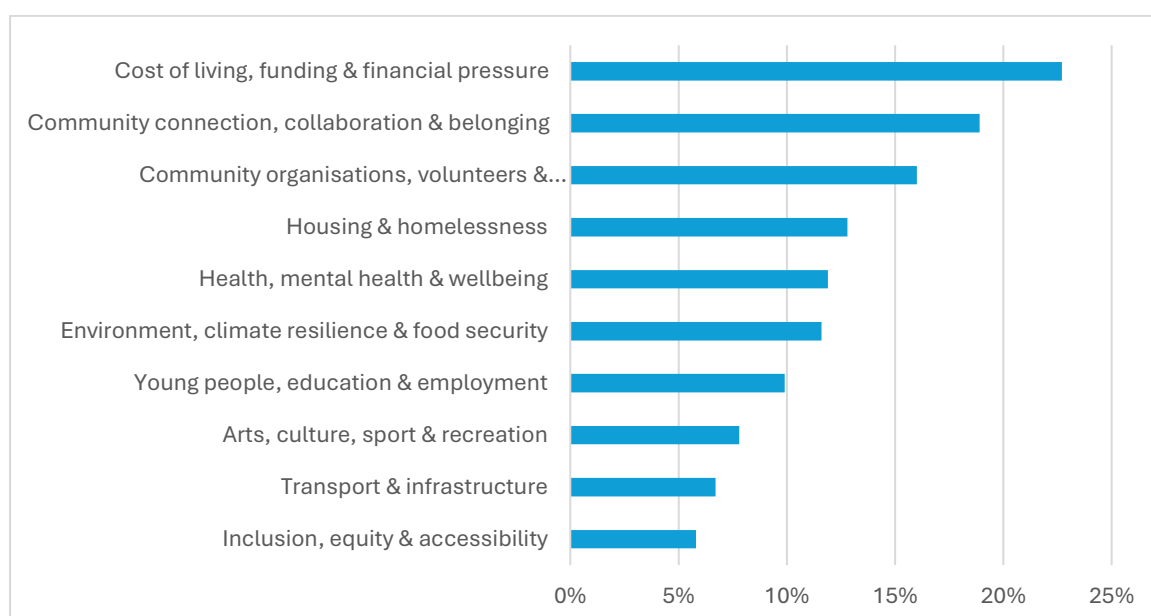
Respondents highlighted opportunities to strengthen community wellbeing by building on local strengths and responding to changing community needs. Priorities included improving access to affordable housing, transport and community infrastructure, while supporting health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, to help people and communities thrive.



Future opportunities and challenges

Respondents identified significant opportunities to build on Dunedin's strong community foundations by fostering greater connection, resilience and inclusion. There was a shared vision for communities where local leadership, collaboration and volunteering continue to strengthen wellbeing and support positive outcomes for everyone. Housing affordability, health and mental wellbeing, environmental resilience, and investment in young people were consistently identified as priorities for the future. Respondents highlighted the value of preventative, community-led approaches that enhance wellbeing and strengthen local capacity.

Alongside these opportunities, respondents recognised the importance of responding to ongoing cost of living and funding pressures, while strengthening the long-term sustainability of community organisations and partnerships.

