

# SWIFTS CREEK FUTURE

## *Regional Context Analysis*

### SUMMARY



# SUMMARY

The Swifts Creek Future project originated through funding from the Local Development Strategy (LDS) as part of the Forestry Transition Initiative announced by the State Government in 2021. This strategic approach employs the Smart Specialisation method to identify potential innovation opportunities within the region, aiming to establish economic stability for the area's future.

Consulting with grassroots stakeholders involves engaging with four primary sectors: Business/ Industry, Education/Research, Government, and Community.

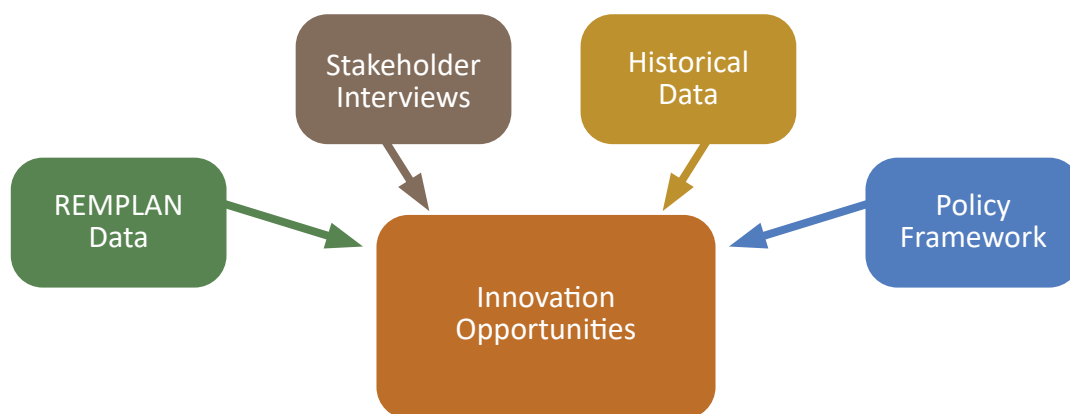


Figure 1: Innovation opportunities are drawn from analysis of several data sets including RemPlan economic data, Interviews with industry, Government, Education and Community, as well as Historical data and policies frameworks.

The project was spearheaded by a dedicated Project Manager, facilitated by East Gippsland Shire as the agency responsible for hosting the funding, and received support from various stakeholders, including the Swifts Creek Community Reference Group (CRG), RMIT University, and DEECA (Department of Environment, Energy & Climate Action). The designated project area encompasses not only Swifts Creek but also neighbouring localities such as Cassilis, Tongio, Bindi, Brookeville, Ensay, Ensay North, Reedy Flat, Tambo Crossing, and Doctors Flat, with Swifts Creek serving as the primary beneficiary of the funding.

The Local Development Strategy was developed with Smart specialisation (S3) strategy at the heart of the methodology. Smart Specialisation is a strategy that helps regions and countries focus on their strengths and unique advantages to foster economic growth and innovation. It involves identifying what a particular area does best, whether it's a specific industry, technology, or skill set, and then concentrating resources and efforts to develop and excel in that area.

This strategy aims to boost competitiveness, create jobs, and enhance the overall economic performance by concentrating on what a region or country is really good at. It's like playing to your strengths in a game - you focus on what you're best at to succeed.

The context analysis signifies the pivotal shift from the initial phase of the Smart Specialisation strategy to the subsequent one. This phase involves a comprehensive examination of economic and community data, which includes interviews with community members and the exploration of historical information. Furthermore, it incorporates a review of existing policies and procedures. This comprehensive analysis provides a holistic perspective that identifies areas with potential for innovation, ultimately bolstering the local economy.



# THE PLACE

The Swifts Creek Future project area lies around 400km northeast of Victoria’s capital and resides within the picturesque Tambo Valley, nestled within the Great Dividing Range. Historically referred to as “Long Gully” from Tongio to Tambo Crossing, this region is traversed by the Great Alpine Road, running parallel to the Tambo River.

This project encompasses 12 towns within its geographical boundaries, including Swifts Creek, Tongio, Bindi, Nunniong, Wentworth, Brookville, Ensay North, Ensay, Doctors Flat, Reedy Flat, Cassilis, and Tambo Crossing. These towns collectively form the Swifts Creek district, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Map of the Swifts Creek district

## Population

	SC District Area	East Gippsland Shire (EGS)	% of SC District to EGS
<b>ABS 2022 Estimated Residential Population:</b>	615	48,922	1.2
ABS 2021 Census Place of Usual Residence Population:	590	48,715	1.2
Land Area (ha):	159,963.110	2,093,950.160	7.6
Census Population Density (persons / ha):	0.004	0.023	-
Gross Regional Product (\$M):	\$41.774	\$2,812.531	1.4
Per Hectare Gross Regional Product (\$):	\$261	\$1.343	-
Per Capita Gross Regional Product (\$K):	\$70.803	\$57.734	-
Per Worker Gross Regional Product (\$K):	\$153.579	\$150.774	-

Table 1: Statistical information for Swifts Creek Future area in comparison to East Gippsland Shire as a whole.

