

The  
**Wellington**  
**Report**

*a Voice for Business*



**Iron Duke**  
PARTNERS

## Foreword

# A Voice for Business, a Voice for Wellington

Welcome to The Wellington Report—a summary of business views on our capital city and its future.



The views of more than 50 senior business leaders, entrepreneurs, and directors are represented here, including their concerns and proposed solutions to make Wellington better.

The report identifies problems such as poor leadership, lack of vision, ageing infrastructure, increasing local government debt and lack of accountability to business.

It also proposes solutions to create a prosperous future, underpinned by businesses that create the jobs that sustain our economy and vibrant retail, hospitality, and arts sectors.

We thank Iron Duke Partners for their help in preparing this report, which is designed to inform policy development and decisions of our civic leaders.

Business is at the heart of our progress as a city and it, therefore, has a strong stake in that prosperity. A business community at its best requires the faith and confidence of the risk takers and entrepreneurs in our midst.

It's vital that our elected members and their officials hear the voice of businesses who are the largest contributors to council rates and to the city's prosperity. Wellington's businesspeople live here because they love this city and want it to succeed. We should get the settings right and allow businesses to do what they do best.

Despite the many challenges highlighted in our report, there are also reasons for optimism, including the reopening of St James Theatre, refurbishment of the Embassy Theatre entranceway, the return of the Airport Flyer, and the opening of Tākina on the horizon.

We take heart from these green shoots, but much more needs to be done. When business does well, Wellington does well, and this report is an agenda to achieve both.

Ngā mihi nui,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Arcus'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Simon Arcus

*Chief Executive, Wellington Chamber of Commerce*

# Numbers You Need to Know



**12%**

## Citizen satisfaction with Wellington City Council 2022

*Council infighting, not listening to residents, and a lack of transparency biggest issues<sup>i</sup>*



**34%** Business respondents expect the Wellington economy to improve over the next 12 months<sup>ii</sup>

Mean income 2021

**\$82,694**

NZ average \$65,910<sup>iii</sup>

Mean household income 2021

**\$157,749**

NZ average \$117,947<sup>iv</sup>

Average house value

**\$1,111,384**

NZ average \$885,966<sup>v</sup>

Average weekly rent

**\$556**

NZ average \$500<sup>vi</sup>



Wellington makes up 12.6% of national GDP<sup>vii</sup>



Knowledge intensive jobs<sup>viii</sup>

Wellington 57.6%

New Zealand average 32.5%

Unemployment rate<sup>ix</sup>

Wellington 2.9%

New Zealand average 3.3%

Citizens feeling safe in the city after dark<sup>x</sup>

2021 45%

2019 76%

# Our Recommendations

1. The first 100 days of the Council term should prioritise key infrastructure investment, with restraint shown toward new projects until existing challenges in water, transport and waste management are being remediated.
2. From the next rating review forward, Council should signal rates rises which are sustainable for businesses to offer them certainty around cost pressures.
3. Within the next term, Council should move to divest responsibility for transport infrastructure and operations from GWRC to a separate entity, whose mandate is to prioritise the *reliability* of transport.
4. Within its first 100 days, Council should outline a plan to prioritise and incentivise rapid CBD densification, in partnership with Central Government and industry. This should include rates rebates, targeted rates on underutilised properties, joint Government funding and the use of innovative funding mechanisms.
5. Within its first 100 days, Council should work with business to create a precinct plan for the city—linking the stadium, Lambton Quay, waterfront, and Courtenay Entertainment Precinct.
6. Council should position Wellington as the national home of Māori and Pasifika business success and cultural celebration through a commitment to hosting events, showcasing performances, and partnering with Māori and Pasifika business groups.
7. Council should transition towards the phased amalgamation of public services and Wellington, Porirua, and Hutt Councils over time.
8. Council should clarify WellingtonNZ's mandate by introducing KPIs based on economic growth and business success.
9. Council should establish a dedicated business representative that acts as the link between Council and business with the position funded directly out of commercial rates. To ensure independence and accountability, the business representative should be appointed by a wider business advisory council, comprised of leading members of the Wellington business community.
10. Council should report quarterly on the additional value received by business from the higher rates differential.
11. Council and Central Government should urgently address rampant homelessness and antisocial behaviour in Central Wellington. This should include an increased police presence in the central city, improved protections for CBD businesses and employees, and efforts to find appropriate, long-term accommodation for rough sleepers.
12. Council should provide incentives to develop derelict sites and underutilised properties in the CBD.
13. Council, in partnership with WellingtonNZ, should engage in a targeted campaign showcasing the wide range of careers that can be started and fostered in Wellington.
14. The Council should produce an independent “State of Business” report annually. This report should outline its progress against these recommendations and the city's business growth.

