



Gorge Road Shops Upgrade

Phase 1 Participation and Engagement Findings Report

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Executive Summary

Phase 1 community consultation for the Gorge Road Shopping Strip was designed to gather insights and impressions of the existing Shopping strip. This information will inform the designers, when developing the concept, of the issues and opportunities recognised by the community, traders, and business owners. It will also indicate the appetite for change and the extent of change required to meet community expectations.

A wide spectrum of the community was involved in the consultation, providing comments on Facebook, in person, and through the Engage Whittlesea webpage. Most respondents indicated a desire to change the shopping strip to improve convenience, safety, and aesthetics. Traders and business owners recognised the need to upgrade the streetscape, resolve car parking issues in the area, and the potential for increased exposure; however, they are understandably concerned with the potential disruption to trading during construction.

Background

The City of Whittlesea established *the Town Centre Revitalisation Program 2021-2025* to have a structured approach to revitalising local and neighbourhood centres; the program addressed a key action in the Council Action Plan.

Gorge Road Shops is a high priority site in the *Town Centre Revitalisation Program*, with identified opportunities to improve social spaces, walkability and connectivity, safety, and greening.

Project Overview

The Gorge Road Shops Upgrade is an upgrade of the existing streetscapes to address the opportunities identified in the Town Centre Revitalisation Program. The project is being led by the Parks Development team in the delivery and assisted by the Urban Design and Transport team for strategy and background. The Community Engagement team was key in developing the consultation plan and activities and facilitating the activities.

The project study area is the immediate curtilage around the shopping strip, encompassing the car parks, pedestrian footpaths, landscape, and park interface. The study area, at inception, does not include the entirety of Reid Street Park and is only addressing the car parks within the park.

Purpose

Phase 1 of community consultation was designed to capture the community's impressions of the existing space, how they interact, and what they believe would improve the space and their experience. This early information will inform the design team of existing issues, appetite for change, and how the space functions when developing the design concept.

Methodology

This is the first of three phases of community consultation and engagement.

Engagement activities were separated into two main groups within the community, the local community and traders and business owners.

Digital Platform

Ideas and opinions of Gorge Road shops were predominantly collected through Council's digital engagement platform; on-site pop-ups and drop-ins supplemented these. The physical presence on-site allowed us to raise awareness of the project and start impromptu conversations with the local community.

The engagement webpage was published on 17 March 2022; the webpage had multiple methods for interacting and providing comments, insights and ideas. The most common response form was through the short survey consisting of three questions. The alternative method for involvement was the social pinpoint map, an interactive map of the project site where users could drop a pin and provide specific insights at a particular location. All digital options for feedback were open on 17 March and remained open for 53 days, closing on 8 May 2022.

Interactive Sessions

Virtual Workshop

Virtual Zoom workshops were offered to the broader community, traders, and business owners. The virtual workshop for the broader community was cancelled since no registrations were received. The trader and business owner specific workshop received two registrations on 28 March 2022.

The timing of the workshops could have influenced the low uptake; the broader community workshop offered was after hours in the evening, and the trader workshop was in the morning during business hours.

In-Person

Council Officers facilitated three pop-up events at the shopping strip to capture the community patrons of the businesses. These were spread across weekdays, evenings, and Saturdays to ensure we could talk with a wide array of the community.

Date	Time	Target audience
Friday 1 April	5:30pm to 7:30pm	Evening take-away and restaurant patrons
Wednesday 6 April	9:30am to 1:30pm	Weekday brunch and lunch patrons and clients of professional services.
Saturday 30 April	9:30am to 11:30am	Weekend brunch patrons and cyclist groups

In addition to the pop-ups, Council Officers availed themselves to traders and businesses for in-person discussions. Businesses were contacted, and informed Council Officers would be dropping into their business at specific dates and times.

Date	Time
Wednesday 4 May	11:00am to 12:00pm
Thursday 5 May	3:00pm to 4:00pm

Advertising and Awareness

The engagement web page and activities were advertised across multiple media sources, and traders posted posters in their windows. They had flyers available for interested patrons, and flyers were distributed to the local area within a 400m radius of the shops. In addition, the Community Development Officer for the area raised awareness with direct emails to traders, the schools, and community houses.

