2025/26 Economic Diversification report



Photo credit: Creative Careers Launch, Deanna Gerlach

ECONOMIC FUTURES | QUEENSTOWN LAKES DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introduction

New Pathways to a Thriving Future is the district's Economic Diversification Plan (EDP) developed to help broaden the local economy and create more meaningful employment opportunities. The plan was endorsed by 18 local and regional organisations in 2024, including Queenstown Lakes District Council.

While Council's Economic Futures team includes two dedicated staff focused on delivering the EDP, a wide network of organisations also contributes to economy diversification across the district. These include;

Community funded organisations e.g. Startup Queenstown Lakes
Government agencies e.g. NZ Trade and Enterprise, InvestNZ
Government programmes delivered regionally e.g. Regional Business Partners, R&D Navigator
Commercially sponsored organisations e.g. Technology Queenstown, Mainland Angels
Volunteer-run interest groups e.g. Women in Tech, Coders groups, Future Leaders in Technology (Flint), Film Otago Southland
Businesses offering shared workspaces and events e.g. Mountain Club
Investment networks e.g. Mainland Angels, Icehouse



This report follows the structure of the EDP and highlights key initiatives undertaken during the year. With the breadth of activity across the district, it does not capture every initiative but instead focuses on those supported by the Economic Futures team and/or other areas of Council.

Pillar 1

Ensure best-fit businesses have the infrastructure they need.

Best-fit businesses are those that create well-paid local jobs while respecting our environment. This pillar focuses on providing the infrastructure, services, and conditions these businesses need to establish, grow, and succeed.

PILLAR 1: ENSURE BEST-FIT BUSINESSES HAVE THE INFRASTRUCTURE THEY NEED

PROJECT 1.1 — FUTURE-FOCUSED INFRASTRUCTURE

Objective

The housing and infrastructure needs of best-fit businesses are met.

Long-term goal

Ensure the district has the right mix of **energy**, **industrial and commercial space**, **transport**, **housing**, **digital connectivity**, and **climate resilience** to support best-fit businesses and sustainable economic growth.

2025/26 focus

Understand and prioritise the infrastructure needs of best-fit businesses.

Key Activities

ELECTRIFICATION

The Queenstown Electrification Accelerator (QEA) was launched with support from the Economic Futures team, Climate and Biodiversity, Destination Queenstown, Rewiring Aotearoa, and EECA to help households and businesses transition to electrification.

During the year, QEA supported $7.3 million in lifetime energy bill savings for businesses and $14.2 million for households. A total of 39 businesses received free energy analysis and advice. Further information is available in the QEA Impact Report.

Economic Futures, with support from QEA, also secured $2 million in EECA funding to help high electricity-use businesses install industrial battery systems. This funding will be available from 2026/27.

REGIONAL DEAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOCUS

Infrastructure needed to support a growing and more diverse economy was a key focus of the negotiations between the Government, Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC), Central Otago District Council (CODC), and Otago Regional Council (ORC).

Key infrastructure-related commitments include:

- **Commitment 3: Energy Resilience** and Innovation containing commitments to enable energy resilience, security and future growth.
- **Commitment 4: Affordable Housing** to improve supply of quality and affordable housing.
- **Commitment 7: Reliable Transport** to deliver resilient, connected transport system in pace with growth, mix or existing and new funding tools and private sector delivery where it adds value.

LAND USE NEEDS

An Industrial Land Survey was undertaken to better understand future business needs. Initially focused on developers, the Economic Futures team helped ensure that their future requirements of business tenants were also considered. In addition, 15 local beverage businesses were interviewed to better understand their infrastructure needs.

The Economic Futures team also joined the group developing the Wānaka Airport Master Plan, helping respond to community aspirations for the airport to support innovation, skills development and well-paid employment opportunities.



Photo credit: Snapshots 2025, Economic Futures



PROJECT 1.2 — BUILD DIVERSE SKILLS

Objective

A strong pool of skilled staff is available.

