



Accountants & Advisors

Australia's *best kept*
accounting secret

 Take the lead

FedBud 26 Survey results

From Hidden to Headline



The business voice behind the Budget

Why this survey matters

SW's 2026 Federal Budget Survey captured business sentiment immediately before late major Federal Budget announcements, including proposed changes to negative gearing, CGT, trust distributions, migration and investment settings.

This timing makes the findings particularly valuable, reflecting real business thinking before policy announcements and media commentary influenced sentiment.

During our webinar, we asked three key questions:

1. How confident are you that the Federal Budget addresses the issues that matter most to Australians?
2. What is your greatest concern about Australia's economic outlook right now?
3. What announcement will impact you the greatest?

The voice of business before the Budget landed

The survey provides a grounded view of how organisations across industries were approaching investment, hiring, AI, sustainability and growth amid rising costs, economic uncertainty and shifting regulation.

Importantly, it highlights what businesses were actually asking for: greater certainty, simpler policy settings and confidence to invest.

Why this matters for advisors & government

As advisors working closely with businesses every day, these insights help connect policy decisions with real commercial behaviour.

The findings provide important context for understanding how businesses may respond to the Budget measures announced, and where gaps may emerge between policy intent and business reality.



Simon Tucker,
Partner, Tax

Matt Birrell,
Partner, Tax

Executive summary



Australian businesses are prepared to invest, but they are doing so cautiously and conditionally. The FedBud 2026 survey reveals an economy that is broadly willing to grow, adopt technology and transition to more sustainable operations - yet increasingly constrained by cost pressures, workforce shortages and policy complexity.

An economy willing, but finely balanced

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) report being somewhat or very confident in their ability to invest for growth over the next 12 months. However, this confidence is fragile rather than assured.

A sizeable neutral cohort (21%) and a meaningful unconfident segment (16%) signal that many investment decisions remain in a wait-and-see position, highly sensitive to changes in cost settings, regulatory clarity and economic stability.

Cost pressure dominates business priorities

Across industries, business sizes and regions, cost of doing business is the single strongest concern shaping expectations for the 2026 Federal Budget. It ranks as the Government's top priority for 38% of respondents, well ahead of productivity, sustainability or workforce reform.

Rising operating costs - including energy, labour, finance and compliance - are constraining margins and forcing businesses to prioritise short-term viability over longer-term ambition. While respondents strongly support productivity-enhancing and future-focused reforms, these are consistently framed as secondary to immediate cost relief.

Investment levers are financial first

When asked what would most improve their organisation's ability to invest, businesses overwhelmingly point to direct financial and cash-flow levers:

- Access to capital and financing (48%)
- Company tax settings (42%)
- Accelerated depreciation (39%)

Skills, training and infrastructure are recognised as important enablers, but they sit behind liquidity, after-tax returns and financing conditions. This highlights a strong preference for measures that immediately reduce risk and unlock capital.

AI adoption is widespread - but not yet scaled

AI and advanced automation are now firmly on the business agenda. Ninety-two per cent of respondents are either using AI or exploring/piloting it. However, the majority remain in early-stage adoption:

- 43% report AI is in limited operational use
- 39% are piloting or exploring
- Just 10% say AI is core to operations

The primary barriers are not cost, but capability and confidence. Skills gaps (66%), data readiness (39%) and cyber or risk concerns (36%) far outweigh financial constraints. Businesses are signalling that AI adoption will only scale with workforce capability, clearer governance and regulatory certainty.

Consistent with this, respondents expect government to act as an enabler rather than a driver - prioritising skills and training, regulatory clarity, and targeted co-investment to support responsible adoption.

Sustainability is mainstream - but burden matters

Sustainability and emissions reduction are no longer niche concerns. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents rate them as important, emerging or a core strategic priority. However, enthusiasm is tempered by cost and complexity.

The strongest signals are for practical enablement:

- Carbon reporting simplification (44%)
- Energy transition incentives (41%)
- Clean technology grants (37%)

Most organisations expect sustainability to carry a moderate cost impact over the next three years, yet one in five remain unsure - reflecting uncertainty about policy settings, timelines and indirect compliance costs. Businesses are seeking clearer pathways, simpler reporting and predictable frameworks to support investment at pace.

The strength of the signal

Taken together, the findings reflect a business community that is ready to invest, innovate and transition, but increasingly constrained by rising costs, workforce shortages and policy complexity.

The strongest call to policymakers is not for short-term stimulus, but for long-term certainty - stable tax and regulatory settings, reduced administrative burden, and coordinated policy that lowers risk and enables private-sector investment to flow.



FedBud 2026 engagement



With the 2026 Federal Budget now released, the focus has shifted from expectation to interpretation. We asked three poll questions to move beyond the Budget headlines and understand how attendees were interpreting the measures in real time.

During our webinar, we asked three key questions:

1. How confident are you that the Federal Budget addresses the issues that matter most to Australians?
2. What is your greatest concern about Australia's economic outlook right now?
3. What announcement will impact you the greatest?

Overall poll summary: cost, confidence and tax certainty are driving sentiment

Taken together, the poll results show that attendees are viewing the Federal Budget through a very practical lens: **will it reduce pressure, restore confidence and provide enough certainty to support decisions?** Three themes stand out:

1. Cost pressure is still the main issue

Cost of living and inflation ranked as the top economic concern at **37%**, followed by government spending and national debt at **20%**. This suggests attendees are concerned about both immediate affordability pressures and the longer-term sustainability of fiscal settings.

2. Confidence in the Budget is weak

Only **16%** of respondents said they were confident the Budget addressed the issues that matter most to Australians, while **58%** were not confident and **26%** were neutral or unsure. This points to a clear gap between what attendees were hoping for and how the Budget has landed so far.