# “Directionless... But We Still Love It”

Wellington once held the title of the *coolest little capital*, a small but vibrant city nestled between the hills in a picturesque harbour. It was the hub for head offices, famous eateries, and iconic events. Wellington today tells a different story. This report summarises the current sentiment towards Wellington, calling on the experiences of passionate business leaders, entrepreneurs, and dedicated Wellingtonians.

The businesses that contributed to this report agreed: the city’s leadership has been inward-looking and complacent for too long. The hard choices to enhance our city’s reputation have not been made. Business feels that the city has failed to invest in its future.

Some of the words used to describe the state of the city included stale, overpriced, tarnished, directionless, lacking ambition, tired, unsafe, stuck, crippled, disengaged, apathetic, stagnant, frustrated, dull, and failing to get the basics right, a sorry summary of the perception of Wellington. Business leaders noted that the city is struggling to regain its momentum after two years of lockdown and isolation coupled with long-term underinvestment in infrastructure.

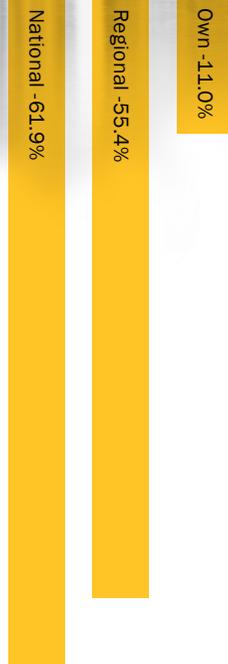
Wellington businesses feel overshadowed by Central Government and that the city is now synonymous with bureaucracy and politics, rather than business and innovation, forgetting the very essence of the heart of the city. Wellington thrives when its businesses thrive, when talent wants to live here and when people see it as a destination.

Despite this criticism, the business leaders we spoke with are deeply passionate about Wellington. They are still in love with Wellington and want to see it regain its status as New Zealand’s world-class capital. You only need to walk along our waterfront, eat in our world-class restaurants, and drink our craft beer to realise why Wellingtonians have so much passion for our city.

Businesses want to help the city succeed, but they cannot do this alone.



Business Confidence



# Getting the Basics Right

**This report found a resounding call from business that first and foremost, they want a functional city that gets the basics right.**

At the core of enhancing the city's reputation and creating the type of environment that attracts talent and business investment, key infrastructure must be operating at its best. Successful infrastructure doesn't make the news or win elections, but it sets the foundation for a city that can adapt and grow.

Business told us that when a pipe bursts, a bus doesn't arrive, or rubbish isn't collected, it hits their bottom line. Wellingtonians are tired of seeing basic infrastructure failing across their city—feeding the narrative that our city is falling behind.