Date	Media	Method
18 March	Digital	Staff Matters (internal)
21 March	Digital	Facebook Post
28 March	Digital	Facebook Post

29 March	Digital + Print	Whittlesea Review Ad
29 March	Digital + Print	Whittlesea Review Article
5 April	Digital	Facebook Post
13 April	Digital	Facebook Post
14 April	Digital	Staff Matters (internal)
03 May	Digital + Print	Whittlesea Review Article

Insights and Ideas

Engagement Results

Participation

The consultation activities received widespread involvement with the broader community. The initial Facebook post was highly successful in advertising the consultation, with 1,548 Facebook users interacting with the post and 90 comments. The comments on the post provided an early glimpse at the issues surrounding the Gorge Road Shops and the interest in the project.

The Engage Whittlesea project page received 759 views from 614 unique visitors throughout the consultation period. 122 of the 614 visitors contributed via the social pinpoint map or the survey, with the short survey being the preferred method of feedback, gaining 103 responses.

The majority (70%) of survey responses were from South Morang, which indicates the shopping strip serves a local community.

Engagement activity	Participation	Number of contributions
Facebook Post	1,548	90 Comments, 99 Reactions
Social PinPoint Map	36	56 Posts, 110 Votes
Online Survey	96	103
Online Workshops	2	NA

Face to Face	120 estimated	NA
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Broader Community

In-person engagement activities for the broader community had an estimated 120 interactions throughout three pop-ups. Interactions varied from discussions prompted by the presentation panels to handing out flyers and suggesting a visit to the *Engage Whittlesea* project page. Informal discussions reflected the sentiment made evident in online submissions.

Traders and Business Owners

Traders, business owners, and employees were alerted of the upcoming consultation before it was made public and were encouraged to attend an online workshop, pop-up, or provide comments online. Subsequent offers for traders to make an available time for discussions in person were provided via email and in-person drop-in by Council officers.

Trader/Business	Interaction
Thirtyfold (Café)	Online workshop, Face to Face
Millership and Co (Real Estate)	Face to Face
South Morang Fish and Chips	Face to Face
Convenience Store	Face to Face
Chung San Chinese Restaurant	Face to Face
Noodelicious	Face to Face
Plenty Valley Family Dentist	Face to Face
Ray White Real estate	Face to Face (Spoke with employees)
Northern Mobile Repairs	Face to Face (Spoke with an employee)
OCTEC Employment services	Face to Face (Spoke with an employee)
The Stylish Barber	Face to Face

Lash and Beauty Port	Face to Face (Spoke with an employee)
First National Real Estate	Face to Face
South Morang Chiropractic Clinic (Reid St)	Online Workshop
Mill Park Community House ATSS	General discussions before the consultation period.
Estia Health Plenty Valley	Online Meeting
South Morang Preschool	Online Meeting
Commercial Hotel	Face to Face (Spoke with managers/employees)

Survey

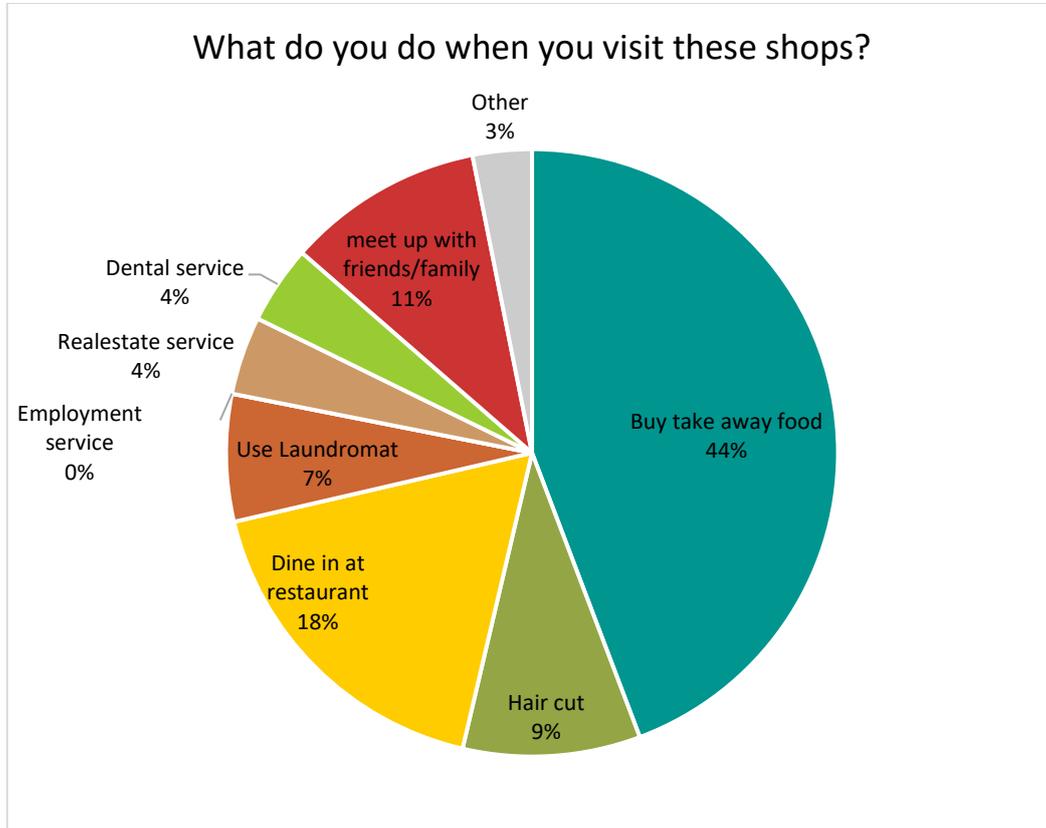
The survey was designed to source the general perception of the shopping strip and the reason for visiting.