3. Tax changes are dominating the business response

Capital gains tax concessions were the standout concern, selected by **49%** of respondents, followed by trust distributions at **26%** and negative gearing at **12%**. This shows attendees are not just looking at headline relief measures — they are focused on how tax settings may affect investment, asset decisions, business structures and long-term planning.

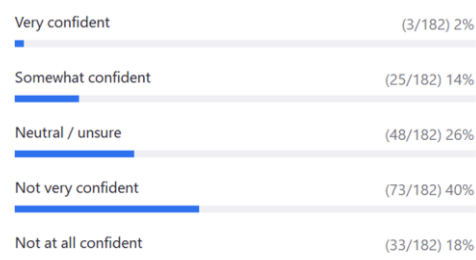
A week post the budget

- Cost pressures, policy uncertainty and major tax reform may delay investment, restructuring and growth decisions.
- This mirrors post-Budget commentary, with business groups welcoming some productivity and R&D measures but warning that CGT, negative gearing and trust changes could weaken confidence and investment.

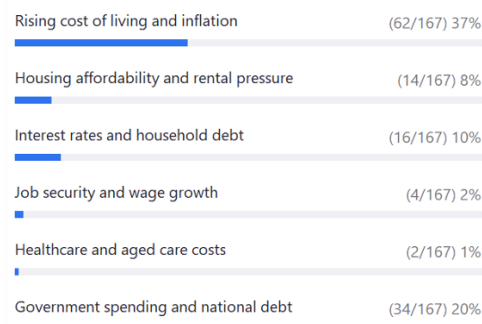
Bottom line

The Budget has not yet shifted sentiment positively. The strongest response is caution, particularly around tax certainty, capital decisions and long-term planning.

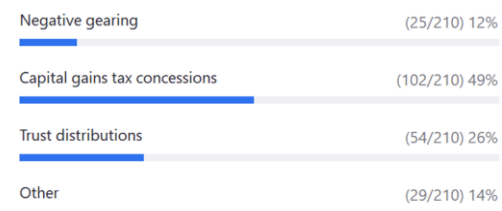
Qn 1: How confident are you that the Federal Budget addresses the issues that matter most to Australians?



Qn 2: What is your greatest concern about Australia's economic outlook right now?



Qn 3: What announcement will impact you the greatest?



Access our webinar with our key experts & Fast Facts on our website



Top 6 survey insights

1

SMEs & mid-market businesses are carrying the signal

The survey is strongly shaped by SMEs and mid-market organisations, which are more exposed to cash flow pressure, workforce gaps, compliance costs and policy uncertainty. This means the findings are less about large corporate sentiment and more about the real-economy businesses most likely to delay or accelerate investment based on Budget settings.



2

Cost pressure is setting the agenda

Rising costs remain the dominant concern, particularly for SMEs and mid-market businesses. Wages, energy, finance, rent and compliance are crowding out longer-term priorities.

3

The Budget has not yet shifted confidence

The strongest post-Budget signal is caution. Businesses want stable, coordinated and practical policy settings that support investment rather than adding further complexity.



4

Investment needs certainty & cash flow

Respondents are looking for practical levers: access to capital, company tax settings and accelerated depreciation, that reduce risk and make investment decisions easier.



AI & sustainability are moving, but not scaling easily

AI adoption and sustainability are both firmly on the business agenda, but progress is being slowed by skills gaps, data readiness, cyber risk, reporting complexity and transition costs.

5

Confidence is fragile, not fixed

Businesses are waiting for clearer signals before committing capital. Post-Budget sentiment suggests tax uncertainty, cost pressure and regulatory change may keep decisions on hold.

6

Investment confidence outlook



Confidence outweighs uncertainty, but caution remains

Overall, the results indicate a net positive investment outlook, with confidence clearly outweighing uncertainty across the sample. Most organisations expect to be in a position to invest for growth over the next 12 months, signaling broadly positive growth intentions.

Confidence is positive, but not unconditional

While optimism is evident, it is not uniform or unqualified. The presence of a sizeable neutral cohort suggests many organisations remain in a “wait-and-see” position, influenced by broader economic conditions, ongoing cost pressures, and demand uncertainty. This points to investment decisions that are highly sensitive to changes in external conditions

Majority report confidence to invest

The largest single response group is “Somewhat confident” (128 responses, ~34%), indicating a cautious but positive outlook among most organisations.

This is followed by “Very confident” responses (101 responses, ~27%), reinforcing a strong base of high confidence in future investment capacity.

Together, these two positive categories comprise 229 responses (approximately 61%), demonstrating that a clear majority of organisations expect to be able to invest and grow over the coming year.

Neutral sentiment highlights delayed decision-making

Neutral sentiment remains significant, with 81 respondents (~21%) selecting “Neutral”. This indicates a substantial proportion of organisations are holding back on firm investment decisions while awaiting clearer economic, market or operational signals.

A meaningful minority face constraints on investment

On the negative side, “Somewhat unconfident” responses (47 respondents, ~12%) and “Very unconfident” responses (17 respondents, ~5%) together account for around 17% of the sample. This group represents organisations facing real constraints or reduced confidence in their capacity to invest.

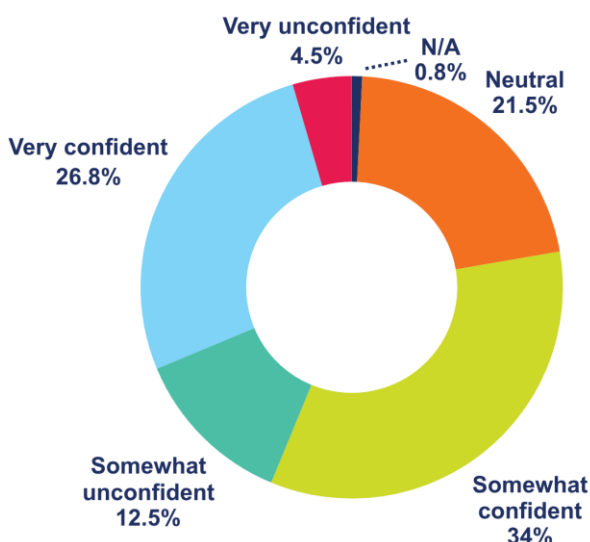
Overall insight

Overall, the findings suggest that while growth intentions are broadly positive, actual investment activity remains fragile.

