



# State of the Shire Report

2021 - 2024







# Contents

## **Section 1**

### Introduction

Upper Hunter Shire	1
Mayor's Message	3
Councillors	4
Organisation	5
IP&R	6
Community Priorities	7
Strategic Directions	8

## **Section 2**

### Strategic Objective Report

Connected Community	11
Protected Environment	19
Thriving Economy	27
Quality Infrastructure	35
Responsible Governance	41

## **Section 3**

### Financial Performance

## **Section 4**

### Looking Ahead

54

# Upper Hunter Shire

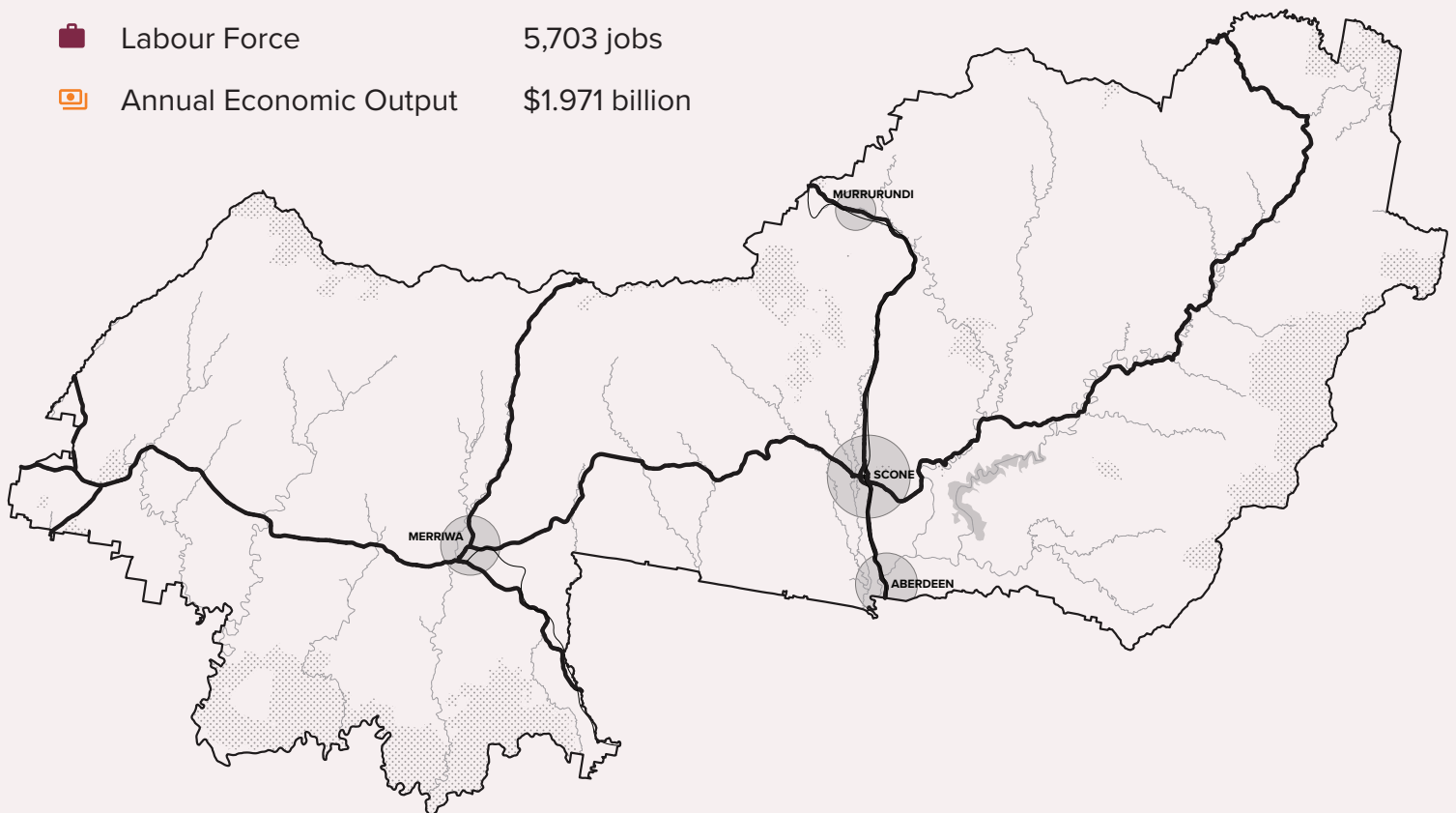
Upper Hunter Shire is located in the Hunter region of New South Wales, about 250 kilometres north of Sydney. It is bound by Liverpool Plains Shire and the Tamworth Regional Council area in the north, MidCoast Council and Dungog Shire in the east, Singleton Council and Muswellbrook Shire in the south and the Mid-Western Regional Council area and Warrumbungle Shire in the west.

The Upper Hunter Shire is a predominantly rural area and encompasses a total land area of about 8000 square kilometres, of which a large proportion is national park and nature reserves. Most of the rural area is used for grazing, dairy farming, horse studs and general farming. The main townships in the Shire are Scone and Aberdeen to the south, Murrurundi to the north and Merriwa to the west. Nestled among our

main townships are many local villages and rural communities.

The Shire is a major cattle, crop, goat, pig, poultry and sheep producer, has an increasing number of vineyards, an abattoir which supplies the Australian and overseas markets, and the best and friendliest rural community within easy travelling distance from Sydney and Newcastle.

	Land Area	8,100km <sup>2</sup>
	National Parks	686km <sup>2</sup>
	Population	14,293
	Labour Force	5,703 jobs
	Annual Economic Output	\$1.971 billion









# Mayoral Message



**Cr Maurice  
Collison**

As we reflect on the term, Upper Hunter Shire Council has made significant progress in delivering vital infrastructure and reducing financial pressures, all while navigating the challenges and opportunities that come with growth and change. Our focus on financial discipline has paid off, with Council successfully reducing its debt from \$37 million to \$29 million over the past three years without taking on any new loans. This achievement is a testament to our commitment to sound financial management and our determination to ease the financial burden on the community.

Key infrastructure projects have been delivered across the Shire, enhancing amenities and services in Merriwa, Murrurundi, Aberdeen, and Scone. From major developments like the Scone CBD revitalisation and the Murrurundi pipeline to upgrades at local parks, ovals, and community centres, these projects reflect our dedication to improving the quality of life for residents. The newly opened Aviation Attraction Centre and the Scone Regional Saleyards also stand as important economic drivers for the region, supporting tourism and local industry.