This project strengthens the local talent pipeline by helping best-fit businesses access the skills they need. It focuses on raising awareness of training and career pathways, upskilling the existing workforce and promoting early-career options across the district.

2025/26 focus

Increase awareness of training and career opportunities for a diverse workforce.

Key Activities

PROMOTING CREATIVE CAREERS

The Path to the Creative World (Te Ara Ki te Ao Auaha) initiative showcased local people who have built successful creative careers in the district, including a jeweller, filmmaker, designer of high-tech camera equipment, and a manufacturer of bespoke packs. This project was co-funded through the 2025 Diversification Fund and delivered by Three Lakes Cultural Trust and Pivot Innovation. The launch of this project attracted more than 250 attendees.

SUMMER INTERNSHIPS

The Technology Queenstown Summer Tech Internship programme provided seven local students with paid, four-week technology internships offered by businesses including AJ Hackett Bungy, RealNZ and Skyline.

> “One of the most defining experiences of the past year was being selected for Technology Queenstown’s Summer Tech Internship Programme with Skyline Enterprises.”
>
> *Samantha Sison (Summer Tech intern)*

TALENT NETWORKS

With around 15 percent of workers employed by businesses outside the district, and others working in small teams, professional networks play an important role in attracting and retaining talent. Groups such as Queenstown and Wānaka Women in Tech, Mountain Club, Queenstown Coders, FLINT, Startup Queenstown Lakes, and Wānaka Tech meetups help connect and support this talent pool. One Queenstown Women in Tech event attracted over 100 participants, demonstrating the strong demand for these opportunities.



Photo credit: Summer Tech Interns, Technology Queenstown

PROJECT 1.3 — INNOVATE AND GROW

Objective

Businesses have the capability and resources to launch, innovate and grow.

2025/26 focus

Build local IP and help best-fit businesses scale.

Key Activities

EXPORTER FOCUS

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) have 18 local export clients that receive proactive one-on-one support from an NZTE advisor and 11 emerging exporters that can access NZTE help to grow their export earnings. Economic Futures liaised with NZTE to help create more seamless support for local exporters and identify new exporters that NZTE may not be aware of.

FOUNDER SUPPORT

Startup Queenstown Lakes (SQL) supports aspiring entrepreneurs to test and validate business ideas before launching. In 2025/26 SQL supported 201 people interested in starting a business, with 25 percent progressing their ideas further. It also provided one-on-one coaching to 26 founders with high-growth potential and supported six startups to secure investment.

SQL helped foster the use of AI to speed up the ability to turn ideas into viable products through a Vibe-Coding Series. SQL also worked alongside Welcoming Communities to promote its services to the Latino community.

Council support was complemented by MBIE funding for Startup Aotearoa resources and coaching. See SQL's end of year report.

> "Your support gave me the confidence to believe that this idea was worth pursuing."
>
> *Startup founder*

INVESTMENT ATTRACTION

Mainland Angels (a South Island network of early-stage investors) connects startups with investors. Regular investor evenings were held in Wānaka and Queenstown, and eight local startups including Race Ranger, First Table, PlanIt, and Loaded Reports secured a total of almost $6 million through this network.

InvestNZ works with migrant investors and foreign direct investment (FDI), with the Economic Futures team maintaining regular engagement with its advisors.



Photo credit: Misfits Vibe Coding, Startup Queenstown Lakes

Pillar 2

Our hosting expertise supports diversification.

Queenstown Lakes has world-class hosting expertise. This pillar focuses on leveraging that capability to create new exportable products, foster innovative creative and technology solutions, and generate opportunities that extend beyond visitor spend.

PILLAR 2: OUR HOSTING EXPERTISE SUPPORTS DIVERSIFICATION

PROJECT 2.1 — LIFETIME VALUE OF THE VISITOR

Objective

Enhance the economic value of tourists beyond their in-country spend.

This project focuses on increasing the value Queenstown Lakes and New Zealand gain from visitors by fostering long-term relationships that extend beyond their visit. Options include purchasing local products, returning to study or work, investing, or becoming ambassadors for the district.

