Quantum Market Research

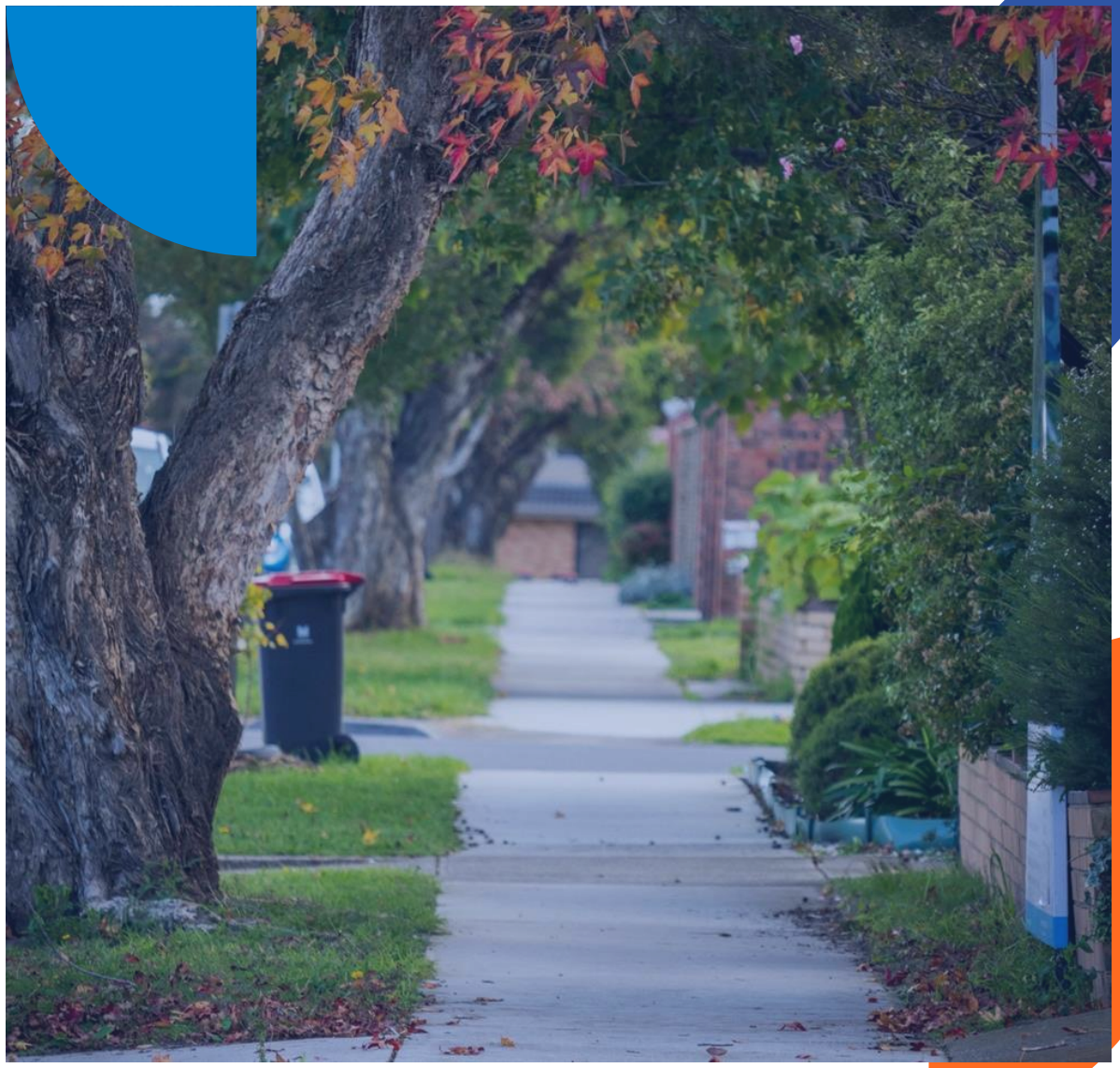
How our growth suburbs are navigating the pandemic: Future considerations for policy

A research report prepared for NGAA

NATIONAL Growth Areas ALLIANCE
NGAA

October 2021
Job number: QMR20028NGAA1

Contents



Summary of key findings

Summary of key findings

1.

There is a need to build financial confidence and resilience in growth areas, to bring it in line with those in other areas.

The pandemic has impacted how Australians feel about our financial futures over the next five years. Whilst we are starting to see financial confidence return, it remains lower than average in growth areas.

To support those in growth areas, there is a need to ensure there is sufficient job availability and appropriate infrastructure, to ensure income and wealth security in these areas in the years to come.

2.

As the world of work changes and employee expectations evolve, there is an opportunity to extend the positive work-related benefits created by the pandemic.

Workplace flexibility in terms of working hours and location will be highly regarded by many workers and contribute to a greater sense of job satisfaction.

However, worker preferences also indicate a need to create local jobs in growth areas, with many employees preferring opportunities to work on-site or at a workplace.

3.

In growth areas, the need for mental health initiatives is high, yet support is less likely to be utilised.

While the sense of uncertainty and associated negative mental health effects are likely to become less acute as pandemic-related restrictions ease, businesses re-open and life resumes, there is a need to ensure that future planning in growth areas takes into account initiatives and infrastructure (e.g. access to the natural environment, mental health professionals and services) that support mental health needs beyond the pandemic.

4.

There are some subtle differences in government priorities in growth areas that highlight some of the unique pressures faced.

Cost of living, mental illness and healthcare will be key issues that differentiate those in growth areas.

In addition, those in growth areas indicate that the pandemic has elevated the importance of local amenities such as shops, restaurants/cafes and parks. This reinforces the importance of investing in local infrastructure in growth areas to enable these experiences closer to home.

About the research

Background

The National Growth Areas Alliance (NGAA) is the peak body for local governments in Australia's outer urban growth areas, and it advocates to state and federal governments on growth area challenges and opportunities.

Australia's fast-growing outer urban areas ("growth areas") are currently home to 5 million, or one in five Australians. These areas experience population growth rates at double the national average and long-term under-investment in vital infrastructure and planning. The NGAA advocates to state and federal governments to improve planning and investment models to support distributing infrastructure, jobs and housing more evenly across the metropolitan area, including bringing new jobs closer to areas of high population growth.

In 2020 Quantum conducted an ad-hoc study using AustraliaNOW to understand how those who reside in the fringe were impacted by the pandemic with a core focus on how work had changed for these residents. The work was enlightening and highlighted the unique challenges faced and opportunities presented for these rapidly growing populations.

The aim of this 2021 research is to shine a light on how those who reside in growth areas are different from the broader population. How are growth area residents thinking, feeling and acting and what does this mean for future policy decisions.

Using the AustraliaNOW data set of over 80,000 interviews with Australian adults, captured over the past 18 months, provides insight into the unique characteristics of those who reside in growth areas.

We have taken an organic approach to investigating the data, looking for where significant differences exist and what this means for those residing in our growth areas.

Definitions of growth areas

Growth areas were defined by postcode, and included all postcodes within the following LGAs.

NSW	VIC	WA	SA	QLD
Blacktown	Cardinia	Armadale	Mount Barker	Ipswich
Camden	Casey	Cockburn	Playford	Logan
Campbelltown	Hume	Gosnells		Moreton Bay
Liverpool	Melton	Kwinana		Redland
Penrith	Mitchell	Mandurah		
The Hills Shire	Wyndham	Rockingham		
Wollondilly	Whittlesea	Swan		
		Wanneroo		
		Serpentine-Jarrahdale		

Methodology

- Online survey conducted via an online research panel

- AustraliaNOW is a weekly survey of 1,000 Australians tracking attitudes and behaviours in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

- Nationally representative sample by age, gender and location (State)
- Total sample size of n=1,000 per week; including approximately 320 residents of growth areas

Fieldwork dates:
- Data collected from March 2020 – 25th October 2021

The project was carried out in line with the Market Research International Standard, AS ISO 20252.

Detailed findings

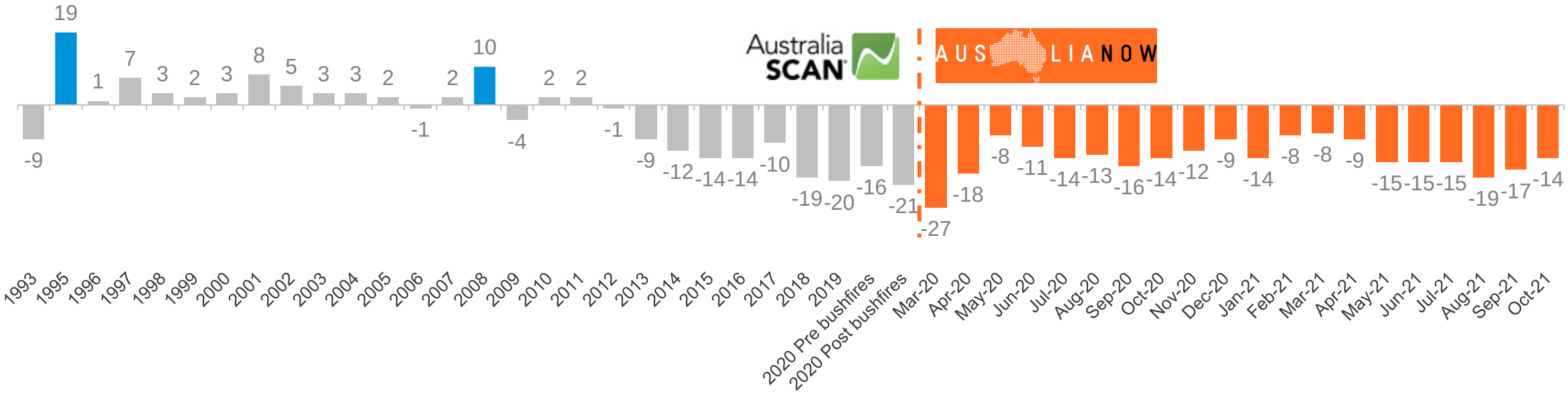
Finances in growth areas

As a nation, financial confidence remains subdued…but shows signs of recovery

The pandemic has impacted how we feel about our financial futures over the next five years. Financial confidence was particularly low in March 2020 as we navigated the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Every successive lockdown brought a new wave of uncertainty and knocked our confidence.

Now, as vaccination rates soar, and some States emerge from lockdown and begin to open up (facing a new dawn of 'living with COVID-19') we are seeing financial confidence start to return. This represents a significant step in the work ahead to reinvigorate the economy.