Looking ahead, our attention turns to completing bitumen upgrades on Barrington Tops Forest Road, sections of Hunter Road, and the rehabilitation of MR358. Plans are also in place to enhance recreational spaces, with master plans developed for Jefferson Park in Aberdeen and the Bill Rose Sports Complex in Scone, aimed at providing modern, accessible facilities for the community.

Engagement with our residents remains a key priority, and the establishment of Community Advisory Committees (CACs) in Merriwa, Murrurundi, Aberdeen, and Scone has provided a valuable platform for community input. While participation in budget and planning discussions has been varied, we continue to encourage more residents to take part in shaping the Shire's future. By fostering stronger communication and collaboration, we can work together to make informed decisions that benefit all.

As we move forward, our vision for Upper Hunter Shire remains focused on building resilient infrastructure, securing essential funding, and maintaining financial sustainability. These efforts are not only about meeting current needs but also about setting a foundation for future growth and prosperity.

# Councillors

Upper Hunter Shire elected 9 Councillors in December 2021.



Cr Maurice Collison  
Mayor



Cr James Burns  
Deputy Mayor



Cr Sue Abbott  
Resigned November 2022



Cr Ron Campbell



Cr Tayah Clout



Cr Elizabeth Flaherty  
Vacated April 2024



Cr Belinda McKenzie  
First Meeting December 2022



Cr Allison McPhee



Cr Lee Watts



Cr Adam Williamson



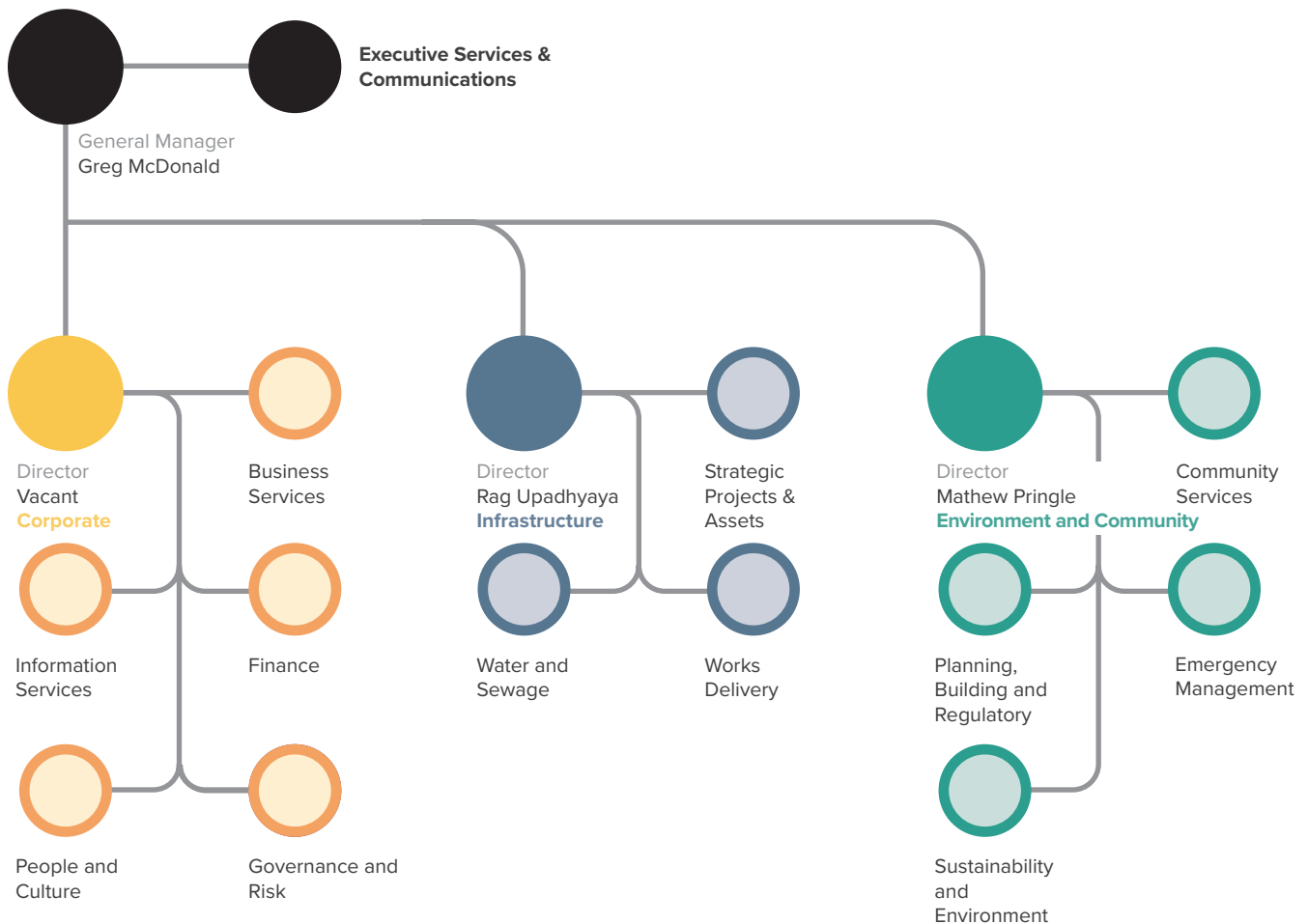
# Organisation

## Vision

**A Quality Rural Lifestyle  
in a vibrant, caring &  
sustainable community.**

## Values

- Mutual respect for people and cultures.
- Ensure staff and community safety.
- Efficient, effective and reliable service.
- Honest, open and accountable.
- Deliver on our commitments.
- Improved environmental responsibility.



