

# Hunter Regional Plan 2041 Consultation Report

December 2022





# Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning and Environment acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

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Hunter Regional Plan 2041 Consultation Report 2022

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# Introduction

The *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* establishes the 20-year strategic land use framework for continued economic transformation in one of Australia's most diverse and liveable regions.

The plan has been prepared in response to the Department of Planning and Environment's five-year review of the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036*. The review meets the statutory requirements while also allowing us to reset priorities in the area through to 2041.

Since the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* was released in 2016, the NSW Government has worked with councils, state government agencies, and the community to deliver on key priority actions, which have informed this review. These actions include:

- releasing the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036* and implementing the catalyst areas
- agreeing to a memorandum of understanding with the Hunter Joint Organisation on implementation of the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*
- exhibiting a draft Hunter Expressway Strategy
- establishing the Greater Newcastle Urban Development Program.

More recently, legislative amendments have elevated the importance of strategic planning at a regional and local level. These changes required councils to develop local strategic planning statements.

The statements, alongside our statutory planning audit of the Hunter's 140 planning proposals commenced since the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* was introduced, informed the review.

The review and the final *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* were also informed by the feedback received when the draft plan was on public exhibition from 6 December 2021 to 4 March 2022. We consulted widely with the community, councils, and other stakeholders during this period.

This report summarises our engagement and consultation process and the feedback received. It overviews the submissions received, key matters raised and our response.

# Engagement Program

The draft plan was released for public feedback for 89 days from 6 December 2021 to 4 March 2022. Its release was supported by our wide-reaching engagement program, which involved:

- online content, including our online interactive engagement hub
- social media campaign
- advertising and media campaign
- online workshops.

The final plan responds to feedback from:

- community members
- business and industry peak bodies
- local government
- state government agencies.

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## Engagement activities

### Online content

We established an interactive community engagement hub via the Social Pinpoint platform. During the exhibition period, the hub recorded:



Figure 1: Online engagement hub statistics

The community engagement hub included an interactive map and a survey for users to provide feedback.

The interactive map represented the Hunter region, sub-regions and significant areas with a series of 'Information Markers' for users to make comments.

Users had the ability to drop a category of pin on the map at a location they wished to make a comment on. The pin categories were general comment, getting around, great places, and things we can improve. We received 64 comments via the interactive map.



Figure 2: Word cloud of the main topics pinned on the interactive map

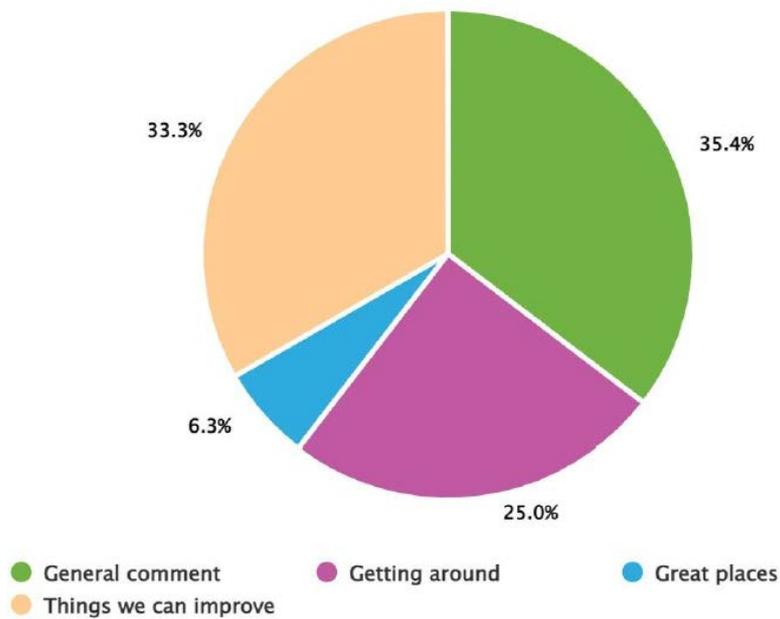


Figure 3: Proportion of comment types for each Social Pinpoint category

The survey asked a series of questions centred around one of the core themes of the plan – the ‘15-minute Region’. It generated 156 responses from 88 respondents:

- 69% said their main way of getting around their local area was driving
- 93% said everyday needs like parks, reserves and public open spaces were within 15-minutes of their home, followed by cafes and restaurants (85%) and schools (83%)
- the most popular everyday needs people wanted within 15-minutes of their home was small bars (43%), followed by cafes and restaurants (42%) and local shops (42%)
- over half of respondents did not support more housing like dual occupancies, terraces, or housing on small lots if it meant a better mix of everyday needs in their neighbourhood
- over half of respondents would support more 2 to 4 storey buildings if they did not dominate the area, were close to public transport and parks/open space
- over half of respondents would not support more housing like dual occupancies, terraces, or housing on small lots if it meant better public transport to access services and less frequent needs within 30 minutes
- 28% of respondents were aged 45-54 and 21% were aged 55-64, with 54% of respondents identifying as female, and 5% of respondents identifying as either Aboriginal or as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

## Social media

A social media campaign was undertaken from 10 Jan 2022 to 18 Feb 2022 to raise awareness of the draft plan and to drive traffic to the planning portal webpage. There were limited comments because of the campaign. Overall, the campaign reached more women than men (52% vs 48%), a trend reflected in every age bracket. The highest reach was with people aged 25-34:

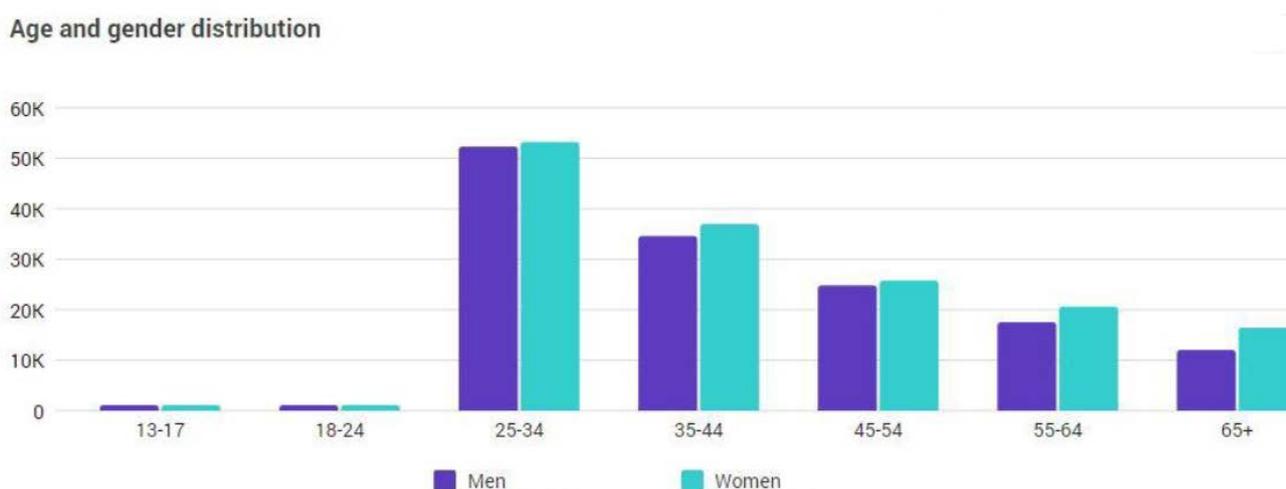


Figure 4: Demographics of people reached by social media

## Advertising and media campaign

Our media strategy consisted of print, radio, and digital display. An advertising and media campaign included paid media to raise awareness and direct people to the online engagement hub.

The Minister for Planning and Public Spaces at the time, the Hon Rob Stokes MP, issued a media release on 6 December 2021 to announce the exhibition.

We ran 84 radio adds across five local stations, reaching a possible listenership of 309,000 people. Radio advertisements generated 2,276 of the 10,576 total user traffic to the Social Pinpoint platform. The campaign took place over 3 weeks, from the 9<sup>th</sup> January until the 23 January 2022.

## Online workshops

Due to COVID-19, we conducted engagement workshops via an online platform with 115 people participating across 8 workshops. We held targeted workshops with councils, the community, stakeholders, and the development industry.