Visitation

The survey filters respondents by initially asking if they have visited the Gorge Road Shops to ensure the survey is completed by people familiar with the shopping strip and the answers are relevant.

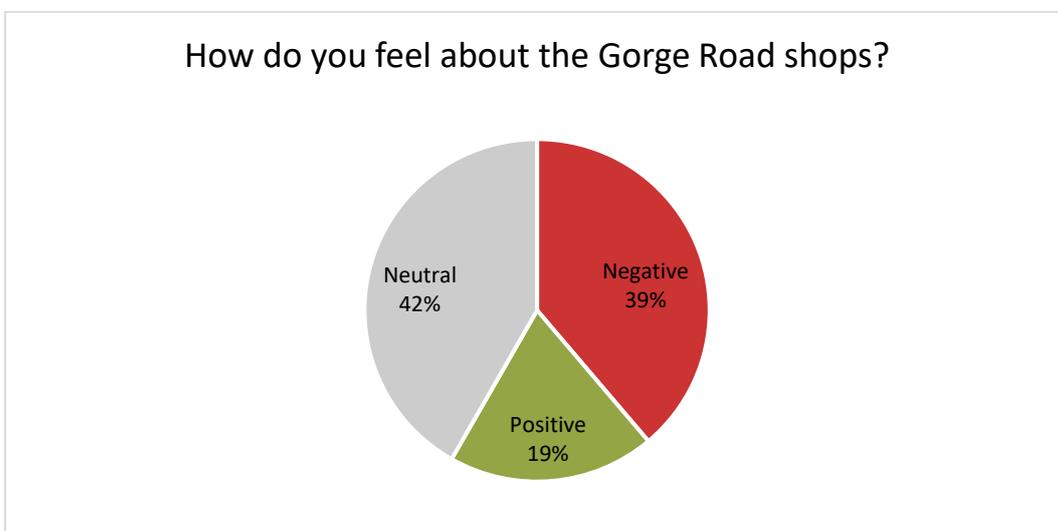
13 of the 103 survey respondents had not visited the shops but were aware of the shops. The majority of reasons for not visiting are related to difficulties in car parking or access. Some identified that the deterrence is that the appearance of the shopping strip is rundown or unappealing.

Of the survey respondents that had visited the shops, the majority were there to buy takeaway food (44%), dine in at a restaurant (18%), or get a haircut (9%).



Gorge Road shopping strip sentiment

Respondents were asked how they felt about the shops to determine the general sentiment of the Gorge road shops. A minority of respondents had positive feelings about the Gorge Road shops.