# Integrated Planning & Reporting Framework

In NSW, local governments like Upper Hunter Shire Council are guided by the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) framework, which ensures long-term planning and accountability. The framework requires three key plans:

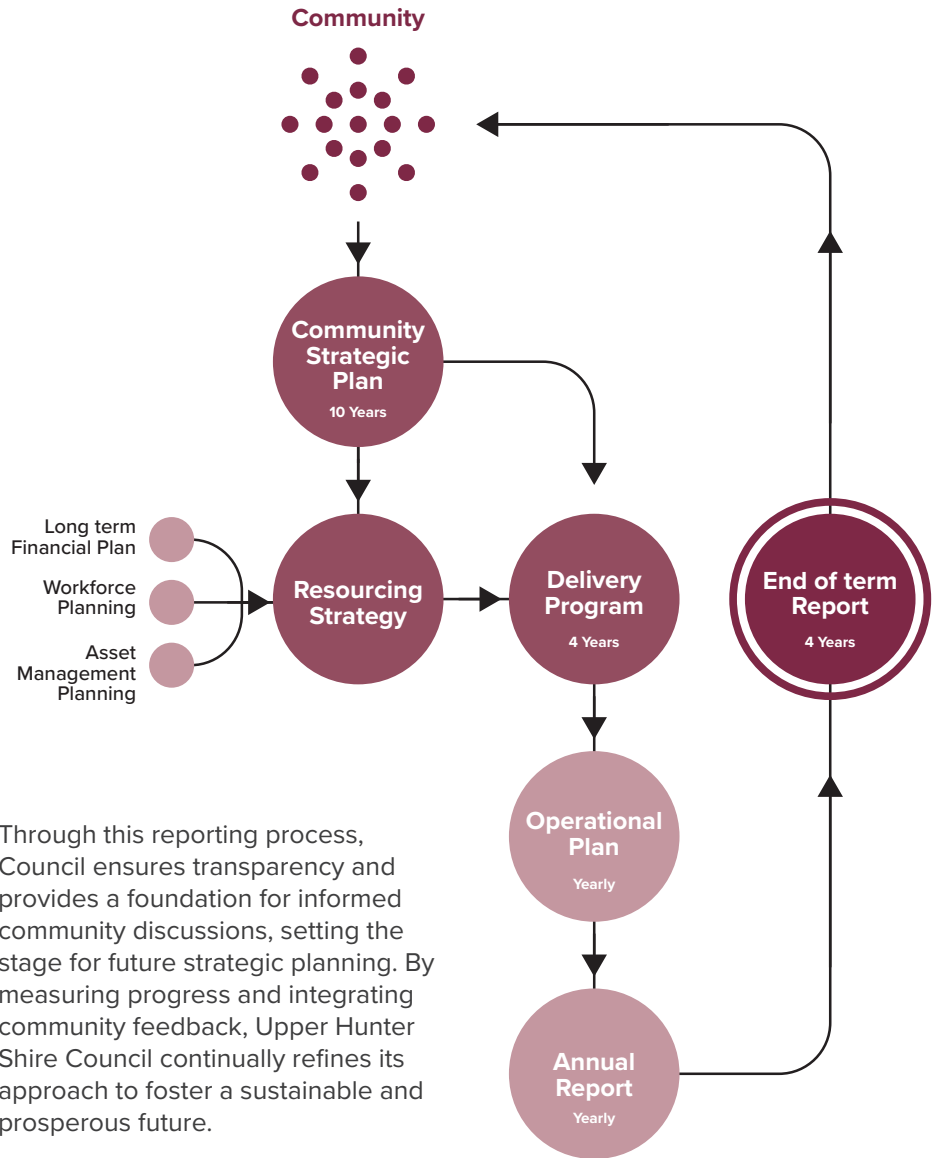
**A Community Strategic Plan (CSP), setting long-term goals for at least 10 years.**

**A Delivery Program, covering a 4-year span that outlines how the goals will be achieved.**

**An Operational Plan, detailing short-term actions to be completed annually.**

As part of this framework, Council prepares a State of the Shire Report, which is presented at the second meeting of a newly elected council. This report covers the previous council's 2.5-year term, objectively assessing progress toward the goals set out in the CSP. It tracks achievements across social, environmental, economic, and civic leadership objectives while identifying areas for future focus. This document plays a vital role in guiding the review of the CSP, an essential component of the IP&R cycle.

**The State of the Shire Report** serves as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of Council's strategies and initiatives. It includes indicators from the CSP, comparing current performance to baseline data from previous reports, enabling both Council and the community to gauge whether strategic objectives are being met and where improvements may be needed. The report also incorporates the quadruple bottom line, addressing social, environmental, economic, and governance impacts.



Through this reporting process, Council ensures transparency and provides a foundation for informed community discussions, setting the stage for future strategic planning. By measuring progress and integrating community feedback, Upper Hunter Shire Council continually refines its approach to foster a sustainable and prosperous future.

**Note:** The delay in local elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic (initially scheduled for September 2020 and eventually held in December 2021) shortened the previous council term. As a result, the State of the Shire Report covers this adjusted timeframe.

# Community Priorities

**Upper Hunter 2032** is the Community Strategic Plan for Upper Hunter Shire. It defines the community’s vision and is our road-map for the future. It brings together extensive community feedback to set key directions and priorities.

Upper Hunter 2032 has been built around five community priorities that reflect the needs and values of the people who live in our region.



## **Connected Community**

Developing and deepening connections of people to each other and their community.

## **Thriving Economy**

Strengthening our vibrant industries and economy while seizing emerging opportunities.

## **Responsible Governance**

Providing efficient and responsible governance in order to effectively serve the community.

## **Protected Environment**

Ensuring the ongoing protection of our environment and natural resources.

## **Quality Infrastructure**

Maintaining and developing our infrastructure network to meet the ongoing needs of our population.

**Each goal is broken down to a series of actionable strategic objectives, which underpin Council’s activities, services and decision making.**



# Community Priorities

## Strategic Objectives

### A connected Community

**1.1**  
Advocate for and increase the availability and affordability of health services.

**1.2**  
Work collaboratively to address social disadvantage.

**1.3**  
Increase promotion of healthy lifestyle.

**1.4**  
Enhance partnerships to maintain a safe community.

**1.5**  
Advocate for, support and provide services and facilities for the community.

**1.6**  
Provide and support a range of community events, festivals and celebrations.

**1.7**  
Acknowledge and respect our Aboriginal culture, heritage and people.

### Protected Environment

**2.1**  
Advocate for, facilitate and support programs that protect and sustain our diverse environment for future generations.

**2.2**  
Encourage and support community participation to care for our environment.

**2.3**  
Ensure all actions, decisions and policy response to natural hazards and climate change remain current.

**2.4**  
Implement and regularly review Strategic Land Use Plans, Environmental Planning Instruments and Development Controls, which reflect the needs and expectations of the broad Community.

**2.5**  
Provide efficient and effective advisory, assessment and regulatory services focused on being customer 'friendly', responsive and environmentally responsible.

**2.6**  
Plan, facilitate and provide for a changing population for current and future generations.

**2.7**  
Provide efficient and effective waste and recycling services and support improved waste minimisation and recycling practices.