Wellington has systematically underinvested in urban regeneration, water infrastructure, public transport, and roading. The infrastructure spend over the next 10 years is forecasted to be \$12 billion. Yet experts have warned that this amount won't even come close to the scale of investment

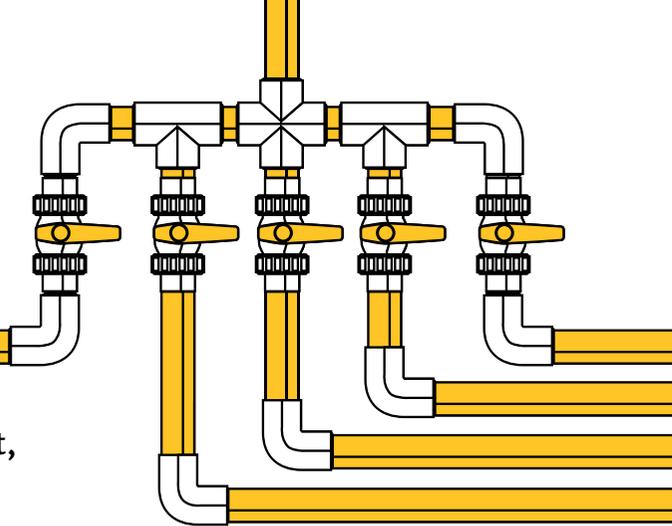
needed, fixing the water infrastructure alone will use up a quarter of those funds, leaving Wellington vulnerable. Businesses are concerned about this infrastructure deficit and a perceived lack of resilience—only 22% of businesses believe our region is prepared for a major earthquake.<sup>xii</sup>

Businesses across a range of industries were aspirational about the greening of the city. However, many echoed similar concerns around supercharging sustainable development in a city where so much critical investment is needed. We heard that bureaucratic tension has hindered both Council and the business community from its transition to a low-emission local economy. Businesses are energised by the opportunity to move towards a circular economy, develop denser housing and invest in a reliable transport system.

Those we spoke to agree with the Climate Change Commission's recent recommendations that stress the need for denser CBDs, where changes to urban form play a critical role to unlock deep emissions reductions over the long term. Ensuring regulatory settings allow for increased density and better use of existing infrastructure have flow-on effects on emissions reductions through shifts in transport modes and the overall liveability of a city.

Getting the basics right and providing much-needed infrastructure provides businesses with the security they need to invest—assurance that the road outside won't be dug up, their waste will be collected on time, and the building they work in is safe.

Our recommendations in this section focus on a clear infrastructure plan for the city, offering certainty in rates rises, forming a dedicated transport organisation for the region, and a plan to collaborate with industry to incentivise densification.



## Recommendations

### 1

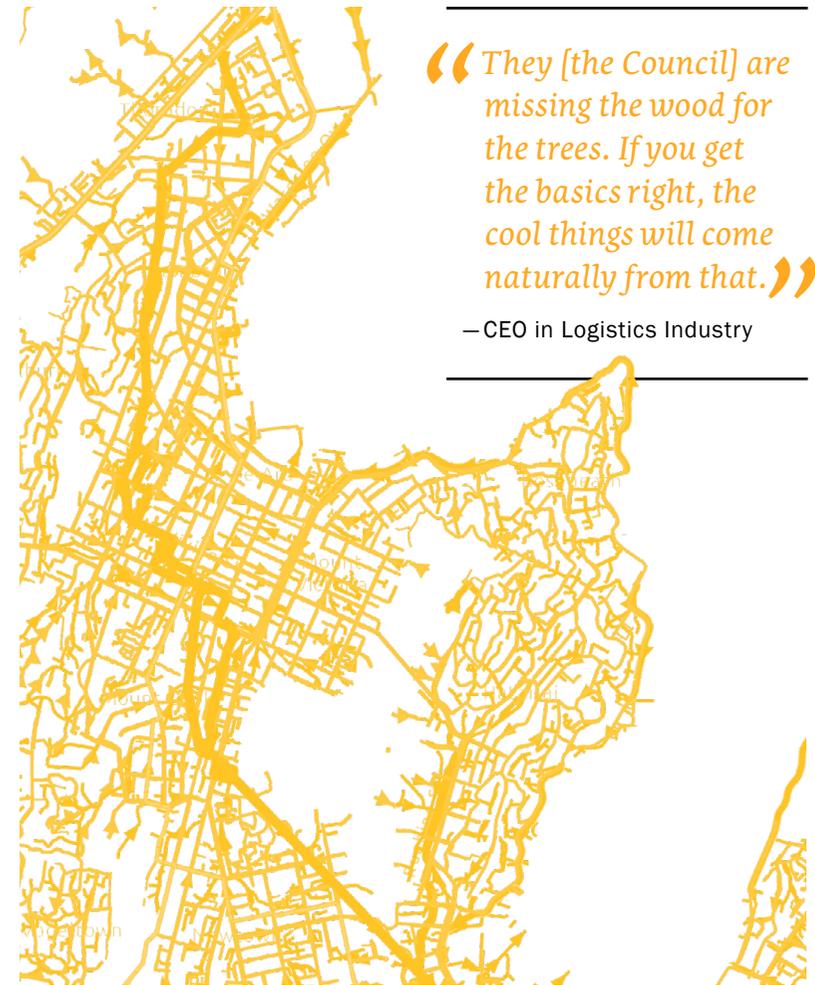
**The first 100 days of the Council term should prioritise key infrastructure investment, with restraint shown toward new projects until existing challenges in water, transport and waste management are being remediated.**