2025/26 focus

Encouraging government agency, and private sector support.

Key Activities

REGIONAL DEAL AGREEMENT

A range of government agencies invest in overseas promotion to build international connections, including NZ Trade and Enterprise, Education NZ, and InvestNZ. To date, however, limited attention has been given to engaging visitors while they are in the country. The Regional Deal includes a commitment for Queenstown Lakes and Central Otago to work collaboratively with these agencies to explore this opportunity.

SUPPORTING A PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVE

Research by several economic development agencies into the potential lifetime value of Californian visitors has helped spark a private sector consortium comprising local and international entrepreneurs. During 2025/26, the Economic Futures team supported the consortium to connect with government agencies and other experts. A pilot programme is planned for 2026/27.

PROJECT 2.2 — EXPORTABLE TOURISM

Objective

Grow exportable tourism and hospitality products and services.

This project aims to turn the strengths of our visitor economy into exportable products and services, from adventure experiences delivered offshore to tourism and hospitality tech solutions and training that can be offered outside the district.

2025/26 focus

Encouraging the growth of businesses offering technology solutions for tourism and hospitality.

Key Activities

The key activities in this area are captured in Project 3.1 Technology (page 13).

PILLAR 2: OUR HOSTING EXPERTISE SUPPORTS DIVERSIFICATION

PROJECT 2.3 — FILM AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Objective

Increase the value of creative industries in the district.

This project focuses on strengthening the district's creative and screen industries by supporting film production, local content creation, workforce development, and creative businesses. Film Queenstown Lakes is Council's film office and forms part of the Film Otago Southland regional collaboration.

2025/26 focus

Supporting location access, building creative capability, and growing local content and intellectual property (IP).

Key Activities

PRODUCTION LIAISON

Film Queenstown Lakes engaged with 115 productions during 2025/26, ranging from low-impact commercial shoots to major scripted productions, including *The Legend of Zelda, A Remarkable Place to Die: Season 2, Heart of the Beast, Klara and the Sun, War Machine, and Apex*.

> "We are so grateful for the continued support of QLDC and the role that they play in enabling us to bring more filming work into our community and showcase us on a national and international level."
>
> *Locations Department, A REMARKABLE PLACE TO DIE (Season 2)*

FACILITATING LOCATION ACCESS

Alongside a streamlined Council permitting process, the Film Office has built strong partnerships with the Department of Conservation and Land Information New Zealand to help productions access locations while protecting the landscapes that make our district unique. The region's quarterly Film Location Access Round Table is recognised nationally as an example of best practice.

The Regional Deal also includes a commitment for Film Queenstown Lakes to work alongside government agencies on location access issues.

GROWING LOCAL TALENT

A Remarkable Place to Die provided several on-set training opportunities for locals, including a Directors Attachment funded by NZ On Air and Film Queenstown Lakes, as well as educational experiences for Wakatipu High School students, including set visits and access to production resources.

The local filmmaking community was supported through the Southern Filmmakers Collective, which showcased local talent and helped filmmakers develop projects like Little Cinema screening nights, networking events, and connections with collaborators and mentors.

The inaugural Short Film Otago Southern Documentary Accelerator supported documentary filmmaking through a one-day accelerator lab in Wānaka attended by 30 filmmakers, and development grants for three regional short documentary projects. A $10,000 production grant was awarded to a Wānaka-based filmmaking team to produce a film about aurora chasers.

FOSTERING A LOCAL SPECIALISATION

Outdoor, adventure and action sports filmmaking is a unique strength of the local screen industry. Film Queenstown Lakes supported a range of initiatives that help grow this niche, including:

- The New Zealand Mountain Film Festival, which showcases a growing number of New Zealand and locally produced films alongside international entries and includes an Adventure Film School.
- Outsiders Talent Development Programme, held in Hāwea.
- Depth of Field Summit, held in Queenstown.

More film industry information is available in the Film Otago Southland Annual Report.