**Table 1:** Online workshop program

Type	Date/s	Participants
Council workshops (2)	10 February 2022	28 (excluding DPE staff)
Community workshops (3)	17 February – 1 March 2022	38 (excluding DPE staff)
Stakeholders' workshops (2)	15 February – 22 February 2022	30 (excluding DPE staff)
Development industry workshop (1)	16 February 2022	19 (excluding DPE staff)

We held workshops to seek participants' insights and feedback to inform the final plan. Overall, there was general support for the draft plan, its direction, and objectives from councils and stakeholders.

There was some concern expressed by councils and community representatives about the implementation of the objectives within the existing planning framework and the need to respond to the varying scales and contexts of places across the Hunter region.

Key workshop findings:

- councils and stakeholders were generally supportive of the draft plan. There were varying viewpoints from community participants, with some commenting that they felt the draft plan had not adequately articulated a clear vision for the Hunter Region
- there was general support from councils and stakeholders about the 15/30 minutes region approach but concern about its implementation in the varying contexts of the Hunter. More detailed work on how this could be effectively delivered and integrated with transport was sought
- the community was hesitant about the 15-minute region and the idea of optimum density. Many commented that the concept was more suited to city centres, such as Newcastle or Sydney and not to the more rural areas across the region. There was some confusion expressed about the 15-minutes being based in the idea of community connection, equity, and access to services rather than a definition of transport accessibility
- participants requested that the plan provide greater detail about the transition from the existing power generation and mining activities, the potential opportunities and impacts on the communities

- there was significant discussion from councils about plan implementation. Several community members commented that the implementation of the plan seemed to focus on rezoning and increased development rather than delivering on a future vision for the region
- representatives from Local Aboriginal Land Councils shared the complexity of the planning process and regulatory environment with Native Titles Act as well as planning legislation. Reflecting this complexity, recognition of the work that is already happening and support to provide the resources, tools and expertise was requested in the review of the draft plan.

# Summary of submissions

We received a total of 100 submissions. We reviewed each in detail and identified and catalogued relevant comments to prepare a comprehensive data set by topic, as follows.

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## Extent of the review

### Key issues

- We heard that the draft *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* was not a review or update of the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* but a completely new document.
- It was suggested the evidence base for the plan, particularly the statutory planning audit, should be made public.

### Response

- While the draft *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* followed an updated format and structure compared to the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036*, the vision, goals, and directions are generally consistent. This includes our ambitions to diversify the economy of the Hunter, protect the natural environment, create well-connected communities and a plan for a variety of housing choices.
- Importantly, the *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* responds to challenges that have become more pressing, such as housing affordability, achieving net zero, climate change adaptation, resilience, and COVID-19 by seeking to drive change.
- The statutory planning audit will be published with the final *Hunter Regional Plan 2041*.

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## Vision and Six Cities

### Key issues

- Several submissions suggested further work was required to improve the vision, noting it should be shown spatially, be more ambitious (calling out the region's competitive advantages), and to recognise important future connections and the need for collaboration with the Central Coast.
- Submissions noted the plan should acknowledge the Six Cities region and the role of the Greater Cities Commission in planning for the region.

### Response

- Mapping associated with parts 2 and 3 of the plan has been revised to spatially show desired outcomes, particularly for regionally significant growth areas which will undergo significant

change. Text in parts 2 and 3 has been refined to align with the maps and to better materialise the vision and desired outcomes.

- The plan has been updated following the announcement of the Six Cities region, recognising the need for co-ordinated planning across the whole of the Six Cities. It also notes the Greater Cities Commission role in preparing a future Lower Hunter and Greater Newcastle City Plan (anticipated 2024).
- As the *Hunter Regional Plan 2041* will not apply to the Cessnock, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, Newcastle, and Port Stephens local government areas (LGAs) once the Lower Hunter and Greater Newcastle City Plan is released, the boundaries in the district section have been revised. The Greater Newcastle and Hinterland districts now solely contain these LGAs and will make the future transition between plans simpler for stakeholders.
- The Objective “Build an inter-connected and globally focused Hunter” has been revised to recognise the opportunities associated with increased mobility across the Six Cities region.

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## Part 1: Making it happen (implementation)

### Key issues

- As a land use plan the regional plan needs to integrate with transport and biodiversity conservation plans by government.
- There was general support for the intent of Part 1 Making it happen, particularly in relation to coordinating infrastructure and land planning. However, there were requests for further detail regarding the operation of the Urban Development Program (UDP) and Place Delivery Group (PDG) including the proposed allocation of resources.
- Several submissions sought clarity regarding responsibility for actions and timeframes, noting that ongoing monitoring and reporting would help to communicate success.
- While there was support for the proposed UDP, several submissions requested:
  - including proposed State and local infrastructure projects in the regional plan
  - establishing sub-committees for affordable housing, infrastructure, and biodiversity
  - clarifying the role of the UDP Committee and infrastructure providers in determining infrastructure priorities and provision
  - increasing membership of the UDP Committee to include representatives from NSW Treasury, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, and the community
  - separation of the UDP Committee into a Lower Hunter and Greater Newcastle City Committee and an Upper Hunter and MidCoast Committee
- The plan should include more reportable housing metrics so that progress can be measured and reported on.

## Response

- We include the input and advice from agencies responsible for transport and biodiversity planning. The regional plan acknowledges the need to align other long-term plans with the vision, objectives, strategies, and actions of the regional plan. The governance framework, including the UDP and PDG will ensure continued involvement of state agencies and alignment between plans.
- We have included further detail to improve understanding of the proposed implementation and governance framework. We will provide information regarding the UDP and PDG on our website as they are established.
- The UDP will monitor the planning, servicing and development of new residential land and housing to ensure sufficient zoned and serviced land is available to meet short- and longer-term market demand. The UDP does not have a statutory role, nor does it assume regulatory functions. It is a forum for the NSW Government, councils, infrastructure providers and relevant peak bodies to better coordinate the supply of land and housing.
- The Regional Housing Taskforce acknowledged the importance of UDPs and recommended strengthening the collaboration between the NSW Government, Australian Government, councils, and industry to improve how we identify, fund, and provide infrastructure to support priority housing. The NSW Government is preparing a response to the taskforce. Its Regional Housing Fund (RHF) will incentivise and support councils to upgrade infrastructure and open space projects that directly support new housing.
- We have included a new action in the final plan to establish an affordable housing roundtable in the Hunter. We will consider expanding membership of the UDP and establishing other sub-committees as required.
- We will publish information via an annual report and an online dashboard with live data on the status of development across the region.
- The plan includes clearer housing metrics to establish desired benchmarks and enable monitoring.

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## Part 2: Objectives

Part 2 Objectives updated the objectives from the 2016 plan in response to local strategic planning and planning proposals. Some submissions described the proposed strategies as vague and needing refinement to clarify how the objectives will be achieved.

We added performance outcomes as an assessment framework for when a local strategic plan or planning proposal does not comply with a regional plan strategy yet can demonstrate how the plan's outcomes could still be achieved.

We reformatted strategies to be clearer about when they apply and what will be expected when undertaking local strategic planning or preparing planning proposals.

We added new objectives relating to transport, rural lands and biodiversity conservation following consultation.

The connectivity objective will align with any future regional transport plan, which should reflect the 3 scales of mobility (15-minute neighbourhoods, 30-minute cities/strategic centres and a 90-minute (Six Cities) region).

The biodiversity and conservation objective will ensure future development occurs in appropriate locations that do not undermine conservation objectives for the region and protect land of high environmental value.

We have renumbered the Objectives to accommodate moving the exhibited Objective 8 Build an inter-connected and globally focused Hunter to be Objective 4. The revised content aligns closely with Objective 3 Create a 15-minute region made up of mixed, multi-modal, inclusive, and vibrant local communities so it made sense for Objective 8 to become Objective 4.

We included Objective 9 Sustain and balance productive rural landscapes to guide planning for rural lands. These areas support resource extraction and productive agricultural activities and need easy access to markets in the Six Cities region.

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## Objective 1: Diversify the Hunter's mining, energy, and industrial capacity

### Key issues

- We heard that the plan should respond to transitioning the economy by focusing on renewables. The renewable energy sector was seen as an opportunity to grow jobs and diversify the economy.
- There was support for re-purposing former mine lands for future employment use. It was suggested this approach be expanded to include all mines and power station sites across the Hunter. Support for investigating a compatibility type mechanism for permitting uses was mixed. Several submissions requested that mines be considered regionally significant growth areas and that new uses be investigated through a whole-of-site place strategy process.