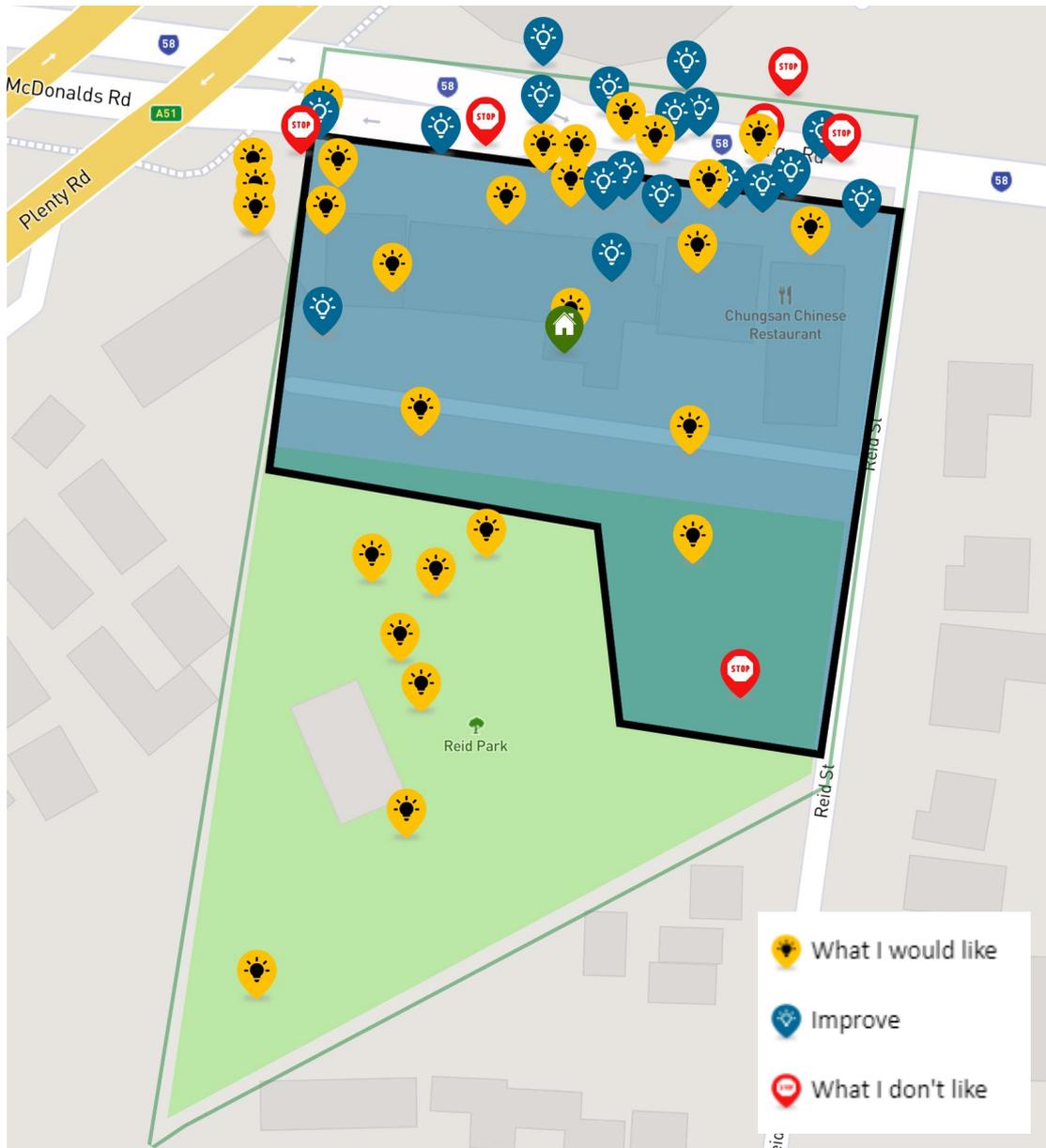
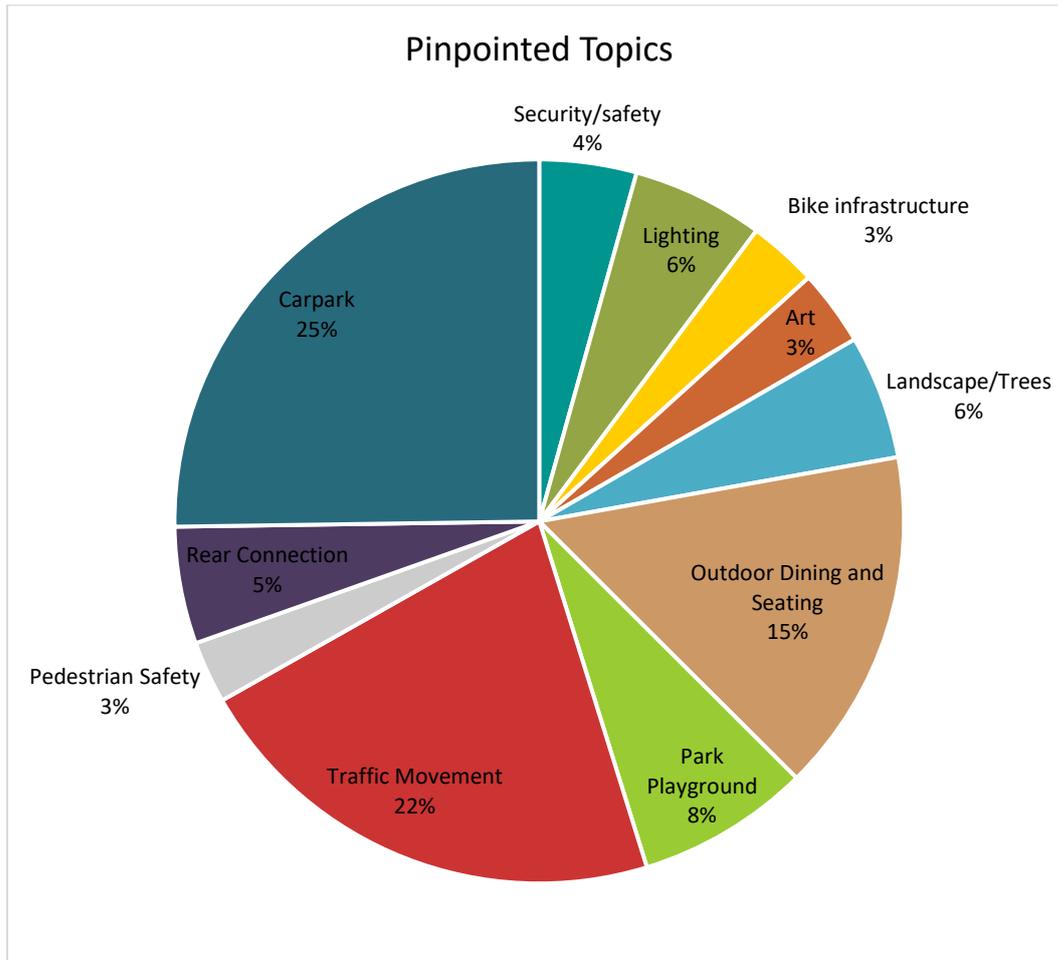