**2.8**  
Implement policies to ensure the protection of strategic agricultural lands, equine critical industry clusters, natural resources and heritage.

### Thriving Economy

**3.1**  
Broaden and promote the range of business and industry sectors.

**3.2**  
Encourage retail and commercial business to increase local employment opportunities.

**3.3**  
Provide attractive and functional town centres and support revitalisation of the towns and villages including investment in built heritage and improvement of existing buildings.

**3.4**  
Provide diversity in tourist attractions and experiences.

**3.5**  
Promote the Upper Hunter's unique brand identity.

**3.6**  
Facilitate and support increased and innovative tourism and marketing opportunities.

# Community Priorities

## Strategic Objectives

### Quality Infrastructure

- 4.1** Provide for replacement, improvement and additional Community and open space infrastructure through investment, best practice and risk management.
- 4.2** Provide inviting public spaces that are clean, green, properly maintained, well designed, encourage active participation, family friendly and accessible to all.
- 4.3** Provide safe and reliable water and sewerage services to meet the demands of current and future generations.
- 4.4** Upgrade and maintain the road network and bridges.
- 4.5** Advocate and improve access to communication services.

### Responsible Governance

- 5.1** Effectively and efficiently manage the business of Council, while encouraging an open and participatory Council with an emphasis on transparency, community engagement, action and response.
- 5.2** Council is focused on innovation and continuous improvement to ensure a high quality of service which is aligned with business needs and community priorities.
- 5.3** Effective financial and asset management to ensure council's long-term sustainability.
- 5.4** Open and effective communication methods and technology are utilised to share information about Council plans, intentions, actions and progress.
- 5.5** Community is effectively engaged, can provide opinion and contribute to decisions that plan for the present and future of the Upper Hunter Shire.
- 5.6** Develop and maintain effective reporting systems that enable Council to measure and report on performance.
- 5.7** Effective management of risk underpins all Council decisions, service delivery and behaviours.
- 5.8** Develop leadership skills and build networks through a range of formal and informal opportunities.
- 5.9** Ensure Council is a great place to work by supporting Council employees in maximising their contribution.
- 5.10** Encourage and build strong partnerships between the Community, business and all levels of government to support implementation of the CSP 2032 and to deliver the Community priorities.
- 5.11** To participate and encourage regional coordination and planning between Councils and other organisations.
- 5.12** Provide timely and effective advocacy and leadership on key community issues and priorities.



Scone Horse Festival





# Connected Community

Developing and deepening connections of people to each other and their community.

## Community Priorities

1.1

Advocate for and increase the availability and affordability of health services.

1.4

Enhance partnerships to maintain a safe community.

1.7

Acknowledge and respect our Aboriginal culture, heritage and people.

1.2

Work collaboratively to address social disadvantage.

1.5

Advocate for, support and provide services and facilities for the community.

1.3

Increase promotion of healthy lifestyle.

1.6

Provide and support a range of community events, festivals and celebrations.



Australia Day  
Scone



## A Connected Community: Strategic Objective Report

### 1.1 Advocate for and increase the availability and affordability of health services.

Council has made significant strides in advocating for improved health services throughout the Shire, particularly focusing on vulnerable populations. Key achievements include:

- Securing funding for telehealth services at Gummun Place Hostel, improving residents' access to specialist healthcare.
- Active participation in local health committees in Merriwa, Murrurundi, and Scone to advocate for improved child health, physiotherapy, dental, and x-ray services.
- Continuous review of the Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) to ensure alignment with the community's evolving needs, demonstrating a commitment to improving access and affordability for individuals with disabilities.
- Working collaboratively with members of the Upper Hunter Mindlink Mental Health Network to facilitate projects and raise awareness and understanding.

### 1.2 Work collaboratively to address social disadvantage.

Council has consistently addressed social disadvantage by fostering partnerships with local services and community organisations. Key initiatives include:

- Collaborating with agencies under the Targeted Early Intervention program to enhance services for vulnerable families.
- Partnering with Upper Hunter Homeless Support to provide accommodation and essential services for families facing domestic violence and financial hardship.

- Facilitating local community networks and participating in the NSW Homelessness Street Count and Upper Hunter Homelessness Forum.
- Work collaboratively with local services to strengthen social and economic inclusion efforts by providing innovative programs including free driver training for Merriwa and Scone youth, supported playgroups and recreational activities.
- Providing practical social services like advice, referral, education support and counselling for vulnerable families.



NAIDOC Youth Workshops





**1.3 Increase promotion of healthy lifestyle.**

Council has been proactive in promoting a healthy lifestyle across the Shire through a mix of sporting activities, mental health initiatives, and community events. Achievements include:

- Organising ‘Cooking for One’ classes in Merriwa and Murrurundi and securing funding for a mountain bike trail at Scone Mountain National Park.
- Promoting physical activities, including running groups, triathlons, social tennis, badminton, hockey, and pickleball.
- Partnering with organisations like Where there’s a Will to offer mental health first aid training and hosting events like parkrun and seated yoga.
- Collaborating with NSW Wheelchair Sports to deliver workshops to school students, encouraging participation in inclusive physical activities.

**1.4 Enhance partnerships to maintain a safe community.**

Council has strengthened partnerships with local networks to promote safety and resilience. Initiatives include:

- Partnering with Hunter Valley Local Area Command and community groups to deliver education around crime prevention, family violence, and rural safety.
- Introducing alcohol-free events, such as ‘Mocktails’ social and cultural activities and events.
- Facilitating regular Community Advisory Committee meetings to address resident concerns and maintain open communication about safety and support networks.
- Supporting the Merriwa Family Support Network and Upper Hunter Community Services Interagency, ensuring comprehensive safety and support measures.

Pickleball classes, Scone

**1.5 Advocate for, support and provide services and facilities for the community.**

Council has continuously advocated for and provided essential services and community facilities, focusing on affordable housing and community inclusivity. Achievements include:

- Enhancing early childhood services, such as Family Day Care and the Scone Early Learning Centre, with referrals to appropriate support agencies.
- Expanding affordable housing options to accommodate families affected by domestic violence and providing independent living units and residential care options for ageing communities.
- Delivering library services that include free memberships, WIFI access, and programs like ‘1000 books before school,’ promoting literacy and community engagement.
- Supporting individuals with disabilities through the implementation of actions from the DIAP (2022–2026), which include improving access to sporting opportunities through NDIS partnerships.

