

## **Inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply**

*Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into securing the Victorian food supply. WCC is located in the City of Whittlesea, Melbourne's outer- north and directly impacted by urban sprawl and population growth at the fringe of Victoria.*

*WCC is a place-based organisation that provides a range of support services including legal, settlement support, volunteering, employment, community information and food relief. The increase of food insecurity in Whittlesea led to the development of the Whittlesea Food Collective, an initiative co-designed with the Whittlesea emergency relief network. The Whittlesea Food Collective, based at Melbourne Polytechnic Epping, has space to store food including cold storage, provides free and accessible fresh and nutritious food to local community members, builds knowledge and skill around food growing and connects people through food preparation and celebration. In 2019 WCC also established Wollert Community Farm in partnership with Yarra Valley Water (YVW) and Melbourne Polytechnic on YVW's Aurora treatment waste to energy plant. Objectives of Wollert Community Farm include conservation, Aboriginal cultural management and food growing. Nugal biik plants and seeds nursery has been established as a social enterprise with the aim of supporting overall farm objectives.*

*WCC's response to the inquiry is based on our experience working in a peri-urban area providing social supports to people living in a growth area and opportunities and challenges we have encountered in establishing the food collective and farm.*

## **City of Whittlesea**

The City of Whittlesea is located in Melbourne's outer- north, and is one of the largest municipalities in metropolitan Melbourne, covering an area of approximately 489 square kilometres. The Wurundjeri Willum Clan is the Traditional Owner of the land that now forms the Whittlesea Green Wedge. A small section of the Taungurung Land and Waters Council area is located in Kinglake West. In comparison with the rest of the municipality Whittlesea's Green Wedge has a higher and growing proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders population.<sup>1</sup>

The City of Whittlesea is also one of the fastest growing with the forecasted population to grow by 44% between 2024 and 2041 from 250,717 to 360,692 residents.<sup>2</sup> Much of that population growth is

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green\\_wedge\\_management\\_plan\\_2023\\_-\\_2033-adopted-version.pdf](https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green_wedge_management_plan_2023_-_2033-adopted-version.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea/population-summary#:~:text=Between%202021%20and%202041%2C%20the,average%20annual%20change%20of%202.24%25>

occurring in newly developed suburbs to the north of the municipality, placing pressure on areas of high conservation and agricultural value.

In 2020-21 the City of Whittlesea's key agri-food industries (agriculture, food and beverage manufacturing) contributed to a total output of \$1,519.8m (8.4% of total output).<sup>3</sup> While Whittlesea was once a productive agricultural area, the agri-food economy is now largely based on food manufacturing, logistics and distribution and service businesses. The increase of land value in Whittlesea's Green Wedge has grown considerably over time and the value increase was greater for smaller land parcels, 38% of private land holdings in Green Wedge A Zone for example are smaller than 8ha, despite this being the minimum subdivision size.<sup>4</sup> The impact of urban development among other factors has changed the extent and overall value and diversity of the agriculture sector, contributing to significant loss of peri-urban value in Whittlesea.

### **The Food Collective**

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) established The Food Collective (TFC) in 2019. TFC aims to create a more equitable food system in the City of Whittlesea by supporting households experiencing financial hardship, increasing access to locally available and affordable fresh food and creating pathways for social connection and employment.

The impact of COVID19 precipitated the need to create a new system of food relief to respond to community needs. The pandemic had the greatest impacts on those who are already at risk of food insecurity and new groups of people began experiencing food insecurity for the first time. TFC quickly transformed to provide emergency food and other household essentials to households experiencing hardship including asylum seekers, single headed households and international students. This experience highlighted the success of place-based organisations like WCC to adapt and respond quickly, as opposed to centralised distribution centres.

Current activities at TFC include a free supermarket for people facing food insecurity, food storage and distribution for local emergency relief providers, community demonstration garden and low cost fresh produce market, with support from Vic Health. In addition TFC is exploring how to grow food, vegetable seeds and seedlings from its' Wollert Community Farm location. Wollert Community Farm is a partnership project between WCC, Yarra Valley Water and Melbourne Polytechnic. The Farm is currently growing native indigenous seedlings and would like to expand to include vegetables.

### **Challenges**

- Climate change is impacting on land degradation and increasing frequency and intensity of hazards such as fire, drought and flood. Average farm profitability in Victoria is estimated to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/4bhdbgth/agri-food-plan-2023-2026-web.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green\\_wedge\\_management\\_plan\\_2023\\_-\\_2033-adopted-version.pdf](https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green_wedge_management_plan_2023_-_2033-adopted-version.pdf)

have fallen around 37% between 2000 and 2020 due to the impacts of climate change.<sup>5</sup> Peri-urban areas are particularly vulnerable to impact of climate change.