## Employment

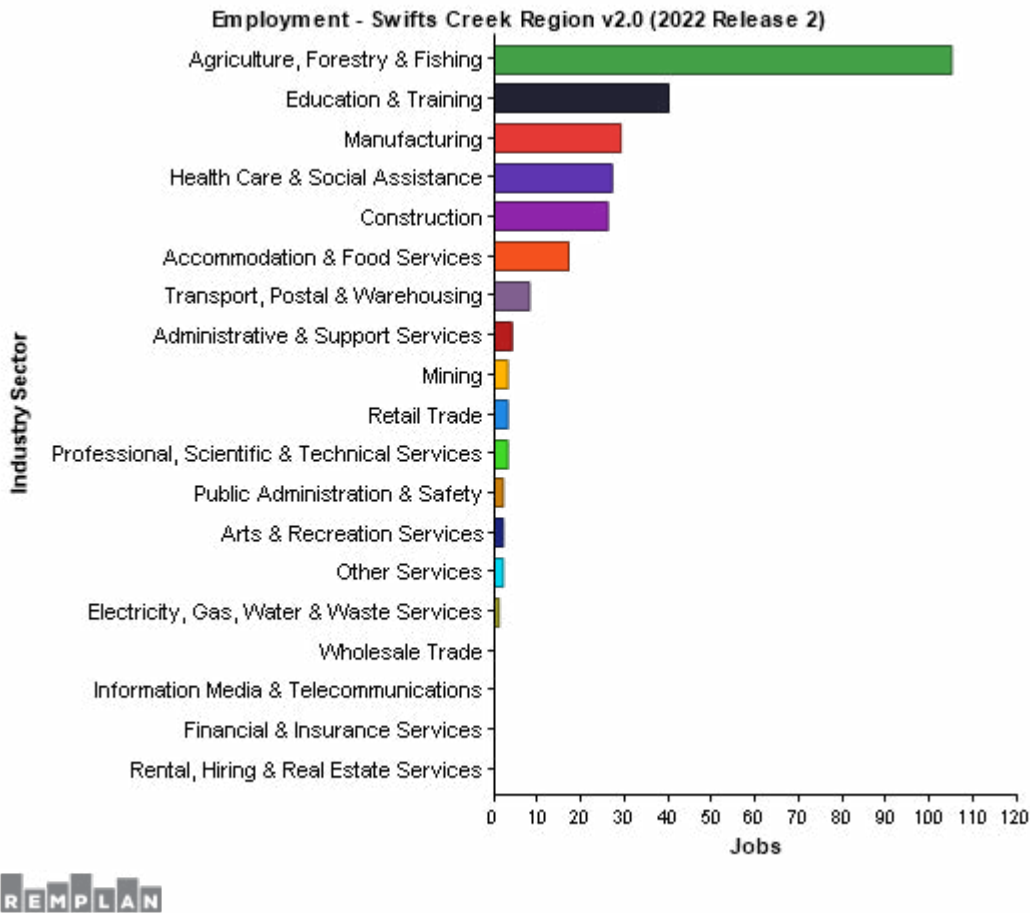


Figure 3: REMPLAN Employment data for Swifts Creek Region

Within the project area, employment primarily centres around Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, collectively constituting nearly 40 per cent of all jobs, employing approximately 105 individuals. This stands in stark contrast to the broader East Gippsland Shire, where this sector encompasses only about 10 per cent of employment. The substantial disparity underscores the pivotal role of agriculture, forestry, and fishing within the project area. Additionally, other significant sectors of employment include Education and Training (comprising 40 jobs or 15 per cent), Manufacturing (29 jobs or 11 per cent), Healthcare and Social Assistance (27 jobs or 9.9 per cent), and Construction (26 jobs or 9.6 per cent).

## Key Sectors

In conclusion, the industry sectors which are the key drivers of the district's economy in terms of regional exports, employment, value-added and local expenditure on goods and services (backward linkages) are detailed in Table 2.

Industry Sector	Backward Linkages	Exports	Employment	Value-Added	Total
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Mining		✓			1
Manufacturing		✓	✓	✓	3
Electricity, Gas, Water & Waste Services					0
Construction	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Wholesale Trade					0
Retail Trade					0
Accommodation & Food Services					0
Transport, Postal & Warehousing	✓				1
Information Media & Telecommunications					0
Financial & Insurance Services					0
Rental, Hiring & Real Estate Services				✓	1
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services					0
Administrative & Support Services					0
Public Administration & Safety	✓				1
Education & Training		✓	✓	✓	3
Health Care & Social Assistance			✓		1
Arts & Recreation Services	✓				1
Other Services					0

Table 2: Key Propulsive Sectors

## History

The historical narrative of this region revolves around the evolution of industries from gold mining to agriculture and timber harvesting, shaping the community's identity. Challenges like declining mining, population shifts, and changing educational landscapes spurred adaptations like the consolidation of schools and the construction of the Swifts Creek Sawmill.

Resilience amid adversity characterises the community, marked by unity during natural disasters like fires, floods, and droughts. The significant 1997 drought prompted innovative farming practices and diversification, exemplified by Nullamunjie's successful olive grove in challenging terrains. Farms shifted from single-focus production to diversified operations, adapting breeds and introducing intensive feeding practices, optimising sales strategies, and exploring soil improvement techniques.