Confidence outweighs uncertainty, but a combination of neutrality and low confidence indicates that investment decisions are likely to remain highly responsive to external shocks or market volatility over the next 12 months.

The data points to an economy that is willing to invest, but where momentum is conditional rather than assured.

Qn: How confident are you in your organisation’s ability to invest for growth over the next 12 months?



Your say

“Policymakers should prioritise stability, clarity, and long-term planning. Businesses are operating in an increasingly uncertain environment, so consistent policy direction and reduced regulatory complexity would support better decision-making and investment confidence.”

“Ongoing weakness in both global and domestic economic conditions is impacting business confidence and delaying investment decisions across the development sector.”

“Stable regulation and innovation-focused policies will help businesses remain competitive while supporting economic growth and digital transformation.”

Budget measures to improve investment capacity

Businesses prioritise direct financial levers

Responses clearly show that organisations place greatest weight on direct financial measures when considering what would most improve their ability to invest for growth. Liquidity, financing access and after-tax returns are the primary constraints shaping investment decisions.

Access to capital and tax settings lead

Access to capital or financing ranks as the most important lever (50.4%), followed closely by company tax settings (45.9%). Together, these results indicate that cash-flow certainty and tax outcomes are the most immediate factors influencing whether organisations are willing and able to invest.

Structural enablers form a second tier of priorities

A second tier of measures is also valued, though clearly secondary to core financial conditions. These include:

- Skills and training support (36.9%)

- Accelerated depreciation (35.5%)
- Infrastructure investment (31.6%)

These findings suggest that while organisations recognise the importance of capability building and structural reform, such measures are unlikely to unlock investment on their own without supportive financial conditions.

R&D incentives are a lower priority for most organisations

R&D incentives (20.4%) rank lowest among the listed measures, indicating less widespread reliance on innovation-specific support as a primary driver of investment capacity across the sample.

Overall Insight

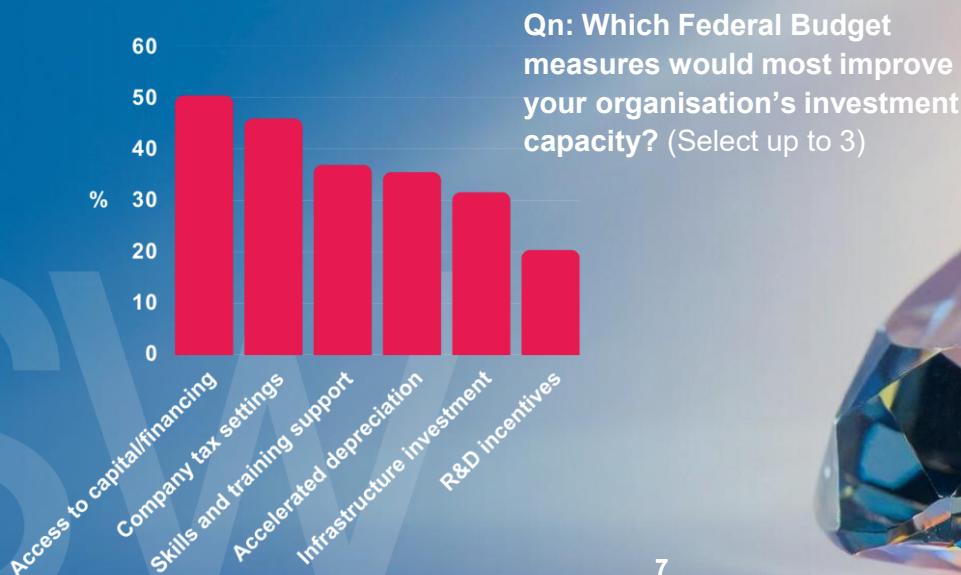
Overall, the results indicate that improving investment capacity is viewed foremost as a financial issue. Access to capital and tax settings are seen as the central levers for unlocking growth, with skills, infrastructure and innovation measures playing supporting rather than leading roles in business investment decisions.

Your say

“Stable funding for workforce development, permanent R&D tax incentives, and consistent support for clean energy and sustainability programs.”

“Investment in infrastructure, skills and technology is critical to improving productivity and unlocking private sector investment.”

“Small businesses and startups require more accessible funding and innovation support to remain competitive and contribute to economic growth.”



AI adoption is widespread, but use is limited in operations



AI is 'in progress' for most organisations (not fully scaled)

Across every business size, the most common state is trial or limited use rather than fully embedded AI.

Mid-market and larger organisations are actively using AI, but most still describe adoption as exploring/piloting or limited operational use (rather than "core to operations")

Non-adoption is concentrated in the smallest businesses

The smallest organisations are most likely to still be on the sidelines. Around one in four sole traders report not using AI (23.8%), and nearly one in five of the 1–20 employee group report the same (18.0%).

By contrast, among 501–1,000 employees, no respondents reported "not using" AI.

'Core to operations' rises with scale - strongest in 501–1,000 employees

Deep integration remains the exception, but it becomes more common as organisations get larger.

The highest "core to operations" result appears in the 501–1,000 employee segment (21.4%), compared with single-digit core adoption in several smaller cohorts (e.g., 1–20 employees: 8.0%; 21–100 employees: 6.8%).

What this means

AI is broadly present, but most organisations are still testing and selectively deploying rather than scaling enterprise-wide.

Smaller businesses are more likely to be not started, while larger businesses are more likely to be integrating and governing AI at scale.