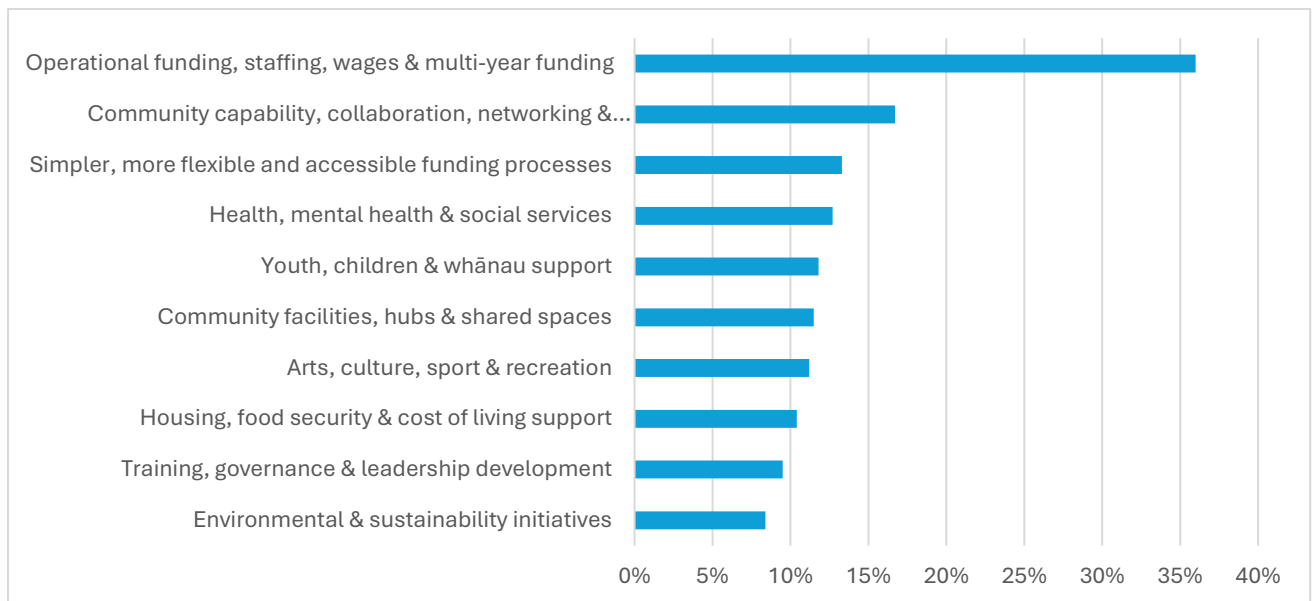


“More youth investment, spaces and opportunities for young people in our city”

What support is needed

Respondents emphasised the importance of funding that strengthens the sustainability and capability of community organisations, their workforce and volunteers. They highlighted the value of building local leadership and supporting collaboration and shared learning between community organisations. Respondents also identified community-based services, shared spaces, arts, culture, sport, recreation and active

transport as important foundations for connected, resilient communities, alongside place-based approaches that enable communities to shape local solutions.



“Consider how to support building connection and relationships across community groups - e.g by similar kaupapa, at similar stage in life-cycle, grappling with similar issues - so groups don't feel so isolated and can more effectively share skills / resources. Balancing the desire to support as many groups as possible with supporting some groups adequately for a longer time frame e.g. 2 to 3 years.”

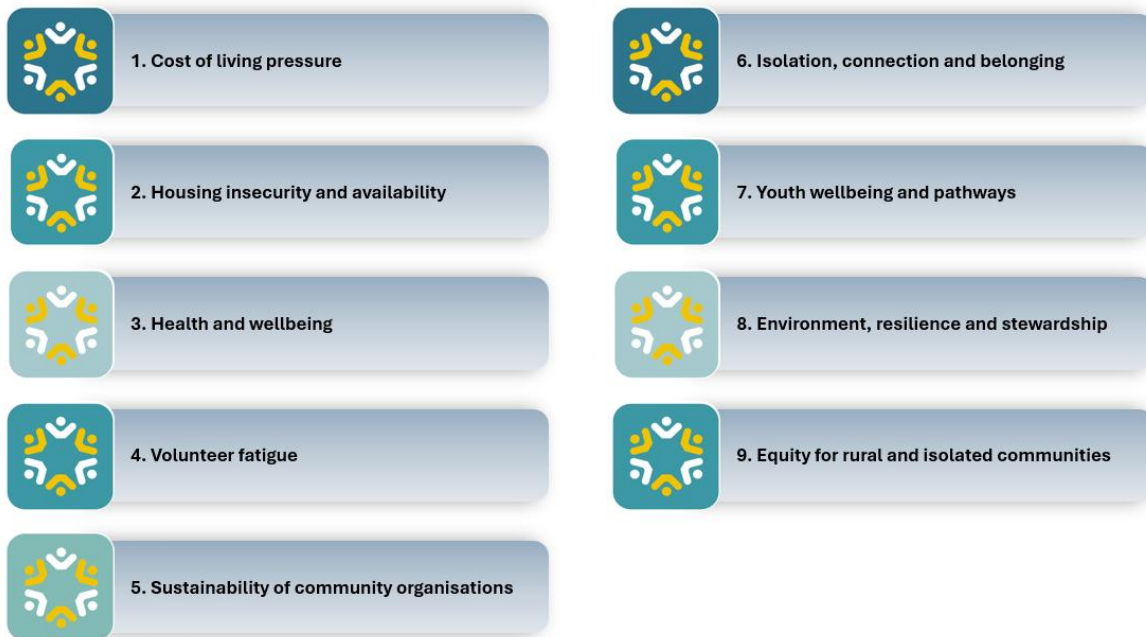
Waitaki District



Place-based hui were held in Ōamaru, Otematata and Palmerston.