The overwhelming ask of business was investment in getting the basics right. The first 100 days of the next term should be focused on mapping and addressing Wellington's critical wounds. Once identified, the funding mandate of the Council going forward should be orientated towards prioritisation of these projects above all others. Council spending should be reviewed to ensure delivery of this core infrastructure.

### 2

**From the next rating review forward, Council should signal rates rises which are sustainable for businesses to offer them certainty around cost pressures.**

There was a resounding understanding from business that the much-needed improvements articulated above will be costly and time intensive. We heard from the business community that they are ready to invest, but they want to see a clear plan from Council with regards to rates rises to give business certainty. Currently business feels the rating increases are out of step with actual Council delivery, while other pressures, such as insurance increases, push up the cost of doing business and function as effective rates increases themselves.



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*“ They [the Council] are missing the wood for the trees. If you get the basics right, the cool things will come naturally from that. ”*

– CEO in Logistics Industry

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Wellington Water Map

## Recommendations Continued

### 3

**Within the next term, Council should move to divest responsibility for transport infrastructure and operations from GWRC to a separate entity, whose mandate is to prioritise the *reliability* of transport.**

The existing public transport network is failing to deliver for Wellingtonians. We heard from business that an unreliable public transport network is already contributing to labour challenges. The reduction in CBD parking without a viable alternative to make it into the city has made transport even less reliable. Here, once again, hard choices are required—and reliability should be prioritised. People need to know they can

get to work on time, and we should be willing to sacrifice cheap public transport to deliver reliable buses and trains.

The transport network is an asset that is being poorly managed with no entity being held to account. It needs to divest this responsibility to an organisation that has tunnel vision for better and more reliable transport outcomes. Auckland Transport is a local example of this done well—and has driven a large uptake in public transport.<sup>xiii</sup> Let's Get Wellington Moving, a source of enduring concern for business, is only one part of a tangled dysfunctional strategy that will benefit from the accountability of a single body.

### 4

**Within its first 100 days, Council should outline a plan to prioritise and incentivise rapid CBD densification, in partnership with Central Government and industry. This should include rates rebates, targeted rates on underutilised properties, joint Government funding and the use of innovative funding mechanisms.**

As rents within Wellington soar to the highest in the country, Council has said much and done little to incentivise denser development in the CBD. Dense developments should be centred around liveable precincts, so people can live where they work. This also draws more people into the city and is good for business.

Densification is the foundation of sustainable and affordable cities. What we heard from business was that Council needs to spend less time consulting on heritage zoning, and more time asking developers, “what do you need from us to make this happen?”

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“Wellingtonians understand there isn't a quick fix to our infrastructure troubles, they just want a plan to be decided on. Everyone understands it will take time and money.”