- Since colonisation, intensive approaches to agriculture have impacted on soil quality upon which food production depends. Volcanic soil in the City of Whittlesea has been further impacted by centuries of cattle grazing making it low grade quality to grow fruit and vegetables.
- Whittlesea's Green Wedge and more broadly across the municipality has a higher rate of First Nation 15-24-year-olds disengaged from employment or study.<sup>6</sup>
- The City of Whittlesea has high levels of food insecurity. The 2020 Victorian Population Health Survey identified that 10 per cent of adults in the City of Whittlesea ran out of food in the previous 12 months and could not afford more. This compares with the Victorian average of 5.9% and the City of Whittlesea is ranked equal 7th highest percentage across all municipalities in Victoria. Between January to December 2023, WCC's emergency relief service data shows that 3,179 emergency relief cases were opened with 2,541 adults and 1,755 children benefitting from emergency relief assistance over this period. Of these clients 44% had a migrant or refugee background.
- Victoria's planning framework has impacted on the green wedge, fragmented agricultural land and increased urban growth boundaries
- Decision making responsibilities within State government in relation to peri-urban agriculture are unclear
- There are restricted and unequal opportunities for farmers in peri-urban areas compared to regional counterparts making it difficult to overcome huge capital costs for new farmers buying into the sector due to higher land cost.
- Economic cost to start up farming in peri-urban areas is further impacted by insecure livelihoods in the agriculture and food industries.

## Opportunities

- First Nations communities living in Whittlesea and in particular the Green Wedge
- Diversity in food supply chains. Small independent food stores, community gardens and orchards, backyard food production, farmers markets and other food markets all contribute to resilient food systems
- Volunteer and community action groups willing to contribute time, knowledge and experience
- Capacity for adaptation and innovation through for example access to an alternative water source/ recycled water at Wollert Community Farm, increasing water efficiency improvements and resilience to drought
- Partnership resources and expertise through Wollert Community Farm and its' partners WCC, Yarra Valley Water and Melbourne Polytechnic

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<sup>5</sup> The University of Melbourne, Building the Resilience of Melbourne's Food System – A Roadmap, A Foodprint Melbourne Report, May 2022

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green\\_wedge\\_management\\_plan\\_2023\\_-\\_2033-adopted-version.pdf](https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/media/beffizes/green_wedge_management_plan_2023_-_2033-adopted-version.pdf)

- The City of Whittlesea and Wollert Community Farm’s proximity to Melbourne Wholesale Market in Epping, the proposed Melbourne Food Innovation and Export Hub (MFIH) and Melbourne Airport.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the State government:

- Support Victorian First Nations Traditional Owners to recover and apply knowledge and practices of traditional food production in peri-urban areas.
- Commit to UN Sustainable Development Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture by legislating the Right to Food and embedding it in all relevant policy frameworks with clear government responsibility.
- Strengthen protection for Melbourne’s peri-urban agricultural land by maintaining Melbourne’s current Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) as a firm boundary that is not subject to reviews or expansion. As per the Roadmap to Building the Resilience of Melbourne’s Food System apply a ‘food production zone’ to all farmland in Melbourne’s peri-urban area.
- Work with developers and local Councils to embed community gardens within new developments as part of the planning process particularly in new estates where garden space for growing food has decreased with increased sized housing.
- Create funding opportunities to support peri-urban farmers to grow food and adapt to climate change including for example grants to encourage protected cropping on land that is not suitable for soil-based production.
- Support innovative approaches to food growing such as Wollert Community Farm. An estimated \$9 million has already been invested by farm partners WCC, Yarra Valley Water and Melbourne Polytechnic and additional project funders (Victorian government, City of Whittlesea) in establishing Wollert Community Farm’s stage 1 infrastructure. This has enabled WCC to develop a native indigenous nursery social enterprise, *nugal biik* plants and seeds. WCC has tried to leverage other finance and funding opportunities to progress food growing on the farm site however this has been difficult particularly considering the higher cost to improve soil quality and adapt to climate change. WCC is also exploring opportunities to develop a social enterprise edible plants nursery (vegetable and herb seedlings), specialising in the propagation of organically certified heirloom varieties and cultural foods to sell into the urban agriculture market of Melbourne. Funding to support such an initiative would provide a strong foundation for this test site in peri-urban agriculture.
- Facilitate sharing of knowledge/ evidence between peri-urban farmers particularly in relation to regenerative and climate resilient practices.
- Invest in training and employment pathways for priority cohorts such as First Nations people to work in the agricultural sector in peri-urban areas.