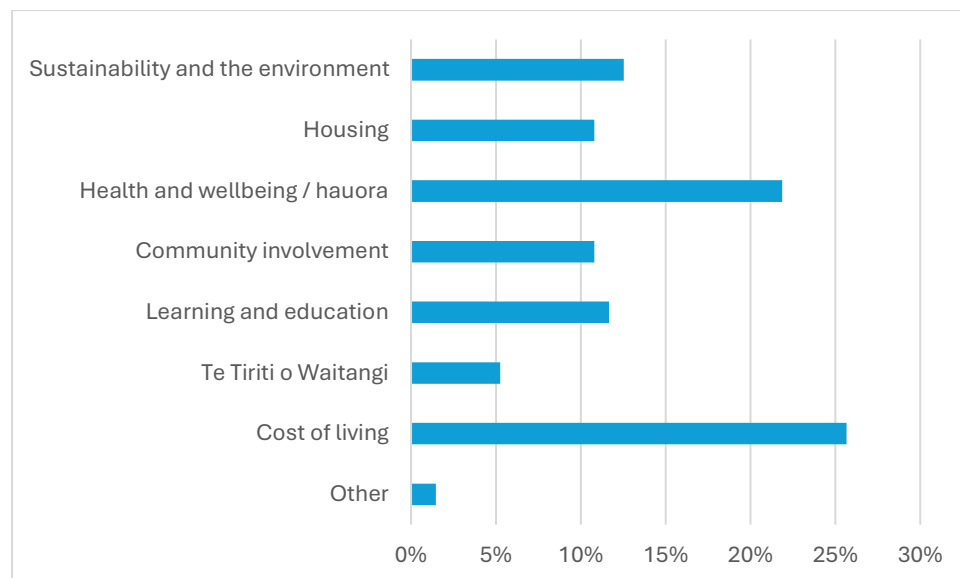
Communities throughout Waitaki described strong traditions of volunteering, mutual support and local leadership. Respondents highlighted opportunities to build on these strengths by investing in community capacity, affordable housing, health services and sustainable infrastructure, while recognising the distinct needs of both urban and rural communities. Across the district, there was a shared emphasis on supporting the long-term sustainability of the people, organisations and networks that underpin community wellbeing.

The top priorities for the Waitaki District were identified as follows:



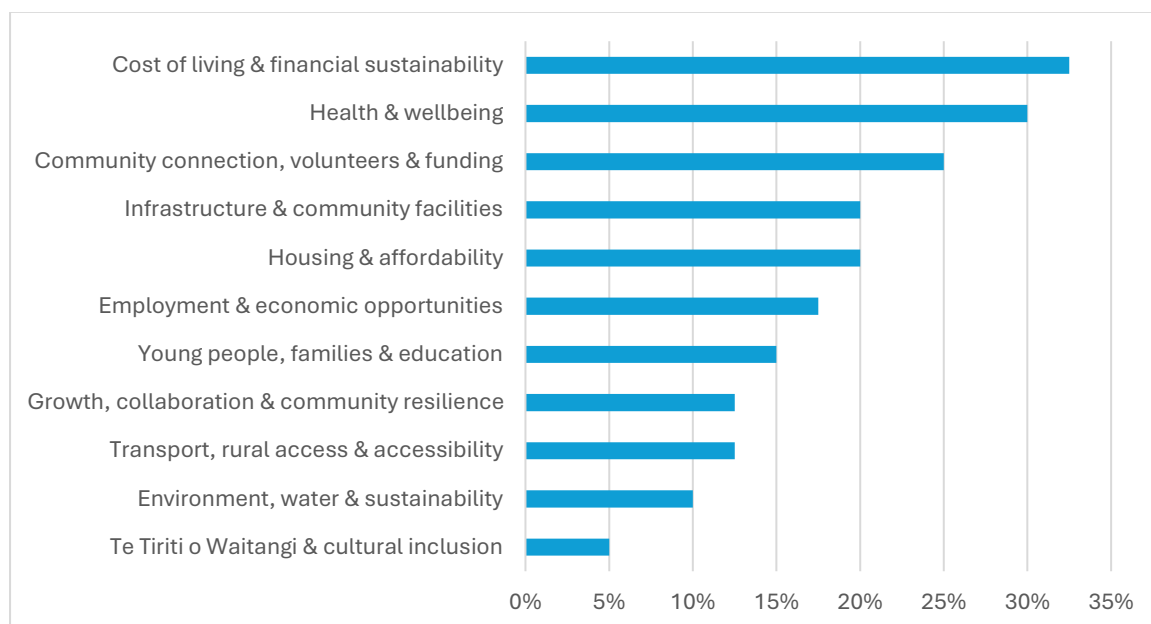
What feels most important to your community right now?