—Partner in Leading Law Firm

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# A World-Class Capital City

**Wellington’s capital city status is a mixed bag for business. Government spending insulates us from downturns and keeps money flowing into the economy. But it currently limits our success, as government competes for talent and defines our reputation.**

Other capitals around the world have managed to carve out their own identity as a city, not just a seat of government. Think of Paris, Tokyo, Washington, or Berlin. What do these world-class Capitals have in common, beyond being the centre of Government?

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“Capitals in Europe stand out because they are culturally rich, ethnically diverse and economically prosperous.”

– Leader in the Hospitality Industry

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Each of these cities has its own challenges, but each has its own identity. They tie their distinct national characteristics in with leading businesses to create quality

shopping, hospitality, events, and iconic art institutions. Capitals showcase the best of a nation’s cultures, successes, and triumphs—Wellington should be that for Aotearoa New Zealand.

Business leaders told us that right now they feel the operations of the Government play a disproportionately large role in defining the city. Being the seat of Government can be a major advantage but should not overshadow or define the culture of the city. Wellington has deep experience in creating a city where the capital is a constituent part—but not all—of its success. Business can help rebalance this. From finance to fashion, entertainment to eateries and business to arts, business has created a city where if people leave, they want to come back.

Capitals are tourism destinations, as well as home to national leaders in every sector. Wellington differs from what many would consider a world-class Capital, especially for our business leaders. We heard of the considerable love and passion for Wellington that the business community holds, and through working in partnership between business, councils, and Government business believes we can regain our status as a world-leading capital.

Our recommendations focus on building precincts that tie Wellington together and showcasing the best of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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“It is a place you go to be with other people.”

– Leader in Property

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## Recommendations

### 5

**Within its first 100 days, Council should work with business to create a precinct plan for the city—linking the stadium, Lambton Quay, waterfront, and Courtenay Entertainment Precinct.**

Businesses told us that they want to see a city connected with the clear precincts that we see in world-class Capitals. We have the opportunity to build upon the Laneway Project which enabled iconic Wellington businesses such as Fix and Fog, Wellington Chocolate Factory and Golding's to make their mark on our city. Businesses say a precinct plan is a step in the right direction and can prevent isolated islands within the city as we see with Wellington Stadium, which lacks the businesses around it to capitalise on its role in the city.