Photo credit: A Remarkable Place to Die, Screentime New Zealand



Photo credit: A Remarkable Place to Die, Screentime New Zealand

PILLAR 2: OUR HOSTING EXPERTISE SUPPORTS DIVERSIFICATION

PROJECT 2.4 — LEARN QUEENSTOWN LAKES

Objective

Increasing training and education opportunities in the district.

2025/26 focus

Promote existing training options and support the University of Otago's establishment in the district.

Key Activities

OTAGO UNIVERSITY SUPPORT

The University of Otago announced its commitment to establish a presence in the district, with a long-term vision of developing a campus. During 2025/26, it delivered an AI Executive Education Programme and began planning for a Batchelor of Entrepreneurship, launching in 2027.

The Economic Futures team supported the University through:

- Participation in the Business School Advisory Panel
- Active support for the Tourism Policy School
- Providing industry-relevant research questions for post-graduate students
- Commissioning University-led research into economic diversification measures

STUDY QUEENSTOWN WEBSITE

www.studyqueenstown.com changed focus from attracting international students to offering a wider range of course choices for anyone wishing to start, advance or change their career.

Pillar 3

Grow niche export industries.

Research shows that economic diversification is most successful when it builds on a district's strengths. In Queenstown Lakes, these include technology, outdoor products, environmental enterprise, and food and beverage.

These sectors are at different stages of development. Some have established businesses and emerging industry clusters, while others remain in the early stages of growth and exploration.

PROJECT 3.1 — TECHNOLOGY

Objective

Businesses within this niche grow and new businesses are attracted because of the niche's strength.

This project supports the growth of Queenstown Lakes' technology ecosystem — from early-stage founders to established companies, scale-ups, and tech-enabled businesses.

2025/26 focus

Develop recognition of the Tourism-tech niche potential and activate tech talent within the district.

Key Activities

DEVELOPMENT OF TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY TECH CLUSTER

Technology Queenstown (TQ) aims to grow a thriving technology industry built off lessons learnt from other mountain towns with successful tech industries. TQ is supported by Accenture, Destination Queenstown, Genesis, NZX, North Ridge Partners, OneNZ, Queenstown Airport, QRC, Russel McVeagh, SBS, and the University of Otago.

After exploring a range of technology specialisations in 2025/26, TQ identified tourism and hospitality technology as a strategic focus and secured the rights to host an international travel-tech conference in Queenstown.

WiT Queenstown, held in July 2026, attracted 300 travel and technology leaders from New Zealand and overseas. The event featured 60 senior industry leaders as speakers and showcased 13 local travel-tech businesses.

The Regional Deal includes a commitment from government to support increased use of technology to boost tourism productivity, aligning with TQ's vision of establishing the district as a 'testbed' for new tourism technology solutions.



Photo credit: WiT Queenstown 2026, Technology Queenstown

PROJECT 3.2 — OUTDOOR ECONOMY

Objective

Businesses within this niche grow and new businesses are attracted because of the niche's strength.

This project explores opportunities to build a niche around the district's outdoor strengths including equipment design, testing and small-scale manufacturing.

2025/26 focus

Complete a 'stocktake' of the businesses to determine the needs of this niche and its growth potential.

Key Activities

MAPPING AND CONNECTING

A local product development expert engaged with 20 businesses in this niche, ranging from established brands such as Mons Royale to founders yet to launch their products. The project also identified a broad range of businesses and agencies that could support the sector's growth.

One-on-one support helped businesses secure:

- R&D support (AWOL)
- Distribution through a major retailer (Easys)
- A large order (Southern Lite Packs)
- Partners where resources are shared (Wai Innovation + AWOL)

PROMOTION

As part of the 2025 Three Lakes Cultural Trust Hui 14 businesses participated in a product showcase. The event was promoted to schools and the wider community, attracting more than 200 attendees.

A mountain bike product accelerator concept was developed. While it did not secure sufficient co-funding to proceed, it highlighted strong international interest in the district as a hub for outdoor innovation and may be revisited in the future.

PROJECT 3.3 — ENVIRONMENTAL ENTERPRISE

Objective

Understand the potential for niche opportunities in environmental enterprise.