Confidence in financial future over next five years
(confidence index = very confident – not confident)

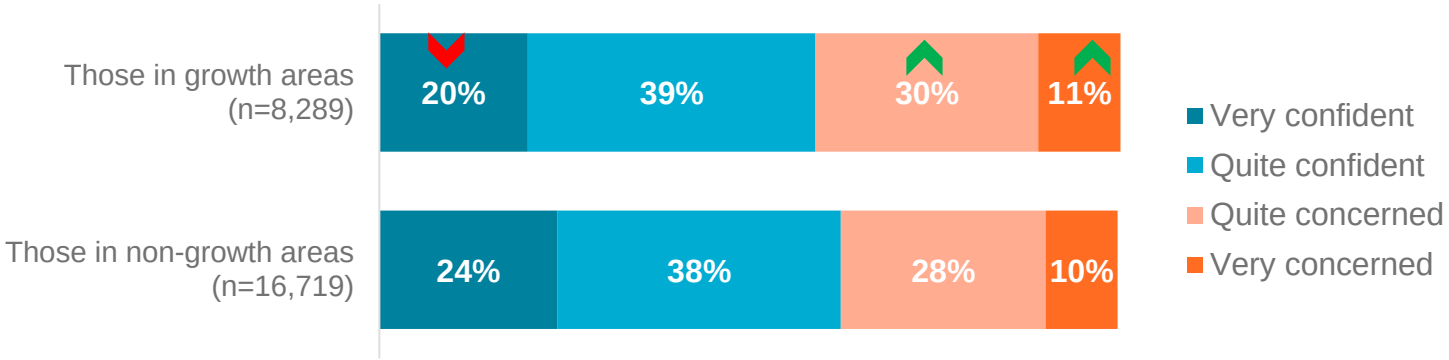


Q13 - Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about your ability to meet your financial needs in the next five years?

Greater level of concern about financial future for those who reside in growth areas

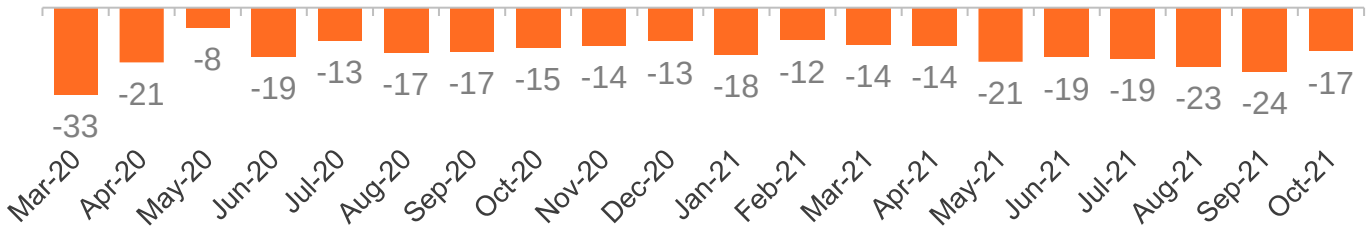
Confidence in financial future over next five years

Base: All respondents (May-Oct 21)



Confidence index = very confident – not confident

Base: Those in growth areas (n=700-3,500 per month)



Q13 - Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about your ability to meet your financial needs in the next five years?

Financial confidence influences how and what we will spend and invest in.

For those in growth areas, financial confidence is not as strong as those who reside in other areas.

Over the past six months, two-in-five have expressed some level of concern about meeting their financial needs in the next five years.

With inflation on the horizon and the spectre of rising interest rates within the next five years, this cohort may need additional support to navigate these changes.

Positively, the bounce-back in financial confidence seen at the overall level has also been reflected in growth areas, indicating a more positive trajectory may follow.

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

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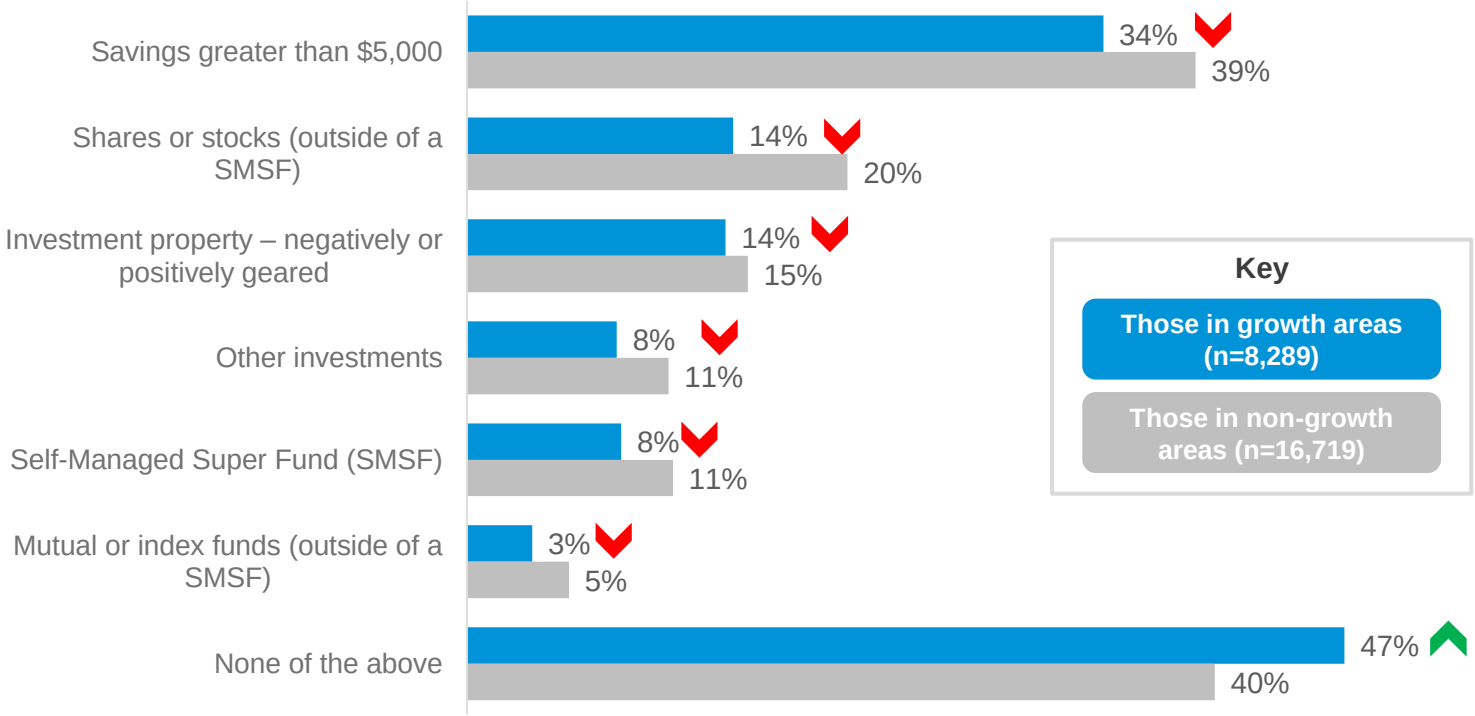
Those in growth areas have less capacity to weather adverse financial events

Financial capacity

Base: All respondents (May-Oct 21)



Q21t - Which of the following do you currently have?

Almost one-in-two adults in growth areas do not have a financial buffer to see them through any future financial challenges.

Only one-in-three (34%) have a savings buffer of greater than $5,000, a significantly lower proportion than those in non-growth areas.

Residents in growth areas are also less likely to have investments (such as shares or property) to build their wealth into the future.

In November 2020 we found that as many as a third of those in growth areas would like assistance or support with their finances.

34%
Of those in growth areas

Would like **assistance or support** in relation to money/finances
(reported in Nov-20)

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

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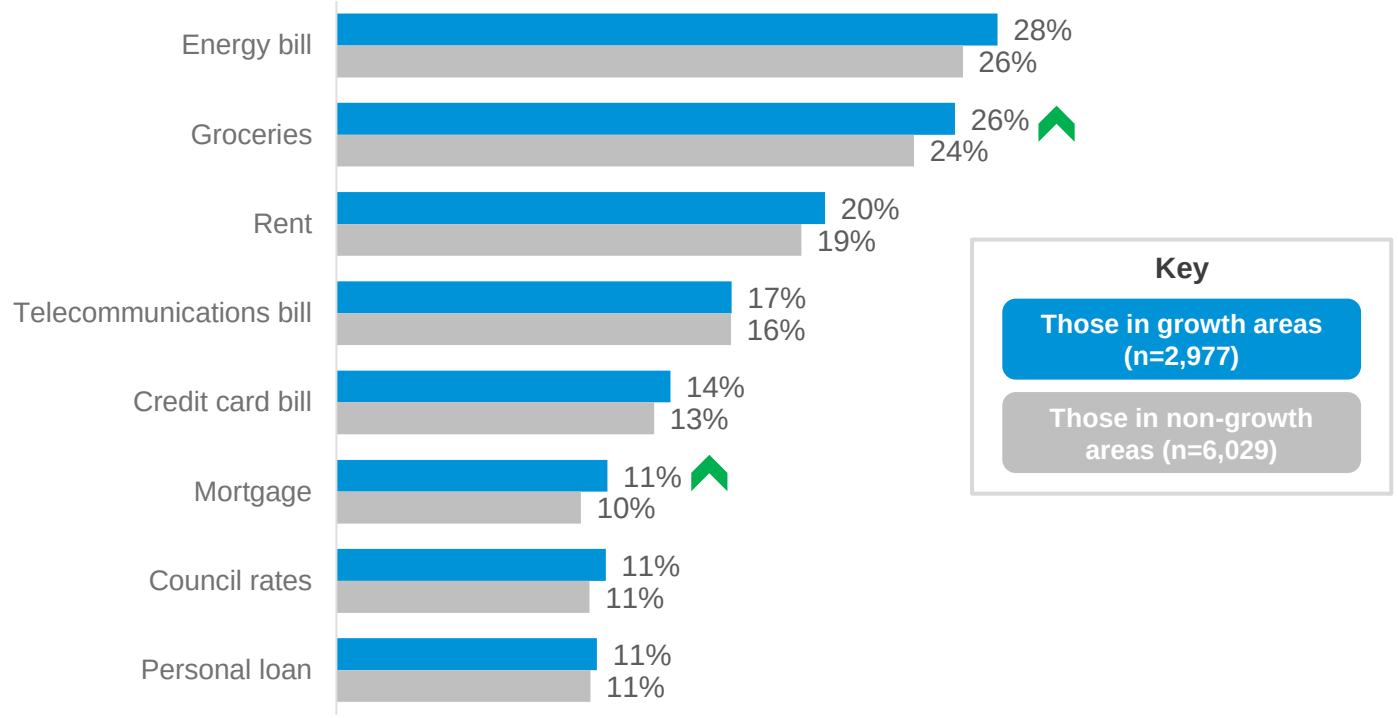
Those in growth areas are more likely to struggle to pay for groceries and meet mortgage repayments