This adaptability isn't confined to agriculture. Local businesses like Swifts Creek Bakery and The Junction Hotel showcased how strategic shifts in location and renovations has contributed to small steps in revitalising the town, driving increased traffic and vibrancy. These instances highlight how small changes within a close-knit community can yield substantial positive impacts, emphasising adaptability, innovation, and collaboration as key themes throughout the region's history.



*Tongio Hotel. Photo courtesy of: Buddah Richards.*



## Policy Framework

The influence of policy frameworks on Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) projects is profound, as these frameworks shape regulations, prioritise strategies, and foster public-private collaborations. They channel resources, promote innovative regulations, align initiatives with overarching goals, encourage partnerships, and set standards for measuring success, creating a structured approach for leveraging a region's strengths for economic and societal advancement.

In East Gippsland's Regional Context Analysis (RCA), numerous local and regional policies and reports were scrutinised, highlighting shared themes, assets, challenges, and strategic directions crucial to the Swifts Creek Future project. Policies like the ARUP Report, Omeo Region Community Plan, and East Gippsland Economic Development Strategy emphasise assets such as primary production, the natural environment, and cultural richness. Challenges encompass infrastructure, technology access, and climate resilience, while strategic trajectories focus on agricultural development, sustainable tourism, and enhanced digital connectivity.

These strategies aim to enhance education accessibility, digital innovation, community wellbeing, diversified production, and tourism promotion, all geared towards fostering growth and resilience. By aligning with these policies cohesively, the region anticipates driving economic prosperity, nurturing vibrant community identity, and ensuring a sustainable future for East Gippsland. The convergence of these policies forms a roadmap poised to propel the region toward sustainable and thriving development, ultimately shaping the outcomes of the Swifts Creek Future project.



Photo courtesy of: Annie Richardson.

## Consultation

The Swifts Creek Community Reference Group played an active role in supporting the Project Manager, offering interview referrals, and contributing to document revisions. This engagement empowered the local community to actively participate in shaping the project's direction and future outcomes. The data collection process aimed to identify perceived assets, challenges, and innovative opportunities within the Swifts Creek district, facilitated through community engagement activities and involvement in local events to broaden participation.

Employing the Smart Specialisation Strategy methodology involved engaging representatives from Government, Research/Education, Business/Industry, and the Community. Interviews with 78 participants, representing 13% of the district's population, were crucial in crafting the Regional Context Analysis report. However, the challenge of involving younger individuals, particularly those under 35, arose as many perceived such projects as the responsibility of older generations.

### Age Distribution of Interviewees

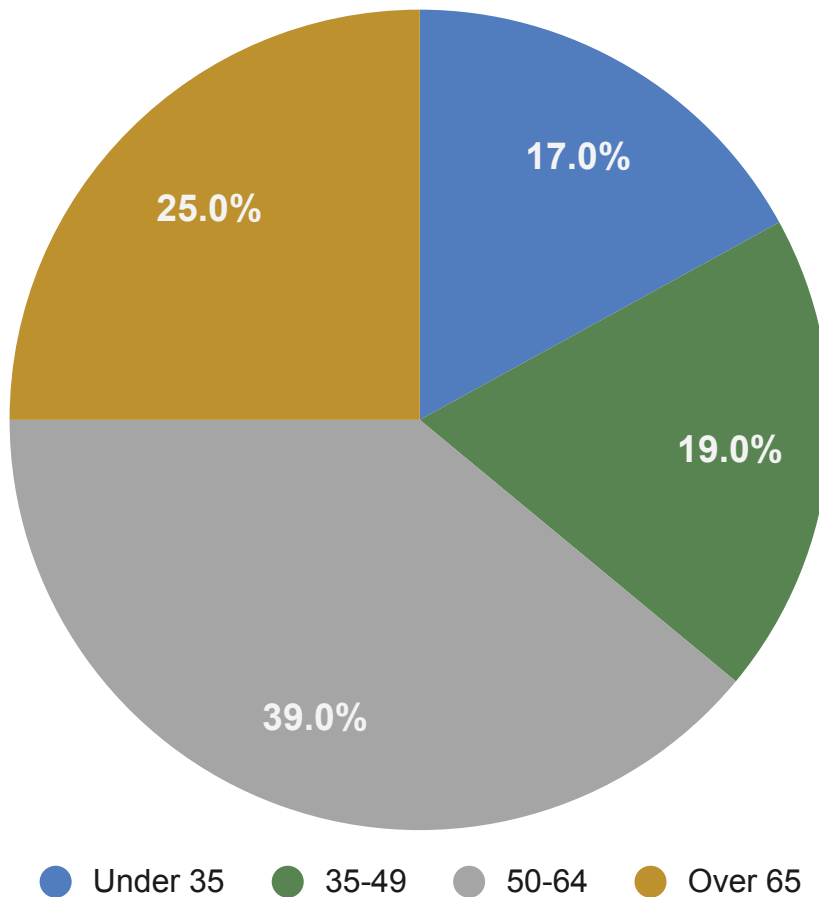


Figure 4: Age distribution of respondents



The interviews revealed diverse perspectives on the district's primary challenges across age groups. Younger families highlighted issues like inadequate housing and activities, while older generations were more concerned about transport accessibility and essential services. Despite efforts to engage a balanced representation from various sectors, challenges were faced in securing more interviews with education and research sector representatives due to limited presence in the area. The breakdown of interviewees by geographical location, depicted in Figure 6, illustrates the number of individuals interviewed in different areas compared to their respective population sizes.