- Some submissions called for the creation of a transition plan for those parts of the Hunter that will be most affected by future changes to coal demand.
- Several submissions requested the plan acknowledge the importance contribution the resource sector makes to the Hunter’s economy, energy production and the construction industry. They suggested these resources and their supply chain networks should be protected from land use conflict.
- Submissions supported the circular economy and saw this as an opportunity for the region to diversify its economy, support sustainability and achieve net zero. Diverse feedback was received on the circular economy. Some suggested it should be an underlying principle of the plan, that the plan remove barriers for circular economy industries, that the plan should recognise the need for government intervention across all levels to make the circular economy work.
- Some feedback was received that efforts to diversify the economy should be broader than the content included in the objective, with knowledge-based industries, health, agriculture, and tourism being commonly identified opportunities.

## Response

- We have amended the plan to note the competitive advantage the region has in renewable and emerging energy production. The potential role of green hydrogen is recognised, and a strategy included to consider diversification opportunities that could emerge from the REZ. Former power station and mine sites have been identified as providing opportunities in this area.
- We now apply the post-mining framework to all mine and power station sites across the region, recognising these places as regionally significant growth areas. Further clarity has been provided about the compatibility approach to permitting prohibited uses, noting this action requires investigation to evaluate its feasibility.
- We have not included an action to develop a transition plan for communities that will be affected by changes in coal demand. This type of work is broadly being undertaken as part of the NSW Government’s *Upper Hunter Economic Diversification Action Plan* and is broader than the land use focus of the *Hunter Regional Plan 2041*. We will continue to work with councils and other stakeholders to progress the land use planning components of the Action Plan.
- The value of our resources and the need to protect operations from land use conflict has been included in the new Objective 9 Sustain and balance productive rural landscapes. The importance of agriculture as a future growth opportunity has been included in this objective and in the district sections of the plan.
- Refinements have been made to the circular economy content to be clearer about the desired outcomes sought. As the response to embedding the circular economy will likely vary across local government areas, the strategy has been broadened to recognise the diversity of opportunities that could be facilitated.
- Knowledge-based industries, health and tourism have been identified as growth opportunities in Objective 8 Plan for businesses and services at the heart of healthy, prosperous, and innovative communities.

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## Objective 2: Ensure economic self-determination for Aboriginal communities

### Key issues

- We received limited feedback on Objective 2. However, submissions generally supported the directions in the objective.
- The focus needs to be broader than just the Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs), recognising the needs of potential Native Title groups.
- Protection of Indigenous culture and sacred sites and supporting the local Indigenous communities needs to be emphasised in the plan.
- LALCs, and substantial landowners considering development opportunities for some of their lands, should be included in the UDP Committee.
- We should not just focus on building the capacity of Aboriginal communities to engage in the planning system, but also focus on building our understanding of their principles and culture.

### Response

- We have updated the objective to take a broader view of land rights, native title, housing, and empowering Aboriginal voices. We will work with relevant groups if there are any positive new claims to protect native title rights and interests and to ensure the planning system does not restrict the use of land for spiritual, cultural, or economic uses.
- The plan now includes Aboriginal cultural heritage in Objective 6.
- LALCs have been included in the UDP Committee.
- We recognise the importance of building relationships with Aboriginal communities and for knowledge transfer to occur both ways. We will commence this process as we engage Aboriginal communities over the 5-year implementation period of the plan.

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## Objective 3: Create 15-minute neighbourhoods made up of mixed, multi-modal, inclusive, and vibrant local communities

### Key issues

- Submissions generally supported the 15-minute neighbourhoods concept, though there was confusion around the idea, with some stakeholders interpreting it as increasing car traffic in residential areas, and others seeing it as generating a need for more parking in centres.
- A variety of stakeholders raised issues in terms of achieving the objective. Some noted it was not applicable to rural areas, while others raised concerns with topography and climate; how the existing street and settlement patterns support car dependence; and the lack of infrastructure and street lighting.
- Stakeholders noted the need for better public transport, more cycling infrastructure, increased tree canopy and shade cover, and shared path networks.

- Respondents raised the issue of land use conflicts such as odour and noise created by non-residential uses in residential areas.
- Many submissions suggested we more clearly demonstrate how to achieve a 15-minute region.
- Some submissions said the draft plan did not identify enough contexts or that the contexts in the draft plan did not align well with their area. Concern was raised that this may limit the ability for new housing areas to be rezoned.
- Submissions from Upper Hunter and MidCoast suggested 15-minute neighbourhoods and 30-minute strategic centres would be difficult to achieve because of the low growth rate and capacity to fund infrastructure.

## Response

- We renamed the objective to “Create 15-minute neighbourhoods to support mixed, multi-modal, inclusive and vibrant communities”.
- New content explains where we are now versus where we want to be, the applicability of the 15-minute concept in various contexts, and how the objective is underpinned by a desired increase in walking, cycling and public transport use.
- We note the 15-minute region is not a one size fits all solution; rather it is a guiding principle to promote and improve connectivity across the Hunter for the 20-year life of the regional plan. Increases in housing density around transport nodes and centres will attract businesses and services to reduce the need to travel for daily needs and will encourage walking and cycling.
- To recognise the need for quality public spaces and an increased urban tree canopy, we expanded the objectives to include the green infrastructure elements from the draft Objective 5.
- To clarify the extent of mixed-use neighbourhoods and limit land use conflict, Strategy 3.1 specifies the kind of low-impact land uses that planning proposals must not prohibit in urban and suburban contexts. The objective has been amended to recognise the various contexts within urban, rural, and suburban settings and to promote sustainable growth, development, and access to these communities.

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## Objective 4: Plan for ‘nimble neighbourhoods’, diverse housing and sequenced development (now Objective 5)

### Key issues

- Submissions sought clarity regarding the population, dwelling and job projections underpinning the proposed increase in density and the specific densities proposed.
- Submissions noted the need for housing diversity, social housing, affordable housing, and adequate supply of rental accommodation, and pointed to the need for incentives to improve provision of these housing types.

- Submissions that supported the concept of nimble neighbourhoods requested further detail on how this would be achieved.
- Some submissions requested direction for the provision for future greenfield opportunities in existing nimble neighbourhoods in a rural or semi-rural neighbourhood.
- Submissions noted the optimum density of 50-75 dwellings per hectare was unachievable, and conflict with the aspirations of local communities, particularly in the context of coastal district.
- Potential future growth areas were generally not supported with concerns raised about the suitability of identified areas and that it unnecessarily restricted sites which may be suitable for meeting housing supply needs in the short to medium term.
- Optimum density was considered difficult to achieve in the Upper Hunter and MidCoast due to low residential growth and market demand being more focused on detached dwellings. Impacts on local character were a concern.

## Response

- We have provided further justification that supports the increase in density, explaining how current housing stock does not cater for shrinking household sizes or allow older residents to downsize within their existing community. The plan also sets targets for infill and greenfield development and explains how this objective will minimise urban sprawl and impacts on wildlife corridors, land with environmental values and scenic landscapes.
- We have included updated population projections and included dwelling targets. Benchmarks for densities in various contexts have been revised with separate targets included for regional Hunter. Density benchmarks are provided as guidance, with where contexts apply to be determined by councils.
- The plan includes establishing an Affordable Housing Roundtable as an action and recognises our desire to support councils which may want to progress affordable housing contributions schemes.
- The plan emphasises an infrastructure-first and place-based approach and identifies the need to improve infrastructure. Increased densities and improved housing diversity will help to reduce the per capita cost of future infrastructure.
- We have replaced the concept of potential future growth areas with a housing supply pipeline which categorises sites based on their level of 'development readiness'. The pipeline provides a pathway for sites to progress which may not be identified in council housing strategies.

