



ABN 19 949 536 343

59 Bonville Avenue | PO Box 3137 | Thornton NSW 2322  
P (02) 4978 4040 | F (02) 4966 0588

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NSW Department of Planning and Environment  
PO Box 1226,  
NEWCASTLE NSW 2300  
E: [hunter@planning.nsw.gov.au](mailto:hunter@planning.nsw.gov.au)

4th March 2022

**Subject: Submission - Draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041**

The Councils of the Hunter region, through the Hunter Joint Organisation (JO), acknowledge the efforts of the Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) in preparing the draft Hunter Regional Plan (Regional Plan), and welcome the opportunity to review and provide a submission. The objectives identified within the draft Regional Plan are generally supported, and demonstrate a high level of alignment with the strategic directions for the region identified by Member Councils through the Hunter JO Board (read more on these strategic directions in our submission). This reflects well on the DPE officers who have worked to engage local government in preparation of the draft and they should be commended.

The areas for significant improvement to the draft Regional Plan relate to critical silence and/or ambiguity on enabling factors, which are indispensable to the realisation of the Plan's stated Vision and Objectives. These are:

**1. Competitive Access to Global Markets**

While the airport and port are referenced in relation to global connectivity, the document is silent on the role of the NSW Government in policy, funding and infrastructure that is essential to international air travel and containerisation as well as the intra-region transport connectivity to make both these gateways competitive access points to global markets.

Irrespective of the role of the NSW Government, we only need ask ourselves 'what are the likely future products and services coming from the Hunter?' and 'what markets will we service?' to realise that lack of competitive access to global markets undermines the draft Regional Plan entirely.

Increased certainty on this issue is critical to catalyse the volume of future investment to keep the Hunter in its current position, much less for it to grow.

**2. Intra-region connectivity, specifically public transport**

Many of the Objectives within the draft Regional Plan are drawn from global exemplars. Yet the plan lacks credible reference to a vital element that makes these exemplars function ... public transport. The metropolitan heart of the region immediately needs a vision and credible concept plan for an integrated public transport solution, followed by a staged delivery plan. The surrounding strategic centres need the same vision, concept plan and staged delivery plans for consistent, rapid



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services into the metropolitan heart, with sufficient increased frequency to make them a practical commuter option.

Increased certainty on this issue is critical to equity and productivity for current and future citizens as well as to retain and attract talent in a global market place that sees a viable public transport option as a critical marker for liveability.

### 3. Governance

Our submission explores this issue further but, in short, clarity on governance in turn supports clarity and execution with respect to how the Objectives are to be realised and who will be accountable for their delivery. In short, we are unsure how governance will work in light of recent announcements.

#### Our Submission

The important observations above should be read in conjunction with the information included in the following submission, which focuses on those areas where alignment across Member Councils has been identified. Broader and more detailed feedback on the draft plan as it relates to specific Council areas will also be provided by individual Member Councils separately to this regional submission.

Feedback provided in the submission is focused on the following areas:

1. Strategic Alignment and Direction
2. Population Forecasts
3. Governance Alignment and Implementation
4. Connectivity
5. Individual Plan Objectives

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss our comments and recommendations.

Should you have any further queries or to discuss any aspects of our submission, please don't hesitate to contact me on 0405 217 249 or at [ceo@hunterjo.com.au](mailto:ceo@hunterjo.com.au).

Yours Sincerely

Joe James  
CEO Hunter Joint Organisation



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## Submission by the Hunter Joint Organisation on the draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041

### Introduction

The Hunter Joint Organisation is a statutory local government entity established by the NSW Government, through the *NSW Local Government Act 1993*, to support councils work together for better rural and regional outcomes, and to enhance the way local and state governments work together to plan and deliver important regional infrastructure and investment.

Member Councils of the Hunter JO include:

- Cessnock City Council
- Dungog Shire Council
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Maitland City Council
- MidCoast Council
- Muswellbrook Shire Council
- City of Newcastle
- Port Stephens Council
- Singleton Council
- Upper Hunter Shire Council

The core statutory functions established for the Hunter JO are:

1. **Strategic planning and priority setting** – to establish strategic regional priorities for the Joint Organisation area and to establish strategies and plans for delivering those priorities
2. **Intergovernmental collaboration** - to identify and take up opportunities for inter-governmental cooperation on matters relating to the Joint Organisation area.
3. **Shared leadership and advocacy** - to provide regional leadership for the Joint Organisation area and to be an advocate for strategic regional priorities.