## Interview sample by industry sector

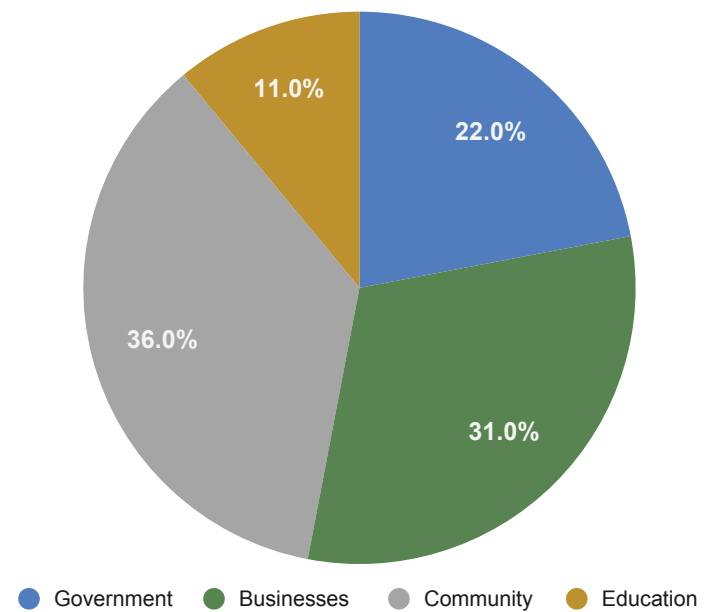


Figure 5: Quadruple helix respondents

Figure 6 (below) displays the breakdown of interviewees by geographical location. The blue bars represent the population size in each area. The green line on the right axis corresponds to the number of individuals interviewed from these locations.

## Interviews conducted by geographical area

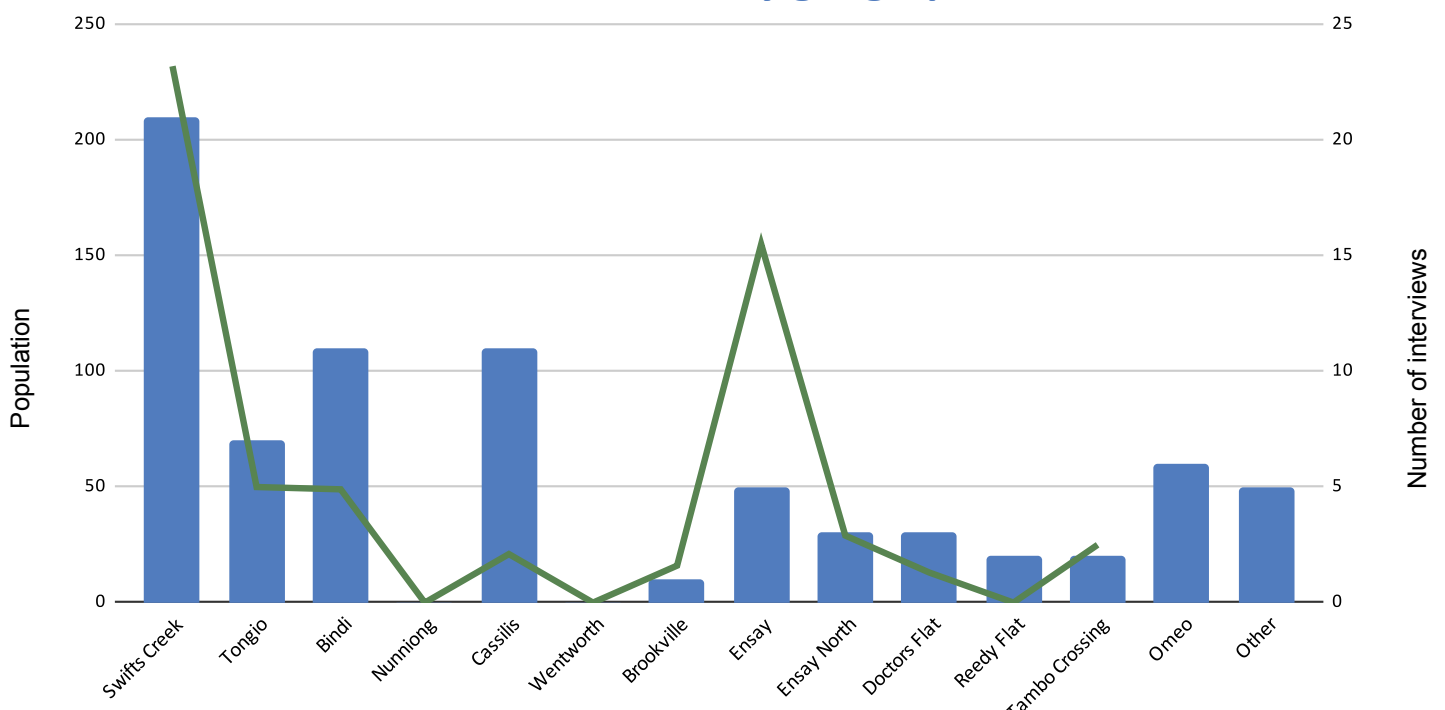


Figure 6: Representation of interview participants from each area compared with total population

## Assets

In the context of a Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) methodology project, a key asset refers to a significant and distinctive strength, resource, or advantage that a region possesses. These assets are pivotal elements or characteristics within the region that can be leveraged to foster innovation, economic growth, and competitive advantage. Identifying and understanding these assets is crucial as it forms the foundation for the strategic direction of the project.