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## Objective 5: Conserve heritage, landscapes, environmentally sensitive areas, waterways and drinking water catchments (now Objective 6)

### Key issues

- Biodiversity and conservation were important to all stakeholder groups. Feedback identified various plans, strategies and legislation that should align with the regional plan.
- There was general support for green infrastructure and utilising integrated water cycle management to support green infrastructure in urban environments.
- Councils and community members noted that the plan did not adequately address heritage.
- We heard that the plan should seek to improve water quality measures to protect marine parks and aquatic reserves, and environmentally sensitive downstream assets.
- Submissions suggested the plan be clearer about the need to protect drinking water catchments and supply infrastructure to ensure the Hunter can grow and be resilient.
- A separate environment objective was suggested, which would identify specific strategies and actions to protect natural areas and biodiversity and drinking water catchments.
- Some submissions requested the plan include an action to undertake strategic biodiversity certification and to develop a biodiversity conservation plan so that development impacts can be offset strategically to maximise regional biodiversity benefits.

### Response

- We moved content regarding biodiversity and conservation from Objective 5 to Objective 6 “Conservation of heritage, landscapes, environmentally sensitive areas, waterways and drinking water catchments”. Urban greenery content is now in Objective 3.
- We created a separate Objective 6 addressing biodiversity and conservation. This responds directly to feedback around the plan’s environmental protection and sustainably aspirations. Strategies supporting the new objective seek adequate protection of high environmental value areas. This will balance demand with the need to conserve the natural environment and retain a quality of life that is inherently connected to nature.
- The new objective 6 addresses the NSW Water Strategy, NSW Koala Strategy and *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. It incorporates strategies to protect coastal environments and to protect heritage.
- We have included biodiversity as a consideration for housing sites in the supply pipeline to develop an evidence base of housing land constrained by biodiversity. This could form the basis for progressing a more strategic approach to biodiversity conservation at the regional scale in the future.
- Protecting drinking water catchments is identified as a planning priority in the district section of the plan, with catchments shown on the relevant district map to signal those lands where neutral or beneficial effect outcomes are relevant.

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## Objective 6: Reach net zero and increase resilience and sustainable infrastructure (now Objective 7)

### Key issues

- Submissions were consistent in highlighting the importance of climate change and the increased risk of natural hazards such as drought, bushfire, flooding and sea level rise. Stakeholders sought assurance that new development would avoid areas where risks cannot be mitigated.
- Submissions identified the need to plan for lower emission transport such as electric vehicles and micro-mobility solutions such as shared bikes and e-bikes.
- Submissions highlighted the importance of carbon sink stores and opportunities for blue carbon and carbon storage areas.
- The plan must align with the Hunter and Central Coast Adaptation Strategy.

### Response

- The final plan now clearly identifies climate change challenges and potential impacts and proposes clear strategies that will limit exposure in the future such as directing residential development away from land constrained by natural hazards. The plan also proposes strategies to adapt existing settlements to the impacts of climate change.
- We expanded the section on net zero transportation, which aims to decarbonise the transport sector.
- We have added content that notes the importance of carbon sink stores.
- We added a strategy requiring local strategic planning statements to give effect to the Hunter and Central Coast Adaptation Strategy.

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## Objective 7: Plan for businesses and services at the heart of healthy, prosperous, and innovative communities (now Objective 8)

### Key issues

- Submissions were generally supportive of strategies to grow and revitalise main streets and town/village centres to support local business and the visitor economy.
- Feedback on the 24-hour economy was mixed, with some noting that it would not be achievable in many areas outside the region's larger centres.
- Some submissions noted that the plan did not address art or cultural infrastructure.
- We heard that education and skills should be a focus for developing prosperous and innovative communities, with some requesting a regional skills plan be prepared. Several submissions suggested the plan should do more to support educational institutions located outside Greater Newcastle.

- The role of last mile freight to support place-making was identified.
- The visitor economy and knowledge industries were raised as diversification opportunities for the region.

## Response

- Culture and art infrastructure sit outside the scope of the plan; however, the plan now recognises the need for centres and main streets to be visually engaging, embrace heritage and Country, and to celebrate local identity.
- We have updated the plan to recognise the importance of knowledge and innovation centres across the region, including those tertiary institutions which sit outside Greater Newcastle. The plan now notes these institutions form a vital role in the skills and training network which collectively positions the Hunter to make the most of future employment opportunities. The plan fosters their expansion and clustering of value-adding activities.
- We have not included an action to prepare a regional skills plan because this sits outside the land use focus of the *Hunter Regional Plan 2041*. However, it is noted that this type of activity has been prioritised for part of the region through the NSW Government's *Upper Hunter Economic Diversification Action Plan*.
- The objective has been updated to provide direction for the visitor economy. It has been included in this objective because it has synergies with strategies to revitalise centres and main streets as well as the night-time economy.

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## Objective 8 Build an inter-connected and globally focused Hunter (now Objective 4)

### Key issues

- Submissions highlighted the importance of freight corridors and supply chain infrastructure like rail connections to the Port of Newcastle and the Newcastle Airport, and the need for this infrastructure to be protected from land use conflict.
- We heard that public transport and infrastructure is inadequate, that the existing bus network is underutilised, and that road infrastructure is not safe for cycling.
- There was a strong desire to see improved connectivity between Sydney, the Central Coast and Greater Newcastle through faster train services and maritime access.
- Plan should encourage building in capacity for lower emission transport such as electric personal, commercial and freight vehicles in new precincts.
- Some submissions indicated the plan should better align with the future growth aspirations of the Port of Newcastle and Newcastle Airport, and that it should recognise the importance of these global gateways to the growth and economic success of the Hunter.

## Response

- We have updated the plan to recognise the importance of freight corridors and supply chain infrastructure and included a strategy to ensure local strategic planning considers land use conflict.
- The plan now identifies key transit corridors and activity centres as focus areas for integrating future growth with public transport so that demand and services can grow.
- We have revised the plan to better recognise the opportunities afforded by the 90-minute region that is the Six Cities region, and for a future fast rail corridor to be safeguarded and precinct planning undertaken around future fast rail stations.
- Low emissions transport such as electric vehicles is now recognised in the plan and direction is provided in Objective 7 Reach net zero and increase resilience and sustainable infrastructure.
- The plan better recognises the importance of the Port of Newcastle and Newcastle Airport to the Hunter and includes specific strategies to support their growth consistent with their respective growth aspirations.

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## Objective 9: Sustain and balance productive rural landscapes (new objective)

This section has been added in response to feedback and provides policies related to resource landscapes and rural communities.

### Key issues

- We heard that local place-making strategies should protect important agricultural land and intensive agricultural clusters from residential and rural expansion to avoid land use conflict.
- Important agricultural land should be defined in the plan.
- Rural enterprises like agri-tourism can be supported but intensification and diversification can also increase the likelihood of land use conflict.
- Local strategic planning should strategically identify land suitable for residential and rural-residential expansion.

## Response

- We have created a new Objective to address issues relevant to ensuring our rural landscapes are productive.
- Important agricultural land is now defined in the plan.
- Strategies are included to guide local strategic planning and planning proposals. Focus is given to protecting rural activities and allowing for their growth and diversification while ensuring land use conflict is avoided.

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## District planning and growth areas

Issues raised in submissions regarding the districts section of the plan were diverse, with the greatest number of submissions received relating to the Greater Newcastle district.

Submissions frequently requested the plan identify specific land parcels as being future housing or employment land. Varying levels of supporting information was provided to justify these requests.

While the requests have not been supported, we have modified the Making it happen section of the plan to provide a pathway for these sites to be considered within the 5-year implementation period of the plan.

Clear guidance has been included to allow stakeholders to evaluate how site-specific proposals align with the objectives and priorities of the plan.

In response to the Six Cities region and the future Lower Hunter and Greater Newcastle City Plan, the district boundaries have been revised. The Greater Newcastle and Hinterland districts now solely contain Lower Hunter LGAs to make the future transition to the new City Plan simpler.

### Greater Newcastle district

#### Key issues

- Numerous refinements were suggested to the guidance in the plan for regionally significant growth areas. This included changes to boundaries, place outcomes and the mapping of constraints/opportunities.
- Submissions requested the plan clarify the status of catalyst areas identified in the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*, with some submissions requesting the plan recognise them as Regionally Significant Growth Areas.
- Several submissions requested new regionally significant growth areas be included for Branxton and North West Lake Macquarie as both are experiencing rapid growth and investment.
- We heard that the New England Growth Corridor should be recognised in the plan, carrying over the importance of this area for new growth from the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*.
- The Newcastle Mines Grouting Fund should be extended.
- Submissions noted Charlestown is growing rapidly and future planning to best harness this growth should be prioritised in the plan.
- Traffic impacts associated with growth and the need for better active and public transport was raised as a concern.