Figure 2 – Community mapped issues and ideas

Pinpoints

Fifty-six pinpoints were posted on the map, with 29 of those being items they “would like”, 20 items to “improve”, and 6 “don’t like”. There were an additional 110 upvotes to the pinpoints identified by respondents. A pinpoint isn’t limited to a single item, and each pinpoint would generally raise multiple items or issues and sometimes pose a solution.

The pinpoints can be grouped into topics for further dissection when discussing the major themes in the next section.



Of the topics, car parking and traffic movement are the most discussed, followed by outdoor dining and seating.

Gender and Equality

Participation

The survey collected basic demographic information and is the only means of accurately assessing how people identify. Of the 103 survey respondents, 73 identified as women, 27 as men, and 3 preferring not to answer. Within these responses, 4 people identified as LGBTQIA+, 5 as people with a disability, and 7 as carers of a person with a disability. It should be noted that there was no representation from people that identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island person.

The majority of respondents were aged between 26 and 55, with only 7 people 25 or below and 17 people above the age of 55. There were no responses from people below the age of 15.

Responses

The three most common words chosen by women to describe the shops were convenient, traffic, and dated. The choice of these words indicates a prioritisation of the function and practicalities of the shopping strip before its appearance. Contrary to this, male respondents prioritised the appearance and physical state of the shops with the three most common words chosen by Male respondents being run down, dirty, and outdated.



Figure 3 - Words chosen to describe the shops by different genders

People that identified as LGBTQIA+ commented on the shopping strip as being unappealing and boring.

People with a disability, or care for a person with a disability, mentioned parking and the difficulty of parking manoeuvres as a negative of the shopping strip. In addition, they chose words like tired and uninviting to describe the shopping strip.

Major Themes

Traffic and car parking

Traffic and car parking at the Gorge Road shops is a theme at the forefront for the community, indicating most respondents drive to the shops. Respondents chose words like busy and congested to describe the traffic along Gorge Road.

Highlighting the importance of addressing this issue is the high frequency of respondents mentioning either of these items.

- Traffic movements in the area are mentioned in 22% of all social pinpoints
- Car parking in the shopping strip is mentioned in 25% of all social pinpoints.

Traffic

The respondents highlighted that the Gorge road “traffic buildup is ridiculous at the moment”¹ and “traffic management there is chaotic”², with most respondents indicating the issue is most prominent during peak times. A combination of heavy traffic and the front carpark is constantly raised with suggestions to “remove parking from gorge road completely as its dangerous...”³ and “remove the parking altogether to remove near miss accidents”⁴. These near misses are usually caused by the “cars (travelling towards Gorge Road) trying to make a right parking turn to the parking lots outside the shops, or those making a very slow, tight, left turn into Commercial Hotel)”⁵. In addition to calls for the removal of the carparks, other suggestions offered by respondents to “prevent cars from turning illegally across double lines into the car parks”⁶ include the installation of bollards and road dividers.