The information provided in this submission focuses on those regional scale issues, priorities and responses on which Member Councils are aligned regarding the focus and directions that are identified in the draft Hunter Regional Plan.

### Overall comments

#### 1. Strategic Direction and Alignment

At an overall level the objectives identified within the draft Hunter Regional Plan are generally supported, and demonstrate a high level of alignment with the strategic directions for the region identified by Member Councils through the Hunter JO Board, which include:



Strategic Priority	Focus
Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A globally focused Hunter connected to international markets will underpin the successful economic evolution of the region</li> <li>• Efficient and effective access to global markets will be key to ensuring the region’s competitiveness in the global marketplace.</li> <li>• Addressing the existing transport infrastructure deficit and improving intra-regional connectivity is key to realising the broader aspiration and strategic goals for the region (i.e. economic evolution, liveability and resilience)</li> </ul>
Jobs and a Growing Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As we transition to a clean energy future, we need to evolve the Hunter’s economy to replace the dominance of coal with other products and services, at a level that will replace and ideally provide more jobs than those currently provided by the coal industry.</li> <li>• Access to global markets to attract investment and talent to evolve our economy, and to sell our products and services on the world stage, will be key to the Hunter’s economic evolution</li> </ul>
Liveability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a highly liveable region and facilitating ease of access to that lifestyle via global connections and improved inter and intra-regional connectivity is key to attracting and retaining skills and talent in the region, and providing a high quality of life for local communities.</li> </ul>
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring the region is prepared for change, and able to withstand and recover from natural and human induced risks (i.e. natural disasters, climate change, economic and social disruption and change)</li> </ul>

The objectives of the draft plan are also generally consistent with the Local Strategic Planning Statements and Housing Strategies of Member Councils that aim to increase urban consolidation in and around centres, housing diversity, walkable neighbourhoods, quality public places and green infrastructure, and access to jobs and services, as well as conservation of important biodiversity and natural areas.

While this alignment is welcomed, it has been identified that the draft Plan represents a significant shift in focus and direction from the previous Hunter Regional Plan 2036. As a general principle, if such fundamental shifts were to occur every five years, it has the potential to compromise the ability of Councils to take a long-term planning approach for the Hunter both locally and regionally.

From a delivery perspective, it is noted that the objectives included in the draft plan are quite broad, with limited detail on how they are to be realised and who will be accountable for their delivery. For those areas where Local Councils will have responsibility for delivery, it is recommended that clear principles be provided that can be used by Councils when assessing planning proposals, in line with the various governance arrangements that are in place. It is also recommended that a monitoring and reporting framework be established, implemented and regularly reported on by the NSW Government to ensure transparency and accountability around delivery of the Regional Plan.



## 2. Population Forecasts

Recent work completed by the Hunter JO, which draws on the expertise and data of Councils, State Government Agencies and Authorities, and key regional stakeholders, is forecasting that the region is more likely to experience a 50,000 -100,000 population estimate above the NSW Government official population forecasts by 2041. This will require additional infrastructure, services, jobs and housing across the region to meet these needs. This potential increase in population will also impact objectives 3 and 4 bringing congestion, connectivity and housing issues into the future over and above the existing planning horizons identified in the draft plan.

A potential solution would be to build in regular population review mechanisms every 2-3 years that assesses the trajectory of population using a broad scope, similar to the population scenario planning work recently undertaken by the Hunter JO. The assessment would include 'trigger points' for population projections that invoke additional infrastructure, services, jobs and housing planning to meet future needs. The trigger points would be designed to meet preparatory planning needs (i.e. 5-10 years for planning to delivery of rail and road improvements, 3-5 years for housing developments etc.)