Understanding and capitalising on these key assets is integral to the Smart Specialisation Strategy, as it guides the development of targeted initiatives and investments that align with the region's strengths and competitive advantages, ultimately driving sustainable growth and prosperity.

Figure 7 demonstrates the top ten assets identified throughout all the interviews. With farming industry at number one, very closely followed by the natural landscape and trails.

### Percentage of interviewees to identify asset

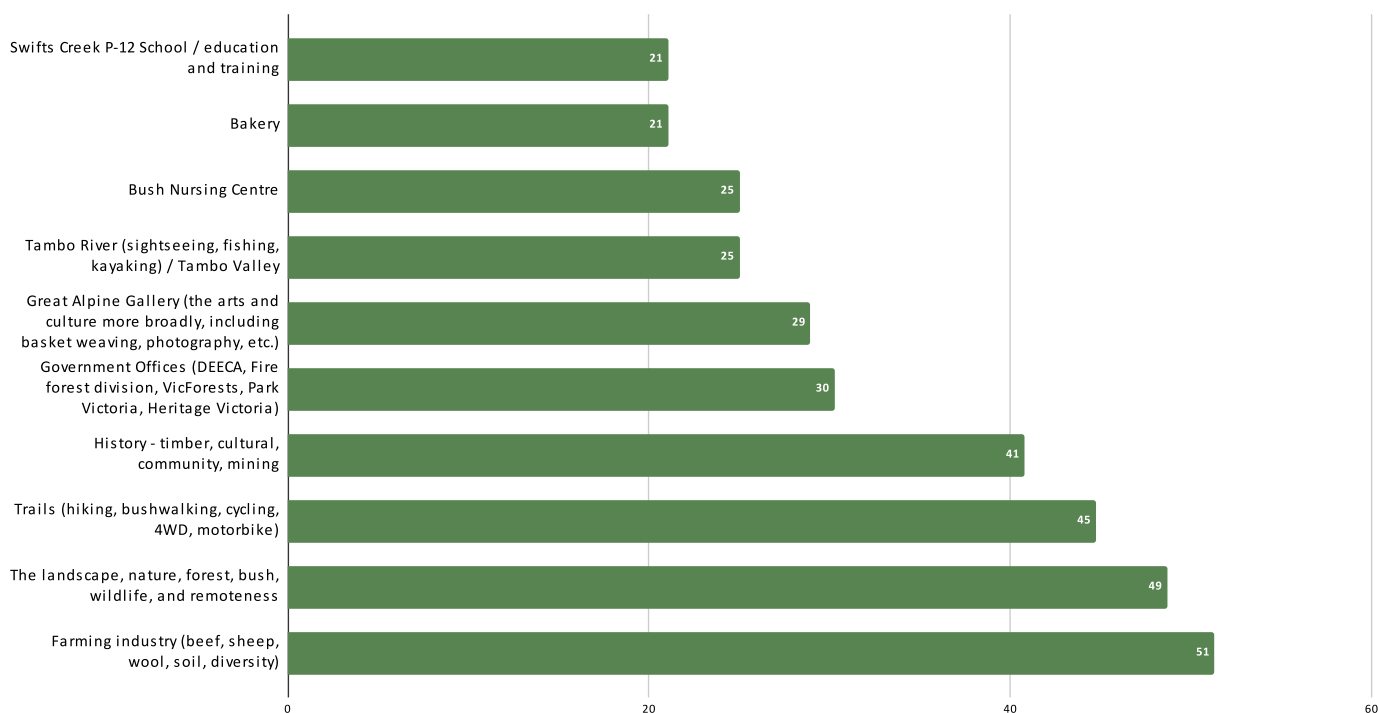


Figure 7: Top ten assets identified by interviewees

## Challenges

In contrast to the assets, a challenge refers to a significant obstacle, limitation, or problem that hinders the region's economic growth, innovation potential, or overall development. Challenges represent areas that require attention, improvement, or innovative solutions to enable the region to overcome barriers and enhance its competitiveness. Addressing these challenges is a critical aspect of the S3 methodology. It involves identifying, analysing,

and strategising solutions to mitigate or overcome these obstacles. By acknowledging and tackling these challenges effectively, the S3 project aims to create a roadmap for targeted actions and investments that support the region's growth, innovation, and competitiveness.

Figure 8 demonstrates the top 12 challenges identified through all interviews that participants saw as barriers to progress and innovation within the region.