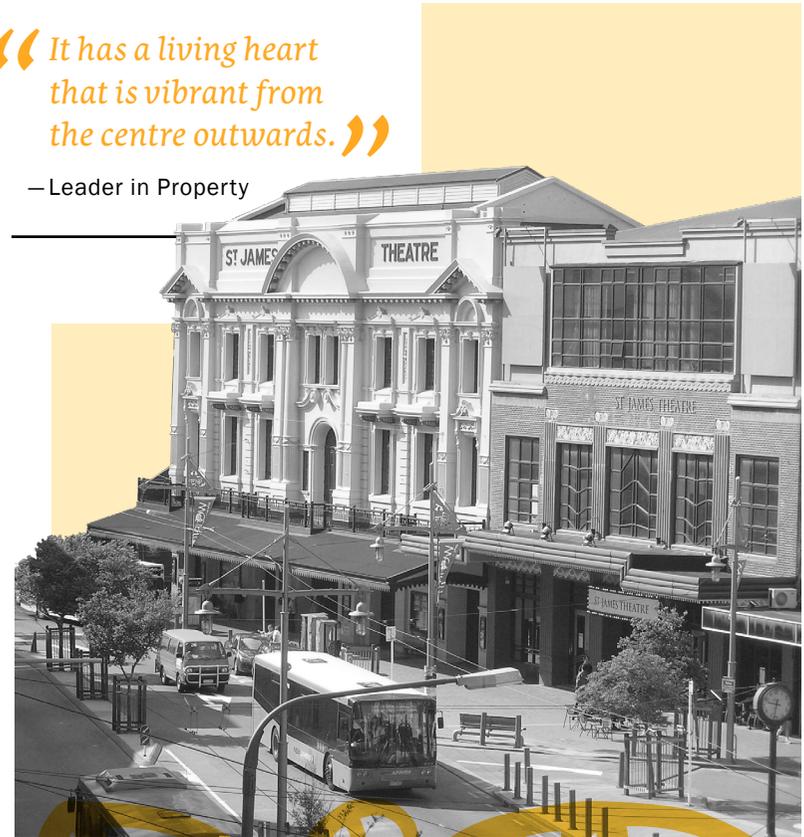
### 6

**Council should position Wellington as the national home of Māori and Pasifika business success and cultural celebration through a commitment to hosting events, showcasing performances, and partnering with Māori and Pasifika business groups.**

Businesses told us that they want New Zealand's capital city to showcase the best of our diverse nation. Creating a home that showcases the success of Māori and Pasifika business success is core to achieving this vision. We have the opportunity with our waterfront, Te Papa, Te Wharewaka and the upcoming Fale Malae to create a showcase of Aotearoa New Zealand and the many successes that sit in our communities nationwide.

*“It has a living heart that is vibrant from the centre outwards.”*

— Leader in Property



# Council, Governance & Structures

**Council and councillors should provide the foundation and strategic direction for a successful city. The view of business is clear: neither of these are being achieved.**

There is a lack of trust between Council and business, as policy implementation grinds to a halt through consultation gridlock and paralysis by analysis. There is a view that internal Council politics has put itself in the way of good outcomes for Wellingtonians. Engagement with Council at any level is challenging, and the impact of consultations is unclear. The role of WellingtonNZ was questioned numerous times as was the clarity of its mandate.

Business leaders are concerned that the greater Wellington region is held back by too many Councils, each focused on their own agenda and failing to find alignment. The region is interconnected in more ways than just the work commute. People do not live in a 'territorial authority' they live in a place, and that place cuts across Council boundaries.

The relationship between Council and the region's business leaders needs to be fixed.

Business has been undervalued. They pay a rates multiplier of 3.7 times that of a residential property of the same value. If you take this differential approach into an everyday setting, where a resident would pay \$5 for a flat white, a business would pay \$18.50 without any increase in value or quality.

Business pays 44% of Wellington's rates yet owns just 15% of Wellington's property value. The benefits they receive do not match the high share of rates they pay. Despite this, Business is generally willing to tolerate the highest differential in the country if they can see a clear return on their investment.

Collaboration is the gateway to success, and this is greatly lacking in Wellington. Business sees that Council, Central Government, and industry sit in their own silos and talk past one another. But these sectors must come together to work for Wellington and get the city thriving again.

Our recommendations focus on a phased approach to amalgamation, clarifying WellingtonNZ's role, and improving the way Council collaborates with business.

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*“We need to break the silos of central Government, local Government and business.”*

— Director in IT Industry

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## Recommendations

### 7

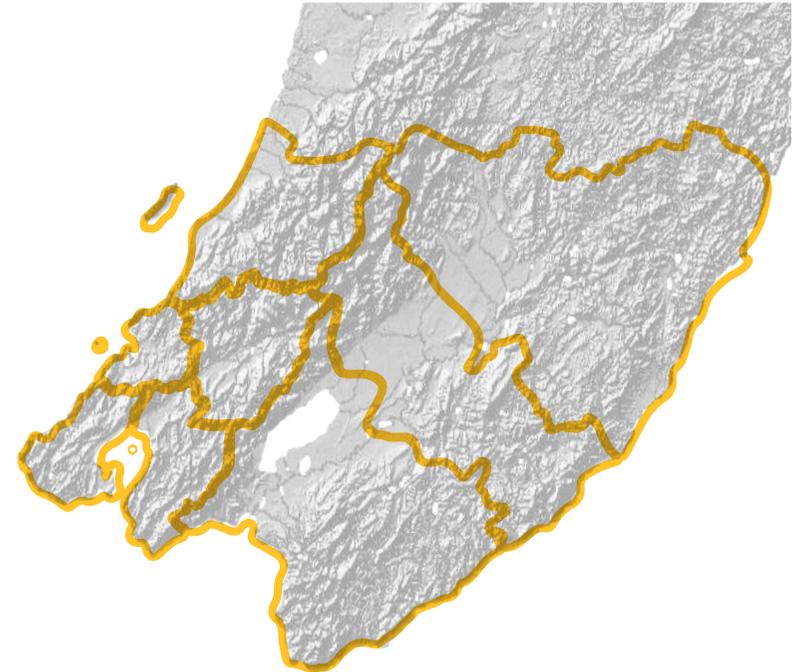
**Council should transition towards the phased amalgamation of public services and Wellington, Porirua, and Hutt Councils over time.**