Environmental enterprises include current and emerging income-generating opportunities in areas such as biodiversity, conservation, renewable energy, environmental engineering, and land-based environmental services.

2025/26 focus

Build understanding of businesses and income opportunities.

Key Activity

SUPPORTING LOCAL IDEA VALIDATION

A range of organisations are exploring opportunities in environmental enterprise, including food resilience initiatives (Food Resilience report), agrivoltaic projects that combine solar generation with food production, and land-based innovation programmes such as the Wānaka Futures Challenge. Biodiversity credits are also an emerging opportunity being monitored.

PROJECT 3.4 — FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Objective

Understand the scale and potential to grow a food and beverage niche.

This project explores whether food and beverage could develop into a sustainable niche industry for Queenstown Lakes.

2025/26 focus

Understand and reduce barriers to growth.

Key Activities

COUNCIL INTERACTION WITH BEVERAGE BUSINESSES

As part of scoping this niche, several beverage businesses raised questions about Council's approach to events and liquor licensing. A follow-up online session helped create a shared understanding of Council processes and timelines.

EXPORT AND LOGISTICS SUPPORT

One-on-one interviews with 12 beverage businesses identified two key opportunities to support growth. Following an interest in expanding sales, NZ Trade and Enterprise organised a workshop attended by 18 local producers interested in exporting to Australia.

Freight costs were also identified as a barrier to growth. Eight local producers participated in a workshop with logistics experts to map opportunities for collaboration and potential cost savings.

FILM PRODUCT PLACEMENT

An international television series filming in the district expressed interested in using local products as props. Thirteen local beverage brands were introduced to the production team to encourage product placement opportunities.



Photo credit: Exporting Beverages to Australia, Economic Futures

Foundations for success

(F.1–F.4)

Foundational projects help ensure the system is coordinated, governed, resourced, culturally aligned, and supported by strong networks.

FOUNDATIONAL PROJECT F.1 — COLLABORATION AND OVERSIGHT

Objective

Establish prioritisation, reporting, and accountability.

2025/26 focus

Strengthen connections between stakeholders.

Key Activities

DIVERSIFICATION FUND LAUNCH

The broad range of organisations supporting diversification is a key strength, bringing diverse expertise, networks, and resources to this work. However it also creates competition for resources and participation. A Diversification Fund was launched in 2025 aimed at supporting diversification through collaborative projects requiring organisations to apply jointly.

The fund received 13 expressions of interest and six applications, which were assessed by an independent panel. Three projects were selected for delivery in 2026/27:

- **More than a playground:** a media campaign showcasing non-tourism businesses across the district.
- **Creative careers showcase:** promotion of creative businesses operating in the district.
- **Community Tech Lab:** connecting local technology talent with community organisations to solve technology needs.