#### Response

- We have revised the regionally significant growth areas to
  - now include catalyst areas from the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*

- update mapping and text in response to feedback
- identify the Branxton and North West Lake Macquarie Areas as regionally significant growth areas.
- The plan now recognises the importance of the New England Growth Corridor in supporting future growth. Infrastructure planning is prioritised for this area so that its strategic centres and new urban release areas can be delivered.
- While the value of extending the Newcastle Mine Grouting Fund is recognised, the future of the fund is subject to a separate review process. The review should be completed later this year.
- We have updated the plan to recognise the importance of Charlestown and the opportunity it provides for supporting the growth of Greater Newcastle.
- Traffic and active/ public transport have been addressed in Objective 3 Create 15-minute neighbourhoods made up of mixed, multi-modal, inclusive, and vibrant local communities and Objective 5 Build an inter-connected and globally focused Hunter.

## Central and Upper Hunter districts (now combined)

### Key issues

- Some submissions suggested the Central Hunter and Upper Hunter districts be combined because characteristics and issues were common.
- Submissions supported the creation of a UDP which included regional Hunter. However, it was suggested that this UDP be separate from the Greater Newcastle UDP so that it can focus on the specific issues relevant to the regional Hunter districts.
- We heard that repurposing former coal mines and the Liddell/Bayswater lands for employment use was strongly supported.
- Direction for the Broke-Fordwich and Hermitage Road vineyards areas should be clearer in the plan.
- The plan should acknowledge the economic growth opportunity provided by the district's infrastructure connections to the Six Cities.

### Response

- We have combined the Central Hunter and Upper Hunter districts into one district called the Upper Hunter.
- The Making it Happen part of the plan has been revised to include a UDP solely focused on the Upper Hunter (including Central Hunter and Upper Hunter districts) and the MidCoast LGA (Barrington and Coastal districts).
- The plan now better recognises the economic opportunities created by the district's access to the Six Cities and provides guidance for councils about how growth can be leveraged.
- The Broke-Fordwich and Hermitage Road vineyard areas have been identified as a Regionally Significant Growth Area and direction included to inform further place-strategy planning.

- While not raised in submissions, further guidance has also been included for the Upper Hunter vineyards and Scone/Equine regionally significant growth areas. This includes scenic mapping to recognise the importance of landscapes and amenity to these industries.

## Central Lakes district

### Key issues

- With the recent and planned closure of several power stations in this district, stakeholders raised concerns with the remediation of associated coal ash dams.
- Eraring Power Station was considered an opportunity for economic development.
- Submissions opposed the inclusion of Warnervale Airport in the plan, possible future master plans and upgrades and potential impacts on the Porters Creek Wetland.
- Concerns were raised regarding water quality in Lake Macquarie and Lake Munmorah.
- As the Wyong Employment Zone is already zoned, it was suggested it be moved into the short-term category for sequencing.
- Central Coast Council requested clarity on whether the relocation of Warnervale Train Station is still proceeding.
- More detail was requested on the future of the Warnervale Town Centre.
- Concerns were raised regarding mapping of biodiversity corridors in certain locations.

### Response

- Remediation of ash dams will be included in power station remediation plans. The development around ash dams will be managed to avoid adverse health impacts on the community or environment. Remediation will be in accordance with the NSW Legislative Council Public Works Committee's report on their enquiry into coal ash repositories, published in September 2021.
- We included discussion on the future of Eraring Power Station. A collaborative planning approach will be undertaken to growth and development of the area.
- The repeal of the *Warnervale Airport (Restrictions) Act 1996* – independent of the regional plan – requires a master plan must for the site. The Warnervale place strategy will need to align with the master plan. The number of submissions concerning Porters Creek Wetland underlined the importance of this ecologically significant area to the community.
- We updated the final plan to acknowledge the need to improve water quality in Tuggerah Lakes. A new strategy requires planning proposals to demonstrate that development within a drinking water catchment or sensitive receiving water catchment will achieve a neutral or beneficial effect on water quality. This is consistent with the recommendations of the Tuggerah Lakes Expert Panel's report.
- We removed the preliminary sequencing and will develop a sequencing plan guided by the infrastructure-first and place-based framework in Part 1 Making it happen.

- Transport for NSW is responsible for a new or upgraded Warnervale station. The regional plan provides a framework for the future land uses in the town centre, including principles to guide any zoning amendments.
- Biodiversity corridors applying to land can be refined with supporting studies which will allow reviewing land zones and possible rezoning can be investigated by individual landowners.

## Hinterland district

### Key issues

- The plan should extend the Hinterland boundary to include the Broke and Milbrodale areas.
- A submission requested the vineyard significant views layer be removed from the Cessnock vineyards regionally significant growth area map because it may pre-empt future work being undertaken by Cessnock City Council. It also questioned the phrase “growth area” being applied to the vineyards because it is a primary production area.
- We heard differing views on whether the plan should identify Wallalong as a new growth area for the region. Some thought it should progress with planning for delivery undertaken now, while others believed it should not be considered.
- The plan should recognise that growth in villages like Seaham and Hinton will be limited due to constraints.

### Response

- While Broke and Milbrodale’s connection to Greater Newcastle and Hinterland areas is recognised, the area has been included in the Upper Hunter district to simplify transition to the new city plan in 2024. The area has been identified as a regionally significant growth area with direction provided about how the area should grow and what further planning is required.
- The significant views layer for the Cessnock vineyards regionally significant growth areas has been retained. This layer is based on Council’s existing development control plan guidance and the plan notes that further work is required to refine visually significant land mapping.
- Wallalong has not been identified as a future growth area, however the plan now provides a pathway for new housing sites to be considered.
- The plan’s guidance for villages like Seaham and Hinton has not been changed. It recognises that constraints will largely influence the ability for new housing to be provided in these areas.

## Barrington district

### Key issues

- Some submissions requested the name of the district be changed to MidCoast LGA, noting “Barrington Coast” is used in tourism marketing by MidCoast Council.
- We heard that Taree would continue to grow but new housing opportunities are limited. New areas should be identified.
- Submissions noted that Brimbin should not be considered part of the Taree housing market but be considered a separate community and housing market.
- The importance of the Taree Universities Campus should be acknowledged because it provides higher level skills and training to the community, readying the community for employment.
- We heard that planning priorities did not align well with the priorities for the Dungog LGA which forms part of the district.

### Response

- The district name has been retained as Barrington because the Barrington Tops is a key feature for large parts of these areas. Several of the centres in this district have an association with this natural feature.
- The plan provides a pathway for new housing sites to be considered.
- A planning priority has been included to recognise Brimbin as its own community and that efficient infrastructure planning will need to occur to facilitate its development.
- The role of the Taree Universities Campus has been acknowledged in the plan.
- Planning priorities have been revised to better guide local strategic planning in the Dungog LGA.

## Coastal district

### Key issues

- New housing should be more focused on detached dwellings rather than infill, with development in coastal villages not exceeding three storeys so it can maintain local character.
- There are opportunities to provide housing on lands not identified in MidCoast Council’s urban growth strategy and these should be facilitated.
- Several submissions requested paper subdivisions such as North Arm Cove be identified as future growth areas and actions included in the plan to facilitate development.
- Land around Pacific Palms, Charlotte Bay and Smiths Lake should be identified as a regionally significant growth area as a place for providing new housing, jobs, tourism, and recreation opportunities.