Your say

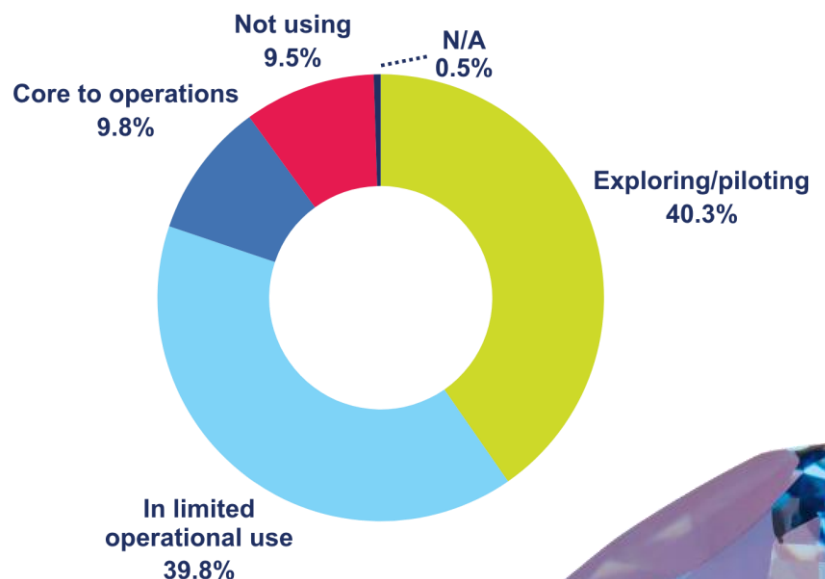
"Limited practical AI adoption support for SMEs. Regulatory uncertainty for AI use in finance. AI capability gap in the existing workforce."

"Invest in AI research."

"R&D incentives for small business for implementation of AI."

"Support investment in online delivery, AI-enabled learning tools, and student management systems to improve quality and scalability."

Qn: What best describes your organisation's current use of AI or advanced automation?



Barriers to greater AI Adoption

Capability & readiness outweigh financial constraints

The results indicate that the primary barriers to greater AI adoption are organisational capability and readiness challenges, rather than purely financial constraints. This suggests that most organisations are willing to invest in AI, but many are not yet equipped to deploy it effectively.

Skills gaps are the dominant constraint

Skills and capability gaps are by far the most significant barrier (68.2%). This highlights a widespread shortage of internal expertise required to implement, manage and scale AI solutions. Workforce readiness clearly emerges as the critical limiting factor in advancing AI adoption across organisations.

Risk, data and regulation form the next tier of barriers

A second tier of challenges reflects broader concerns around trust and governance:

- Cyber and risk issues (40.1%)
- Data availability or quality (39.0%)
- Regulatory uncertainty (35.8%)

Skills & capability shortages are the key constraint on AI adoption

Together, these barriers point to concerns about the reliability of underlying data, the robustness of governance frameworks, and confidence in regulatory settings required for safe and effective AI deployment.

Cost is a secondary, not primary, barrier

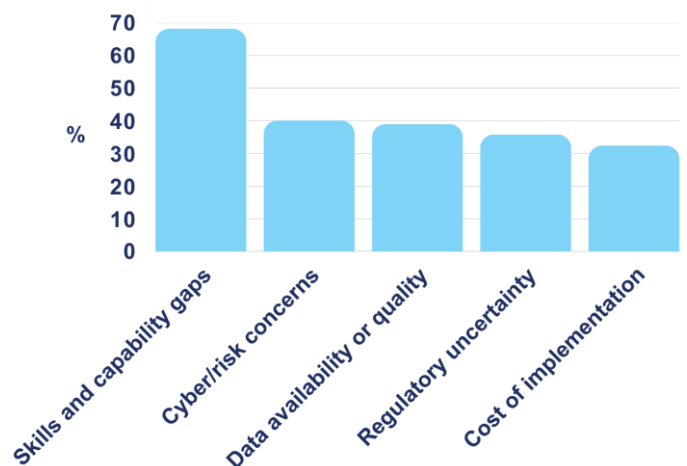
While still important, cost of implementation (32.4%) ranks lower than capability and risk-related barriers.

This indicates that technology affordability is not the main constraint relative to structural and organisational readiness challenges.

Overall insight

Overall, the findings suggest that AI adoption is being slowed less by cost and access to technology and more by people capability, data maturity, and risk and regulatory confidence. This highlights the need for targeted investment in skills development, governance frameworks and data readiness to unlock broader and more scalable AI adoption.

Qn: What are the main barriers to greater AI adoption? (Select all that apply)



Your say

“Grant tax reductions or R&D subsidies to AI research and development enterprises that meet ethical standards, while requiring enterprises to allocate part of their budget to employee skill upgrading to cope with the changes in job structure brought about by AI.”

“Targeted tax incentives and grants to support investment in artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure, cybersecurity, and automation would enhance productivity and global

competitiveness. Encouraging businesses to adopt advanced technologies is critical for long-term economic growth.”

“Investment in innovation and digital transformation: Support for adopting new technologies, automation, and digital tools would help improve productivity, efficiency, and global competitiveness.”

“Regulatory uncertainty for AI use in finance.”



Government's role in supporting AI & digital innovation



Government is expected to act as an enabler, not the primary driver

Responses show a clear expectation that government should play a practical enabling role in accelerating AI and digital innovation.

The emphasis is on capability building and policy clarity, rather than direct intervention or market-led deployment.

Skills and workforce capability are the top priority

Skills and training programs rank as the most important government role (63.9%). This reinforces earlier findings that capability gaps are the single biggest barrier to AI adoption. Organisations are signaling strong demand for workforce development to ensure AI solutions can be implemented effectively and responsibly.

Regulatory clarity is critical to confidence and investment

Regulatory clarity (53.8%) closely follows skills development as a priority. Respondents highlight the need for clear, consistent and predictable rules to reduce uncertainty and enable confident, long-term investment in AI technologies.