## 3. Governance Alignment and Implementation

At an overall level, it is the policy position of the region's councils, through the Hunter JO Board that the following is needed regarding the delivery of key regional planning documents such as the Hunter Regional Plan:

- Greater regional input and influence in decision making is required on projects and initiatives that will principally shape the region and its future
- Increased local (regionally based) leadership and involvement in tactical decision making, to facilitate understanding of and accountability around decision making at a local level, and to avoid a disconnect with place by State Government decision making around the delivery of local resources and programs.
- Greater accountability around the prioritisation, sequencing and resourcing of delivery of regional plans. Responsibility and accountability for the delivery of actions is dispersed and fragmented across a range of agencies and stakeholder organisations.
- Greater accountability within central government for prioritising the policy framework and resourcing needed to deliver key State Government Planning documents.
- More sophisticated approaches to planning and investment. Coordination of planning, infrastructure and budgets across delivery agencies will deliver better outcomes from public investment in the region.
- Improving the currently fragmented governance approach to the delivery of regional plans is required, to enhance strategic planning and investment in the region, at a time when such investment is critical to support the region transform and diversify its economy in the face of major structural adjustments in the energy, resources and manufacturing sectors.

It is noted that the draft plan identifies specific new governance arrangements regarding the delivery of the Hunter Regional Plan, including extension of the Urban Development Program Committee to encompass all of the Hunter Region, and the establishment of a Place Delivery Group to address agency referral and place-making matters. Specific feedback on these new arrangements



are provided below, however at an overall level regarding governance arrangements proposed in the draft plan, the following comments are provided:

- In December 2021, the NSW Government announced the establishment of the Greater Cities Commission, which will now incorporate Newcastle, and potentially the broader GNMP area. Clarity regarding the involvement or relationship between the Greater Cities Commission and both the Hunter Regional Plan and GNMP needs to be clearly identified within the Hunter Regional Plan, to ensure accountability around decision making and plan delivery is clear.
- Other key regional strategies and reforms have also recently been released or are on the verge of being released. The relationship between these and the frameworks and responsibilities included in the draft regional plan are unclear. It is recommended that these strategies and reforms be considered concurrently, to ensure alignment between them and with the regional plan prior to it being finalised. This will provide greater certainty that planning proposals, consistent with the regional plan, will align with the statewide reforms and achieve more efficient implementation. Examples of these recent strategies and reforms include:
  - Transport for NSW's draft Hunter Regional Transport Plan
  - The Minister's recently released Planning Principles
  - Ministerial Directions (to come into place in March 2022)
  - Recently revised SEPPS
  - Employment Zone Reforms
  - Greater Hunter Regional Water Strategy
  - Lower Hunter Water Security Plan, all of which have direct implications for the Hunter Regional Plan.
  - Regional Housing Task Force Recommendations Report

#### Hunter Urban Development Program Committee

The draft plan identifies the expansion of the Urban Development Program to encompass all of the Hunter Region, and to also "incorporate the landholdings of Local Aboriginal Land Councils to integrate these sites more effectively into an overall program of urban development". While improved coordination toward urban development based on a strong evidence base is supported, the following limitations with the approach identified in the draft plan have been identified by Councils:

- Councils to which inclusion in the Committee will be extended, will experience even further impositions on their already limited resources arising from both participation in the Committee itself and the requirement to prepare information and reports for the Committee. It should be noted that these Councils are generally more resource constrained than those participating in the existing UDP Committee for the Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Area. To assist with managing these resourcing impacts, it is recommended that a template for monitoring land availability should be created by DPE and financial assistance provided to councils to:
  - develop mechanisms to readily report on key parameters; and
  - develop place strategies without undue increases in demand on council resources.



- The draft plan identifies a broad remit for the extended UDP Committee. Given representation proposed for the Committee includes a number of industry and professional stakeholders (eg. UDIA, Property Council), this could create the perception of bias toward development industry outcomes. This could be addressed by refining the scope of the Committee to a very specific role, or potentially broadening membership to reflect specific objectives and outcomes identified by the draft plan. For example, expanded membership could include:
  - NSW Communities and Justice – to provide a focus on addressing housing issues around quality, availability and affordability
  - Aboriginal representation, particularly given the integration of the landholdings of Local Aboriginal Land Councils within the remit of the Committee
  - Other relevant specialist State Government Agency representatives (eg. Department of Planning & Environment Biodiversity and Conservation Division) to ensure that all aspects of planning are considered.
- The current structure of the Committee and its focus has the potential to mean regional Councils characterised by lower urban growth rates (i.e. those not included in the current GNMP area) will be considered a lower priority for the Committee, reducing the ability of these Councils to provide development that is needed by their local communities