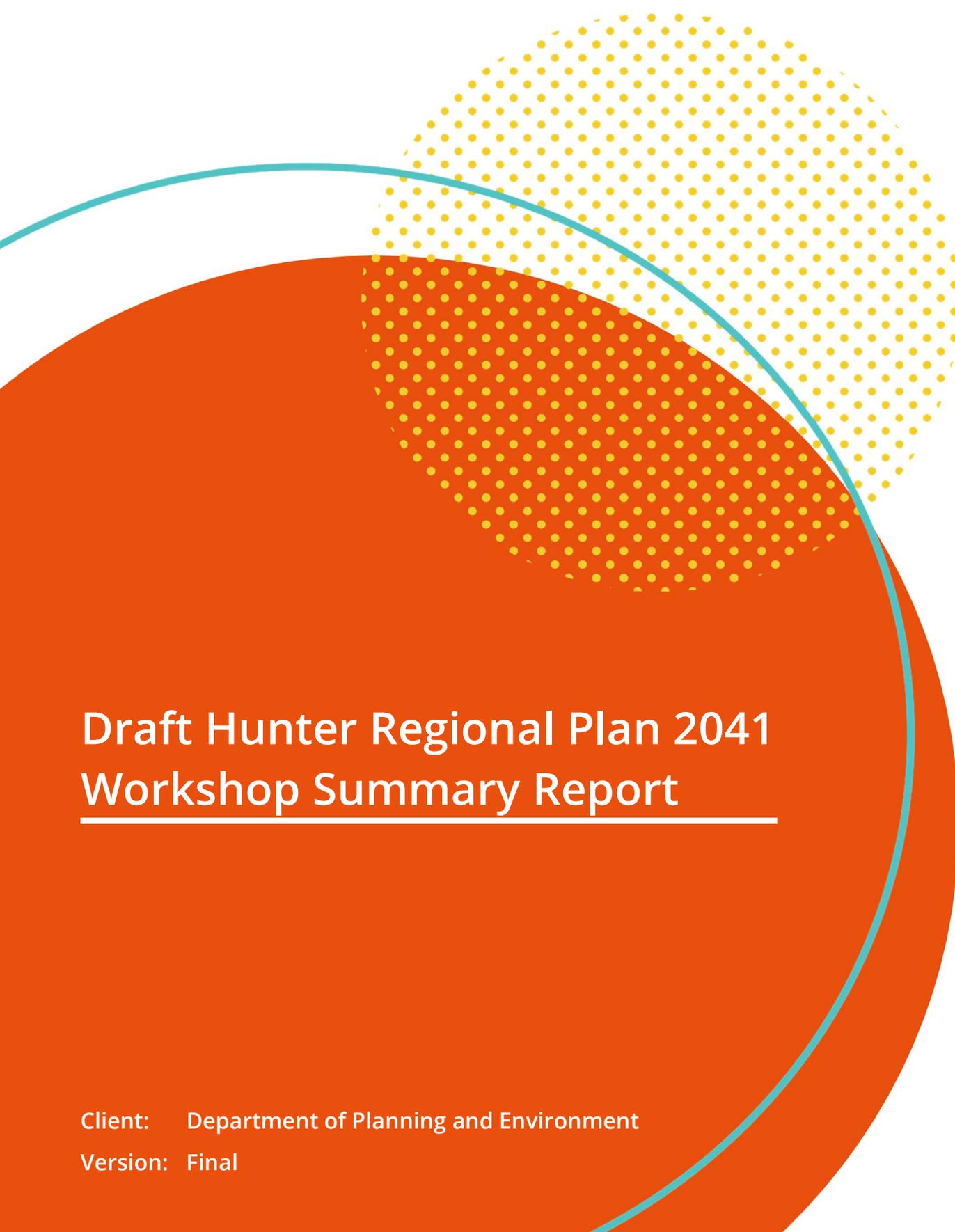
## Response

- We have not changed the plan's desire to see more diversity of housing development in the Coastal district. The plan considers where we want to be within the next 20 years and a shift to more diverse housing is desired. This will promote housing affordability and diversity while respecting the rich environments which surround our coastal settlements.
- Changes to Part 1 Making it happen now provide a pathway for the progression of new housing sites not identified in a council strategy.
- A planning priority has been added for council to undertake further investigations into the feasibility of developing paper subdivision sites in the Coastal district.
- A regionally significant growth area has not been included in the plan for land around Pacific Palms, Charlotte Bay and Smiths Lake. Further investigation is required before this could be supported in the plan.

# Attachments

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Attachment 1 – Cred Consulting Workshop Summary Report

A decorative graphic consisting of a large orange circle at the bottom left, a smaller yellow dotted circle at the top right, and a light blue arc that overlaps both circles.

# Draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041 Workshop Summary Report

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Client: Department of Planning and Environment

Version: Final





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**Cred Consulting acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Biripi, Geawegal, Worimi, Wonnarua, Darkinyung, and Awabakal lands that form the area we call the Hunter region, and the Gadigal land on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past, present and future.**

# 1. Executive summary

This report summarises findings from meetings and workshops designed and facilitated by Cred Consulting in February and March 2022, with the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (the Department). The Department sought feedback from councils and other stakeholders on the draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041 (the draft Plan).

Feedback provided in these meetings and workshops will inform preparation of the final Hunter Regional Plan 2041 (the final Plan).

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## 1.1 About the Hunter Regional Plan

The NSW Government has reviewed the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* as part of its first five-year review to reset its priorities and extend its reach to 2041. The regional Plan is a 20-year land-use blueprint to support the prosperous future for the Hunter Region.

The draft Plan provides the updated priorities for the region and covers the 10 Local Government Areas of the region: Cessnock, Dungog, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, MidCoast, Muswellbrook, Newcastle, Port Stephens, Singleton and Upper Hunter Shire.

## 1.2 Summary of workshop key findings

- Councils and stakeholders were generally supportive of the draft Plan. There were varying viewpoints from community participants, with some commenting that they felt the draft Plan has not adequately articulated a clear vision for the Hunter Region.
- There was general support from councils and stakeholders about the 15/30-minute region approach, but they expressed concern about its implementation in the varying spatial context of the Hunter Region and commented that more detailed work on how to effectively deliver this concept was needed and that transport was a key factor in being able to achieve this.
- Overall, the community were hesitant about the 15-minute region and the idea of optimum density. Many commented that the concept was more suited to city centres, such as Newcastle or Sydney, and not to the more rural areas across the region. There was some confusion expressed about the 15 minutes being based in the idea of community connection, equity and access to services rather than a definition of transport accessibility.
- Community workshop participants requested that the Plan provide greater detail about the transition from the existing power generation and mining activities, the potential opportunities, and impacts on the communities.
- There was significant discussion from councils about the implementation of the Plan and several community members commented that the implementation of the draft Plan seemed to focus on rezoning and increased development, rather than delivering on a future vision for the region.
- Representatives from Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Councils shared the complexity of the planning process, and the intertwined regulatory environment with Native Titles Act as well as planning legislations. Reflecting this complexity, recognition of the work that is already happening, plus support to provide the resources, tools and expertise, was requested in the review of the Hunter Regional Plan.

## 2. Introduction

The workshops were part of the wider engagement activities delivered to support the public exhibition of the draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041, which occurred between 6 December 2021 and 1 March 2022.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic limitations, all community engagement activities were conducted via an online platform ('Zoom'), with the aim of reaching council and community stakeholders across the region.

**From across the Hunter region, 115 people participated in eight workshops delivered from 10 February to 1 March 2022.** Table 1 (on the following page) provides an overview of engagement activities.

### 2.1 Workshop overview and methodology

For the draft Plan consultation during exhibition, a total of eight workshops were held. At all meetings, the Department's Central Coast and Hunter Region team presented the context and renewed approach that has shaped the review of the existing plan and provided details about the implementation and delivery approach being proposed for the Hunter Regional Plan 2041. The workshop was structured around the three parts of the draft Plan: Making it happen (Part 1), Objectives (Part 2), and District planning and growth areas (Part 3).

Following the Department's presentation of the draft Plan context and renewed approach, Cred Consulting facilitated discussion regarding:

- What participants see as being the priority for the Hunter region over the next 5 to 20 years
- Which objectives of the draft Plan participants supported/agreed with
- Which objectives of the draft Plan require amendment and/or strengthening
- Whether the areas identified in Part 3: District planning and growth areas needed to be updated
- Whether the proposed implementation and 'infrastructure first' approach is appropriate to deliver on the vision and opportunities within the Hunter Region.

The eight workshops were designed to engage with local councils, local Aboriginal community representatives, the development industry, stakeholders from across the region representing business, education, the environment and industry, and the community to provide their insights and useful feedback to inform the finalisation of the Plan.