**1.6 Provide and support a range of community events, festivals and celebrations.**

Council has hosted and supported numerous community events that foster engagement, inclusivity, and celebration across the Shire. Highlights include:

- Hosting the Australia Day ceremonies, Merriwa Family Fun Day, Scone Colour Run, and other vibrant events such as Seniors Festival, Youth Week, Harmony Day and the Kia Ora Youth Music Camp.
- Organising the ‘Mayor for a Day’ competition, encouraging youth leadership and participation in local governance.
- Supporting community-driven initiatives like the Scone Community Connect Day and Merriwa Little Sprouts Day to enhance social cohesion.
- Facilitating youth school holiday excursions and collaborating with Upper Hunter Youth Council, ensuring young people are engaged in planning and leading activities.

**1.7 Acknowledge and respect our Aboriginal culture, heritage and people.**

Council has shown ongoing commitment to acknowledging and respecting Aboriginal culture and heritage. Initiatives include:

- Partnering with local Aboriginal groups and Winanga-Li family support services for NAIDOC Week events and coordinating Flag Raising Ceremonies for Reconciliation Week.
- Supporting Welcome to Country ceremonies, including the Smoking Ceremony for Belltrees Public School’s Eco-Schools accreditation.
- Ensuring that Acknowledgement of Country is included in all official events and working closely with Aboriginal community representatives to ensure cultural sensitivity in planning and activities.

Cr Lee Watts at Kia Ora Youth Music Festival







Goodness  
Gravel Gundy





Major Project

# Hall Crawl

The Upper Hunter 'Hall Crawl' project remains a powerful example of community spirit and resilience, emerging as a key initiative during the 2021–2024 term. The project was born from a need to reconnect and rejuvenate communities following the compounded stress of droughts, bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Running from May 28, 2021, to December 31, 2022, the 'Hall Crawl' was a series of events held in various community halls across the Shire, each designed to reflect the unique characteristics of the local communities.





More than just social events, the ‘Hall Crawl’ provided a platform for local entertainers, fundraising opportunities for community groups, and a stage for the Rural Fire Service (RFS) to promote critical bushfire preparedness and volunteer recruitment. Each event was crafted to ensure full engagement from the community, and the overwhelming participation confirmed the project’s success in bringing people together.

The impact of the project on the community’s social fabric cannot be understated. After years of isolation and natural disasters, these events offered a much-needed space

for people to reconnect, share their experiences, and strengthen community bonds. The gatherings not only celebrated survival but also facilitated economic recovery, providing income for local caterers and entertainers. Additionally, the RFS utilised the opportunity to engage with communities on vital bushfire preparedness and safety measures, ensuring that the events had lasting benefits beyond immediate entertainment.

Although the project encountered challenges—such as unpredictable weather conditions and logistical difficulties related to entertainment

in the post-COVID era—flexibility and quick problem-solving ensured its success. These challenges were navigated with creativity, demonstrating the resilience and determination of both Council and the communities involved.

The ‘Hall Crawl’ has proven to be a sustainable model for community engagement and recovery, showcasing the essential role of communal events in fostering resilience. It highlighted the importance of local halls as key community assets and the value of volunteerism in maintaining community strength. The project’s popularity and impact suggest it could be expanded in future years, serving as a blueprint for similar initiatives in other rural communities recovering from adversities.

The Upper Hunter ‘Hall Crawl’ project was a vibrant, community-led initiative that not only brought immediate joy and relief but also helped strengthen community bonds for the long term. Its success highlights how communal activities can play a key role in rebuilding and reinforcing social connections, offering a model for future recovery efforts in rural communities.





# Protected Environment

Developing and deepening connections of people to each other and their community.

## Community Priorities

2.1

Advocate for, facilitate and support programs that protect and sustain our diverse environment for future generations.

2.2

Encourage and support community participation to care for our environment.

2.3

Ensure all actions, decisions and policy response to natural hazards and climate change remain current.

2.4

Implement and regularly review Strategic Land Use Plans, Environmental Planning Instruments and Development Controls, which reflect the needs and expectations of the broad Community.

2.5

Provide efficient and effective advisory, assessment and regulatory services focused on being customer 'friendly', responsive and environmentally responsible.

2.6

Plan, facilitate and provide for a changing population for current and future generations.

2.7

Provide efficient and effective waste and recycling services and support improved waste minimisation and recycling practices.

2.8

Implement policies to ensure the protection of strategic agricultural lands, equine critical industry clusters, natural resources and heritage.





Murrurundi



## Protected Environment Strategic Objective Report

Australian  
Museum Future  
Now Exhibition

### 2.1

#### Advocate for, facilitate and support programs that protect and sustain our diverse environment for future generations.

Over the term, Council has been proactive in advocating for and supporting sustainability initiatives:

- Council entered into a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) for renewable energy to power its largest electricity-consuming sites, including street lighting, reducing its corporate greenhouse gas emissions by 20%.
- Council adopted a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, implementing key actions such as introducing the FOGO kerbside collection service, developing an emissions reduction masterplan, and upgrading street lighting to energy-efficient LEDs.
- Ongoing education programs, including school incursions and community outreach on waste management and sustainability, were provided. Programs such as Good for the Hood and Get Grubby were offered to both schools and the wider community, with regular sustainability-focused social media communications.
- Council also supported the establishment of a community garden in Scone and a community nursery in Merriwa to promote local sustainability.



### 2.2

#### Encourage and support community participation to care for our environment.

Council has consistently engaged the community to participate in environmental protection initiatives:

- The Merriwa community nursery was developed to produce seedlings for land rehabilitation, including areas impacted by bushfires, helping to restore biodiversity.
- Council facilitated Clean Up Australia Day with the local Scouts and Girl Guides, promoting environmental care by cleaning up public spaces such as Elizabeth Park and Campbells Corner.
- Council continued to provide access to sustainability education programs like Good for the Hood, engaging community members and schools in sustainability practices.
- The Australian Museum's Future Now display at the Scone Administration Centre, held in August 2024, was a major educational initiative. Approximately 200 students and community members attended facilitated sessions across five venues, enhancing environmental awareness and participation.

**2.3****Ensure all actions, decisions and policy response to natural hazards and climate change remain current.**

Council has worked towards building community resilience and maintaining responsive climate policies:

- Council remained an active participant in the Hunter Joint Organisation to develop strategies for disaster recovery and community resilience. These strategies respond to the increasing frequency of natural disasters like floods and bushfires.
- Three local waste storage sites were identified in Aberdeen, Merriwa, and Murrurundi to be used in emergencies, showcasing proactive disaster preparedness.
- Policies to reduce the impact of natural hazards were embedded in local planning controls, including Natural Disaster Clauses in the Upper Hunter LEP 2013 to support recovery efforts and mitigate impacts during severe weather events.