Unclear or fragmented regulation is seen as a material constraint on adoption.

Financial support remains important, but secondary

Grants and co-investment (50.9%) feature strongly, indicating that organisations value direct financial support to help reduce risk and encourage adoption at scale.

Lower-ranked but still relevant measures include:

- Tax incentives (36.3%)
- Public-private partnerships (20.4%)

These are viewed as secondary support mechanisms, particularly useful for longer-term collaboration, scaling and investment stimulation rather than immediate adoption triggers.

Overall insight

Overall, the findings indicate that government is expected to act less as a direct driver of innovation and more as an enabler.

The strongest role for government lies in building workforce capability, providing regulatory certainty, and offering targeted financial support - creating the conditions necessary to unlock sustained private-sector AI adoption and growth.

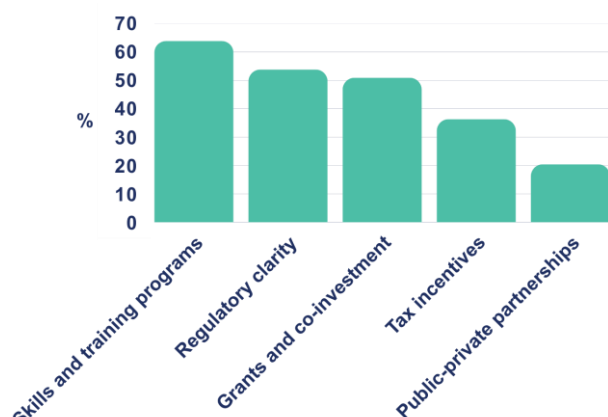
Your say

"The government should prioritise funding and incentives for practical, real-world AI applications such as automation, predictive analytics, and anomaly detection."

"These technologies can materially improve productivity and reduce reliance on manual processes across industries like infrastructure, insurance, and legal services, where large and complex datasets are common."

"Employment changes from AI expansion, Management of resources needed by Data Centres, Security of online data."

Qn: What role should government play in supporting AI & digital innovation?



Significance of sustainability & emissions reduction

Sustainability is widely recognised, but not yet consistently prioritised

The data indicates that sustainability and emissions reduction are broadly recognised as relevant across organisations, but they are not yet consistently embedded as a core strategic priority for most.

Sustainability is important, but often secondary

The largest group of respondents classify sustainability as “Important” (132 responses, ~35%).

This suggests sustainability is widely acknowledged, but for many organisations it sits alongside other competing business priorities rather than leading strategic decision-making.

A meaningful minority have embedded sustainability into strategy

A further 81 respondents (~21%) identify sustainability as a “Core strategic priority”, indicating a meaningful segment of organisations where sustainability considerations are already embedded into core strategy and decision-making frameworks.

Momentum is building, but formalisation remains limited

Sixty-six respondents (~18%) describe sustainability as “Emerging”, reflecting growing awareness and increasing consideration.

However, for these organisations sustainability has not yet been fully formalised into strategy, governance or operational processes.

A significant minority have not yet prioritised sustainability

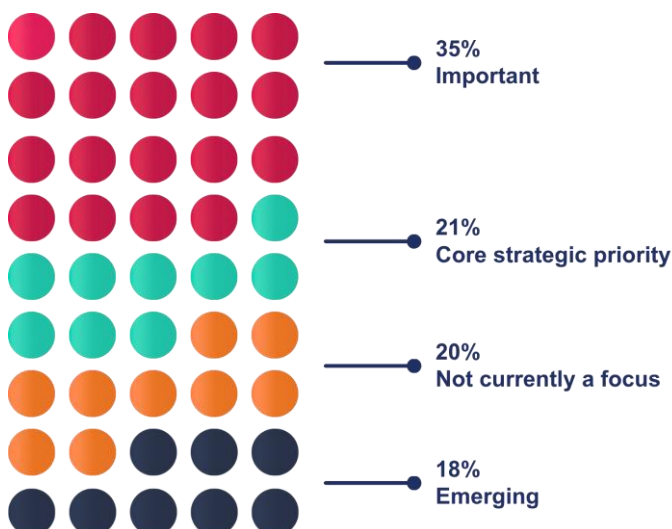
At the same time, 76 respondents (~20%) report sustainability is “Not currently a focus”, highlighting a substantial minority where sustainability considerations have not yet been elevated as a priority. An additional 22 responses (~6%) were recorded as N/A.

Overall insight

Overall, the results show that sustainability is in transition - widely recognised and increasingly important, but unevenly embedded across organisations.

While momentum is clearly building, only a smaller proportion have fully elevated sustainability and emissions reduction to a core strategic driver. This points to continued variability in ESG maturity across the sample.

Qn: How significant are sustainability and emissions reduction considerations for your organisation?



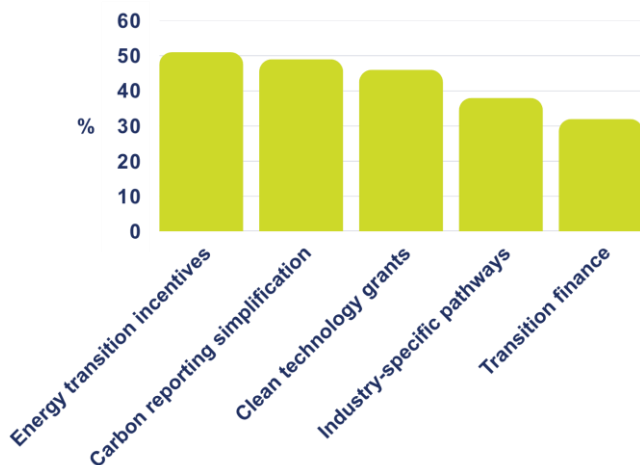
Over 60% see sustainability & emissions reduction as a key focus

Businesses want simplicity & direct incentives to accelerate sustainability action

Responses show that organisations are primarily seeking practical, financial, and administrative support to enable sustainability and emissions reduction efforts, rather than purely high-level policy commitments.