For each workshop, presentation methods were varied:

- Council workshops (2) - Participants included council staff. The Department presented the context and key drivers influencing the review of the existing plan, the highlights for each objective of the draft Plan, the district planning and regionally significant places, and the implementation approach, and sought feedback throughout the presentation. All 10 councils were invited to participate in the workshops. Representatives from 9 councils participated.
- Development industry workshop (1) – Participants were specific to development industry representatives from the Central Coast and Hunter regions. At this workshop, both the draft Central Coast Regional Plan 2041 and the draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041 were discussed, with a focus on objectives and issues specific to the property and development industry. Representatives from the Greater Sydney Commission also attended the workshop to listen and provide an update on the inclusion of the Greater Newcastle area of the Hunter into the new Greater Cities Commission.

- Stakeholder’s workshop (2) – Two workshops were held – one for Greater Newcastle stakeholders and one for the remainder of the Hunter. These workshops targeted local business, education, industry and tourism stakeholders, as well as utilities providers and transport infrastructure (Newcastle Ports and Newcastle Airport) service sectors. The Department presented the context and key drivers influencing the review of the existing plan, the highlights for each objective of the draft Plan, the district planning and regionally significant places, and the implementation approach, and sought feedback throughout the presentation.
- Community workshops (3) – for the local community from across the Hunter Region. The Department presented the context and key drivers influencing the review of the existing plan, the highlights for each objective of the draft Plan, the district planning and regionally significant places, and the implementation approach, and sought feedback throughout the presentation. This provided the context for informed discussion at the workshops by all participants. The community workshops were attended by a combination of residents, landowners, council staff, local councillors, industry experts and representatives of local community and residents’ groups.

Table 1. Overview of engagement activities

Type	Date/s	Participants
Council workshops (2)	10 February 2022	28
Community workshops (3)	17 February – 15 February 2022	38
Invited stakeholders’ workshops (2)	15 February – 22 February 2022	30
Invited development industry workshop (1)	16 February 2022	19

# 3. Summary of discussion

The workshop discussions facilitated by Cred Consulting form an important part of the feedback on the draft Plan and will be considered in preparation of the final Plan. This section provides a summary of discussions at all workshops regarding the draft Plan. Discussion points have been separated into three parts, to align with the structure of the draft Plan: Making it Happen, Objectives, and District planning and growth areas.

## 3.1 Introduction

Overall, there was general support for the draft Plan, its direction, and objectives from councils and stakeholders. There was some concern expressed by council and community representatives about the implementation and additional local considerations reflecting the varying scales and contexts of places across the Hunter region.

Development and property representatives discussed and requested clarification about the calculations and assumptions that were factored into the stated levels of developable land across both the Central Coast and Hunter regions. One participant at the property and development stakeholder’s workshop also requested that an affordable housing target, like what has been expressed in the draft Central Coast, also be considered for inclusion in the Hunter Regional Plan.

Objective 3: Creating a 15-minute region was a focus of discussion across all workshops. Many participants asked questions to clarify the concept itself, the intended outcomes, and how it would be implemented given the geography and existing land-use pattern across the Hunter region.

While many attendees supported the intention of this objective to create greater equity of access across the Hunter region and to have services, work, and entertainment opportunities closer to where people live, it was discussed and acknowledged by Department staff that work was needed to further consider the varying scales and geographies across the region. It was identified that the forthcoming Regional Transport Plan would be critical in the successful delivery of Objective 3.

## 3.2 Regional Plan Objectives

This section summarises the feedback and discussions about the objectives within the draft Plan. Across all workshops, discussions were guided by participants and mainly focused on Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7. Feedback on the remaining objectives was limited. Comments have been captured in the meeting notes and may be included in the formal written submissions to the Department throughout the public exhibition.

### *Objective 1: Diversify the Hunter’s mining, energy and industrial capacity.*

Mining, industry and energy production is synonymous with the Hunter region. Council, the community and stakeholders all agreed that there should still be a lot of mining activity in the Hunter for the future, and that the coal mines are considered to be strategic land holdings by the State government, contributing to NSW's economy due to existing global export demand.

Industry stakeholders expressed a motivation for discussions on the topic of transition and diversification for the Hunter region aligned to the various policies of the different levels of government, the policies on the future energy roadmap, and what opportunities the Hunter can leverage, given the existing infrastructure and local expertise.

Council and stakeholders acknowledged the importance of this Objective and the implementation of the strategies and actions to positively transition the Hunter to renewable energy production, and how industry and government can, together, explore how best to position the Hunter as leaders in this transition.

One industry stakeholder noted the need to align with the new Critical Minerals Strategy adopted by government, as this could support the transition of a significant proportion of workers from the coal mining industry in the future, even when coal mining is in decline.

### ***Objective 2: Economic self-determination for Aboriginal communities.***

There was strong support across all workshops for the inclusion of Objective 2. Representatives from Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) and local Aboriginal community emphasised the need for a commitment of resources to LALCs and other organisations, especially in the regions, to achieve the intended outcomes of this objective.

It was discussed that LALCs' resourcing capacity is very low, and understaffed. In addition, the rezoning process for LALC land is extremely complex, and requirements go beyond those outlined in the planning legislation and processes. It was requested that this complexity needs to be acknowledged by government and regulatory agencies, along with the impacts on the resourcing of LALCs and Aboriginal communities.

Staff from the Department acknowledged that effective engagement and partnerships with LALCs is important to ensure the economic self-determination for Aboriginal communities. Also, that there will be trials and processes working towards a streamlined system to allow LALCs transparency on decisions over biodiversity and land-use plans and development set by the government.

The Department is also working alongside the Darkinjung LALC, Biraban LALC and Eden LALC on trialling a number of policy pathways to address biodiversity constraints.

Participants identified three things LALCs has already expressed to the Department over a very long time that need to be addressed and that they would like reflected in the final Plan. They include:

- Challenges with the planning system and working with government.
- Challenges with the planning biodiversity system.
- Requirements under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act and alignment with the planning process.
- Lack of recognition of work being undertaken by LALCs with limited resources.

### ***Objective 3: Create a 15-minute region***

Most council, stakeholder and community participants were supportive of the desired outcomes and intention behind Objective 3; however, a common concern raised was the varying spatial context of places across the Hunter region, which may it difficult to achieve this objective, or, even it not being relevant – especially for more rural areas in the Upper Hunter.

Some councils expressed cautious optimism about the idea of a 15-minute region and requested the final Plan provide more detailed research and explanation about how it could work for the whole of the Hunter region. Some councils felt that the 15-minute region concept was not relevant to them and that it was only suitable for Newcastle City Centre and inner-city areas.

While it was noted that many of the smaller centres across the region are highly accessible for residents already, to achieve the intended amenity and service provision to create a connected city, it would require significant densification and increased populations. This may have an impact on the existing character and attraction of the place. It was agreed that public transport, as well as walking and cycling infrastructure, would need to significantly improve across all areas of the Hunter region to be able to achieve this objective.

The context framework supporting the 15-minute region concept was discussed in detail. There was a lot of focus from councils on the terminology and the categorisation of “contexts” that would be the basis for the implementation and understanding of the 15-minute region. Some participants commented that the terminology was a little too “Sydney-centric” and also that a number of the “contexts” did not apply to their Local Government Area.

It was also suggested that a gap in the framework is the categorisation of the coastal context and a 15-minute region would only work in limited scenarios. For example, coastal urban locations lack any existing connectivity or public transport, making it difficult to enable this. It was suggested the initiative should be considered only after Transport for NSW has sufficient services in place.

One council participant asked, “How do we link our locales to these contexts?” It was also discussed that within councils’ existing Local Strategic Planning Statements (LSPS), the local contexts and characteristics of each have been articulated, and yet, there was uncertainty as to how this had informed the regional plan review, the development of Objective 3, and the “context” framework.

It was agreed that many towns across the Hunter region already have strong social connectivity and are relatively walkable, which the 15-minute region objective can build from. However, there was some concern about the movement and transport connectivity and that there are still a number of locations that do not fit within the parameters proposed. Without adequate transport infrastructure, this objective would be difficult to achieve, even in the long term. Staff from the Department acknowledged that further refinement was needed to provide greater naunce in the implementation of Objective 3.

Councils suggest that to create more certainty for this objective and the concept, transport options must be included and leveraged. By better-articulating in the final Plan what it is meant by a 15-minute region and what amenity, density and services would likely be expected, the infrastructure needs would be clearer. It was also noted that, although the concept is a good idea, it might also be too aspirational for smaller council areas and towns across the region, especially the Upper Hunter’s more rural areas.