Will struggle to pay in the next 3 months

Base: All respondents (May-Aug 21)

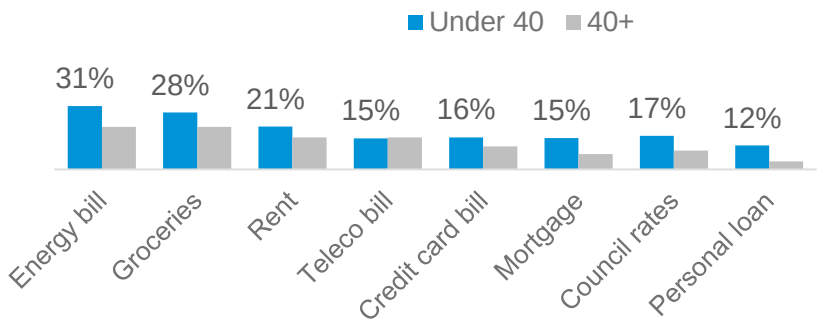


Q12 - In the next three months do you think you will struggle to pay any of the following?

Financial pressures among those in growth areas lead to a slightly higher incidence of bill stress, particularly for essentials such as groceries and mortgage repayments (leading to a greater risk of defaulting).

Under 40s are particularly vulnerable to bill stress, with 64% of this cohort struggling to pay at least one bill.

Under 40s in growth areas were significantly more likely to struggle to pay bills



Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

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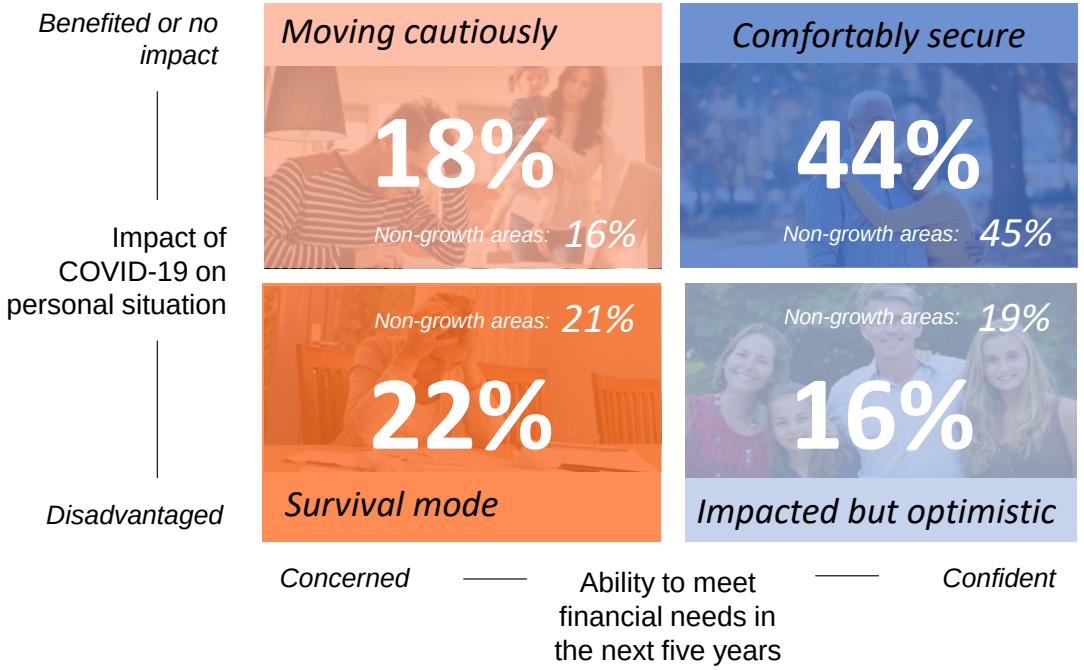
A high proportion in growth areas are sitting comfortably, but over one in five are struggling

Impact of the pandemic and confidence in financial future

Base: All respondents, Sep-Oct-21. Those is growth areas, n=2,613. Those in non-growth areas, n=5,387.



The community can be divided into four key segments based on:

1. **The impact of the pandemic on their personal situation**
2. **Their perceived ability to meet their financial needs in the next five years**

Those in growth areas that are more likely to be in ***Survival Mode***:

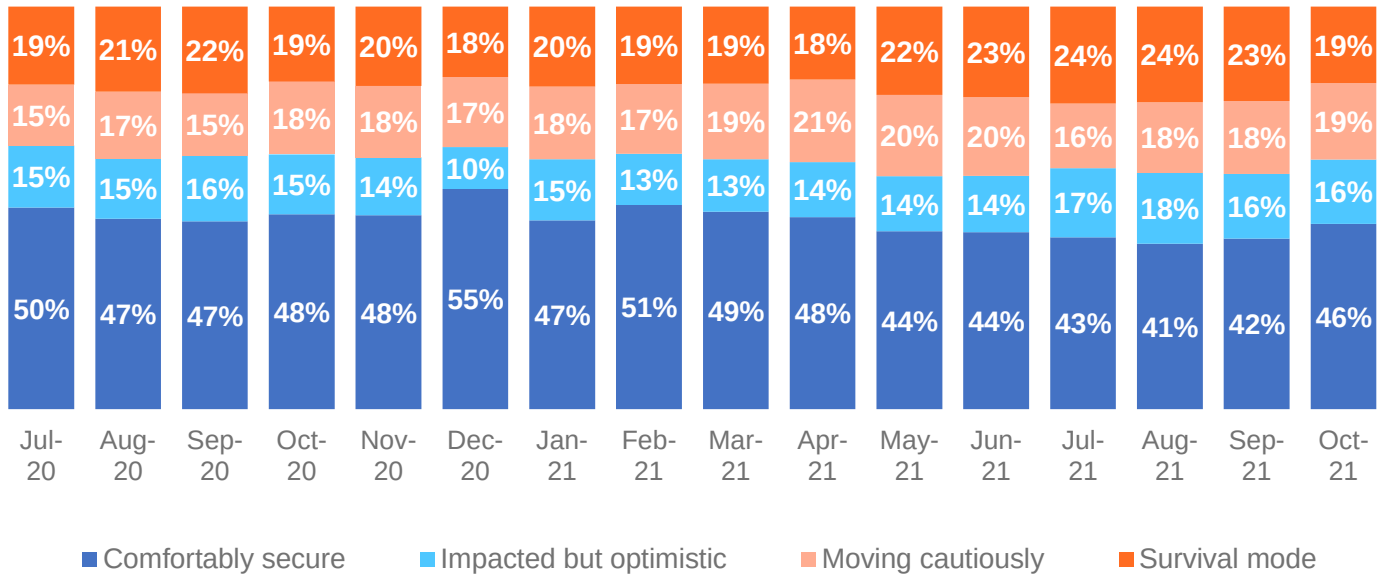
- NSW: 26%; VIC: 26%
- Females: 25%
- 18-39 years: 24%
- Unemployed: 30%
- Those at home (caring for children/maternity/ or paternity leave): 27%
- Single people living alone: 28%
- Lower household incomes (<$50K per annum): 28%
- Renters: 28%

Q13 - Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about your ability to meet your financial needs in the next five years?
Q112 - Which of the following statements best applies to you? "For me, the COVID-19 situation has been…"

As restrictions have eased in NSW and Victoria, the proportion of those in growth areas in *Survival Mode* has decreased

Impact of the pandemic and confidence in financial future

Base: Those in growth areas (n=292-1,653 per month)



Q13 - Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about your ability to meet your financial needs in the next five years?
Q112 - Which of the following statements best applies to you? "For me, the COVID-19 situation has been…"

As seen with financial confidence, the easing of restrictions and return of many industries in both Victoria and NSW has seen a reduction in the cohort in growth areas that are considered in *Survival Mode.*

Those in growth areas in NSW and Victoria have driven the increase in the proportion of the community that are *Comfortably secure.* This is the cohort that is likely to drive the economic recovery, more likely to intend to increase their spending on discretionary items over the next 3 months.

Intend to spend more on non-essential items in the next 3 months

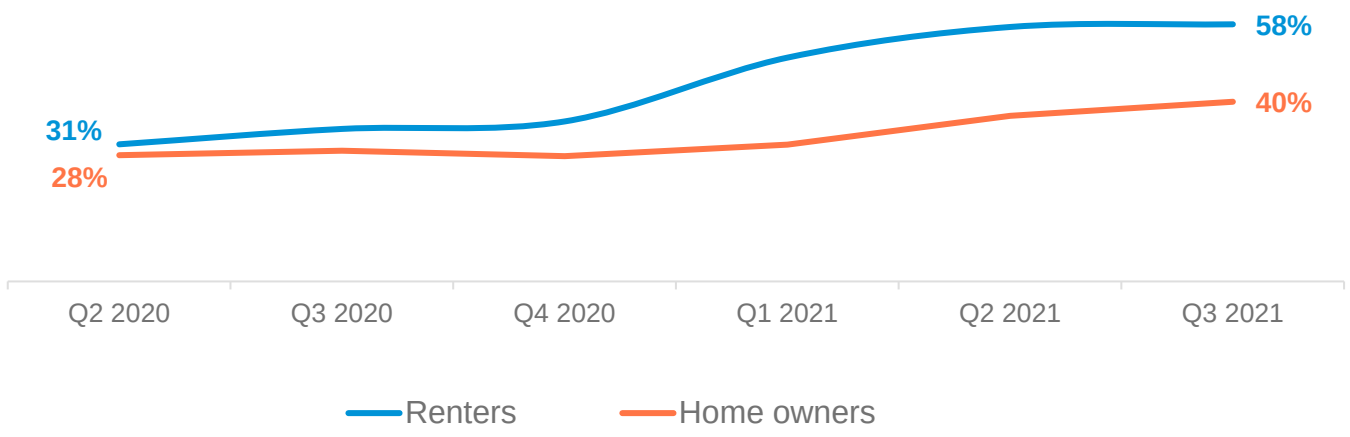
Base: Those in growth areas (n=2,613)

17%	17%	9%	13%
Comfortably secure	*Impacted but optimistic*	*Moving cautiously*	*Survival mode*

Concern about the impact of the pandemic on house prices has grown

Concern about the impact of the pandemic on house prices
(% very/extremely concerned)

Base: Those in growth areas (Renters: n=192-909 per month; Home-owners: n=317-1,456 per month)



Q.9. How concerned are you about the impact of Coronavirus/COVID-19 on…?