Respondents highlighted the importance of building on the district's strong community networks to support wellbeing, connection and resilience. Priorities included improving access to affordable housing, health services and transport, particularly for those in rural communities. The contribution of community organisations, volunteers and community facilities was recognised, with emphasis given to investing in equitable, community-led solutions.



Future opportunities and challenges

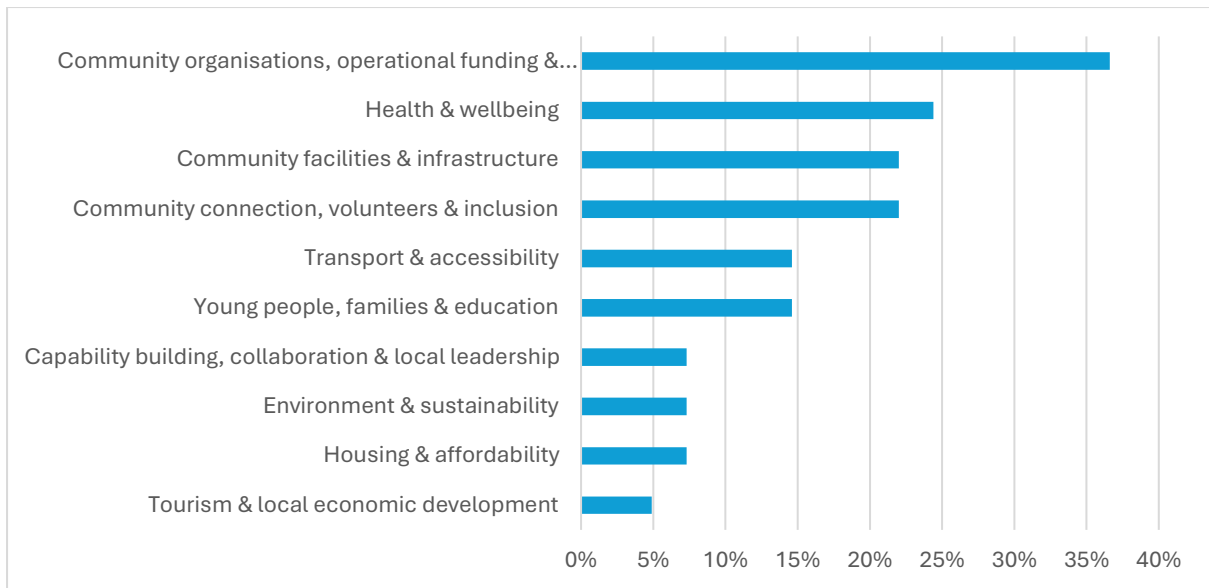
The future opportunities and challenges identified by respondents reflect a strong focus on strengthening community resilience while responding to increasing social and economic pressures. Investing in community centres, low-cost or free activities and transport were offered as opportunities that would enable participation in the community. However, there was strong recognition that if communities do not act themselves, these projects will not go ahead, and this model is becoming increasingly unsustainable.



“The big opportunity is to keep building on what we have- great venues and facilities, great groups that serve the community. The challenges are rising costs and diminishing pool of volunteers- there is an opportunity from groups to collaborate more and share resources.”

What support is needed

Respondents emphasised the importance of long-term, flexible investment that strengthens the sustainability of community organisations and reduces administrative burden. They highlighted the value of investing in health, wellbeing and preventative services, alongside volunteers, community hubs and shared facilities that foster connection and participation. Respondents also identified opportunities to support young people and families, improve equity for rural and smaller communities, and invest in community projects from planning through to delivery. A visible, relationship-based funding approach that builds local capability and supports community-led solutions was seen as key to achieving lasting community outcomes.