Industry stakeholders commented on connectivity being critical for business and that the 15-minute region supports this whether a commercial business, tourism or agriculture. Having access to services and facilities, housing and employment is critical to attracting workers and visitors. One tourism industry stakeholder suggested that the current plans and visitor projects from Cessnock and Singleton Councils should be considered in the final Plan.

#### ***Objective 4: Plan for “Nimble Neighbourhoods”.***

There was agreement from council stakeholders that while this Objective does talk to density in a more positive way, and that support from the Department was needed to share this message and articulate how this could be achieved. Greater clarification about the implementation of Objective 4 was requested by both council and community workshop participants.

There was some concern that the proposed increase of density outlined in the draft Plan of 50-75 dwellings per hectare would result in “sacrificing amenity and open space.” This would also mean significantly more investment and land acquisitions from councils to “retrofit” existing areas and offset the reduce of open space. Some council, community and stakeholder workshop participants felt that the proposal within the draft Plan for increased densities was a good idea for the Hunter region; however, the problem for some areas is the market uptake and the development feasibility for higher densities and small housing typologies.

While the development industry participants were supportive of this objective, community participants were primarily concerned that this represented a focus of the draft Plan on rezoning and redevelopment for the region, rather than the broader strategic future growth and wellbeing for communities. There was also confusion about the idea of having a minimum density provision, rather than a maximum, and concern that this provides limited certainty about the extent of development in existing communities.

One council participant expressed concern that, “When council is negotiating with developers, is to explain what the optimum density is, and also what the regional plan is stating for local contexts in relation to this”. One development representative felt that, “The vision and concepts themselves will be widely supported, but when we get into the details of what is optimum density and what is available transport, this might get messy,” and that it is assumed that, “Every council will have a different level of support and local communities may support this Objective, but not in their local area”.

Some councils also expressed concern with how to implement the concept of “optimum density” within the existing LEP/DCP framework, as some zoning and controls do not allow for the redevelopment and upscaling of density to achieve the intended outcome of this objective.

### **Objective 7: Plan for businesses and services**

Industry stakeholders suggested that the implementation of Objective 7 needs the Department to work with local businesses and organisations across the region to understand what is needed and how best to leverage the assets of the Hunter region.

It was discussed that to activate the region as an innovative and prosperous one, the business areas need to be further investigated and opportunities identified to revitalise CBDs and commercial centres across the region. The Greater Sydney Commission representatives noted that as part of the expanded Greater Cities Commission – which includes Greater Newcastle councils – they are looking at the short and long-term trends and changes that are driving the strategic planning of cities.

Some councils identified the opportunities for town centre across region to redefine its role and character to guide the redevelopment of commercial areas given the impacts of COVID-19.

## **3.3 Regionally Significant Places/District Planning**

All workshop participants agreed that a place-based approach is important to balance future growth, while also ensuring that the characteristics that attract people to the Hunter region are valued and retained.

Housing supply, the availability of appropriate and diverse housing and housing affordability were consistent themes of discussion with councils, the community and stakeholders. Smaller dwellings, cost of development and social housing were some of the gaps in the current market highlighted throughout the workshops. Servicing of the new development was also discussed as an imperative to enable land to be “unlocked,” and to ensure adequate pipeline of housing was being planned for.

Additionally, reference to other available housing related documents were discussed. Currently, the draft Plan provides linkage with the Regional Housing Taskforce recommendations and, once adopted, will be considered in the finalisation of the Hunter Regional Plan 2041

Representatives from educational institutions and organisations expressed concern that the draft Plan does not mention the opportunities of education in contributing to the future population and economic growth of the region. It was suggested that the final Plan outline the importance of education in terms of supporting innovation and new industries, contributing to the support the social wellbeing of the communities across the region, retaining talent, and contributing to the economic growth of the Hunter region.

In terms of Newcastle Airport, representatives noted that two things not mentioned in plan that will be significant for the future of the Hunter region: the air freight capacity, and economic opportunities with the role of the airport in export and import industry. Also that the work being undertaken for Williamstown around the defence industries and, in particular, the Astro Aerolab development and Williamstown Special Activation Precinct. It was requested that these projects and the collaborations be included within the region plan to enable the transition into relevant local planning documents such as the LSPS, LEPs and DCPs to support these opportunities.

Another consideration is the future extension to the Newcastle Airport runway and the expected increased demand for flights to and from the airport. Stakeholders noted that they were unsure as to whether there is adequate planning protection around certain zones of the airport to protect its operation, and about what the implications for future development around the edge of these industrial assets in the region could be.

Hunter Water representatives stated that the drinking water catchment protection is currently relevant to Dungog and Port Stephens Council, who they work closely with on both strategic planning and development assessment processes. It was requested that this work be reinforced in the regional plan, as it was in the previous plan. Also it was flagged that catchment areas may expand when the Lower Hunter Water Security Plan is adopted.

Hunter Water also noted that they are keen for further discussions on the Lower Hunter Water Security Plan – ensuring alignment with long-term strategic water supply, improved water quality, a blue-green grid. Also, around how the consideration of water is embedded early in the development considerations, servicing unsewered areas, and how to better work with the Department and councils on how to effectively provide and fund remote services. Hunter Water representatives also were enthusiastic to participate in discussions about the sequencing of land release and developments to align servicing investment, which will benefit from an agreed prioritisation.

### 3.4 Implementation

Most councils agreed that public transport and associated infrastructure is a key consideration for the Hunter Region and the successful delivery of the vision and objectives outlined in the draft Plan. Also, the significant number of planning reforms being undertaken by the Department will need to align with the regional plan so that the objectives and intended outcomes can be achieved through local LEPs and planning strategies.

There was general support for the infrastructure and growth planning approach, although community representatives felt that the draft Plan and the proposed governance, such as the Urban Development Program (UDP) membership, was too focused on development outcomes, and that the community were not part of the conversation. It was requested that community input be included within the UDP process.

It was acknowledged that if infrastructure is not provided, the delivery of the plan will not be possible. Funding of adequate infrastructure to support future development remains an issue, especially for transport, health and educational infrastructure. Department staff have consulted with NSW Health and Education to understand the local capacity issues and have identified some operational barriers. Therefore, the Department, through the regional planning processes, are talking with these agencies about how to assist them to plan for infrastructure delivery within the Hunter region.

Another consideration, especially for MidCoast and Upper Hunter councils was the acknowledgement that local government is a significant infrastructure provider and that the final Plan needs to enable councils to leverage it to gain funding for critical infrastructure. There was also discussion about the gap in the draft about any potential “limits” to growth in certain areas due to environmental, amenity and infrastructure limitations.

Councils and developers raised concerns that the approach seemed only focused on new sites yet to be zoned, rather than existing zoned sites which may have issues. The Department noted that they were open to using the model for existing zoned areas, as well as for planning proposals.

It was discussed that consideration also be given to the potential implications of the new benchmarks set in the Hunter Regional Plan and that some local objectives and strategies may have to be shifted. It was also discussed that the context model was too urban-centric for some councils across the Hunter and may need to be reconsidered.

Stakeholders identified that the planning process can be restrictive for growth and that the uncertainty of infrastructure delivery and navigating through various agencies can be an obstacle. The detailed infrastructure delivery model was generally welcomed by stakeholders, though recognising that there is still work to be done to refine it. Further discussions with council and stakeholders about the infrastructure capability/capacity and how this will work in practice was requested. The Department noted that the intention would be to have the model in place for the final Plan.

Local Aboriginal Land Council representatives reinforced that although they want to unlock the economic potential of land holdings, the planning process is costly and difficult to navigate. It was asked that all stakeholders understand that the process is lengthy for LALCs as it involves not just planning legislation, but also Native Title requirements, and that this complexity be reflected in the final Plan to increase understanding by all stakeholders.

Listening to community stakeholders, and how agencies are engaging with local Aboriginal communities early in the process, is critical. It was expressed that conversations once the Plan had been drafted is too late, and that LALCs are significant landholders and therefore should be included as part of the UDP. Staff from the Department acknowledged that the UDP and Development Delivery Plan process changes which will help resolve the blockages to development on land in LALC jurisdiction.

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