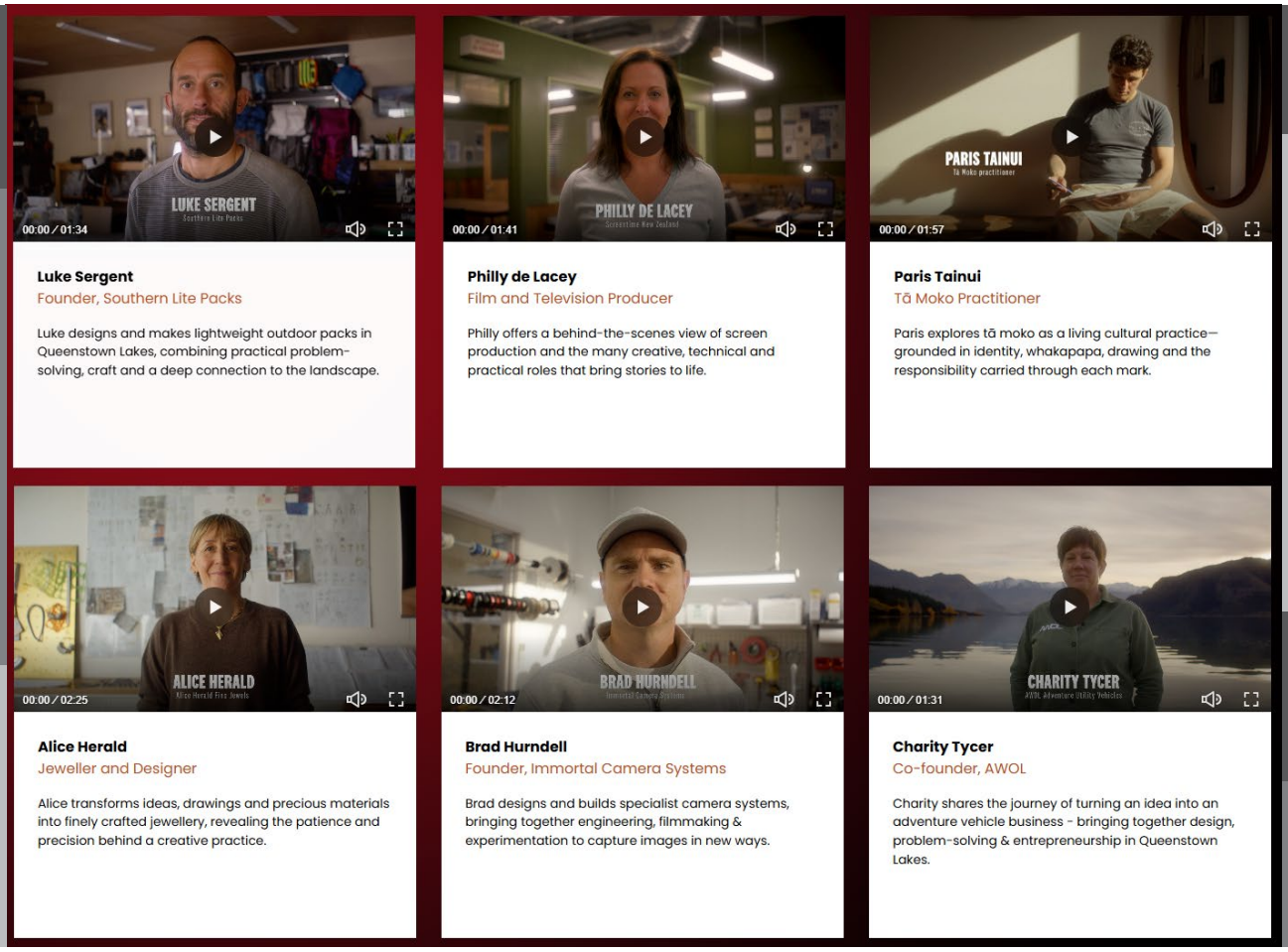


Photo credit: The Path to the Creative World screenshots, Bunker Street Film Co.

FOUNDATIONAL PROJECT F.2 — SUPPORT MĀORI ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

Objective

Work alongside Māori to support diversification. This project recognises that Māori have unique ways of working and distinct aspirations and aims to respond to these.

2025/26 focus

Build stronger understanding of Māori businesses in the district, and the barriers they face to growth.

Key Activities

SUPPORT FOR KUMA

KUMA, the pan-iwi Southern Māori Business Network, was supported to strengthen capability and connections among Māori businesses across Otago. KUMA held its Business Awards in 2025, with two local businesses recognised: Kauati received the Supreme Award and Kaitiaki Fire Protection won the Emerging Business Leadership Award.

FOUNDATIONAL PROJECT F.3 — UPDATE QUEENSTOWN LAKES BRAND & MARKETING STRATEGIES

Objective

Align brand and marketing activities with diversification and regenerative tourism goals.

This project aims to broaden the district's brand beyond tourism to reflect its diversification aspirations.

2025/26 focus

Share diversification stories and support a more holistic place brand.

Key Activities

PLACE BRANDING

Queenstown Place DNA® Analysis and Report project was run by DQ to help capture the key values of Queenstown. This process included desktop research, resident sentiment analysis, stakeholder and Kāi Tahu interviews, community workshops, private interviews, and observational research. Wānaka was completed in previous years. The findings will help inform both tourism marketing and economic diversification initiatives.