### Place Delivery Group

The draft plan identifies that place strategies will be overseen by a place delivery group chaired by the Department, and including relevant public authorities, infrastructure providers and LALC's and councils. Improved alignment of infrastructure, planning and collaboration across government through the Place Delivery Group (PDG) is welcomed. To function successfully (i.e. with efficient and effective decision-making) and to provide certainty when planning significant growth areas it is recommended that the Place Delivery Group:

- Include all relevant State agency and utility representatives, such as Hunter Water and Ausgrid, to allow the group to consider all infrastructure simultaneously in planning for growth areas.
- Be provided with certainty on the provision of infrastructure in precinct planning. There is concern the PDG will have difficulty achieving this as most State agencies are unable to commit to infrastructure provision without funding available.
- Be clear on how commitments to Place Strategies and the associated infrastructure is to be addressed.
- Have quick and helpful direction for transitioning existing projects into the new process.

To be effective at a broader governance level, the PDG therefore requires the necessary authority and/or statutory backing to be able to compel or make agencies and other delivery partners accountable for the delivery actions assigned to them. This will be necessary to overcome primary challenges arising from portfolio driven governance arrangements independently driving the priorities of agencies that can contribute to sub optimal outcomes including misaligned sequencing of infrastructure and service delivery. Ensuring that the delivery, monitoring and evaluation systems established by the PDG are clear around delivery responsibility, the outcomes to be realised, the



reporting obligations of delivery partners and the triggers / processes for amending priorities will be critical to successful implementation of the plan's objectives.

#### 4. Connectivity

The region's councils, through the Hunter JO have identified intra-regional connectivity as a primary regional issue that will need to be addressed to effectively deliver on the objectives identified in the draft Regional Plan. The Hunter region is comprised of different communities, assets and features, that while individually unique, effectively function as a connected and collective whole that together underpin the identity, lifestyle and functioning of the region. Improved, effective connectivity within the region will be critical to successfully delivering the range of objectives included in the draft plan. Intra-regional connectivity will underpin the ability to provide affordable housing; to attract and move skills and talent throughout the region; facilitate the movement of goods and services efficiently and effectively (including to the regional's two major international gateways); and to provide the vibrant and liveable communities to which the plan aspires.

The place based planning approach underpinning the draft plan is recognised and supported, and will assist in maintaining and adding value to these local characteristics. It is recommended however, that the plan's narrative also strongly recognise the importance of maintaining and improving connectivity between these diverse communities, features and assets, to maintain the value proposition that this provides to residents and visitors to the region.

While the draft plan acknowledges that connectivity plays an important role in linking the region's diversity together, the objectives and strategies within Objective 8, focus predominantly on inter-regional and global connectivity. While this broader connectivity is central to the region's future economic evolution and liveability, it is recommended that an increased emphasis be included in the plan around "intra" regional connectivity, which will be crucial to ensuring that the region itself will be able to best capitalise on the opportunities from enhanced global connectivity provided through Newcastle Airport and the Port of Newcastle.

While the plan addresses the identification and prioritisation of infrastructure on a place based / structure planning basis, it is unclear how the identification and prioritisation of regional scale infrastructure required to underpin connectivity between "places" will be identified and prioritised. This will be important to ensure that key intra-regional infrastructure needs are strategically identified and planned for, and to ensure that the impacts of local place based planning don't negatively impact on regional infrastructure connectivity, for example, the creation of new transport pinch points within another place arising from planning decisions occurring elsewhere that have not adequately considered the broader impacts of place based planning decisions.

#### Standardisation / Streamlining of Delivery Processes

It is noted that the Infrastructure First Place-based Delivery process is an approach that is also reflected in the recommendations of the Regional Housing Taskforce Recommendation Report. The Infrastructure First Place-based Delivery process identified in the draft regional plan however, can currently be interpreted as having a bias towards streamlining greenfield development over infill development to cater for growth. It is recommended that the process:





- Streamline planning processes to support infill development and growth outcomes; not only greenfield land release. The vision of the draft Hunter Regional Plan is unlikely to be realised without State Government action and funding support to unlock infill development and improvement of existing urban environments in line with the Better Placed and Greener Places guidelines.
- Provide a genuine streamlined process that does not simply replicate the existing rezoning process.
- Provide an appropriate funding mechanism to enable councils to more actively pursue strategic goals rather than relying on proponents to fund planning investigations.
- Consider the priorities within each Council area and not just the priorities of high growth locations (eg. the residential yields and minimum lot sizes will differ significantly between metro locations and regional towns)

To this end the Hunter JO has been working on a project with stakeholders to achieve 'A collaborative approach to rezoning in the Hunter region', to investigate a common approach to rezoning processes to achieve the following objectives:

- Streamline, simplify and standardise processes for Hunter councils and proponents.
- Target key barriers to deliver in the planning proposal process.
- Ensure Hunter councils and DPIE (and the community) see a return on the investment in regional and local strategic planning and the adoption of local strategic planning statements.

Supporting processes and frameworks will be essential to ensure successful delivery of the regional plan. This includes measures that:

- Can be put in place at the regional level within the regional plan, to provide greater certainty and efficiencies during the planning and rezoning process.
- Are supportive of reform to processes 'behind the plan' at the regional level to achieve collaboration, and efficient implementation of strategic planning outcomes.

At a workshop in September 2021 hosted by the Hunter JO, the following matters were identified as key areas to improve to achieve rezoning (in order):

- Standard process for resolution of agency issues
- Standard agency advice on specific issues
- Gateway information requirements
- Standard Gateway conditions
- Planning proposal templates
- Lodgement forms

At the workshop, agency consultation and resolution of agency issues was identified as a key issue in the planning proposal process. Including processes and measures in the regional plan that provide further guidance on the resolution of agency issues 'up-front' during the strategic planning and planning proposal process would be of benefit.

This project is ongoing, and the Hunter JO and member councils look forward to continuing to collaborate with the DPIE Hunter office on it to achieve these objectives, which would support the implementation of the regional plan when finalised.



## 5. Comments Specific to individual draft plan objectives

Objective	Comments
<p>Objective 1. Diversify the Hunter’s mining and industrial capacity</p>	<p>The Plan highlights a shift in the government's approach to post-mining land use considerations. Rather than returning land to its pre-mining state, or as agricultural or biodiversity land, the Plan states there may be opportunities to utilise mining infrastructure to leave an economic legacy for the community, with opportunities for future investors to develop the land post-relinquishment.</p> <p>This approach is supported, as is the action identified in the draft plan for the Department to investigate site compatibility mechanisms to allow development applications to be lodged for non-permissible uses and associated subdivision for the areas of interest parts of mine sites consistent with the Hunter Regional Plan, and considering mechanisms to provide more flexibility in post mining land uses as part of the development consent process. It is recommended that when implementing this action the following be considered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proximity - Implementing this action is particularly relevant to circumstances where mines are not too remote from other services and amenities, or the site will be able to provide these as well.</li> <li>• Managing industrial capacity and creating flexible planning and development controls will need to respond to new opportunities and technologies, including catalytic investments and transition to net zero emissions. This may mean a shift from traditional industrial and manufacturing into advanced and smart manufacturing, artificial intelligence and robotics, or more distributed manufacturing. E-commerce is increasing demand for warehouse and logistic properties to accommodate automated warehousing.</li> </ul> <p>Compatibility criteria should actively facilitate the implementation of industries and practices that align with the NSW Governments’ targets and objectives for “Net Zero by 2050” and the Hunter Renewable Energy Zone, and the region’s move toward a Circular Economy.</p> <p>Strategy 1.4 Circular Economy – the inclusion of Circular Economy within this objective is welcomed, as are the range of focus areas identified within the Strategy. It is recommended however, that an additional action be included to remove barriers / provide incentives and planning support to facilitate the establishment of knowledge and innovation hubs within circular economy precincts.</p>