Businesses were clear that the time is fast approaching for the amalgamation conversation to restart in our region, especially for the metros of Wellington City, Porirua, Hutt City and Upper Hutt. This process has already begun in many areas behind the scenes and echoes our recommendation for one transport entity across the region. We believe this work needs to pick up pace with the end goal of being one united Wellington Council.

### 8

**Council should clarify WellingtonNZ's mandate by introducing KPIs based on economic growth and business success.**

Business leaders told us that the role of WellingtonNZ is not as clear as it could be. Its mandate and structure are also perceived to be complex and cumbersome. If our city is going to thrive, it needs an economic development agency that is fit for purpose, has strong ties with the region's businesses and works in step with others.



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*“There is no weighting of business into Council's decision making, even when they consult, they say they will take it on board but then they just do their own thing.”*

– CEO of Wellington Business

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## Recommendations Continued

### 9

**Council should establish a dedicated business representative that acts as the link between Council and business with the position funded directly out of commercial rates. To ensure independence and accountability, the business representative should be appointed by a wider business advisory council, comprised of leading members of the Wellington business community.**

As mentioned before in this report, business is prepared to pay higher rates if it can see a clear return on investment. We heard that other cities, such as Dublin, have been able to provide this through a funded position for a business liaison manager or similar. They act as the voice for business internally and be a lightning rod for good ideas from the business community. To support such a liaison, Council should establish a business advisory council to offer further input, and ensure the representative remains accountable to the business community.

### 10

**Council should report quarterly on the additional value received by business from the higher rates differential.**

Business leaders are concerned that they do not know what their rates are being spent on that directly benefits them as businesses. Outside of core Council services such as water, waste, roads, parks and recreation, business leaders would like to see what their return on investment is from their higher rates to give them more confidence in their city's leadership. It is often claimed that businesses are charged higher rates because they use more Council services. A quarterly report on the additional value received by businesses would help show operators what they are paying for and why.

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“Council doesn't think in partnership with business.”

—CEO in the Hospitality Industry

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# A Place Where Talent Wants to Live

Wellington has been hit hard by labour and skills shortages. Almost all of the businesses we spoke to believe Wellington is in a uniquely challenging position trying to attract and retain talent due to the declining affordability, safety, and liveability of the city.

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“There are other jobs in the city that need to be provided for. The ‘non-glamorous’ careers aren’t advocated enough.”

— Leader in Industry Association

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Many of these challenges have been outlined above, such as the need for a reliable transport network and a denser, more affordable CBD. Businesses told us that their battle to retain staff is no longer just Wellington vs Auckland, it’s Wellington vs the world. We heard of staff leaving for more affordable and attractive cities, while others have looked at relocating their head offices out of Wellington as it becomes a less desirable place to do business. The Chamber’s July 2022 Business Confidence Survey found 86% of respondents were finding it harder to fill roles than 12 months ago.

Alongside making Wellington an attractive place for young people, we need to broaden our definition of talent. Too often it is classified as university students and young professionals, neglecting those in the hospitality, retail and manufacturing industries who are fundamental to keeping Wellington’s vibrancy alive.