As house prices soar in major cities, concern about the impact of the pandemic on housing affordability has increased.

This is particularly the case for renters in growth areas, as home ownership feels further out of reach, and the cost of delaying entering the market continues to increase.

Almost a quarter of those in growth areas (24%) indicated that housing affordability was one of their top priorities for government to focus on (a similar proportion to those in non-growth areas – 25%).

24%
Of those in growth areas

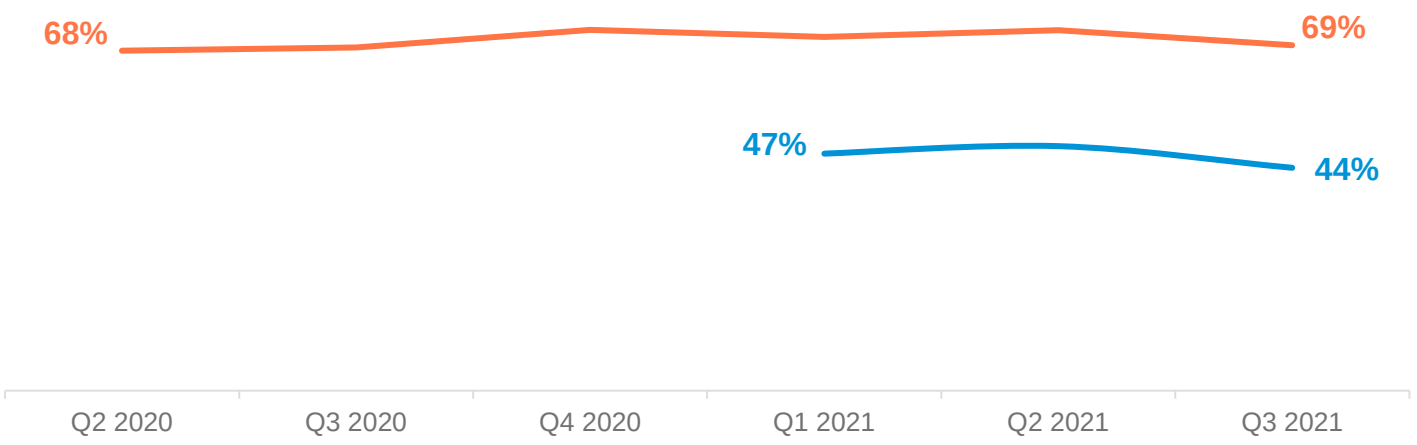
Selected 'housing affordability' as one of their top 5 priorities from government
(reported in Sep-Oct 21)

Work in growth areas

Whilst job security is high for over two thirds, there is some vulnerability in the event of job losses

Job security (% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6)

Base: All workers in growth areas, n=1,744-3,367 per quarter



If I were to lose my job/source of income, I would be very confident in getting another job/finding more work

I am confident that I can keep my current job/hours/source of income for the next 6 months

Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

Job security has remained largely stable amongst workers throughout the pandemic.

Whilst as many as 69% of workers in growth areas feel confident about keeping their job or main source of income over the next 6 months, only 44% of workers in growth areas would be very confident in getting another job or finding more work if they were to become unemployed. Confidence has been particularly low for those working in retail (43% confident in finding work) and administrative and support services (39% confident), and for the part time and casual workforce (39% confident).

If I were to lose my job/source of income, I would be very confident in getting another job/finding more work

(% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6; Jul-Sep 21)

44% Agree / **56%** Disagree

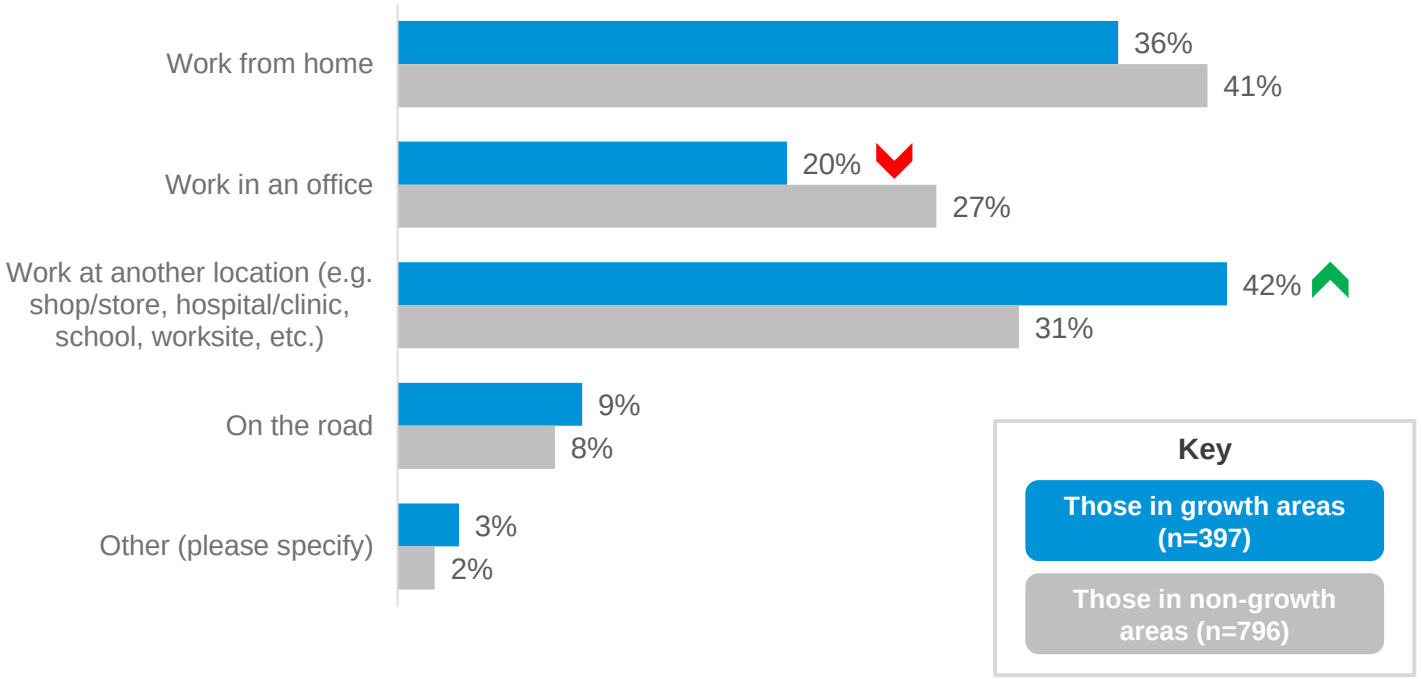
*Non-NGAA areas: **47%***

*Non-NGAA areas: **53%***

Over a third (36%) of those in growth areas were working from home in Aug-21

Current work location

Base: All workers (Aug-21)



*Q701. Which of the following best describes your **current** work location?*

Whilst many in growth areas have had to adapt to working from home during the pandemic, those in growth areas were more likely to be working at a central, public-facing location such as a shop, hospital, school or worksite. This is likely to have brought with it increased COVID-19 associated pressures and risks, including exposure risk, the need to potentially isolate and increased health measures (e.g. protective equipment and masks for some States and industries).

Working from home was more common in growth areas in NSW (46%), Victoria (42%) than in QLD (23%).

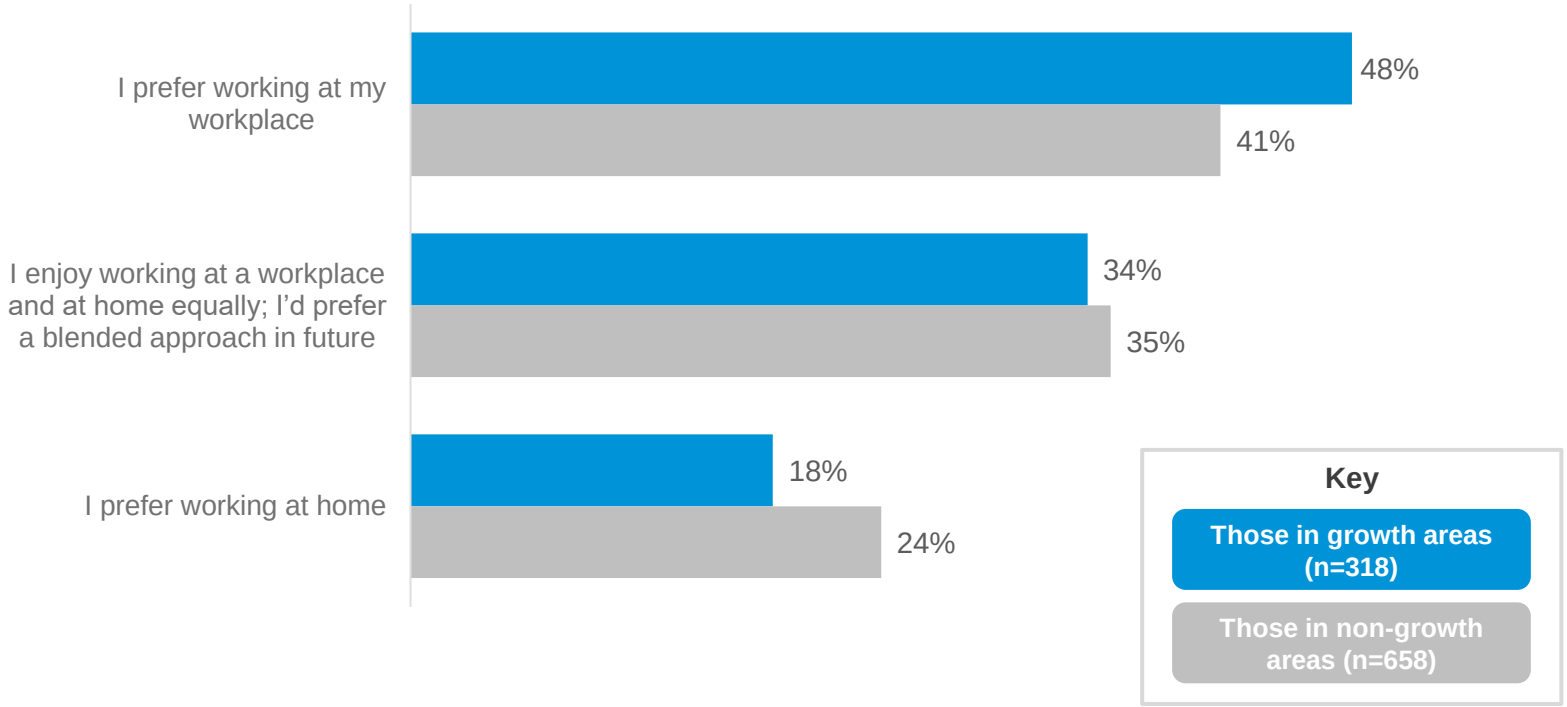
Those that were working from home were doing so **4.3 days per week** on average.

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

Compared to other Australians, those in growth areas are significantly more likely to prefer working in their workplace

Preference for future work location

Base: Workers that could work from home (Aug-21)



Q705. What is your preference for your future working situation?

Of workers in growth areas, 48% prefer working at their workplace (among those having the option to work from home).

Of those in growth areas *working from home at the time of surveying*, 29% preferred working from home, 30% would prefer to work from their workplace and 41% would prefer a blended approach.

Working from home preferences were higher in growth areas in Melbourne (21%), compared to growth areas in Sydney (13%), Brisbane (18%) and Perth (16%).

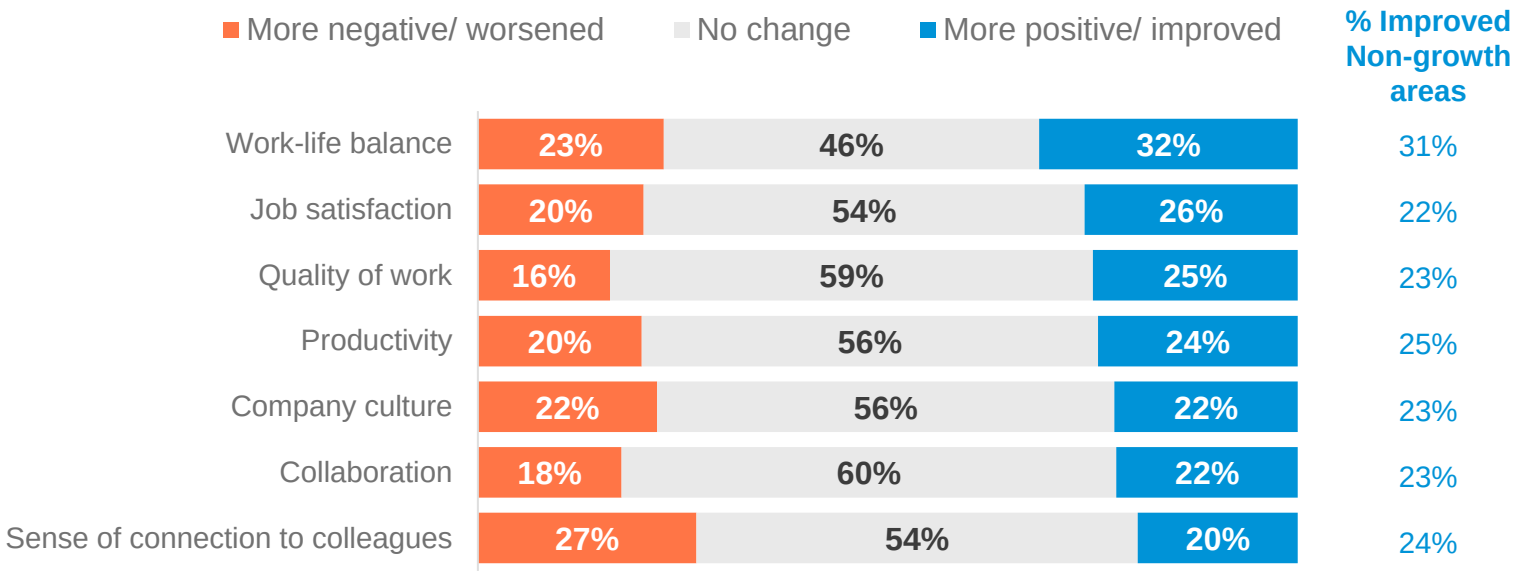
Those aged 40+ were significantly more likely to prefer working at their workplace (54%), whilst those with families were more likely to prefer a blended approach (38%).

Whilst this raises questions about the role of the office in the future, and suggests that flexibility in work location is likely to be a consideration for some job applicants moving forward, it also indicates a need to bring jobs locally, with many employees preferring opportunities to work on-site or at a workplace.

For a third of workers in growth areas, the pandemic has improved their work-life balance

Impact of pandemic on attitudes to work

Base: All workers in growth areas (Aug-21), n=c. 370



Q706. Have any of the following aspects of how you feel about your work changed compared to pre-COVID (i.e. before March 2020)? 'Don't know/not applicable' removed.

Despite overhauling the way many of us work, the pandemic has brought some positive changes to the world of work.

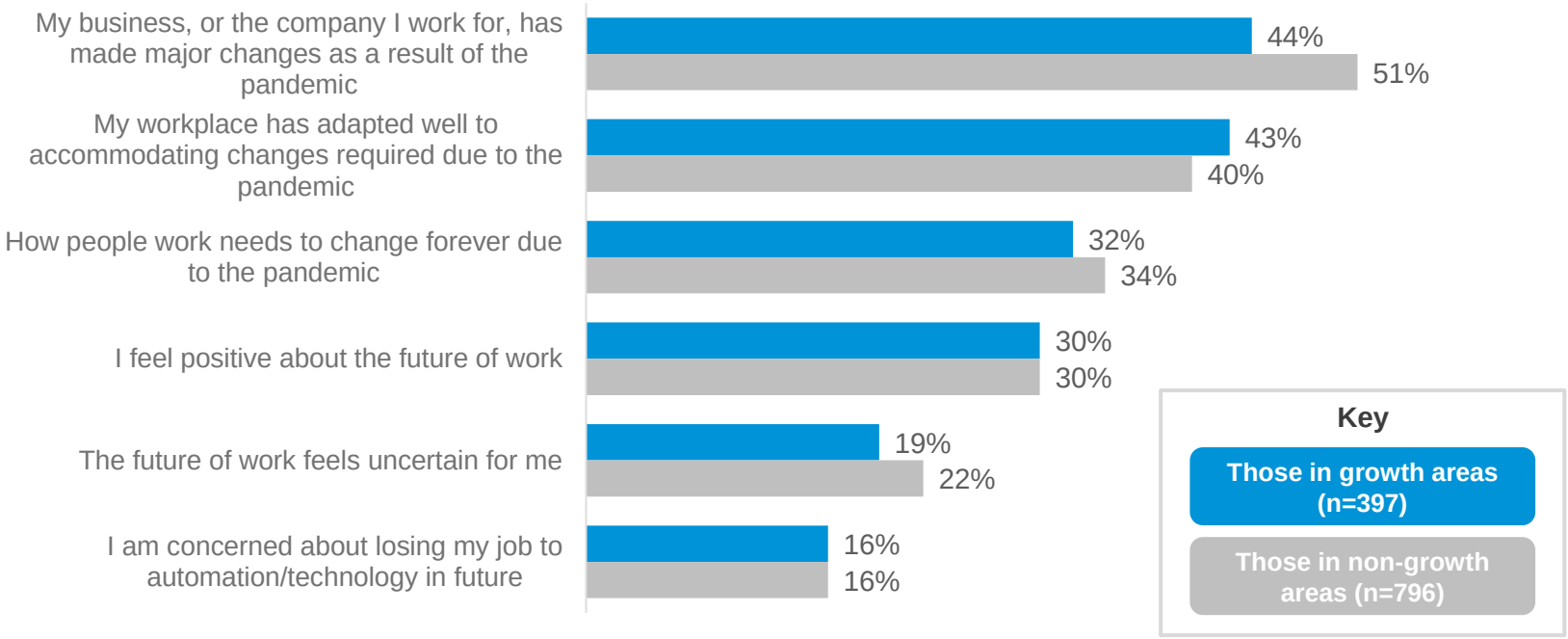
For almost of third of workers in growth areas (32%), the pandemic has led to improvements in work-life balance. However, for 23%, their work-life balance has suffered.

Those in growth areas were more likely to report improvements in job satisfaction (25% compared to 23% of those in non-growth areas), but less likely to report improvements in connection to colleagues (20% compared to 24%).

Positively, those in growth areas are less likely to believe that the future of work feels uncertain

Impact of pandemic on attitudes to work (% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6)

Base: All workers (Aug-21)



Q708. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the workplace and how we will work in the future? 'Don't know/not applicable' removed.

For those in growth areas, experiences with employers during the pandemic were slightly more positive than those in non-growth areas.

Over two in five workers (43%) indicated that their employer had adapted well to accommodating changes required due to the pandemic compared to 40% of those in non-growth areas.

Equally positive was the finding that workers in growth areas were less likely to indicate that the future of work feels uncertain (19% compared to 22% of those in non-growth areas).

As many as 44% of those in growth areas indicated that their business, or the company they work for, has made major changes as a result of the pandemic (for example changing how they do business, what they sell, etc.).

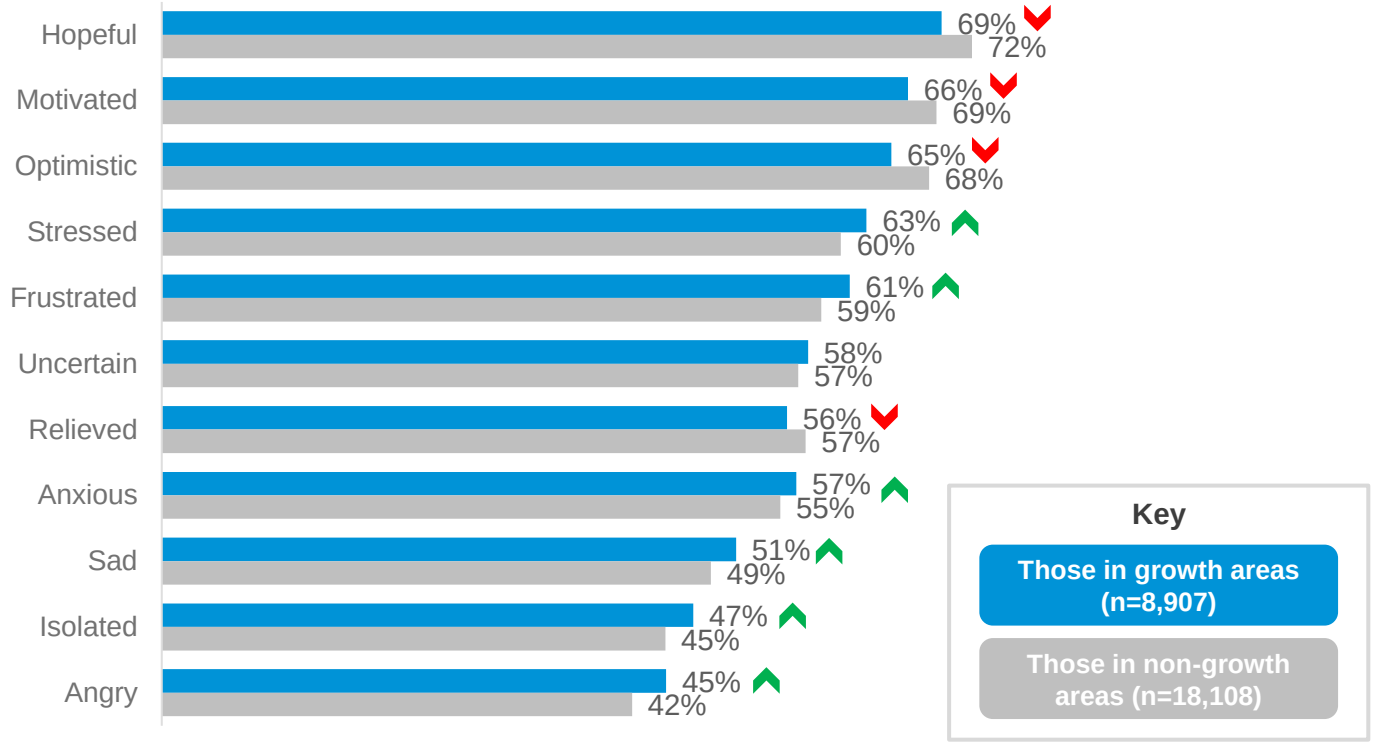
Growth areas represent a large workforce, and there is opportunity to provide a local workforce, underpinned by appropriate planning and investment.

Health and wellbeing in growth areas

Mood in the growth suburbs is not as buoyant as other locations

Emotions experienced

Base: All respondents (Apr-Oct 21)



Q.7. Thinking back over the last week, how often did you feel…

Residents of growth suburbs are more likely to have experienced negative emotions over the last six months and less likely to have experienced positive emotions of hope, optimism and relief.

Of concern is the higher than average presence of markers associated with poor mental health, such as anxiety isolation and stress. Females, those aged under 40 and those in the casual workforce are more likely to have experienced these poor markers of mental health over the past six months.

While uncertainty is likely to become less acute as pandemic-related restrictions ease, businesses and industries re-open and life resumes as COVID-normal, there is a need to ensure that planning in growth areas takes into account initiatives and infrastructure (e.g. access to the natural environment, access to professionals, etc) that supports mental health beyond the pandemic.

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

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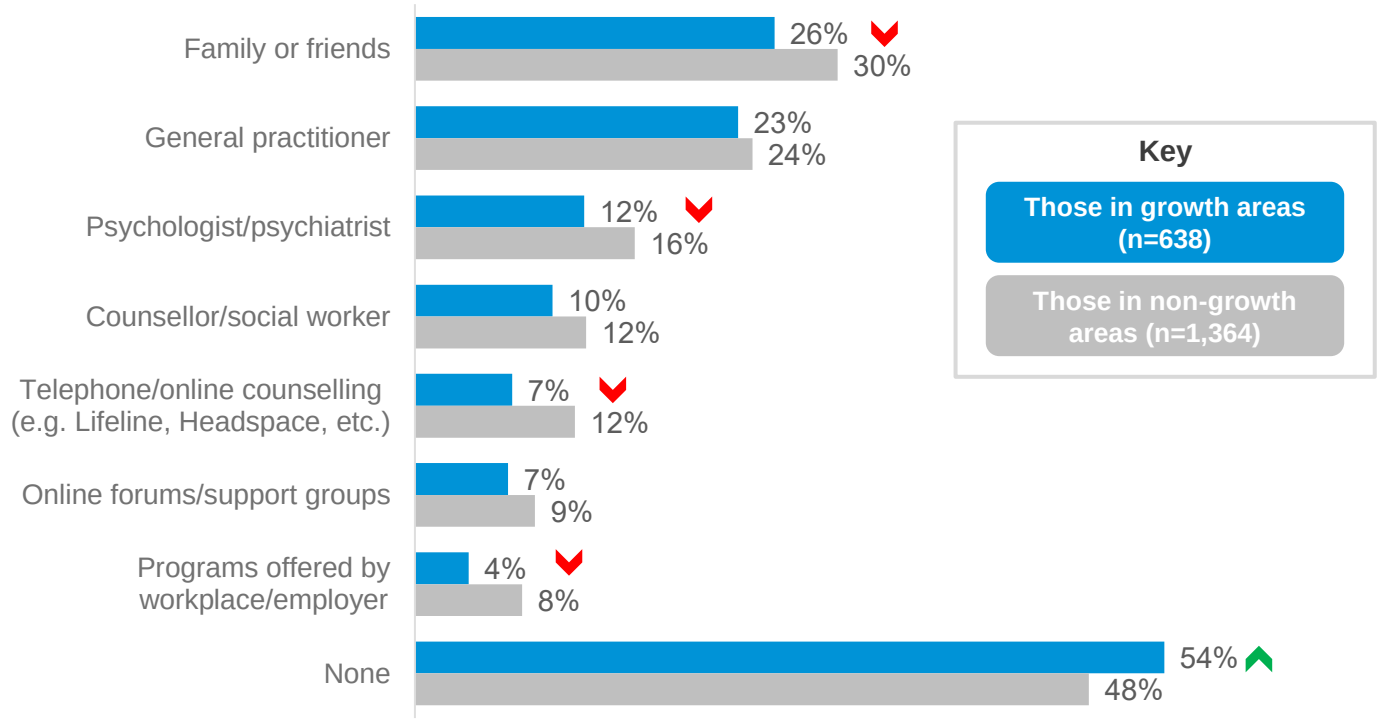
Despite a higher rate of negative emotions, those in growth areas are not accessing support as widely as others

Accessed mental health support

Base: All respondents (Apr-21)



Q18p. Have you accessed any of the following for mental health assistance in the past 12 months?

Those in growth areas were significantly less likely than those in non-growth areas to have spoken to family or friends or accessed a psychologist/psychiatrist, telephone/online counselling or workplace program in relation to their mental health.

This suggests that there is a reluctance to access such resources, an inability to access them, or both.

They were also less likely to indicate that they had taken mental health day off work more often since before the pandemic (18% compared to 22% of those in non-growth areas).

Accessed *any* mental health support in past 12 months

46% *Growth areas*

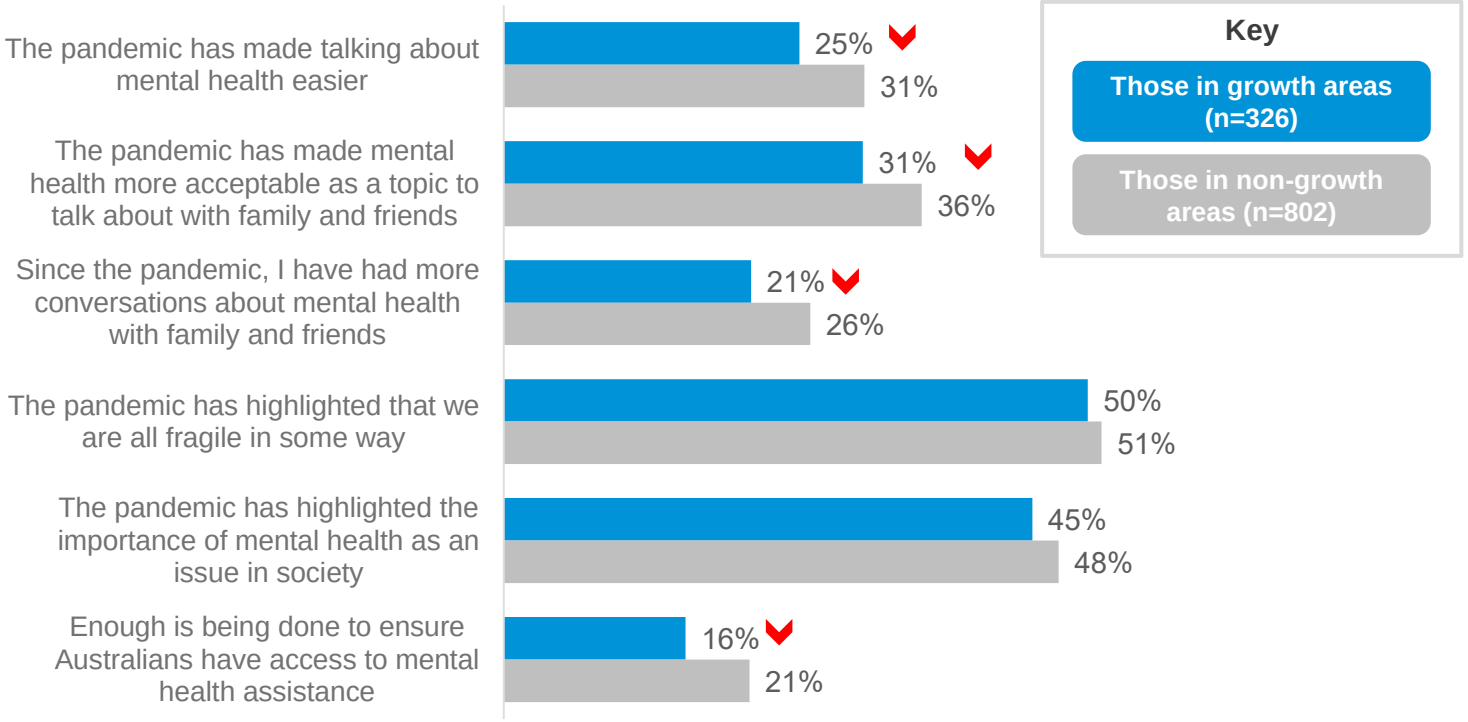
52% *Non-growth areas*

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

Attitudinally, there appears to be less comfort with discussing mental health issues among those in growth areas

Attitudes to mental health

Base: All respondents (Apr-21)



Q.18n. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about mental health?

Those in growth areas were significantly less likely to agree that the pandemic has made talking about mental health easier, made it more acceptable as a topic to talk about with family and friends, or triggered actual conversations.

Further, only 16% agreed that enough is being done to ensure Australians have access to mental health assistance (compared to 21% of those in non-growth areas) indicating a perceived lack of access.

In Aug-21, only two in five people in growth areas (40%) agreed that 'Australia is more united since before the pandemic', suggesting there are some perceptions of social division that need to be addressed.

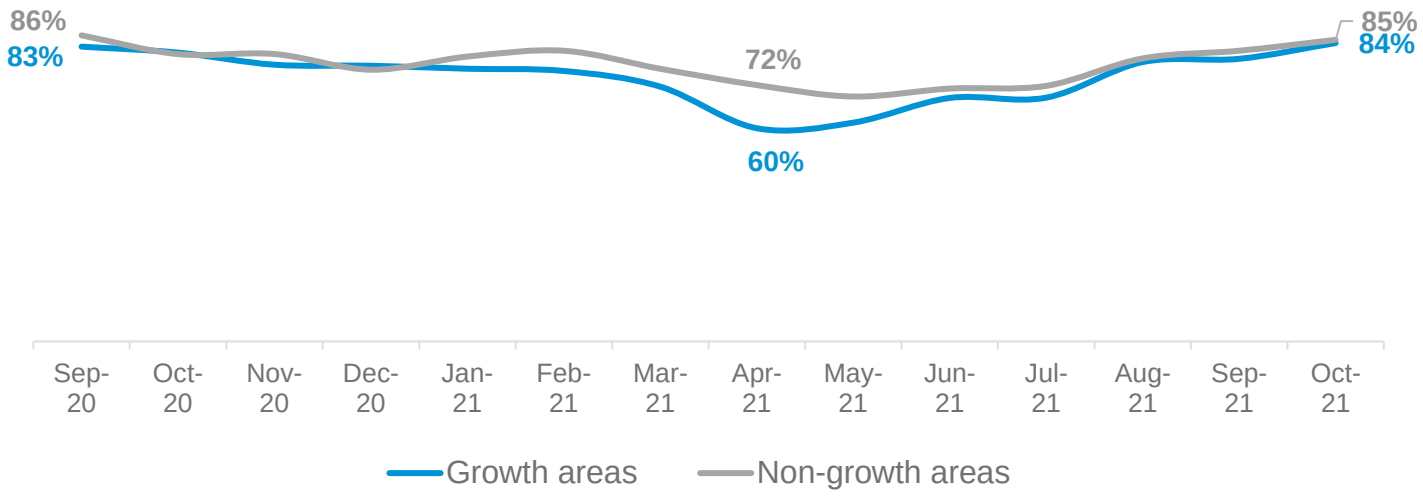
This clearly presents an opportunity to build psychological resilience in growth areas through greater mental health education and access to support.

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

COVID-19 vaccination take-up and intentions in growth areas have moved into line with those in non-growth areas

Vaccine take-up and intentions (% vaccinated or intend to be vaccinated)

Base: All respondents, Growth areas, n=approx. 300 per month, Non-growth areas n=approx. 650-700 per month



Q10g - How likely would you be personally to get vaccinated against COVID-19?

Whilst those in growth areas lagged in terms of vaccination uptake and intentions earlier in the year, they have now increased to 84% already, or intend to get, vaccinated.

This is clearly a key factor for ensuring the health and wellbeing of residents in growth areas, the continued productivity of the workforce, and the capacity of local hospitals.

Three-quarters of those in growth areas now agree that we need to learn to live with COVID-19 in our community.

We need to learn to live with COVID-19 in our community

(% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6; Oct 21)

75% Agree

25% Disagree

*Non-NGAA areas: **74%***

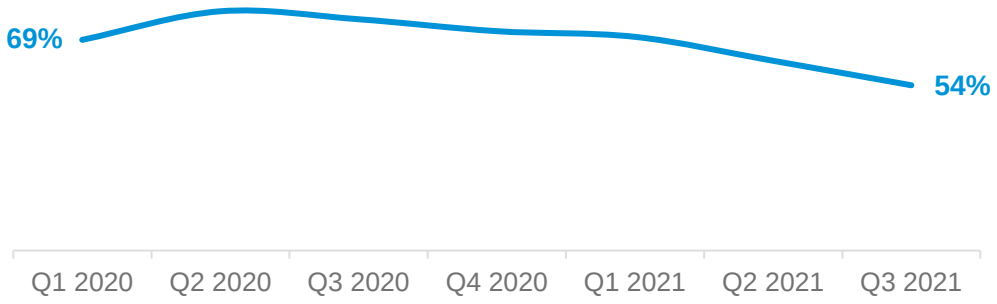
*Non-NGAA areas: **26%***

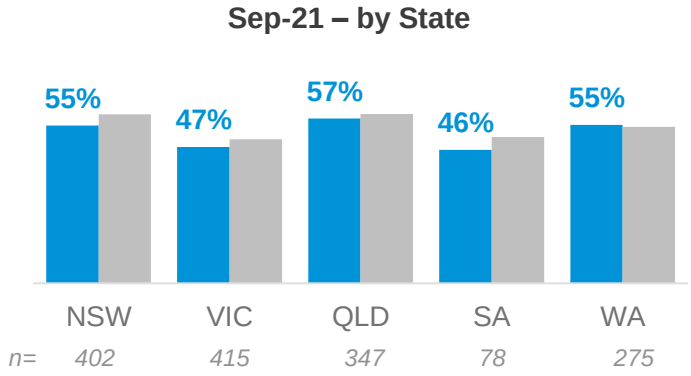
Confidence in leadership and priorities

Confidence in Federal Government has dropped significantly since the start of the pandemic

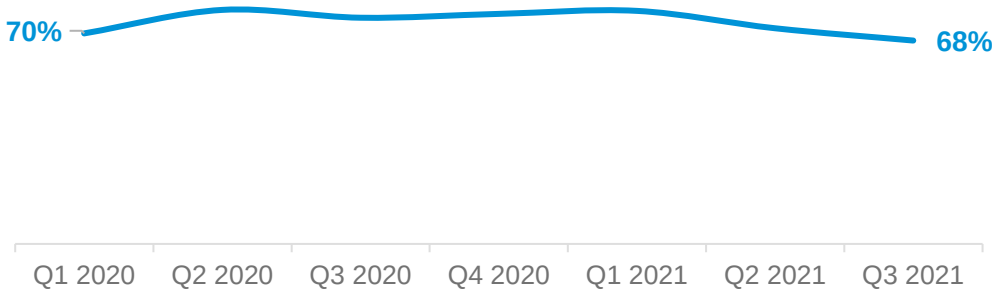
Confidence in Federal Government

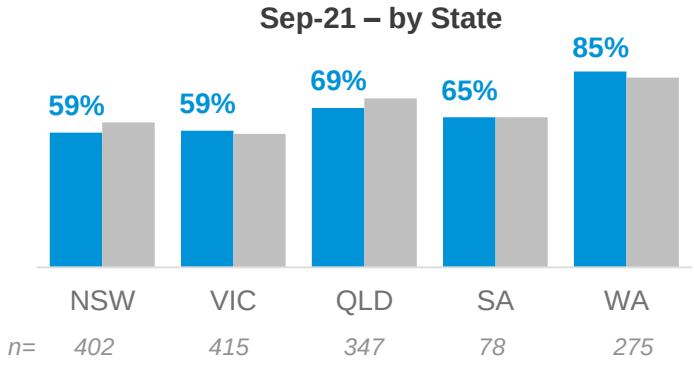
Base: All respondents in growth areas (n=476-3,648 per month; Sep-21 n=1,517)





Confidence in State Government





Q14. How confident are you in our…

Confidence in the Federal government among those in growth areas has fallen since mid-2020, in line with the national average.

Confidence in the Federal government is lowest in growth areas in South Australia (46% confident) and Victoria (47% confident).

Confidence in the Western Australian State government (85%) and Queensland State government (69%) is significantly higher than confidence in other State governments.

Key

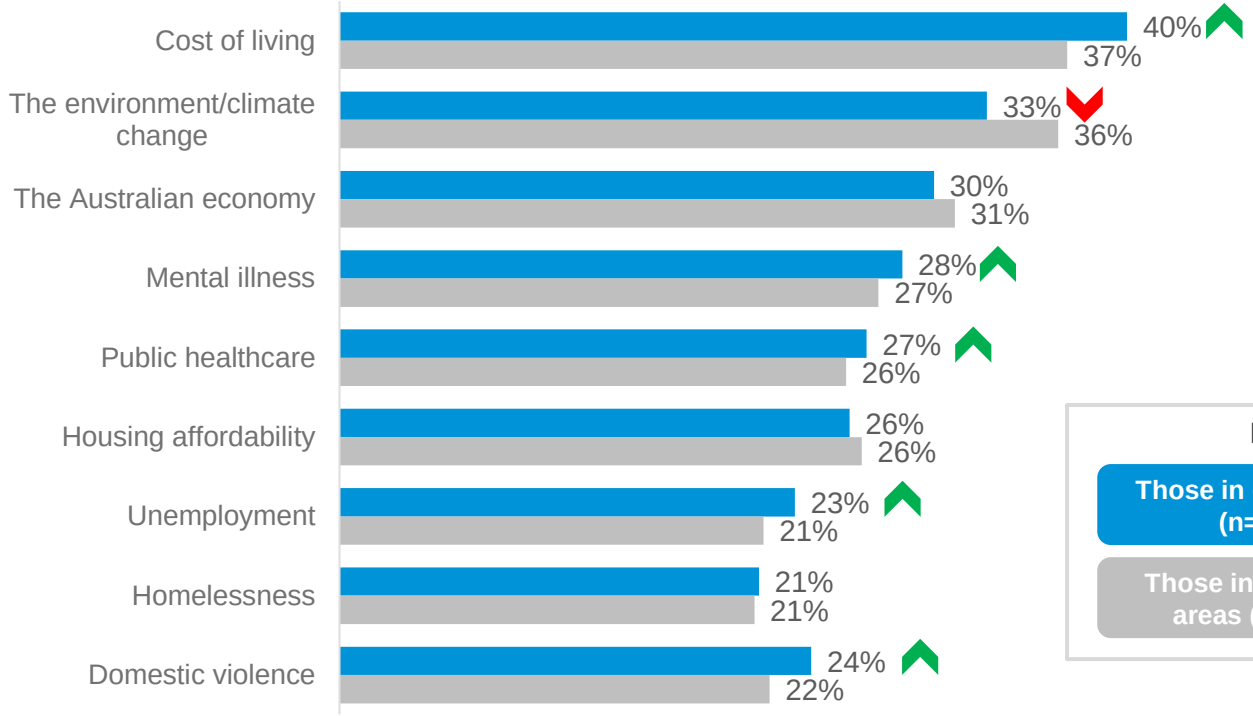
- Those in growth areas
- Those in non-growth areas