Objective	Comments
Objective 2 - Ensure economic self-determination for Aboriginal communities	<p>This objective is supported. However, as identified previously in this submission, while the expanded focus of the UDP Committee identifies an expansion of scope to include the landholdings of Local Aboriginal Land Councils within its remit, there is no representation from Aboriginal communities on the proposed UDP Committee.</p> <p>Building capability and capacity within Aboriginal communities and organisations to ensure economic self-determination will also require significant support and resourcing. It is recommended that the NSW Government provide the necessary resources to support this process.</p>
Objective 3. Create a 15-minute region made up of mixed, multi-modal, inclusive and vibrant local communities	<p>This objective is supported, however as acknowledged in the plan, it represents a significant change in approach for the region, given that for many decades, growth in the Hunter has assumed that cars would continue to underpin most of our needs, often involving travelling long distances to do so. As a consequence, regional growth has developed both in land use, urban design and transport infrastructure, in a way that has made personal vehicle use the most attractive choice, and indeed often the only realistic choice.</p> <p>The following factors need to be considered regarding delivering on this objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater clarity is required as to how this objective will be achieved in regional towns and villages where the public transport (school based) and pedestrian/cycle paths are limited, and where the current density ratios and percentage of infill versus greenfield development are substantially different to more urban areas, which is often a reflection of lifestyle choice (i.e. a desire for larger lots in peri-urban and rural areas)</li> <li>• To be successful, integration of this objective will be required within other key regional planning strategies, activities and services (e.g. Regional Transport and Health Services strategies).</li> <li>• This objective can be supported substantially through the establishment and/or protection of regional corridors to facilitate both local and regional interconnectivity. For example, the region has a number of existing regional corridors including existing or former rail lines, that if proactively preserved have the potential to provide:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future routes for light or heavy passenger rail</li> <li>• Bus routes</li> <li>• Recreational walking and cycling routes</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Development of an assessment matrix would assist councils and/or applicants to determine how easy and enjoyable it is for a person to access their local centre. Walkability studies and cycling studies will need to be developed to support the 15-minute neighbourhood concept. A matrix should be included to allow councils to determine future residents' accessibility to local centres in a relatively comparable and consistent way.</p>



Objective	Comments
	<p>Work undertaken by the Hunter JO during 2021 has identified the significant potential to link existing and planned cycleway infrastructure across all council areas; to create an integrated region wide network. The “Shiraz to Shore Cycle Trail”, connects the picturesque wine country to the spectacular coastal beaches and lakes, providing the spine to a much broader connected regional cycleway experience. The Shiraz to Shore concept takes advantage of the Hunter’s flat river valley to create a truly accessible cycle experience that doesn’t require a high level of the fitness or skill. In addition to improving local connectivity between centres, the project would be a showpiece regional asset and experience that would attract cycle tourism to the region, which is well documented as a driver of visitor spend and overnight stays. The inclusion of “Shiraz to Shore” as signature connectivity project within the strategy would be welcomed.</p>
<p>Objective 4. Plan for “Nimble Neighbourhoods”, diverse housing and sequenced development</p>	<p>While increasing population density is supported, achieving an urban density requirement of 50-75 persons per hectare region-wide will be very challenging. One way to address this may be to set more specific targets and timeframes for high and low growth areas rather than establishing one target for the whole region. Such targets could reflect the particular lifestyle and characteristics of localities (e.g. coastal and rural features).</p> <p>Clarity is needed on how the minimum of 50-75 dwellings per hectare is to be applied. Housing as “complying development” does not necessarily trigger a council's involvement and existing greenfield developments in the Hunter are currently not meeting this target. There needs to be clear direction and possibly modelling in areas where it can be achieved to assist and encourage its take-up.</p> <p>The Regional Housing Taskforce Recommendation Report (October 2021) makes a number of recommendations that are consistent with achieving this objective. It is recommended that these be considered and reflected within the plan, particularly given the challenges surrounding housing affordability in the region.</p> <p>The draft regional plan discusses the need for a range of housing types – including affordable, diverse, and accessible. To achieve these outcomes, Councils welcome further support from the NSW Government. For example, at a practical level this could include photos and videos showing how well-designed smaller dwellings and infill can work. These could show how affordable and diverse housing can be well integrated, with real examples to help pave the way for the region rather than each council try to sell this important message on an individual basis. Financial or planning incentives could also be provided to encourage adaptable housing that enables people to live through different stages of their life without having to sell and move.</p>