**2.4****Implement and regularly review Strategic Land Use Plans, Environmental Planning Instruments and Development Controls, which reflect the needs and expectations of the broad Community.**

Council has actively reviewed and updated land use strategies to meet the community's evolving needs:

- The Upper Hunter Land Use Strategy 2024 - 2041 was adopted by Council following a detailed review of the Upper Hunter Land Use Strategy 2017 and extensive community consultation. This strategy is essential in guiding land use decisions for growth, change, and infrastructure development, ensuring alignment with community expectations.
- The Upper Hunter Development Control Plan 2015 was reviewed and updated, resulting in the adoption of the Upper Hunter Development Control Plan 2023 (DCP). The DCP provides detailed planning and design guidelines for new development and supplements the provisions of the Upper Hunter Local Environmental Plan 2013.
- Council partnered with neighbouring councils, including Muswellbrook, Singleton, and Dungog, to develop the Upper Hunter Region Employment Lands Strategy, aimed at supporting economic and community development through strategic land planning.

**2.5****Provide efficient and effective advisory, assessment and regulatory services focused on being customer 'friendly', responsive and environmentally responsible.**

Council continued to provide timely and efficient regulatory services:

- Council's development assessment and building certification processes have remained on track throughout the term, ensuring a customer-friendly approach while maintaining environmental responsibility.
- Regular reporting of key performance indicators (KPIs) shows that Council has efficiently addressed development applications and inspections, demonstrating consistent service quality.



**2.6****Plan, facilitate and provide for a changing population for current and future generations.**

Council's planning initiatives ensure that it can support population growth and changing community needs:

- The Housing and Land Supply Monitor was updated annually, confirming that land availability for urban and rural residential development was sufficient to meet anticipated demand.
- The Upper Hunter Land Use Strategy provided clear directions for growth and identified the infrastructure needed to support development, helping to guide local and state government budget allocations for future planning.
- Council negotiated and/or entered into a number of planning agreements with developers of proposed renewable energy projects, securing millions of dollars in developer contributions towards community enhancements and road maintenance.
- Numerous submissions were made to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure in respect of various state significant development projects that would impact the Upper Hunter Shire Local Government Area and its communities.

**2.7****Provide efficient and effective waste and recycling services and support improved waste minimisation and recycling practices.**

Council has made substantial progress in modernising its waste management services:

- The FOGO kerbside collection service was launched in July 2022, successfully reducing landfill waste by over 1,000 tonnes in its first year, with a recycling rate increase to 54.4%, a significant improvement from the previous 20%.
- Council introduced a plastic shredder at the Scone Waste Facility for limited plastics processing and expanded the range of recyclable materials, including polystyrene, solar panels, and agricultural drums.
- The installation of a weighbridge at the Aberdeen Waste Facility, powered by renewable energy, enabled more accurate billing and improved operational efficiency.

**2.8****Implement policies to ensure the protection of strategic agricultural lands, equine critical industry clusters, natural resources and heritage.**

Council has consistently applied protective policies to safeguard critical resources:

- The Upper Hunter LEP and DCP continued to be applied in the assessment of development applications to ensure the protection of strategic agricultural lands, equine critical industry clusters, natural resources, and heritage.
- Council endorsed and placed on exhibition the Upper Hunter Land Use Strategy, which includes strategic directions to protect these critical areas, ensuring long-term sustainability and preservation.





Major Project

# FOGO

The Food Organics/Garden Organics (FOGO) kerbside collection service, introduced in July 2022 by Upper Hunter Shire Council, marked a significant step forward in the region's waste management strategy. The program aimed to divert organic waste from landfill, promoting sustainable practices and reducing environmental impact. Over the past two years, the initiative has been transformative for the community, contributing to significant waste reduction and enhancing the region's waste diversion efforts.

**In its first full year of operation (2022/2023), the FOGO program enabled residents to divert 1,755.65 tonnes of food and garden waste from landfill. This waste was processed into compost by Loop Organics in Ravensworth, highlighting the program's contribution to the circular economy.**

Prior to the FOGO initiative, the Shire's waste diversion rate was just over 20% in 2021/2022. The introduction of the FOGO service resulted in a dramatic increase, with 54.40% of kerbside waste being diverted from landfill in 2022/2023. This trend continued into 2023/2024, with 55.15% of total waste diverted, including 1,721.27 tonnes of organics. These figures demonstrate the community's commitment to the program and its success in reducing landfill reliance.

The program has significantly reduced the volume of waste sent to landfill. In the 2022/2023 financial year, the amount of waste sent to landfill was reduced by 1,053 tonnes, compared to previous years. This not only extends the lifespan of the landfill but also reduces environmental impacts associated with landfill waste, such as greenhouse gas emissions.

Alongside the FOGO service, residents continued to contribute to recycling efforts. In 2022/2023, 821.21 tonnes of recyclable materials were collected and processed, ensuring these materials were diverted from landfill and reused in new products. This effort complements the organic waste diversion, making Upper Hunter Shire's waste management system more efficient and environmentally friendly.

Upper Hunter Shire has emerged as a leader in sustainable waste management, surpassing the NSW state average for waste diversion. The waste diversion rate of 54.40% in 2022/2023 exceeded the 46.1% state average from 2020/2021, reflecting the region's commitment to sustainability and forward-thinking waste management policies.

The success of the FOGO program is a direct result of the dedication and active participation of Upper Hunter Shire residents. The community's adoption of the program has been impressive, with individual households consistently separating organic waste from other waste streams. This commitment has not only resulted in environmental benefits but has also saved valuable space in local landfills and reduced waste management costs over the long term.

## Future Outlook

Building on the success of the FOGO program, Upper Hunter Shire Council plans to continue promoting sustainable waste management practices. Council aims to further reduce landfill waste and increase participation in recycling and organic waste programs. The consistent diversion rates of over 50% suggest that Upper Hunter Shire is well on its way to becoming one of the most sustainable regions in the Hunter Valley.

The introduction of the FOGO service has had a profound impact on waste management in Upper Hunter Shire. By significantly increasing the waste diversion rate and reducing the volume of waste sent to landfill, the program has set a new standard for sustainability in the region. As the community continues to embrace these initiatives, Upper Hunter Shire is poised to maintain its leadership in environmental stewardship and waste management innovation.