MULTI-CHANNEL PROMOTION OF ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

A range of organisations shared stories highlighting businesses and industries beyond tourism through websites, LinkedIn and other media channels including:

- **Technology Queenstown:** 3,000 LinkedIn followers.
- **Mountain Club:** 5,300 podcast downloads during 2025/26.
- **Startup Queenstown Lakes:** 2,700 Facebook followers and more than 1500 Instagram followers.
- **1964 Mountain Culture Magazine:** featured local outdoor product businesses.

The Economic Futures LinkedIn page also continued to grow its audience, supported by personal reposts and partner networks.

FOUNDATIONAL PROJECT F.4 — RESOURCES & CAPACITY

Objective

Secure resources and build capacity to deliver the EDP.

This project ensures Economic Futures, and the wider ecosystem, has the people, funding, and organisational support needed to deliver on the EDP.

2025/26 focus

Diversify funding sources for economic diversification initiatives.

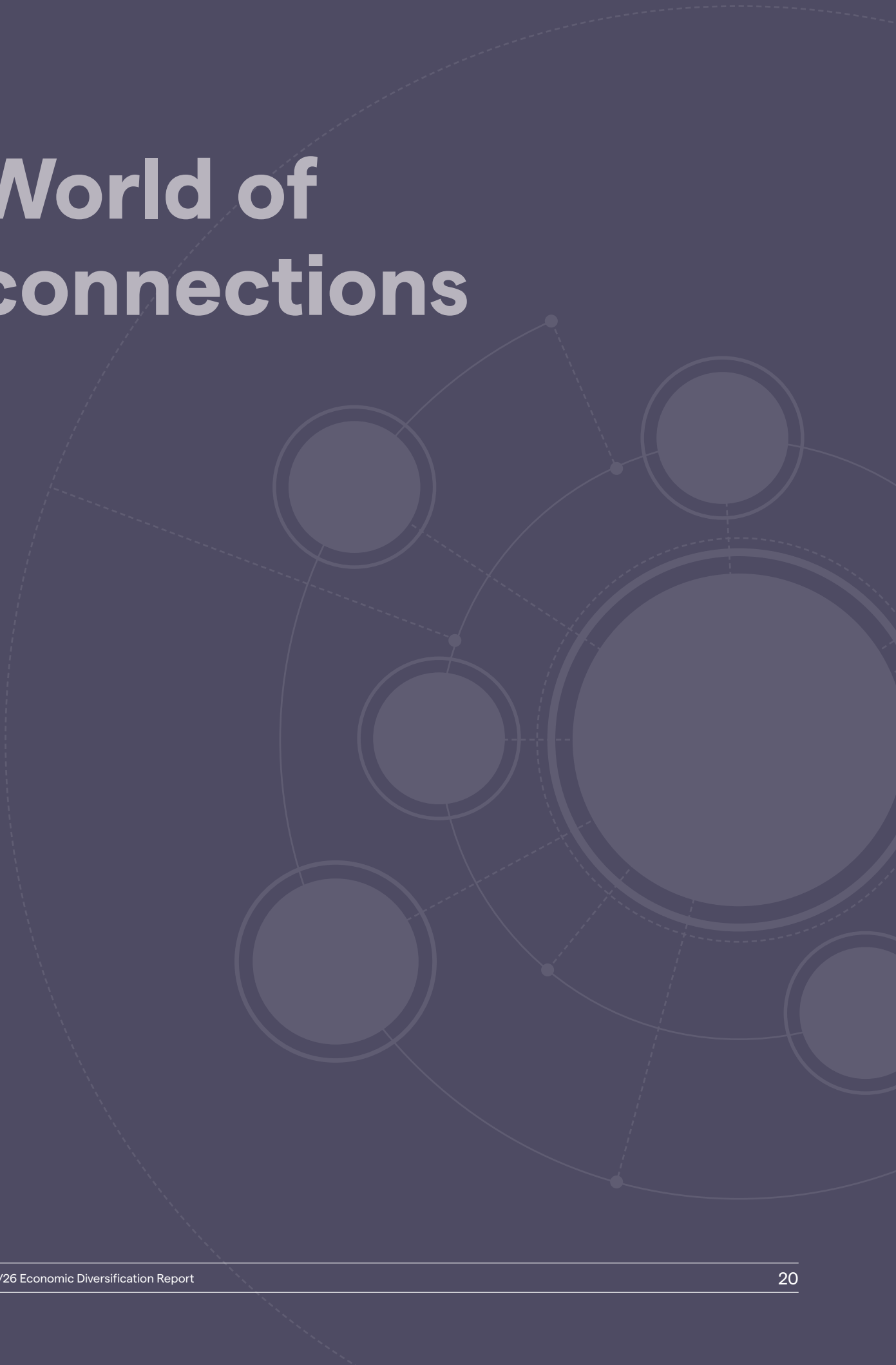
Activity

SECURING EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Additional funding and in-kind support were secured for diversification initiatives during 2025/26 including:

- Support from 17 private-sector sponsors for the Web in Travel (WiT) tourism technology conference.
- In-kind support for Startup Queenstown Lakes from organisations including Mountain Club, Kia Ora Digital, Growth Pilot, Criterion Law, Sprinklr and Product in Your Pocket. Startup founders also contributed time to advocacy, podcasts, and events.
- MBIE funding for a business coach through the Startup Aotearoa programme.

World of connections



WORLD OF CONNECTIONS

Objective

Bring high-contributing individuals and relevant public and private agencies together to amplify efforts and support enterprise growth.

This project aims to harness the passion of people to create a healthier local economy for future generations.

2025/26 focus

Foster connections that encourage collaboration across organisations.

Key Activities

ONE-ON-ONE REFERRALS

Connecting people and organisations is a core economic development function. While difficult to quantify, one-on-one introductions remain an important way of supporting collaboration, new ventures, and business growth. Work is underway to better measure these outcomes.

JOIN THE DOTS GROUP