Objective	Comments
	<p>Disability inclusion and accessibility are key principles that Councils are required to address in local planning processes. It is recommended that a stronger emphasis be placed on these aspects within the objectives and principles of the regional plan.</p>
<p>Objective 5.            Increase green infrastructure and quality public spaces and improve the natural environment</p>	<p>Recognition by the plan of the importance of connection to nature, and that it is increasingly important to provide access to nature and green infrastructure is strongly supported. Coastal environments (lakes and beaches) and natural areas (waterways and biodiversity) are environmental assets at the core of the region’s “value proposition”, and a strategic regional approach to their planning and management is paramount to the future liveability and economic evolution of the region. This includes consideration of the strategic opportunities for realising regional biodiversity outcomes that can be realised from the future management and rehabilitation of mining lands.</p> <p>The draft plan identifies (Strategy 5.6) the need for “strategic land use planning to identify and take account of the location and extent of areas of high environmental value, including areas of high environmental value, including areas of potential serious and irreversible species, threatened species, biodiversity corridors and koala habitat”. This strategy is strongly supported, however in order to be effectively realised, there is a need to undertake a strategic region-wide biodiversity conservation assessment process, and from the outcomes of this process, develop a Regional Biodiversity Conservation Plan or equivalent. Such a plan would identify regionally significant biodiversity assets and corridors and guide the effective conservation, restoration and management of biodiversity and natural areas across the region, including but not limited to the areas of habitat connectivity identified in the draft plan (p48). As well as taking a broad region-wide approach to biodiversity assessment and planning, a plan of this nature would provide a strategic context within which to direct the identification and implementation of biodiversity offsets generated from development processes to locations of strategic priority and value across the region.</p> <p>While waterways are identified within the draft plan (Strategy 5.10 and 5.11), these strategies are quite limited in scope and focus predominantly on development assessment. The potential to rehabilitate and reconnect the region’s waterways with the community is substantial, and would provide environmental, economic and recreational benefits for local communities right across the region, as has been demonstrated in other cities and regions around the world where substantial waterway restoration initiatives have been undertaken. It is recommended that the regional plan take a more strategic approach to the planning and rehabilitation of the region’s waterways to realise these potential benefits right across the region.</p>



Objective	Comments
	<p>Building on the above comment regarding Strategies 5.10 and 5.11, creating more green space and opportunities for community activity in direct proximity to the region’s waterways could also be activated by planning strategies and mechanisms that encourage more adaptive, softer approaches to flood mitigation and drainage (e.g. the restoration of concrete drainage channels to more natural waterways and reduced “hard’ engineering solutions for managing flood risk.</p>
<p>Objective 6.            Reach net zero and increase resilience and sustainable infrastructure</p>	<p>From the perspective of building resilience to the impacts of climate change, this objective focuses predominantly on natural disasters / resilience to shocks. It is recommended that greater recognition be included within this section of the need for the region to proactively plan for the longer term risks and opportunities that will arise from forecast changes in climate. These risks and opportunities span all aspects of the region’s communities and economic activities, including agriculture, mining, food security, water management, retail and tourism.</p> <p>Particular reference should be made to the Hunter Central Coast Adaptation Strategy developed by DPIE and endorsed by the Hunter Central Coast Regional Leadership Executive in late 2021. This strategy seeks to guide regional collaboration and complementary approaches to increase regional resilience to climate change impacts, across a number of focus areas that are strongly aligned with those of the draft Hunter Regional Plan. Through the strategy, government will build adaptive capacity in the Hunter and Central Coast regions to respond to the negative impacts of climate change and engage effectively with the community to ensure an equitable adaptation to climate change impacts for the whole community.</p> <p>Building resilience of the region’s water resources (quantity and quality) is not really addressed within this objective, however future access to water supplies will underpin the delivery of many of the other objectives and strategies identified within the draft regional plan (economic, social and environmental). It is recommended a greater focus on water resilience be incorporated, including strategies for ensuring place based plans integrate increased water resilience and efficiency within the urban environment, for natural ecosystems and for increasing agricultural diversity and intensification.</p> <p>A transition to low emissions transport across the region will play a substantial role in facilitating achievement of this “reach net zero” objective. The opportunity exists for the regional plan to outline a more strategic approach to the planning and implementation of zero / low emissions transport technologies and networks across the region (e.g. EV charging networks) to facilitate the uptake of such technologies, and to attract</p>