The social pinpoint map had 70 upvotes on the 23 pinpoints mentioning traffic movements and safety. Those pinpoints highlighted the following issues with the traffic movements in the area –

1. Right-hand and turns into parking bays on Gorge Rd (Eastbound traffic).
 - a. An illegal movement for 14 of the 22 parking bays due to a marked double continuous dividing line.
 - b. Sudden braking causing traffic to back up and near misses occurring.

¹ Contribution ID 6716, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

² Contribution ID 4817, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

³ Contribution ID 5945, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

⁴ Contribution ID 4779, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

⁵ Contribution ID 5184, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

⁶ Contribution ID 4901, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

2. Exiting parking bays on Gorge Rd is difficult.
 - a. The favored maneuver is to reverse out behind other parked cars and then merge right into the traffic lane.
3. Left turn into the Commercial Hotel (Eastbound traffic).
 - a. Sudden braking causes traffic to back up and near misses occurring.
4. Slip lane to turn left onto Plenty Road (Westbound traffic).
 - a. Suggestion to relieve queuing traffic during peak times.

Another traffic movement worth noting was raised in discussions with traders and the broader community to a lesser extent.

5. The use of the Reid Street entry as a U-turn after exiting the Commercial Hotel car park.

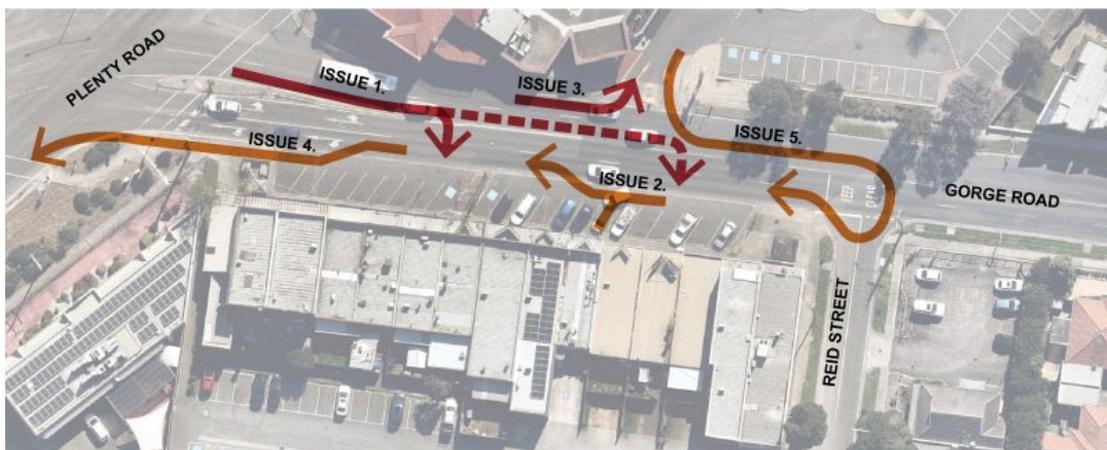


Figure 4 Traffic issues identified by the Community

It should be noted that Gorge Road is managed by the Department of Transport and not by the City of Whittlesea. However, these issues identified by the community affect the shopping strip and the success of an upgrade to the area. The redesign of the shopping strip could address these issues with a fundamental change to the car parking at the front of the shops. Some items suggested by the community, such as a median strip or barrier to separate traffic lanes, are not possible due to Whittlesea not having the authority to undertake such works. However, suggestions for car park reconfiguration or removal can be investigated. There is evidence of community support for a fundamental change to the car parking, with 47 upvotes on the 18 social pinpoints mentioning some extent of car park removal from the front of the shops. Due consideration is required for the prosperity of the traders that benefit from parking on Gorge Road, “people will shop where it’s more convenient than

having to park around the back”⁷. “15min parallel car parks”⁸ have been suggested as a solution and should be considered when designing the streetscape.