# Thriving Economy

Strengthening our vibrant industries and economy while seizing emerging opportunities.

## Community Priorities

3.1

Broaden and promote the range of business and industry sectors.

3.4

Provide diversity in tourist attractions and experiences.

3.5

Promote the Upper Hunter's unique brand identity.

3.2

Encourage retail and commercial business to increase local employment opportunities.

3.3

Provide attractive and functional town centres and support revitalisation of the towns and villages including investment in built heritage and improvement of existing buildings.

3.6

Facilitate and support increased and innovative tourism and marketing opportunities.





Merrivale Festival of the Fleeces



## ↗ Thriving Economy

### Strategic Objective Report

#### 3.1 Broaden and promote the range of business and industry sectors.

Council has worked extensively to support and promote business and industry diversity across the Shire:

- The We LIVE Here program, which supports small local businesses, continued to thrive over the term, with a record \$840,140 loaded onto 11,171 cards from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2024. The program saw 15,472 redemptions, resulting in \$737,028 spent within the local economy, demonstrating strong community support for local businesses and contributing to the economic vitality of the Upper Hunter region.
- Significant strides were made in the Place Branding Initiative, actively engaging agriculture, tourism, and arts sectors to elevate the region’s profile. This project is set to enhance economic diversity and visibility of Upper Hunter’s business sectors nationally, with further development expected in 2024 and a launch in 2025.
- Council supported local businesses through the development and leasing of commercial spaces, fostering small business growth and contributing to local employment opportunities.

#### 3.2 Encourage retail and commercial business to increase local employment opportunities.

Council fostered an environment conducive to business growth and job creation:

- Completion of the first phase of the Scone CBD revitalisation project and significant capital upgrades in Merriwa have revitalised town centres, attracting new businesses and encouraging retail expansion.
- Council supported community events like Merriwa’s Festival of the Fleeces, which generated tourism and helped boost retail and commercial activity.
- Events such as Warbirds Over Scone and the year-round visitation to the Hunter Warbirds Aviation Centre have brought steady business traffic to the region, stimulating the local economy.

#### 3.3 Provide attractive and functional town centres and support revitalisation of the towns and villages including investment in built heritage and improvement of existing buildings.

Revitalisation efforts across the Shire’s towns have been a major focus during the term:

- Significant investment has been made in upgrading town centres in Merriwa and Scone, with capital works aimed at improving functionality, attractiveness, and enhancing the visitor experience.
- The Development Control Plan 2023 (DCP) provided clear guidelines for integrating new developments into business centres, preserving heritage, and promoting commercial activity across towns.



Mural restoration, Kelly St, Scone

3.4

**Provide diversity in tourist attractions and experiences.**

Council has worked to diversify and enhance tourism offerings to attract a broader range of visitors:

- The Hunter Warbirds Aviation Centre has become a standout addition to the region’s tourism landscape, offering a unique visitor experience that enhances the diversity of attractions in the Upper Hunter. By partnering with major events like the Aberdeen Highland Games and the King of the Ranges Festival, Hunter Warbirds has complemented these iconic local celebrations, adding depth to the visitor experience. The centre has also attracted aviation enthusiasts from across Australia, further boosting the region’s tourism profile.
- Cycling tourism in Merriwa and Scone, along with perennial support for major community events, demonstrated Council’s commitment to promoting unique visitor experiences.
- The Scone CBD redevelopment was designed to encourage outdoor, kerbside dining and evening trade, creating a more vibrant atmosphere for both residents and visitors. This initiative supports the tourism strategy to foster evening activity hubs, extending visitor engagement beyond daytime attractions.

Hunter Warbirds Aviation Centre hosting Westpac Upper Hunter Rescue Ball





3.5

**Promote the Upper Hunter’s unique brand identity.**

Efforts to establish and promote the region’s brand identity progressed significantly during the term:

In 2023, Council launched the Place Branding Initiative, engaging expert agencies to develop a distinctive brand highlighting the Upper Hunter’s unique offerings. This initiative aims to drive economic development, enhance tourism, and instill community pride.

Council secured over \$250,000 in funding from the Department of Regional NSW’s Resources for Regions program, with additional investment from Muswellbrook Shire Council, extending the initiative’s reach across the broader Upper Hunter region.

In 2024, the project progressed with a comprehensive community consultation campaign. Discovery workshops were held in Scone, Merriwa, and Murrurundi, gathering resident insights. Targeted stakeholder interviews with key community advocates provided valuable design research.

The development of creative territories was presented through in-person exhibitions, allowing community feedback to refine the proposed branding directions.

Brand Exhibition, Murrurundi

3.6

**Facilitate and support increased and innovative tourism and marketing opportunities.**

Council has continued to support tourism through a variety of events and innovative strategies:

- Funding was secured for projects such as the Equine Centre of Excellence and seasonal light shows, enriching the tourism landscape.
- The Destination Management Plan guided new tourism opportunities, including cycling tourism and support for local emerging industries.

- Council supported major events like Warbirds Over Scone, the Merriwa Festival of the Fleeces, Aberdeen Highland Games, King of the Ranges Festival and Scone Horse Festival, while also providing financial backing through its donations policy.
- Council has facilitated increased and innovative tourism opportunities through the development of a new brand identity for the Upper Hunter, which is set to enhance the region’s visibility and support major events aimed at attracting diverse visitor markets once launched.







Aberdeen Highland Games



Major Project

# Scone CBD Revitalisation

The Scone CBD Revitalisation Project is a transformative initiative aimed at enhancing the economic and social vitality of Scone. Valued at over \$22 million, this project is a key part of Upper Hunter Shire Council's broader strategy to position Scone as a thriving regional hub, following the completion of the New England Highway bypass in 2020.



## Key Developments & Achievements

**✓ Stage Completion:** As of September 2024, both Blocks 1 and 2 of Kelly Street have been completed, marking a significant milestone for the project. Works on the final block commenced in late September 2024, with full completion anticipated in early 2025.

**↑ Infrastructure & Aesthetic Upgrades:** The project has delivered new pedestrian-friendly areas, wider footpaths, and improved kerbside access, creating an inviting streetscape that encourages outdoor dining, shopping, and community interaction. These upgrades are aimed at fostering a vibrant local economy by boosting foot traffic and supporting evening trade opportunities for local businesses.

**💧 Stormwater & Drainage Systems:** Essential upgrades to stormwater drainage have mitigated flood risks in the CBD area, improving long-term resilience to heavy rainfall and other environmental factors.