“Otago Community Trust already plays a vital role in supporting and uplifting our region, and we truly value the way OCT stays connected with communities, listens closely to local priorities, and invests in projects that matter. Continuing this style of partnership is incredibly important for rural areas like ours, where distance, isolation, and limited services make progress harder to achieve without strong external support.”

Upper Clutha

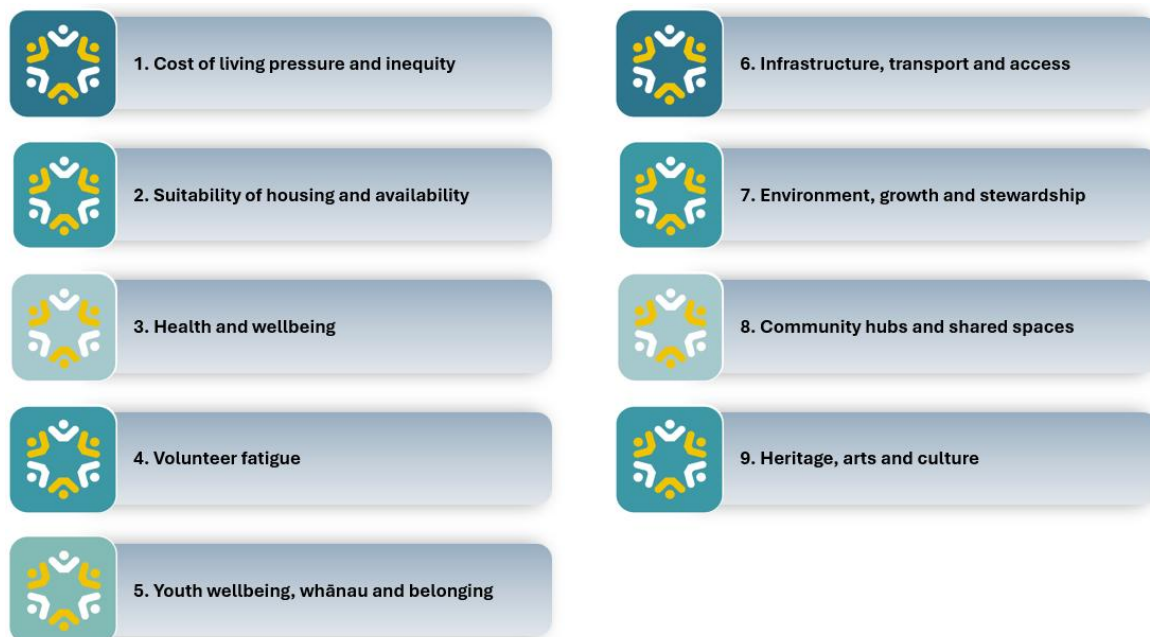


Place-based hui were held in Wānaka and Luggate.

Across Wānaka and its surrounding communities, participants described a place that is capable, values-driven and highly engaged, with strong volunteer energy, innovation and pride in its environment and lifestyle. At the same time, there is a consistent and growing sense that pressure is accumulating faster than systems can respond.

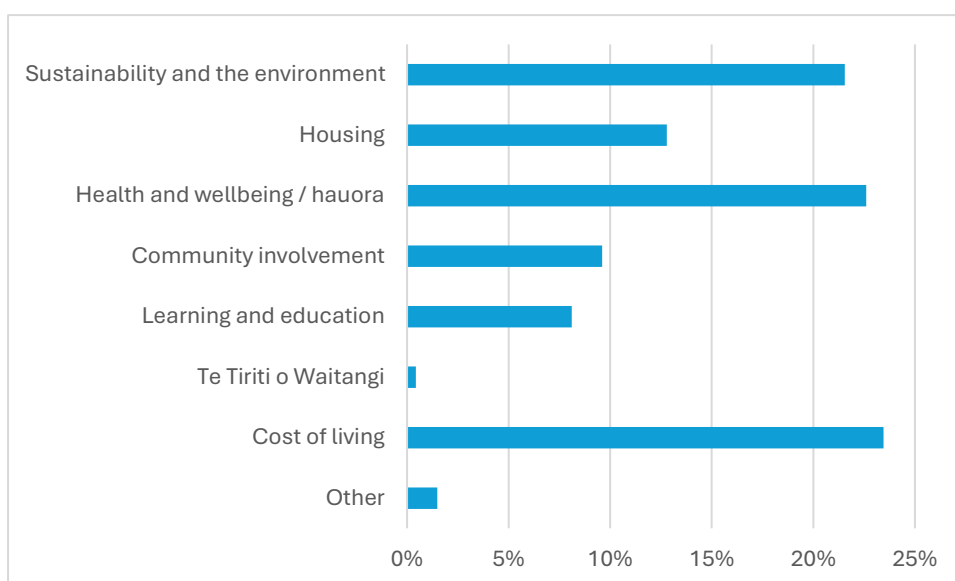
This is a story of a community that works hard, gives a lot, and increasingly absorbs the consequences of rapid growth, high costs and infrastructure lag.