Car Parking

Respondents indicated the car parks behind the shops also require improvements. With some requesting the “car park needs to be completely revamped”⁹, and referring to the informal gravel car park between the shop parking and preschool carpark as a “mess when it rains”¹⁰. Respondents believe an “upgraded parking and rear access to the shops”¹¹ can “handle all car parking for the precinct”¹² if designed accordingly and complemented with clearer pedestrian links as currently “access to back parking area here, but it is quite narrow and not obvious.”¹³

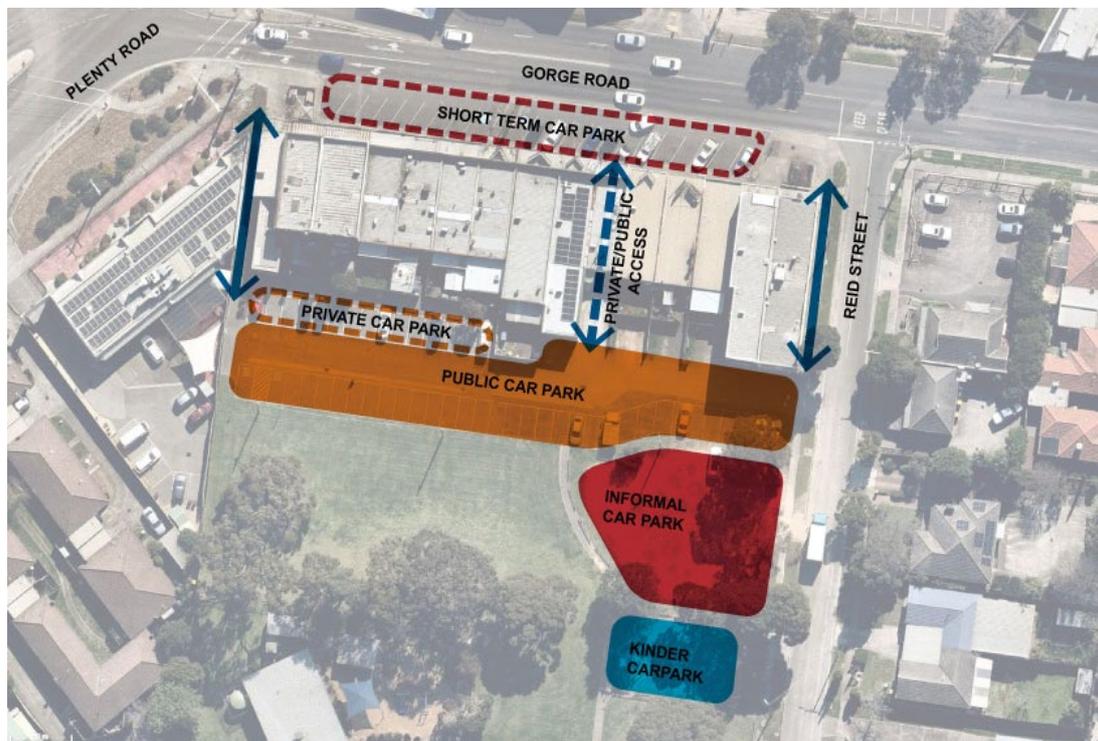


Figure 5 Gorge Rd shop car parks

⁷ Contribution ID 5026, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

⁸ Contribution ID 6716, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

⁹ Contribution ID 6729, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

¹⁰ Contribution ID 5187, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

¹¹ Contribution ID 6717, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

¹² Contribution ID 5948, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

¹³ Contribution ID 5292, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

Traders provided some insights into how their patrons and clients accessed their businesses. Most would utilise the parking at the rear due to the time restrictions or the difficulty in traffic movements for the parking on Gorge Road. The short time restrictions introduced over a decade ago have made patrons with longer business interactions find parking either at the rear of the shops or in the Commercial Hotel carpark. Both these alternative parking locations have access issues; some traders citing clients have had to run across Gorge Rd, and some indicated that their clients were unaware of the laneway access to the west and would resort to using Reid St.

Additional items raised by Traders include the dysfunction of the car parking behind the shops. The dirt bowl informal car park is the main complaint due to its problems after wet weather and inefficiencies due to the lack of parking bay marking. The formalised parking area also had its issues, being inconsistent parking bay sizes and the odd configuration with a splay. An unforeseen issue raised by traders was that bin days would cause havoc with the inconsistent bin collection time, sometimes with bins left out all day would inhibit access to parking bays. Resolution of these issues would increase usage and efficiencies of the rear car park.

Outdated and unappealing

Survey respondents see the Gorge Road shopping strip as an unappealing place, using words like boring, unappealing, uninviting, dull, uneventful, unpleasant, and unwelcoming.

One of the factors influencing this perception could be the cleanliness of the Gorge Road shopping strip, from a combination of poor maintenance of the public realm and shops and the dumping of rubbish in the rear car parking. Survey respondents described the shopping strip as dirty, scruffy, untidy, and unclean.