### Challenges identified by interviewees

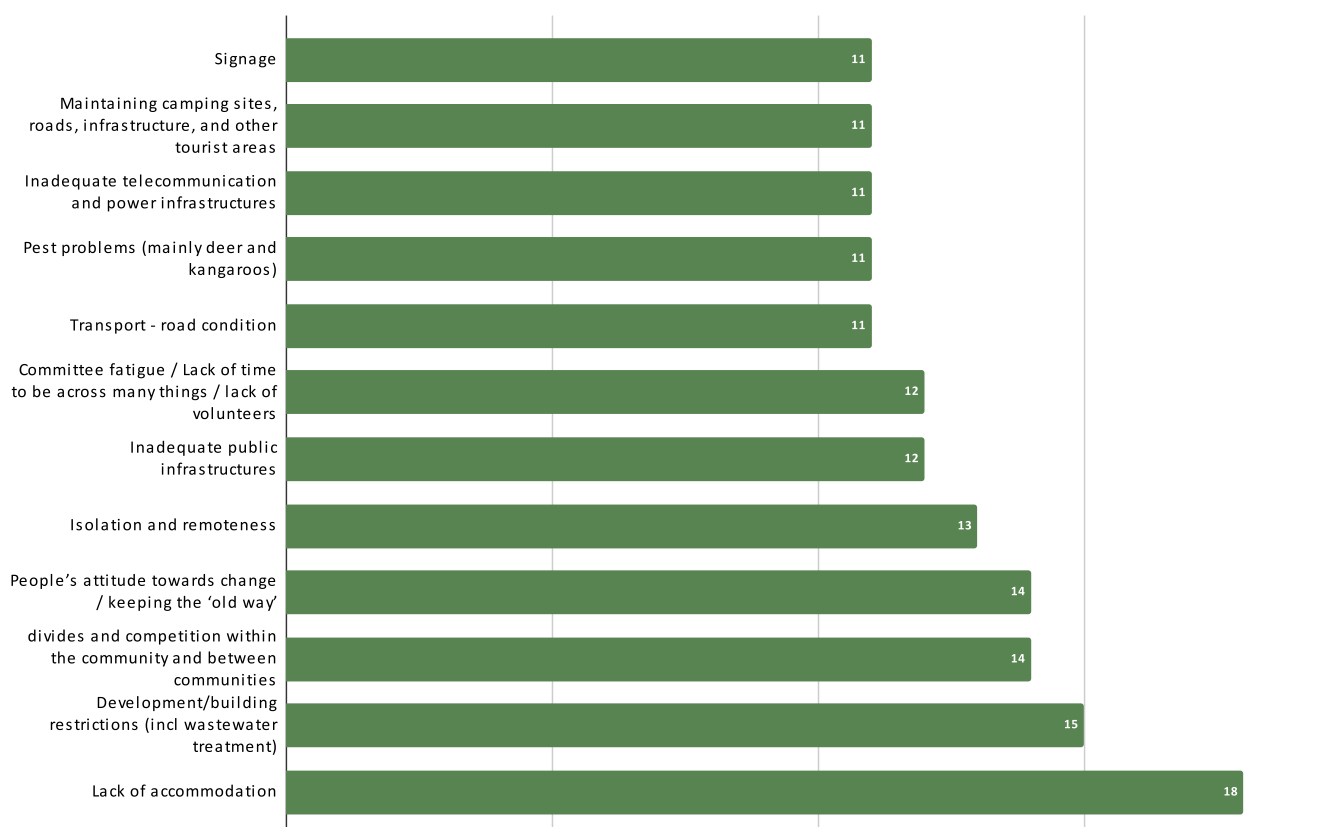


Figure 8: Top 12 challenges identified by interviewees



# INNOVATION OPPORTUNITIES

Building on the data and insights gathered about the Swifts Creek district and from the consultation process, this concluding section of the report presents several potential innovation opportunities worth exploring further. These will be discussed in the Entrepreneurial Discovery workshops scheduled for early 2024. It's important to note that not all of these identified opportunities may lead to concrete projects; their development will depend on the outcomes of these workshops. The opportunities identified from the analysis include:

- » Nature-based recreation and tourism
- » Education & Skills Centre
- » Multifunctional Tourism Centre
- » Value-add primary industry
- » Oram Estate Independent Living
- » Soil and Cultivar Research

For each opportunity, we outline the basic proposition, followed by an analysis of key assets. This helps in identifying the potential competitive advantage each opportunity may offer if further developed. Additionally, we present a brief overview of potential challenges associated with each opportunity. The section on each innovation opportunity concludes with a description of the respective workshop set to explore these ideas in more detail.

## Nature based recreation & tourism

### Basic Proposition

The Swifts Creek district is characterised by an abundance of natural assets that lends itself to significant nature-based tourism development based on outdoor recreation.

### Key Assets

The region's stunning natural landscapes and profound historical roots are universally acknowledged as its most significant assets, as emphasised by most interviewees. For families, this provides a unique chance to explore the area, fostering a deeper connection to the outdoors and reap numerous health benefits, all while gaining a deeper understanding of the region's unique heritage. Notable sites such as the Jirnee water race, King Cassilis historical area, and Nunniong High Plains, hold significant potential for further development by offering a wide array of recreational opportunities, such as camping, travel, birdwatching (twitching), photography, hiking, horseback riding and cycling. In addition, the region boasts well-established driving tours like the Nunniong Road and Dargo

Road, which continue to draw numerous visitors as identified in the report. These scenic routes provide a strong foundation on which to build the district's tourism industry. The Tambo Rivers offers a diverse range of outdoor activities. It's a hotspot for fishing enthusiasts and ideal for rafting and kayaking; with an increasing number of mountain bike tracks and trails, like those in Omeo and Ensay, underscoring the appeal of nature-based tourism.

