



# Regional development priorities for the Meander Valley community – Forum Summary and Outcomes

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February 2025

## Introduction and overview

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2025, the Tasmanian Policy Exchange and the Meander Valley Council held an Economic Development Forum in Westbury to share ideas about the region's future. We would like to thank everyone who participated in the forum for their contributions.

The aim of the day was to identify Meander Valley's most pressing economic development challenges and opportunities, as well as policy priorities to address them.

The Forum covered issues ranging from demographic change and economic growth to productivity and agricultural innovation. In many cases, data and evidence presented by TPE researchers and experts from the state government aligned with the experience of business and community leaders in the room. At other times, participants offered alternative perspectives which have been incorporated into this summary report.

Five priority areas for supporting continued sustainable growth and development were identified:

1. Working with community and providers to develop **new models of aged care and childcare** that support liveability at all ages and stages. Participants stressed the importance of flexible models for ageing in place and improving local access to childcare.
2. **Fostering connection and community for new arrivals.** Participants recognised a welcoming and supportive culture as essential to attracting and retaining new residents, especially people born overseas. Helping new residents to develop a sense of belonging will ultimately encourage them to spend more of their time and money in the community.
3. **Supporting investment and innovation in agri-business.** Embracing opportunities for diversification into new products and markets will drive growth in Meander Valley's most important sector.
4. Building on Meander Valley's status as **a transport and logistics hub** for freight, industry, and visitors. Meander Valley industries benefit from the region's proximity to major freight and passenger transport routes, ports, and markets. Investing in technologies such as EV charging can ensure that communities like Deloraine remain key hubs in the state's north and north west.
5. Planning for **future workforce** needs with a strategic and coordinated **regional skills strategy**. Supporting future growth in Meander Valley will require a concerted focus on pathways into areas of skills demand, including agriculture, health and care, construction, and tourism and hospitality.

Further reflections on these themes, as well as participants' ideas for putting them into action, are summarised in the table below.

## Themes and ideas from the forum

| Themes                                                                              | Insights from forum participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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| 1. Working with community and providers to develop new models of aged and childcare | <p>Population growth in Meander Valley is driven by two cohorts – employed young people with small children and older retirees – whose specific service provision needs (childcare and aged care) are currently in very short supply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants agreed that childcare was indeed a significant barrier to full workforce participation for residents (especially women) in places like Westbury, Hadspen, and Carrick.</li> <li>• Views on aged care availability were less straightforward: while acknowledging that residential places were not keeping pace with growth in the region’s population of older people, participants noted a shift towards in-home care models.</li> <li>• The development of integrated, coordinated programs to facilitate aging-in-place while ensuring that older people still have choice and the ability to remain in their communities if and when they require residential care services</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2. Fostering connection and community for new arrivals                              | <p>Domestic and international migration are essential for meeting workforce needs in Meander Valley, especially in the tourism and hospitality sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many participants noted that recent arrivals from diverse backgrounds increasingly had difficulty finding affordable housing and developing deep connections with their new communities.</li> <li>• Some participants believed that migrants’ preference was to move to Meander Valley for a short period of time, sometimes due to visa requirements, before departing for major urban centres on the mainland. Others stressed that, if new arrivals were able to build local networks, find meaningful employment, and develop community connections, they were much more likely to become long-term residents. <a href="#">Evidence from elsewhere in northern Tasmania</a> strongly supports the latter view.</li> <li>• The importance of embedding new residents in supportive local networks applies equally to people who have moved from other parts of Tasmania and work in Launceston. Building a sense of belonging and community increases the chance that new arrivals will stay in Meander Valley for the long term.</li> </ul> |
| 3. Supporting investment and innovation in agri-business                            | <p>Meander Valley’s agriculture and food processing industries are major local employers and a key driving force behind regional productivity, innovation, and output.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

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|                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants recognised the value of investments like the Tasmanian Irrigation scheme, though some noted that despite state and Commonwealth subsidies, irrigation water remained expensive for more marginal operations and crops.</li> <li>• This highlights the importance of adaptation to increasingly the sector's profitability. Tools like the Tasmanian Government's enterprise suitability maps can aid producers wishing to explore opportunities for diversification and innovation.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 4. Cementing Meander Valley's status as a transport and logistics hub for freight, industry, and visitors | <p>Meander Valley's central location and connection to key road and rail transport routes is a valuable asset and a foundation for growth in the region's visitor economy and transport, logistics, and warehousing industries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants observed that the combination of affordable housing and proximity to Launceston have driven rapid growth in Westbury, Hadspen, Carrick, and surrounding areas. The effect of this has been to steadily shift the region's 'commuter belt' west, with implications for infrastructure and traffic flow.</li> <li>• Tourism and hospitality industry operators remarked on the value of Meander Valley's position as a 'gateway' to flagship tourist attractions in the north and northwest.</li> <li>• Capturing a greater proportion of the visitor economy value that moves through Meander Valley via installation of infrastructure like electric vehicle charging or the strategic promotion of local attractions (caving around Mole Creek, for example) could increase visitor nights and spend in the LGA.</li> </ul> |
| 5. Planning for future workforce need via a strategic, coordinated regional skills strategy               | <p>Meander Valley's strong population growth, high employment, and tight labour market are positive and welcome developments, but several key industries are now struggling to recruit skilled staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants highlighted the challenges of finding suitable staff across many roles and industries, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector.</li> <li>• Workforce modelling and projections show that the health care, social services, agriculture, and food processing sectors will also struggle with recruitment in the coming years.</li> <li>• Participants were supportive of the development of a long-term regional skills and training strategy to plan help connect graduates with education and training pathways and local employers.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |