

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER REPORT

Our Mission

To provide strong, reliable leadership and advocacy on matters relevant to business in greater Ballarat.

Our Vision

To be the number one relevant resource for business.

b2b 'Business to Ballarat'

In June and July 2025, our Winter media campaign highlighted the benefits of supporting Ballarat businesses during the colder months. Throughout the year, the b2b brand was a key tool in promoting Commerce Ballarat members through various initiatives, such as curated gift guides, the Best Steak Sanga in Ballarat, encouraging the community to keep their dollars local and support the growth of our local economy. In November and December we ran our regular Shop Ballarat messaging across Radio, TV and Print media with a 'Ballarat Dollar' social media campaign that saw sponsors and local businesses take the streets and show the impacts spending local has.

A big thank you to our current Sponsors: Ballarat Removals & Storage, Mercedes Benz Ballarat, Central Victorian Investments, Simplex Insurance Solutions and Sovereign Press.

Biznet Breakfast Series

Our Biznet Breakfast series is held throughout the year, on the first Tuesday of each month (excluding January and November). The breakfasts provide networking opportunities, as well as insights from a broad range of guest speakers on a number of different topics.

Over the past year we have heard from:

2025: June – Birthday Celebrations, July - Committee for Ballarat- Ballarat Energy Network, August David 'DJ' Jochinke – President, National Farmers' Federation, September Marketing Panel, October - Ballarat Racing Industry- Breakfast with the Stars, December - Ballarat Foundation Christmas Appeal

2026: February – Have Breakfast with the Animals, March - Dr Jen Markovec Monash University, April - Couples in Business May – BRMC Social Cohesion

Thank you to our 2026 Sponsors: BJT Legal, City of Ballarat, PPT, Adroit Insurance & Risk, Z Protection Services and Radio Ballarat

Business Weekly

Weekly newsletter distributed to 1800+ Ballarat businesspeople. All members have the opportunity to promote their news and events within the various sections of the newsletter, including stories, achievements, community events and initiatives your business is involved with. These also feature on the homepage of the Commerce Ballarat website for the week. Commerce Ballarat's e-news has an average open rate of 44.3% (average industry open rate 20% and 30%).

Business Awards 2025/26

We were thrilled to confirm in early 2026 the continued partnership between Commerce Ballarat and Federation University into 2029. We extend our appreciation to Federation University, especially Professor Duncan Bentley, Helen Ryan and the dedicated team. The awards provide a unique occasion for businesses to assess and refine their performance. In 2025, participation remained healthy. In 2026 we are introducing the oeDigital Ethical Business Award. We thank Judges and Mentors who volunteer their time to ensure the integrity of the program and a big thank you to the 2026 sponsors Federation University, City of Ballarat, The WIN Network, Ballarat Times News Group, Stoke Design, Regional Development Australia Grampians, Central Highlands Water, Gawk Outdoor, Bartlett Manufacturing, Mercure Ballarat Hotel and Convention Centre, Nevett Wilkinson Frawley, Haymes Paint, Ballarat Group Practice, The Turret Café, Calacare, oeDigital, Community Bank Buninyong, 3BA, Power FM & Admedia.

B31 August Business Festival

Commerce Ballarat facilitates B31 August Business Festival every year with a variety of networking and development

opportunities delivered throughout the month. Continuing a practice started in 2023, our 2024 brochure and website featured a directory of corporate experiences, local dining options, meeting spaces, accommodation and regional tourist attractions to appeal to businesspeople from outside of Ballarat. The B31 2025 program delivered 32 events throughout the month of August. We are looking forward to forming an exciting program of events for the coming 2026 festival. Thank you to our 2025 sponsors, Ballarat Times News Group, Radio Ballarat, Small Dog Design, BJT Legal and Colliers.

Central Highlands Growers & Producers Hub

Commerce Ballarat commenced work on the Central Highlands Growers and Producers Hub in September 2023, which had sixteen members at the time. Since then, membership has increased to 148. The aim of the Hub is to create a vibrant and supportive network of businesses dedicated to promoting quality produce from our region. It's also about fostering collaboration, sharing knowledge and creating opportunities for local growers, producers, and artisans. We thank the five LGAs that came on board and put their trust in us, Hepburn Shire, Pyrenees Shire, Golden Plains Shire, Ararat Rural City, City of Ballarat.

Forge and Feast

Forge & Feast is a month-long festival that celebrates the growers, producers and venues in the Central Highlands region. It is designed to promote the region as a food destination and a producing powerhouse, a place that you visit, to explore & experience, rejuvenate & indulge, and connect with the space you're in. It is also designed to fill a gap in the tourism calendar in the Central Highlands and encourage visitation to the region during a time that is traditionally quieter. By offering unique experiences and exclusive events, Forge & Feast aims to offer a peek behind the curtain, and see, learn, taste and experience all that the Central Highlands has to offer. This year we were excited to deliver a festival featuring 124 events, over 55 growers and producers, and extensive destination marketing to promote the Central Highlands as a food and tourism hub. We were also excited to deliver for the first the Meet the Makers trade day as part of our launch event. This saw our growers and producers connect with restaurants, retailers and other local businesses from across the sector, to create connections and relationships. In 2026, we aim to make this portion of the program bigger and better, expanding into a full day with development opportunities around wholesale trade and marketing for our growers and producers. A big thank you to Community Bank Creswick & District, Community Bank Buninyong, Community Bank Ballan & District, City of Ballarat, Pyrenees Shire Council, Hepburn Shire, Ararat Rural City Council & Golden Plains Shire.

Uncover Central Highlands

Uncover Central Highlands consists of a Facebook and Instagram account aiming to reveal the rich tapestry of life in Victoria's Central Highlands, highlighting the people, places, businesses, and products that make this region unique. Our goal is to foster a deeper connection between locals and visitors, driving both tourism and business growth in this vibrant heartland. 2025/26 Insights: 247,298 Reach | 1318 comments | 1812 Link Clicks | 202,874 Views | 11,489 Likes & Interactions | 16,324 Followers

NextGen Collective

Since September 2013, the Commerce Ballarat Young Professionals Network has been providing support, networking, and development opportunities to those in their 20's and 30's within Ballarat. In 2025, the Young Professionals Network becomes the NextGen Collective. NextGen Collective is the place to be for emerging talent in Ballarat. The Collective is dedicated to our city's young people and works to help them network, push their limits, and grow as individuals in their lives and careers. It's business-made casual, and the benefits extend far beyond the workplace. Opportunities abound, and there is a lot of fun to be had along the way.

NextGen Collective is an added benefit for Commerce Ballarat members. All young professionals who are employed by or are Commerce Ballarat members can attend most functions for a reduced fee. All other attendees are welcome to attend most events as non-members.

With the support of Inspire HQ in 2025 we delivered 2 x NextGen Next Steps Development sessions, Leadership: It's a Mindset, End of Year Bar Hop.

Thank you to our 2026 Sponsors Gforce & Accenture

Development

Over the past year, Commerce Ballarat has delivered a wide range of professional development and business growth opportunities designed to support local businesses, emerging leaders and industry sectors across Ballarat and the Central Highlands. These opportunities comprised of industry tours including manufacturing and business site visits, industry chats

and forums focused on hospitality, tourism, growers, producers and trade sectors, as well as practical workshops and webinars covering topics such as finance, retail leasing, dispute resolution, tender writing and business growth. Additional development opportunities were provided through the Ballarat Tradie Network, the NextGen Collective, mentoring programs, leadership and networking initiatives, and collaborative training.

Business Day Out

2025 Business Day Out once again delivered an inspiring and thought-provoking experience for our regional business community, bringing together 169 attendees for a day focused on innovation, leadership, business growth and collaboration. Held at The Goods Shed Ballarat, the event featured an outstanding line-up of speakers including Dr. Dinesh Palipana, Jason Clarke, Danielle Pearce and Shaun Briggs, while also engaging more than 350 secondary school students across nine schools. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 90% rating the event as excellent and 95% saying they were very likely to attend again in the future. Commerce Ballarat sincerely thanks all sponsors and supporters who helped make the event possible, including CountPro, gforce employment + recruitment, Ai Group, Stoke Design Co, Sovereign Press, The Goods Shed, Itinerant Spirits, Power FM, 3BA, The WIN Network, Ballarat Times News Group, Western Bulldogs and the City of Ballarat for their valued support and commitment to strengthening regional business connections and opportunities.

Industry & Education Partnership Bus Tour

May 2026, the Industry & Education Partnership Tour brought together participants from education and industry for a full day of site visits, networking and career pathway discussions across Ballarat and regional Victoria. The tour included visits to the Ballarat Wildlife Park and Gaia EnviroTech, where attendees gained insight into careers in wildlife, sustainability, manufacturing and renewable energy through presentations, guided tours and conversations with industry professionals. Networking opportunities continued over lunch at Itinerant Spirits, followed by presentations from Federation University Australia and Accenture on cooperative education opportunities, future career pathways and regional workforce development. The afternoon concluded with an engaging panel on agriculture and emerging jobs of the future, featuring local leaders from farming, agribusiness and ag-tech, providing participants with valuable exposure to diverse industries, career journeys and future employment opportunities. Thank you to our panellists, our hosts and the participating schools, and to Highlands LLEN and Workforce Australia for your support of the initiative.

Business Mentoring Program

A program for members offering one on one mentoring and group workshops. This program offers mentoring to new businesses and or those that are looking for growth or change. In 2025 we welcomed ten businesses to the program, in 2026 we have adjusted this to a by need process so mentees can apply throughout the year and be paired with a mentor as needed. Thank you to the mentors who volunteer to assist.

Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance

In 2025/26 we continued to facilitate VRCA. Mission - To be recognised as the collective voice for regional Chambers of Commerce and Business Associations. Vision - A prosperous regional Victoria; vibrant, healthy, heard and connected. Currently there are 33 members and this continues to expand. The VRCA group catch up online once a month and met up in person in Ballarat in October 2025. The VRCA has advocated on behalf of regional Victoria on topics including: Proposed Work From Home Legislation, Making Business Easier & Cheaper in Regional Victoria, Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund Levy, The Health of Chambers. VRCA conducted a survey and released a detailed 'Business Health Report' in October 2025 and May 2026.

Central Highlands Drought Resilience Project

The project delivered a broad range of initiatives between September 2024 and April 2026 focused on strengthening drought resilience, business capability, community wellbeing and economic development across the Central Highlands agricultural sector. Key activities included the delivery of the six-week Farmers of the West fitness and mental wellbeing program in partnership with Federation University and the Western Bulldogs Community Foundation; the inaugural Farmer's Day Out, which attracted 170 attendees for keynote presentations, workshops and networking focused on the business of farming; and the Forage & Feast Festival, a region-wide food and tourism initiative featuring 124 events, over 55 growers and producers, and extensive destination marketing to promote the Central Highlands as a food and tourism hub. Additional activities included the completion of the Central Highlands Resilient Agriculture Project with Federation University to investigate diversification and resilience opportunities for the agriculture sector, alongside a series of Agri Business Development workshops, panels and industry chats covering succession planning, exports, retail innovation,

digital capability, customer service, manufacturing, finance and family business. Collectively, these activities aimed to improve industry resilience, encourage stronger business thinking within farming communities, support diversification and tourism opportunities, strengthen networks and collaboration, and provide accessible professional development and wellbeing support for regional businesses and producers.

Advocacy

Commerce Ballarat represents our members and the wider business community on a wide range of issues to all levels of government.

Additional representation on behalf of our members Includes:

- Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance
- City Leaders Meeting
- Central Highlands Economic Development Forum
- Central Highlands Water Customer Advisory Panel
- Ballarat Jobs Plan Taskforce
- Ballarat Liquor Accord
- Ballarat Community Safety Alliance
- Ballarat Business Women

We understand and empathise with our business community in what continue to be difficult times. This week we released the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance May 2026 Business Health Survey Report, Commerce Ballarat will continue to call on all levels of Government to make doing business in this state cheaper and easier!!

Whilst we understand the constraints in this economy our organisation relies on the support of the business community through sponsorship and membership, if you would like to know more please make contact anytime.

Kind regards
Jodie Gillett
Chief Executive Officer
Commerce Ballarat

b2b Business to Ballarat, always try and buy local.