### Competitive Advantage

Every nature-based tourism activity in the region is designed so that participants can return to their starting point without needing to retrace their steps. Additionally, these activities offer the flexibility to begin from various locations and incorporate other recreational and sightseeing options, allowing visitors to tailor their experiences to their personal preferences. The existing infrastructure in place means that enhancing and expanding nature-based tourism can be achieved with relatively lower financial and physical investment. This not only benefits those directly involved in developing these opportunities but also opens up avenues for local educational and skill development in related areas such as health, wellbeing, maintenance, and management.

### Challenges

The key challenges in developing these initiatives is engaging land managers and securing financial support for projects on public land. It's crucial to not only promote and facilitate access to these areas but also to safeguard their fragile ecological balance. At present, there's a notable lack of signage and mapping. However, with careful planning and strategic development of the nature-based tourism sector, these issues — both environmental protection and improved signage — can be effectively addressed. Addressing land-use challenges requires further exploration.

### Workshop Design Principles

The first step involves evaluating the progress, achievements, and future plans of existing projects in the district. The workshop will focus on exploring opportunities for eco-tourism packages and tours, emphasising the importance of collaboration among operators of various nature-based activities. Engaging public landowners, key community groups, tour operators, and development businesses from the outset is crucial for identifying required resources

and identifying potential barriers. This collaborative approach will be a central element of the workshop.

## Education & Skills Centre

### Basic Proposition

At the core of all identified innovation opportunities lies the need for a local workforce with the right skills.

### Key Assets

As identified in the preceding sections, Swifts Creek has an established foundation in education and training, providing essential support to families throughout the project area. A broad range of industry and business skills are evident within the district, these can be harnessed to expand both accredited and non-accredited educational and training opportunities. Leveraging existing models and learning opportunities, the district is well-positioned to grow in this area. The anticipated diversification in business sectors offers further prospects for learning, skill enhancement, and retraining, particularly in areas like horticulture, beekeeping, forest and land management, business development, marketing, and financial skills. Establishing a localised resource and business hub represents a strategic investment for the region's economy. This initiative has the potential to drive economic growth, create employment, foster entrepreneurship, and bolster both resilience and sustainability.

### Competitive Advantage

In recent times, education and training providers have revisited their approaches, strengthening their connections with regional communities. A key focus for growth across regional Australia, including Swifts Creek, involves aligning educational programs with the needs of local industries. While not exclusive to this district, systematically expanding educational offerings to meet future business requirements also plays a significant role in enhancing both educational and employment opportunities within the region. This approach can ultimately attract families to settle in the district permanently. The introduction of international educators to Swifts Creek has brought a wealth of diverse skills and experiences, enriching the local educational landscape and fostering opportunities for knowledge exchange. These elements collectively lay a robust foundation for continued development in the region.

### Challenges

Securing support from the Department of Education and Training (DET) to provide opportunities within the current educational infrastructure is essential. While achievable, past experiences have shown that ensuring a stable workforce of teaching professionals and support staff in the area is a significant challenge. Overcoming this requires further investigation. Additionally, the availability of suitable accommodation in the district is a key constraint in both retaining and expanding a skilled workforce. Lastly, the technology and connectivity infrastructure necessary for online learning, accommodating shifts in educational delivery methods, require significant upgrades.

### Workshop Design Principles

The workshop will map the existing knowledge provision and delivery methods that can be shared within the district. It will also identify the gaps in supply in light of the anticipated industry growth and diversification. This is expected to result in a shared vision and strategy to create an education and training centre capable of meeting the future needs of the district. Crucial to this workshop's success is the participation of key stakeholders, including the Department of Education and Training (DET), Gippsland TAFE, Federation University, local business owners, and community groups.

## Multifunctional Tourism Centre

### Basic Proposition

Swifts Creek has a strong history that is underplayed and lacks a dedicated physical place for community interaction.

During the interviews, a recurring theme emerged: a dearth of historical and cultural knowledge, coupled with a noticeable gap in available activities within the area. Local families often seek destinations outside the local area for entertainment and enrichment.

### Key Assets

The thriving art community in Swifts Creek plays a vital yet often understated role in supporting various local initiatives. Recognising this, there is an opportunity to establish a communal focal point: an interactive space designed to encompass and showcase the district's rich history, both in terms of industry and culture, as well as its flourishing art scene, akin to the installation pieces along the Poets Walk. In addition to providing a much-needed community place, it would create an inviting stop for

visitors to the region, promoting both engagement and stay.