The top priorities from the Upper Clutha communities were identified as follows:



What feels most important to your community right now?

The vulnerability of limited access to services and the impact of population growth and tourism on the natural environment featured strongly in the feedback. Respondents also noted that community organisations, volunteers and families are increasingly filling gaps left by housing markets, health services and transport systems that are no longer keeping pace with the realities of life in the Upper Clutha.

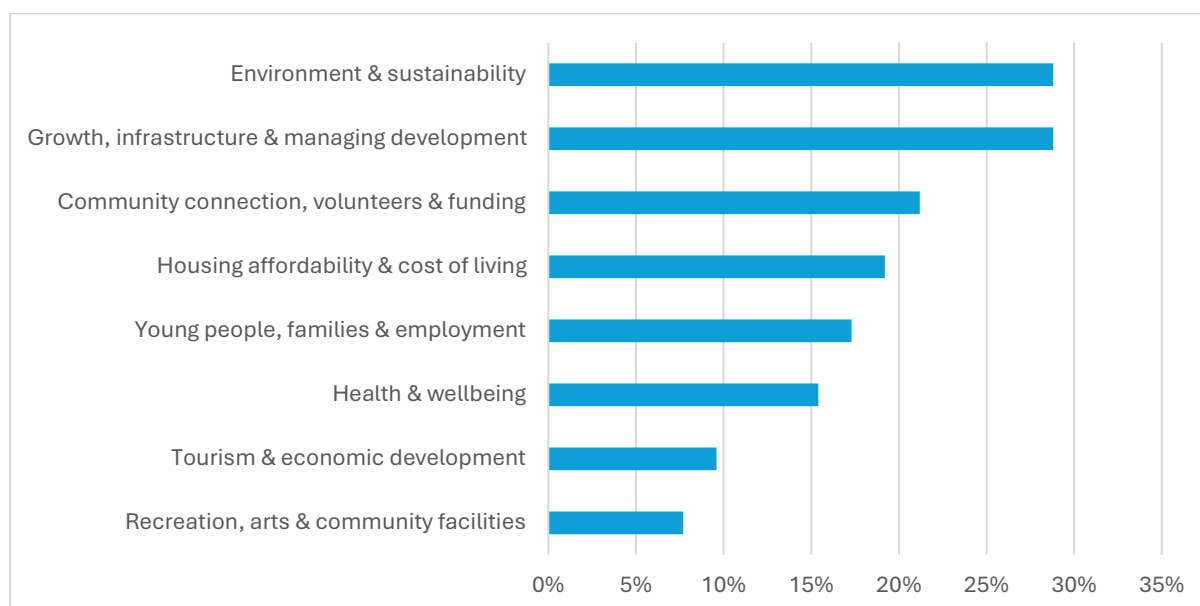


“People with health issues are choosing to move out of the district - this is not a sustainable and fair system.”

Future opportunities and challenges

Respondents highlighted opportunities to strengthen community wellbeing by improving access to mental health support, affordable housing and essential services, while responding to the needs of a growing and diverse population. They emphasised the importance of protecting the natural environment, planning for future growth and resilience, and investing in infrastructure, transport and community safety.

Respondents also recognised the vital contribution of arts, sport, volunteers and community organisations in fostering connection and wellbeing, and highlighted the value of coordinated investment and partnership to support thriving communities.