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

In growth areas there is greater focus on the things that affect individuals - cost of living, mental illness and healthcare

Government priorities

Base: All respondents (May-Oct 21) – top nine of 34 shown



Key

- Those in growth areas (n=7,947)
- Those in non-growth areas (n=16,016)

Q16a - Which of these do you believe are the five (5) most important things for government to take action on straight away?

Although priorities for government for those in growth suburbs broadly align with the wider population, subtle differences exist that highlight some of the pressures those in growth areas are facing.

Cost of living concerns tops the list and is a priority for two in five. Health and wellbeing topics fall within the top five priorities for government, like the broader population but again a greater focus on these areas for those in growth suburbs.

With a greater focus on issues closer to home, bigger challenges such as the environment and global warming are less of a focus.

Other topics where growth areas over-index

	Suicide	Violent crime	Quality of life	Traffic congestion
Growth areas	16%	15%	11%	8%
Non-growth areas	14%	14%	10%	5%

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

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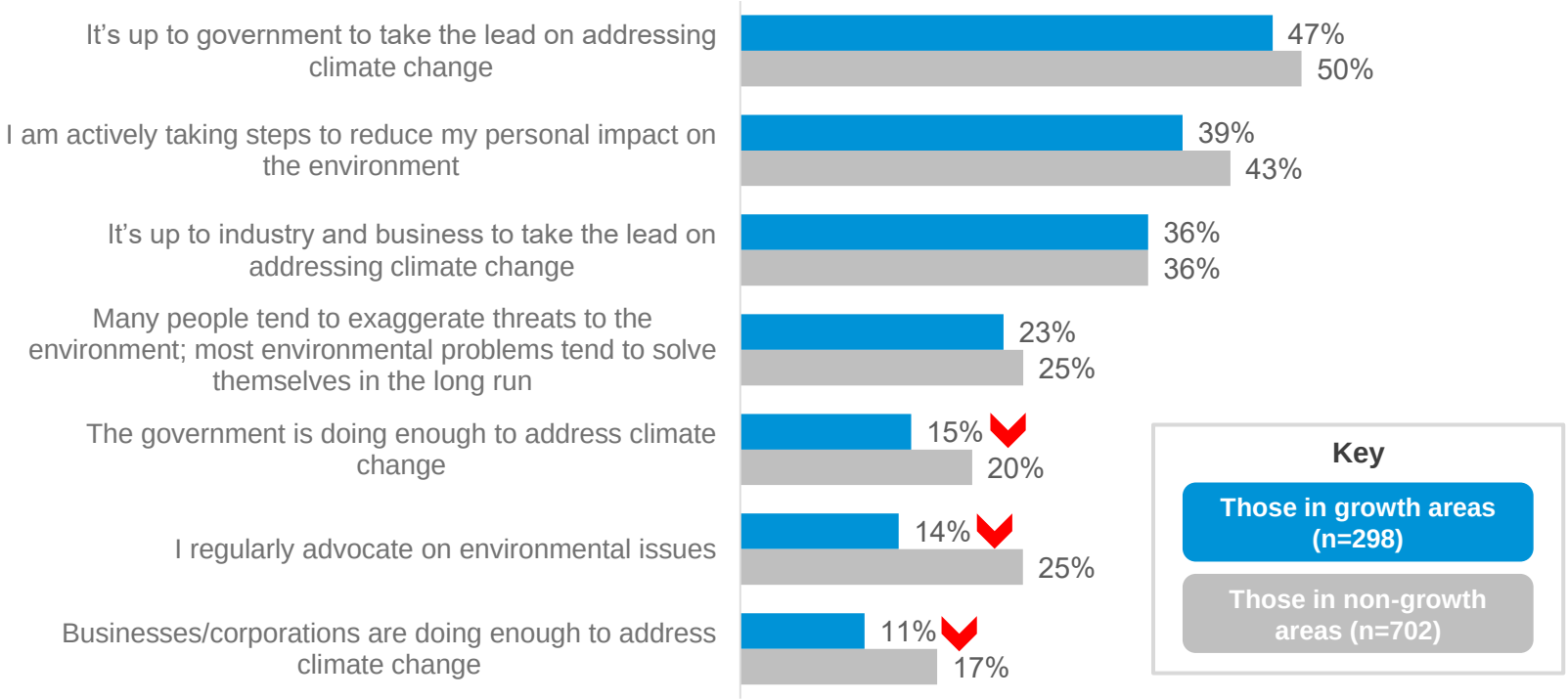
Less focus on environmental topics for those who reside in growth areas, but greater sense that more should be done

Attitudes to the environment (% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6)

Base: All respondents (Apr-21)



Q18s. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the environment and sustainability?

While those in growth areas are less proactive in taking steps to actively reduce their own environmental footprint, they are less likely to believe that the government and businesses. corporations are doing enough to address climate change.

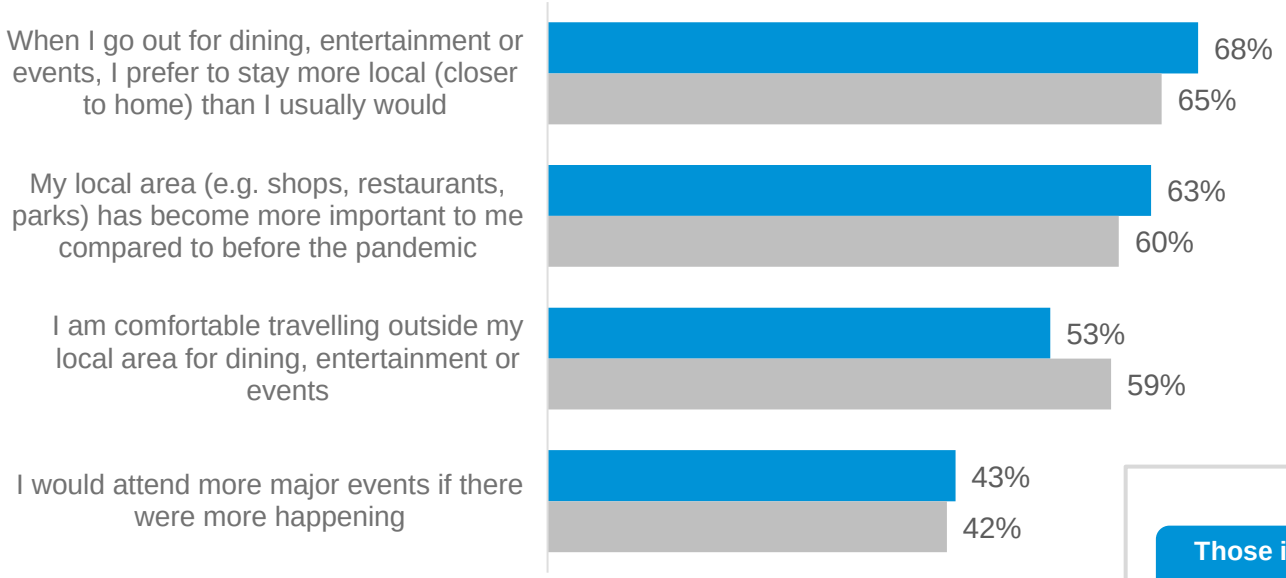
The proportion that believe it's up to government to lead the way on addressing climate change (47%) outweighs the proportion that believe it should be up to industry (36%), suggesting that there is a strong expectation of government taking leadership on these issues.

Significantly higher/ lower than non-growth areas at the 95% confidence interval

Increased focus on the importance of the local area amenities, and less comfort travelling beyond

Attitudes to local area (% Agree – 4 to 6 out of 6)

Base: All respondents (Jun-21)



Key

- Those in growth areas (n=335)
- Those in non-growth areas (n=665)

Q137. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

Lockdowns and limitations on travel have changed the way we live, socialise, move about and what we place importance on.

For just under two thirds (63%) of those in growth areas, the pandemic has elevated the importance of local amenities such as shops, restaurants/cafes and parks.

Over two thirds (68%) prefer to stay closer to home for dining, entertainment and events. Almost half (47%) of those in growth areas are *not* comfortable travelling outside their local area for entertainment.

This reinforces the importance of investing in infrastructure in growth areas to enable these experiences closer to home.

Appendix

Respondent profile

Nationally representative sample by age, gender and location.

N=1,000 per week.

Quotas and weighting

Quotas were applied to ensure a representative spread of responses by gender, age and State. Data has also been weighted by State and gender to achieve a representative profile.

Sample accuracy

The weekly results are based off a total sample size of n=1,000, yielding a maximum margin of error of +/-3.1% (at the 95% confidence interval). This means that for a result of 50%, we can be 95% confident that the result in the actual population will range between 46.9% and 53.1%.

Weekly sample	Proportion of sample (weighted %)
Total	100%
Gender	
Male	48%
Female	51%
Gender fluid/diverse/non-binary	1%
Age	
18 – 29 years	22%
30 – 39 years	18%
40 – 49 years	18%
50 – 59 years	15%
60 – 69 years	15%
70+ years	12%
State	
NSW	32%
VIC	26%
QLD	20%
SA	7%
WA	10%
Other	5%

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