The community's resilience and its rich history, including the presence of nearby historical sites, present numerous opportunities for creative and innovative initiatives. Within this cultural ecosystem, the vibrant creative community plays a pivotal role in nurturing these prospects. The strength of this community lies not only in its artistic endeavours but also in its ability to serve as a unifying force. It brings people together, fostering a sense of togetherness and shared purpose. Through integrating artistic expressions, cultural events, and interactive installations, the community can collectively narrate its (his)story, bridging the past with the present and future.

### **Competitive Advantage**

The community's deep appreciation, knowledge and connection to history, the preservation of key sites, and the rich cultural heritage create a unique platform to showcase the vibrancy and dynamism of the district. As such, the centre becomes the embodiment of Swifts Creek's innovation journey.

### **Challenges**

The existing gallery, despite recent renovations, is limited in size and has little scope for further expansion. This makes it less ideal for becoming a centralised hub for historical information, a place where the community and visitors can converge to celebrate, exchange, and access information and activities. Further investigation is needed to determine whether existing spaces can be upgraded to fulfil this vision, or if a new facility needs to be created to accommodate these needs now and into the future.

### **Workshop Design Principles**

The workshop would refine the vision for the centre and investigate its viability in terms of need and outcomes. It will discuss the district's current infrastructure and potential, and map alternative locations if current sites are deemed unsuitable. Ideally the workshop will involve stakeholders from EGSC, community groups, researchers and businesses.

## **Value-add Primary Industry**

### **Basic Proposition**

Swifts Creek can further build on its agribusiness sector and quality produce, increasing the value-add of this industry.

### **Key Assets**

Agriculture, as shown in the data, is the district's most valuable industry. It has the strength to support and grow the economic future of the area. There are a number of active community groups committed to the sector that want to drive improvements in production. This provides the critical mass and expertise to realise this opportunity.

### **Competitive Advantage**

A strong and well-established connection between local producers and hunters forms a solid foundation for driving innovation in the region. Current feasibility studies are exploring the potential for branding locally sourced beef, which, if proven successful, can serve as a model to encompass a wide range of other locally grown products. Given the substantial meat production in the area, there is ample potential to add value to our produce. With the diverse array of goods at our disposal, a unique opportunity emerges to establish a community cafe or culinary centre. This hub could not only showcase our local produce, offering a unique experience for both the community and eco-tourists but also open up new career perspectives for local residents, further bolstering our economy and strengthening community ties.

### **Challenges**

Regulations, locations and investors are all potential barriers to agricultural value-add innovation. The need for collaboration and investment into the potential innovation opportunities can limit the feasibility of some projects. This requires further exploration.

### **Workshop Design Principles**

Identify potential value-add opportunities for the area's produce, including meat processing. Assess their viability and underlying (resource) requirements. To achieve this, industry experts, local producers, hunters, Agriculture Victoria and EGSC as well as community representatives need to participate in the workshop.



## Oram Estate Independent Living

### Basic Proposition

Establishing an independent living facility will support the local economy and provide an exemplar case for healthy ageing and improved quality of life.

### Key Assets

The ageing population of the area supports the need for an independent living facility. Such a facility would enable residents to maintain their independence and stay in their own homes longer, without having to leave their community. The existing health infrastructure in the Bush Nursing Centres and Omeo District Health can support a healthier community and aged population.

### Competitive Advantage

The Oram Estate project has been a consideration within the community for some time. The purchase of the land for development has been realised. Much of the project has been scoped and planned, with the support of an energetic project committee. The project has widespread support from the community.

### Challenges

Planning overlays, development restrictions, and wastewater treatment are potential barriers to the development as well as financial support and opportunities. These require further investigation.

### Workshop Design Principles

Given that the project is well-defined and developed, a further workshop is not necessary. The project is “shovel-ready” and can be submitted for support through the Forestry Transition.

## Soils & Cultivar Research

### Basic Proposition

Swifts Creek has a unique environment for development and research into soil and species improvement.

### Key Assets

The region boasts a diverse array of soils that can accommodate a wide spectrum of plant species, from crops and fodder to olives, horticultural crops, and vineyards. The soil types in the area range from fertile river flats to rocky, acidic soils, and clay-rich terrain. However, the region’s agricultural potential is subject to variability due to the impacts of erosion and climate. Notably, there is a climate shift north of the catchment boundary between Omeo and Swifts Creek allowing for area-specific investigations.

### Competitive Advantage

The range of soil types, acid levels and erosion as well as climates within a small area of country including both the lower valleys and river flat as well the hills, lend themselves well to improvement and variety adaptation. The introduction of olive farming into the area, while not unique in its singularity but unique to this area, demonstrates the ability to adapt the produce to suit the landscape, similarly, varieties of apple and pear were investigated to establish the most appropriate varieties to suit the landscape and climate.

### Challenges

Available land and willing participants in the endeavour, investment, and engagement from academia. Introducing change and alternatives into a historically traditional industry.

### Workshop Design Principles

The workshop will focus on the exploration of soils in the area and potential improvement processes, diversity of species adaptability including orchard varieties, crops, fodder, and fibres. Significant consultation with researchers, industry, and government, with community and business is needed to establish potential options for energy sources and the ultimate service reach and outcomes for the initiative.



Thank you to the communities of the Swifts Creek Future project and all the participants for their contribution and support.

For all the information and analysis please refer to full regional context analysis report.

Cover image: Annie Richardson

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