Businesses working within the entertainment precinct are concerned for the safety of their staff and patrons. This is a sentiment shared by 45% of Wellingtonians who no longer feel safe in the city after dark.<sup>xv</sup> This narrative extended to several other businesses who felt they were experiencing heightened levels of antisocial behaviour in the city at all hours of the day. So far businesses felt that the measures to improve the city, make it safer and a more vibrant place to live have been ineffective.

Businesses spoke of countless examples of when Council and the business community had successfully partnered to improve the liveability of cities. In Calgary, for example, the city Council requires all new high-rise developments in the CBD to have a public art component, leading to competition between developers for the most prestigious art. In other cities, they placed targeted incentives to ensure the development of derelict spaces. There are a number of spaces in the Wellington CBD that are ripe for redevelopment.

Our recommendations focus on recapturing our status as the coolest little capital through increasing safety, a collaborative approach to redevelopment of underutilised sites and promoting careers to keep talent in the capital.

## Recommendations

### 11

**Council and Central Government should urgently address rampant homelessness and antisocial behaviour in Central Wellington. This should include an increased police presence in the central city, improved protections for CBD businesses and employees, and efforts to find appropriate, long-term accommodation for rough sleepers.**

Businesses want young people to be safe while enjoying the arts and entertainment. In light of increased crime and violence in the CBD, businesses felt that Central Government has a role to play in ensuring the area encompassing Courtenay Place, Cuba Street and the Michael Fowler Centre is a safe and attractive one. The reputation of Wellington having an unsafe nightlife culture is one that drives away talent and adds to the daily struggle of running a business.

### 12

**Council should provide incentives to develop derelict sites and underutilised properties in the CBD.**

Businesses spoke about the impact of the derelict buildings throughout the CBD and the missed opportunities for development such as Molly Malones. To bring vibrancy into the city these derelict buildings need to be redeveloped – whether it be for accommodation, entertainment, or retail. Council needs to partner with those invested in the rebuilds of some of our major sites through a pragmatic and timely consenting process and targeted incentives.

### 13

**Council, in partnership with WellingtonNZ, should engage in a targeted campaign showcasing the wide range of careers that can be started and fostered in Wellington.**

Businesses expressed concern about the traditional definition of talent and that their industries were being left behind. Industries that are categorised as ‘less skilled’ are not promoted to the same extent as university and graduate jobs. Failure to promote these industries fails to recognise that not every person wants to pursue a professional career and the opportunities that exist to be successful in other industries. The concern for employing young talent exists for both skilled and less skilled industries.



*“The private sector struggles because it competes with the public sector and market rates are driven by big fish with the deepest pockets which small businesses can’t compete with.”*

— CEO in the Insurance Industry

# Accountable Government

## Recommendation

### 14

**The Council should produce an independent “State of Business” report annually. This report should outline its progress against these recommendations and the city’s business growth.**

Those who contributed to this report would welcome the opportunity to meet with Council within a year of publication to follow up on our recommendations. As a significant stakeholder and Council funder, the business community stand ready to hold the incoming Council to account and to help it succeed on behalf of all Wellingtonians.

Looking forward, the Council should improve accountability to its business ratepayers, producing an annual report into business in the city, its performance against these recommendations, and examining the barriers to the city’s business growth. To maximise accountability, such a report should be conducted independently.



# Sources

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- xi Wellington Town Hall Image by Michal Klajban**  
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- xii Wellington Chamber of Commerce, Election 2020 Report**  
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- xiii AT Metro patronage report, monthly patronage data from July 2005 to June 2022**  
<https://at.govt.nz/about-us/reports-publications/at-metro-patronage-report/>  
**Note:** Dec 2010 (year AT formed) ended in 4,382.6 (thousands to decimal point). By Nov 2019 it had increased to 8,971.8. The numbers have seen a downward trend in last few years – can be attributed to the lock downs. They have been increasing steadily since September 2021.
- xiv St James Theatre Image by Bruce Staples**  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St\\_James\\_Theatre.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St_James_Theatre.jpg)
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