Qn: What sustainability-related support would be most valuable from the Federal Budget?



- Energy transition incentives (51%) rank as the most valued support measure, closely followed by carbon reporting simplification (49%), indicating strong demand for both financial encouragement and reduced compliance burden.
- Clean technology grants (46%) also feature prominently, reinforcing the importance of direct funding to support investment in low-emissions technologies.
- Industry-specific pathways (38%) suggest organisations also value tailored transition frameworks that reflect the different challenges across sectors.
- Finally, transition finance (32%) ranks lower but still meaningful, highlighting a need for accessible financing mechanisms to support longer-term decarbonisation projects.

Overall insight

Overall, the findings indicate that organisations are looking for a combination of financial incentives, simplified regulatory processes, and targeted funding support to help accelerate sustainability transitions, with a strong emphasis on practical enablers rather than abstract policy direction.

Your say

“By prioritising investment in agri-tech, sustainable resource management, emissions reduction, and resilient regional infrastructure, the government can drive Australia’s agricultural sector toward greater innovation, profitability, and environmental stewardship.

This will position the industry for long-term growth and global competitiveness in the face of changing climate and market conditions.”

“Support for decarbonisation and low-emissions mining - The government should prioritise targeted incentives and co-investment to accelerate the adoption of low-emissions technologies across mining operations, including electrification of fleets, renewable energy integration at mine sites, and carbon capture and storage where appropriate.”

Sustainability transition brings high costs & uncertainty

Estimated cost impact over the next 3 years

The data suggests that most organisations expect the cost impact of sustainability compliance or transition to be manageable over the next three years, although uncertainty remains a notable theme.

Moderate impact is the most common expectation

The largest group of respondents expect a moderate cost impact, with 114 responses, representing 30% of total respondents. This suggests that many organisations recognise sustainability compliance and transition will involve additional costs, but do not expect these costs to be extreme or unmanageable.

Minimal impact also represents a significant share

A further 91 respondents, or 24%, expect the cost impact to be minimal. When combined with those expecting a moderate impact, this indicates that more than half of respondents view sustainability-related costs as present, but broadly manageable in the near term.

Significant cost impacts remain a concern for some organisations

A notable proportion of respondents expect a more substantial financial impact. 84 respondents, or approximately 23%, anticipate a significant cost impact over the next three years.

This indicates that, for some organisations, sustainability compliance and transition requirements may meaningfully affect operating expenses, capital investment decisions, resourcing, or broader business planning.

Uncertainty remains high

A further 72 respondents, or approximately 19%, are unsure about the likely cost impact. This level of uncertainty suggests that many organisations may still be assessing the financial implications of sustainability compliance and transition.

This could reflect differences in regulatory exposure, industry sector, organisational maturity, or the extent to which sustainability planning has already been embedded into business strategy.

N/A responses were limited

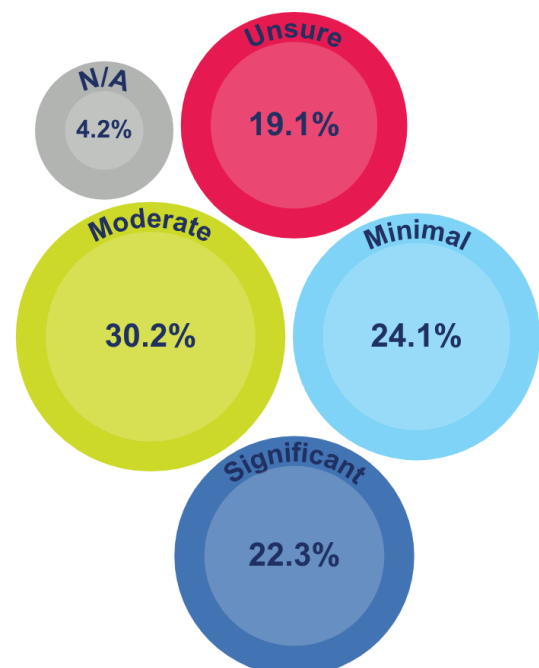
Only 16 respondents, or approximately 4%, selected N/A. This suggests that most organisations have at least a directional view on the potential cost impact, even where that view is uncertain.

Overall insight

Overall, the findings indicate that sustainability compliance and transition costs are widely acknowledged, but are generally expected to be moderate rather than extreme.

While many organisations appear to be planning for manageable cost impacts, the sizeable proportion of respondents expecting significant costs or remaining unsure highlights that financial uncertainty continues to play an important role, particularly for organisations earlier in their transition planning or operating in more complex regulatory environments.

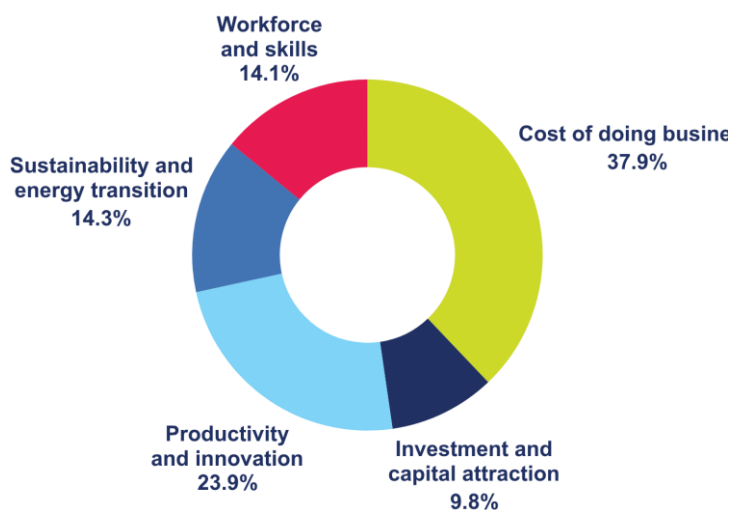
Qn: What is the estimated cost impact of sustainability compliance or transition for your organisation over the next 3 years?