Respondents would like Council to “improve the overall facade of the strip”,¹⁴ with the main complaint being the area is “poorly maintained and look quite shabby”¹⁵. A submission even suggested the Gorge Road Shops “looks like a Third World shopping strip...It looks cheap and down-market.”¹⁶

Another factor is that the shopping precinct streetscape has reached the end of its design life. Survey respondents describe it as dated, outdated, old, aging, tired, rundown, shabby, neglected, obsolete, and ugly. This is further reinforced in discussions with the broader community during pop-ups and by traders.

¹⁴ Contribution ID 5232, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

¹⁵ Contribution ID 4881, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

¹⁶ Contribution ID 4875, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

Suggestions to “update footpath to standardised paving (bluestone?) and remove tired patchwork to concrete”¹⁷ and installation of “designer lighting, paving, gardens”¹⁸ were provided in social pinpoints.

Social Pinpoints identify many items to be improved and upgraded, including outdoor dining opportunities and furniture, Reid St Park, landscape and trees, and lighting.

Traders also raised the issue of tidiness and cleanliness as a factor in the space being unappealing. Citing the rear carpark regularly has rubbish from fast food franchises dumped in the parking bays.

Connectivity

A common discussion point is the general connectivity of the area, whether that be accessing the shops from the rear carpark or the relationship between the Park and the shops. Respondents suggested improvements to allow for “outdoor dining space to rear of shops”¹⁹ and “Cafes could have more seating out the back with access to the park”²⁰. Respondents highlighted the need to improve the side access lane as it is poorly lit, and they “wouldn’t find it appealing to use”²¹.

The connectivity issues could be addressed in tandem with the above themes, as they are interrelated.

Outdoor Dining

Fifteen per cent of the social pinpoints submitted indicate there is a desire to have more outdoor dining. Most of these submissions reiterated the need to have some separation from Gorge Road traffic and discussed the barriers to outdoor dining citing “Plenty road is loud”²², the risk of getting hit by vehicles overhanging the footpath, and dust and fumes from vehicles.

As mentioned previously in the car parking theme, there is an appetite to reconfigure the car parking at the front to allow for the widening of the footpath area and there is an opportunity to introduce outdoor dining to the back. Specific pinpoints suggest options on how to create more outdoor dining,

¹⁷ Contribution ID 6249, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

¹⁸ Contribution ID 5232, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

¹⁹ Contribution ID 5287, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

²⁰ Contribution ID 6717, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

²¹ Contribution ID 5292, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

²² Contribution ID 5194, Social Pinpoint, March 2022

- “Remove parking and create an outdoor seating area suitable for families”²³
- “Convert street parking to parallel parking. This would balance widening the footpath for outdoor dining”²⁴
- “Removal car park from West end of shopping precinct.”²⁵
- “Cafes could have more seating out the back with access to the park.”²⁶

The functional feasibility of these options should be reviewed in preparation for the concept design.

Traders are supportive of improved opportunities for outdoor dining and are only hesitant due to the disturbance to business during construction. The hospitality-based traders are more supportive as they recognise the benefits to their business.

Design Considerations

Traffic and Car Parking

- Gather quantifiable traffic and pedestrian movement data to inform and support any proposed change.
- Investigate car parking solutions in front of shops to address the issues identified by the community, including service relocations required.
- Investigate reconfiguring car parking at the rear to improve interfaces with the Park, street, and rear of shops.

Outdated and unappealing

- Consider best practice design with bespoke elements to increase the prestige and appearance of the shopping strip.
- Consider materials that will endure lower maintenance schedules but will still have a high level of aesthetics.
- Consider landscaping treatments and street trees that will bring character to the shopping strip without blocking the visibility of shops.

Connectivity

- Investigate treatments to the pedestrian walkthrough and Reid Street to increase usage and safety.

²³ Contribution ID 6728, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

²⁴ Contribution ID 6249, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

²⁵ Contribution ID 5230, Social Pinpoint, April 2022

²⁶ Contribution ID 6717, Social Pinpoint, May 2022

- Investigate improvements to interfaces between the rear of shops and rear carpark.
- Investigate improvements to the interface between the rear car park and Reid Street Park.
- Investigate improvements to rear carpark and Reid Street frontage.

Outdoor Dining

- Investigate options to increase outdoor dining opportunities.
- Review the best locations for outdoor dining.
- Investigate options in reducing the impacts of Gorge Road Traffic on outdoor dining.

Next Steps

Design

The design consultant will review this consultation report whilst undertaking site analysis and preliminary design work. The consultant will provide solutions to the community raised issues and balance them with the requirements of Council.

Consultation

A draft concept design will be published for the second phase of community consultation. This is an opportunity for the community to provide feedback on the solutions proposed. The draft concept will be endorsed by Council before the commencement of consultation.