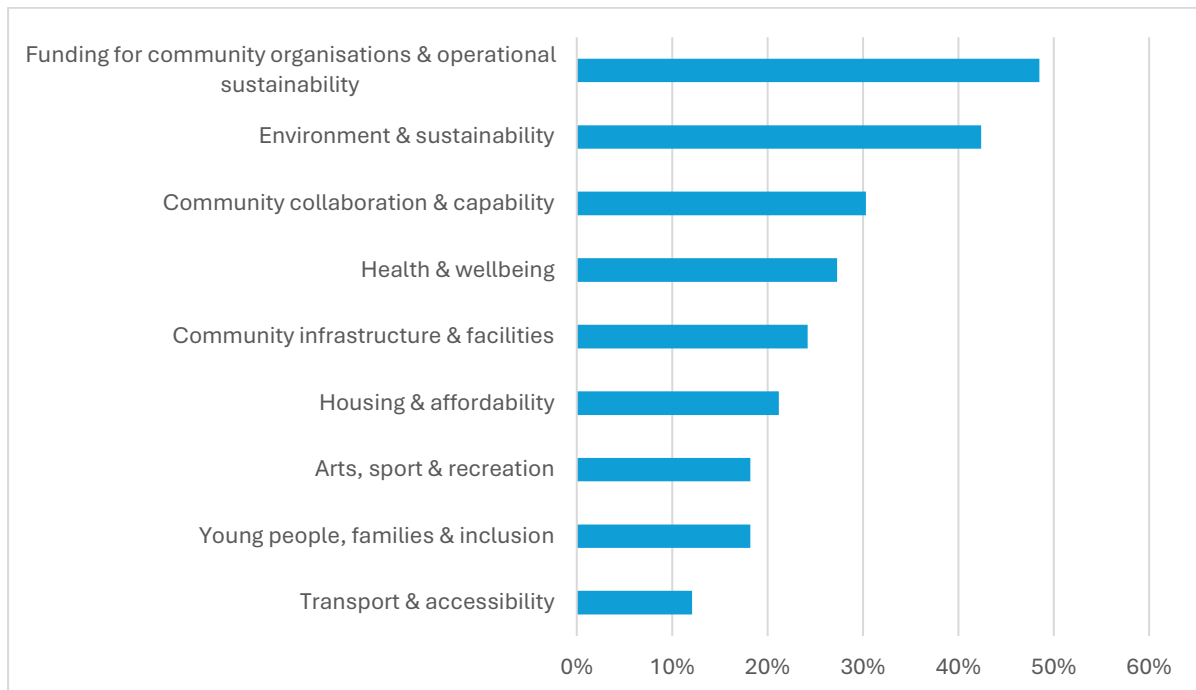


“Community connections are vital to our community. We have good access to nature and the environment. Significant challenges with an aging population, lack of public transport, lack of suitable housing for younger and older people, health inequities.”

What support is needed

Respondents emphasised the importance of long-term, flexible investment that strengthens the sustainability and capability of community organisations. Further to this, they also identified the value of investing in children, young people and families and shared infrastructure that builds connection and wellbeing. Improving equitable

access across Upper Clutha communities, and maintaining a relational, trust-based funding approach were seen as essential for enabling collaboration and community-led solutions.



Priority Communities feedback

As outlined in the methodology section, we undertook some targeted interviews and hui with people and groups representative of priority communities identified in our current strategic plan. The feedback from these engagements broadly followed the same data trends outlined in the general community feedback above. In addition to the general feedback, we heard the following priorities:

- The importance of physical community spaces and hubs that reflect identity, to promote a sense of pride and belonging in the community
- The persistence of structural barriers to full participation in the community, such as accessibility, safety concerns and cultural and language barriers.

What will this data be used for?

This input from the Otago community has directly informed OCT's new strategy, released in August 2026.

The new strategy includes a renewed vision for Otago - Empowered People, Thriving Communities, Sustainable Environments, which reflects what we heard in our community engagement as outlined in this report.

The strategy also sets out a refreshed mission and values, and our commitment to mana whenua. The new strategy articulates the roles the Trust can play and how we intend to apply the strategy to our granting and investment activity going forward.

As a next step, the Trust will review its funding framework to ensure it remains aligned with the new strategy, and with the community aspirations we heard through our community engagement. We hope to be able to provide an update on this before the end of the 2026 calendar year.