Cost pressures dominate, productivity & innovation reforms secondary



Qn: Which of the following should be the Federal Government's top priority in the 2026 Budget?



Responses show a clear and decisive preference for immediate cost relief as the Federal Government's top Budget priority.

Cost of doing business

Cost of doing business (143 responses, 38%) ranks well ahead of all other categories, indicating that organisations are most focused on addressing immediate financial pressures such as operating costs, compliance burden, and input expenses.

Productivity, innovation, & transition

The next most important priorities are productivity and innovation (90 responses, 24%), followed by sustainability and energy transition (54 responses, 14%) and workforce and skills (53 responses, 14%), which sit at similar levels of importance.

These results suggest a balanced secondary focus on long-term competitiveness and capability-building, though still clearly secondary to cost concerns.

Your say

"Lower energy costs."

"Rising costs and productivity challenges. Businesses across industries are facing increasing input costs (energy, labour, supply chains) alongside stagnant productivity growth. Addressing this through tax incentives, investment in technology, and regulatory reform is critical to improve efficiency and competitiveness."

"Energy security and domestic supply vs exports."

"Consistent support for clean energy and sustainability programs."

"Australia's medium-term growth is constrained by structural productivity challenges. The 2026 Budget is expected to focus on lifting the economy's "speed limit" through targeted reforms. This requires integrated policy across infrastructure, skills, migration and industry development (including the Future Made in Australia agenda), ensuring capital is allocated efficiently and regulatory settings enable innovation and investment."

Investment & capital attraction

Investment and capital attraction (37 responses, 10%) ranks lowest, indicating that while investment stimulation is relevant, it is not seen as the most urgent national priority compared to immediate cost pressures and productivity improvements.

Overall interpretation

Overall, the findings highlight a strong short-term economic pressure narrative, where organisations are prioritising relief from rising business costs above broader structural reforms or growth-enabling policies.

While productivity, innovation, skills, and sustainability remain important, they are secondary to cost containment and operational viability. This suggests that many organisations are currently operating in an environment where margins, input costs, and regulatory burden are primary constraints, shaping their policy expectations.

In essence, the 2026 Budget priorities reflect a clear message: businesses are looking first for cost relief, and second for long-term enablers of competitiveness and transition.



Methodology & respondent profile



Respondent profile: mid-market, SME-led and east coast weighted

Understanding who responded is important context for interpreting the survey findings. The results are shaped by a strong professional services and mid-market business lens, while still capturing perspectives from a broader mix of operating sectors across the economy.

Methodology

This report is based on an online survey of 377 respondents across Australian industries. The survey was open from 30 March 2026 and closed at 11:00pm AEST on Sunday 10 May 2026. Responses were collected through an online form and are presented as a pooled view of participants.

The survey combined quantitative and qualitative inputs. Multiple-choice questions, including single-select and multi-select questions, were used to capture measurable trends, while free-text responses allowed participants to expand on sector-specific challenges, priorities and policy concerns.

To highlight the voice of business, this document shares showcases some of these responses as they related to components of the survey. Responses have been kept anonymous, except for the winner of the survey, who has agreed to have his comments shared publicly.

Analysis approach

Results are unweighted and reflect the views of respondents who participated during the survey period. For multi-select questions, percentages represent the share of respondents who selected each option, meaning totals may exceed 100%. Duplicate responses using the same email address were removed.

Open-ended responses were reviewed thematically to identify recurring issues, sentiment and supporting examples. Findings should be interpreted as an indicative snapshot of business perspectives, noting that response volumes varied across sectors and respondent groups.

Key themes explored

The survey examined business views on investment conditions, growth confidence, Budget measures, AI adoption, digital innovation, sustainability, transition costs, sector-specific policy issues and feedback for policymakers.

The survey responses are strongly weighted toward small and mid-sized businesses, giving the findings a practical, real-economy perspective rather than a large-corporate view. Across 377 responses, the strongest concentration came from organisations with 21–100 employees, supported by a clear mid-market revenue profile.

Half of respondents reported annual turnover between \$1m and \$50m, with the largest group sitting in the \$10m–\$50m range.

This means the results are particularly reflective of businesses that are large enough to be investing, hiring and managing growth, but still highly exposed to cost pressures, workforce constraints, cash flow and policy uncertainty.

The geographic profile is also concentrated in Australia's major business centres. Victoria was the largest contributor, followed by New South Wales, with the two states together representing more than half of responses. Queensland and Western Australia also provided meaningful representation, while smaller states and territories had a lighter presence.

Overall, the dataset provides a strong read on the sentiment of SMEs and mid-market businesses, particularly across the eastern states, where many organisations are actively balancing growth ambitions with cost, labour and regulatory pressures.





Industry overview



Sector profile: professional services lead the sample

The survey was weighted toward Professional, Financial, Legal and Business Services, which accounted for 37% of responses. This gives the findings a strong advisory and business services lens, particularly on tax reform, investment confidence, compliance, capital decisions and regulatory change.

There was also meaningful representation from key operating sectors, with Construction & Property, Tourism, Hospitality & Gaming, Agribusiness, and Manufacturing, Trade, Logistics & Communications each representing around 10–12% of responses. These sectors provide useful insight into cost pressures, workforce shortages, supply chain issues and investment conditions.

Smaller respondent groups included Education & Training, Energy, Utilities & Resources, Health & Social Assistance, and Government, Public & Not-for-Profit. While less represented, these sectors add perspective from areas strongly affected by policy settings, funding decisions and labour market constraints.