Objective	Comments
	<p>external investment in this kind of infrastructure across the region. Planning strategies and development standards have the potential to facilitate, incentivise or regulate to encourage these changes along with car free, car emission neutral developments.</p> <p>The integration of resilient housing design principles within new developments and the retrofitting of older developments (along with broader streetscapes and community spaces) to improve both resilience to climate impacts (eg extreme heat, storms and flooding) and energy and water efficiency, has the potential to contribute substantially to achieving the “reach net zero” target. The regional plan has the potential, through strategic goals and planning controls, to facilitate the uptake of more resilient and efficient design, which in addition to reducing shock impacts arising from extreme events, will also contribute to long term housing affordability and liveability by reducing ongoing household operating costs.</p>
<p>Objective 7. Plan for businesses and services at the heart of healthy, prosperous and innovative communities</p>	<p>The draft regional plan does not articulate the current skills shortages facing the Hunter Region, where less than 50% of the population have post-school qualifications, yet 90+% of future jobs are expected to require such qualifications.</p> <p>It is recommended that this objective should be accompanied with a region-wide plan to develop local skills and attract people to the region who are highly skilled. In line with this, the name of the objective could also be renamed “Plan for highly skilled people at the heart of healthy, prosperous, and innovative communities” to reflect the significance of this challenge.</p> <p>COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in people working remotely, often connected to employment in Sydney, Melbourne, or other global cities. There is an opportunity for the Hunter Region to attract remote workers due to the advantageous lifestyle our region offers. Similarly, region-wide strategies could be implemented to integrate remote workers with local professional ecosystems.</p> <p>Strategy 7.5 does not appear to be a strategy, but a list of activities already undertaken. Health care is an important part of the Hunter’s economy and services and should be better integrated and supported with strategy. Similarly, education and childcare are very important to a functional and successful community and direction is needed in these areas.</p> <p>Strategy 7.3 “Night-time Economy” – the extension of the focus of night-time economy activities to incorporate non-alcohol based activities such as extended opening hours for libraries, galleries and museums is welcomed and encouraged.</p>



Objective	Comments
<p>Objective 8. Build an inter-connected and globally focused Hunter</p>	<p>The objective of building an interconnected and globally focused Hunter is fully supported, however this needs to encompass both inter-connectivity and intra-connectivity to be successful.</p> <p>Strategically, one of the key moves required to underpin the successful economic evolution of the region is to significantly improve direct connectivity to global markets. This will provide the opportunity to underpin the replacement of coal by building demand for new and additional products and services, and at the level that will be needed to replace jobs that will be lost from the region’s transition away from coal. Efficient and effective access to global markets will also be key to ensuring the region’s competitiveness in the global marketplace.</p> <p>Creating a highly liveable region and facilitating ease of access to that lifestyle via effective global connections will also be key to attracting and retaining the skills and talent needed to drive this economic evolution.</p> <p>As well as ensuring that the region is connected globally and to other regions, the regional plan needs to include a focus on intra-regional connectivity. This is necessary to address and rectify not only an existing deficit in transport infrastructure that exists in the region, but will be integral to ensuring other plan objectives such as the 15-minute region, affordable housing; attracting talent, facilitating the movement goods and services efficiently and effectively throughout the region; and providing vibrant and liveable communities can be realised.</p> <p>In addition to hard infrastructure, improving intra-regional connectivity will also require strategies around transport system reviews, including the improved integration and timetabling of transport services to meet community needs and to connect key regional facilities. This is a substantial task that will require collaboration across a number of State Government agencies and key regional stakeholders such as Newcastle Airport and both public and private transport providers. It is recommended that this be included as a strategy in the Hunter Regional Plan along with who will be responsible for driving this process. If addressed within the draft Hunter Regional Transport Plan, it would be good to reflect this within the Plan.</p> <p>In addition to the current strategies identified in the draft plan, it is recommended that additional focus be included that recognises the importance of off farm supply chain infrastructure and services that are necessary (e.g. warehousing and distribution facilities) to ensure the viability of on farm activities by ensuring their products are able to connect efficiently with both domestic and international markets. This should consider the planning strategies or measures can be implemented to facilitate the appropriate and timely establishment of such facilities.</p>





ABN 19 949 536 343

59 Bonville Avenue | PO Box 3137 | Thornton NSW 2322  
P (02) 4978 4040 | F (02) 4966 0588

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