Facilitated by the Economic Futures team, Join the Dots provides an informal forum for organisations to build relationships, share updates, and seek support. The network helps build trust and reduce institutional barriers.

The group of over 60 individuals includes representatives from local business chambers, Angel investment networks, technology groups, women's business and technology networks, government business support agencies, Māori business organisations, the Economic Development team within Council, and volunteers involved in business and economic development.

Members contribute to a shared event calendar to minimise the risk of overlapping events and improve coordination across the ecosystem.

The relationships developed through Join the Dots were instrumental in enabling organisations to collaborate on applications for the Diversification Fund (outlined in Foundation Project F.1).

SHOWCASING INITIATIVES

The annual Snapshots event helps ensure governance groups, community leaders, and stakeholders have visibility of the breadth of diversification and destination management activity underway.

The October 2025 event had 14 speakers from organisations including Invest South, Southern Hemisphere Proving Ground, Mons Royale, Technology Queenstown and Mountain Club. Feedback from over 80 attendees was very positive.

> "The ecosystem, in my mind, has matured far beyond and far faster than what I thought it would be."
>
> *Mat Wong, Queenstown Lakes District Councillor*

> "Great line up and a reminder of how much is really going on."
>
> *2025 Snapshots audience member*

PRIVATE-SECTOR CONNECTIONS

Mountain Club connects founders, investors, creatives, SME owners, and industry leaders through a global membership network. It connects locals with a global network in ways that regularly turn into collaborations and new ventures that support the diversification of the regional economy. Between July 2025 and June 2026, 190 new members joined, with total membership now standing at 479. Over this period Mountain Club hosted 240 member events ranging from weekly wellness sessions such as pilates, ski touring, and mountain biking to Industry Leaders sessions, professionally facilitated round tables, member-led workshops and social events. A highlight of this year has been expanding cross-region support across the wider Queenstown Lakes region.



Photo credit: Snapshots 2025, Jonny James


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