How to interpret this profile

Respondents were grouped into overarching industry categories for reporting purposes. Some respondents may have selected the category that best reflected their role, service area or association affiliation rather than their organisation's primary industry.

For this reason, the sector profile should be interpreted as an indicative view of the respondent base, not a strict industry census. Association data is treated separately as a measure of survey reach and engagement, rather than direct industry representation.

Overarching sector category	Share of total responses
Professional, financial, legal & business services	37%
Construction & property	12%
Tourism, hospitality & gaming	11%
Agribusiness	10%
Manufacturing, trade, logistics & communications	10%
Education & training	8%
Energy, utilities & resources	6%
Health & social assistance	6%
Government, public & not-for-profit	1%

Industry association participation

Association reach

The survey was supported by a broad mix of industry associations and professional networks, helping extend participation across sectors including professional services, mining and resources, agribusiness, property, tourism and hospitality, childcare, health, government and trade.

Of the 377 respondents, 181 identified an industry association or network affiliation, while 196 did not specify one, with nothing to support those that consider themselves a private individual.

How to interpret this data

Association affiliation should be read as an indicator of survey reach and sector engagement, not as a direct measure of industry representation.

Some respondents may have selected a professional network, referral body or association rather than the sector their organisation operates in.

For this reason, **industry selection is used as the primary respondent profile**, while **association responses are used to show survey distribution and reach**.

Association	Responses	Share of total responses
No association specified	196	52%
Professional, financial, legal & business services	36	10%
Mining, resources & technical services	32	8%
Agribusiness	30	8%
Property & construction	28	7%
Tourism, hospitality & leisure	28	7%
Education, childcare & training	16	4%
Trade, manufacturing & export	6	2%
Health & social assistance	3	1%



The Voice of business

As part of our FedBud survey, participants shared thoughtful perspectives on the policy priorities, reforms, and investment areas they believe should be front of mind for government and industry.



Tristan Holroyd

Congratulations to our FedBud survey winner!

Congratulations to Tristan Holroyd on winning the \$1000 Visa Gift card as a result of completing our FedBud survey.

His insights highlighted the importance of improving competition in lending, reducing unnecessary regulatory burden, and investing in the digital and sustainable finance infrastructure needed to support long-term productivity and growth across the sector.

Explore Tristan's responses below:

Make home lending more competitive by fixing refinancing & discharge friction

- The strongest immediate issue is that borrowers still face slow, inconsistent refinancing and discharge processes, which weakens real competition even when better loan options exist.
- The MFAA's 2026–27 pre-Budget submission makes this its first priority and specifically points to faster switching, clearer discharge timeframes, upfront repricing offers from lenders and allowing brokers to act in the discharge process with consent. That matters because the association argues competition only works properly when borrowers can actually move lenders without excessive friction.

Reduce & better target regulatory costs, especially where broker risk is low

- The second major issue is the rising cost and complexity of regulation, particularly the Compensation Scheme of Last Resort (CSLR) and overlapping compliance obligations. MFAA says levy settings should be proportionate and aligned to actual claims experience, rather than imposing broad costs that do not reflect broker risk.
- In practice, this is a Budget issue because higher compliance and levy costs ultimately raise the cost of doing business, reduce smaller operators' viability, and can narrow consumer choice.

Invest in digital finance infrastructure, especially the Consumer Data Right, secure data sharing, cyber resilience, & scam prevention systems

This is one of the clearest productivity plays for finance because it reduces onboarding friction, improves credit assessment, supports switching, and makes data-driven services safer for consumers and SMEs. Both AFIA and FinTech Australia are pushing for targeted investment here

Invest in digital finance infrastructure and simplify rules for nonbank and business lending

- A third priority is lifting productivity through Consumer Data Right implementation, digital infrastructure, and regulatory simplification, especially for nonbank lenders and business lending.
- MFAA calls for CDR to become core infrastructure in home lending and refinancing, while AFIA is pushing for regulatory simplification for nonbank lenders plus targeted investment in AI and digital infrastructure.

Together, these reforms would shorten approval times, improve data portability, support competition beyond the major banks, and improve access to finance for households and SMEs

Improve capital and innovation settings for fintechs and non-bank lenders.

The strongest measures here are better R&D and sandbox settings, more predictable funding pathways, and procurement reforms that let smaller Australian fintechs win government work.

FinTech Australia argues this would support competition, productivity, and local scale-up growth, while AFIA is also calling for targeted investment in AI and digital infrastructure for the broader finance industry.

Prioritise sustainable finance infrastructure rather than just headline climate spending

The government should keep backing implementation of Australia's sustainable finance taxonomy, because Treasury says it helps direct private investment, support net zero, and reduce greenwashing.

That is especially important for lenders, asset managers, and brokers because clearer definitions make it easier to design and assess credible green and transition finance products.

Disclaimer



This publication, including all survey results and insights, is for general information purposes only and does not constitute financial, legal, tax, or other professional advice. No reliance should be placed on its content, and independent advice should be sought before making any decisions. SW Accountants & Advisors, and its related entities, offices, employees, and representatives, will not be liable for any loss or damage arising from use of or reliance on this publication.

No part of this publication, including any content, data, findings, or insights, may be reproduced, republished, redistributed, or otherwise used in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of SW Accountants & Advisors.

 Take the lead

Australia's *best kept*
accounting secret



SW

Accountants & Advisors

Yuggera Nation

Brisbane
Level 15
240 Queen Street
Brisbane QLD 4000
T +61 7 3085 0888

Kulin Nation

Melbourne
Level 10
530 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
T +61 3 8635 1800

Whadjuk Nation

Perth
Level 18
197 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
T + 61 8 6184 5980

Eora Nation

Sydney
Level 7, Aurora Place
88 Phillip Street
Sydney NSW 2000
T +61 2 8059 6800



sw-au.com

SW acknowledges and pays respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.