**🏡 Public Space Enhancement:** The revitalisation of St Aubins Square has added much-needed public space, providing a hub for local events, gatherings, and markets. This space has been designed with flexibility in mind, allowing it to serve as a focal point for both community engagement and tourism.

The project officially commenced in March 2023 with preparatory works, including securing approvals from Transport for NSW and conducting condition assessments of adjacent properties. By April 2023, construction was well underway, focusing on significant upgrades to Kelly Street and St Aubins Square. These enhancements involved a combination of roadworks, stormwater infrastructure, pavement reconstruction, and landscaping improvements.

## Economic and Social Impact

The Scone CBD Revitalisation Project has been a key driver of economic activity, supporting local businesses and creating jobs throughout the construction phase. By improving the functionality and aesthetic appeal of the town centre, the project aims to make Scone a more attractive destination for visitors, investors, and residents alike.

The new streetscape design, which encourages outdoor and kerbside dining, has positioned Scone as a more vibrant, bustling town centre. Additionally, the improvements are expected to stimulate both day and evening trade, adding to the economic resilience of the community.

## Looking Ahead

With the final block currently under construction, the Scone CBD Revitalisation Project is on track for full completion in 2025. This project not only represents a substantial investment in Scone's future but also serves as a blueprint for similar regional town revitalisation initiatives. Through this ambitious project, Upper Hunter Shire Council has reinforced its commitment to creating a prosperous, dynamic, and sustainable future for Scone and the broader Upper Hunter region.





# Quality Infrastructure

Maintaining and developing our infrastructure network to meet the ongoing needs of our population.

## Community Priorities

4.1

Provide for replacement, improvement and additional Community and open space infrastructure through investment, best practice and risk management.

4.2

Provide inviting public spaces that are clean, green, properly maintained, well designed, encourage active participation, family friendly and accessible to all.

4.3

Provide safe and reliable water and sewerage services to meet the demands of current and future generations.

4.4

Upgrade and maintain the road network and bridges.

4.5

Advocate and improve access to communication services.







## Quality Infrastructure

### Strategic Objective Report

#### 4.1

#### **Provide for replacement, improvement and additional Community and open space infrastructure through investment, best practice and risk management.**

Council has focused on creating and enhancing public spaces that serve as vital community hubs, encouraging recreation and engagement:

- The development of St Aubins Square as part of the Scone CBD Revitalisation Project has provided an inviting, accessible space for residents and visitors, enhancing the community's open space infrastructure.
- Murray Bain Oval Playground saw significant improvements, including the installation of new playground equipment and the relocation of exercise facilities, along with lighting upgrades, to create a more accessible and engaging space for families and residents.

#### 4.2

#### **Provide inviting public spaces that are clean, green, properly maintained, well designed, encourage active participation, family friendly and accessible to all.**

Council has prioritised the upgrade and maintenance of public spaces to promote active participation and ensure accessibility for all:

- The Scone CBD Revitalisation Project has revitalised the town's commercial centre, encouraging more foot traffic and outdoor activities with wider footpaths and enhanced public amenities.
- The construction of the Merriwa Shared Pathway has further contributed to providing safe and

accessible spaces for walking and cycling, promoting healthy lifestyles and greater connectivity in the town.

- The development of the Scone Mountain National Park Mountain Bike Trail, funded through a \$200,000 NSW Government Place to Play grant, has added a unique recreational asset to the region. The trail caters to all skill levels, providing a balanced experience of both conservation and recreation, further promoting active participation and outdoor activities in the Upper Hunter.
- The improvements to Jefferson Park and ongoing community consultation for its masterplan reflect Council's dedication to creating well-designed, inviting spaces for the community.
- Over the electoral term, Council invested in 4000 metres of footpaths and cycleways in 2023, with 400 metres added in 2024, significantly improving pedestrian and cyclist accessibility.

#### 4.3

#### **Provide safe and reliable water and sewerage services to meet the demands of current and future generations.**

Council continues to ensure the provision of essential services while planning for future upgrades:

- Over the term, Council replaced 4,081 metres of water mains and relined 4,344 metres of sewer mains, ensuring the long-term sustainability and reliability of water and sewerage services.
- Planning has commenced for the construction of a new Water Treatment Plant and the renewal of the Scone Sewerage Treatment Plant, which will meet the demands of the growing community and ensure safe and reliable water services for future generations.
- Council continues to focus on sewer sludge removal, with several thousand tonnes of biosolids removed from the Merriwa Sewer Treatment Plant to improve operational efficiency.

**4.4**

**Upgrade and maintain the road network and bridges.**

Council has delivered significant upgrades and maintenance to roads and bridges to improve safety and accessibility:

- Upper Hunter Shire Council has made significant investments in the road network over the term, with a total expenditure of \$75.1 million dedicated to maintaining and upgrading essential infrastructure. This includes \$22.1 million for regional road improvements, \$30.6 million for sealing projects, and \$8.2 million for the resheeting of unsealed roads, ensuring safer and more reliable transport throughout the Shire.
- Council also replaced 15 aging timber bridges with new concrete structures, representing a total investment of \$12.4 million. Fourteen of these bridges were completed as part of the Bridge Replacement Program, while an additional bridge was replaced at the start of the term. These upgrades significantly enhance the safety and longevity of the Shire’s transport network.
- A total of 100.7 kilometres of bitumen roads were resealed, and 96.2 kilometres of unsealed roads were resheeted, while 1,200 metres of kerb and guttering and 5,010 metres of footpaths and cycleways were constructed, improving connectivity and accessibility.
- Heavy patching efforts covered 35,048 square metres of sealed roads, addressing significant wear and maintaining a high standard of road quality. Additionally, major improvement works on Barrington Tops Forest Road and Hunter Road, valued at approximately \$21 million, are ongoing to further enhance road safety and support agricultural and tourism transport needs.

**4.5**

**Advocate and improve access to communication services.**

Council remains active in advocating for improved telecommunications across the Shire:

- Regular meetings with Telstra and the leasing of land to improve mobile coverage in Bunnan highlight Council’s efforts to ensure reliable communication services for all residents, particularly in rural and remote areas.



Cameron Bridge construction.



# Bridge Replacement Program

Major Project

Under the Community Strategic Plan 2032, Upper Hunter Shire Council has made significant strides in delivering Quality Infrastructure, culminating in the successful completion of the ambitious Bridge Replacement Program. With 14 bridges now replaced, including the newly opened Dartbrook Bridge in July 2024, this transformative initiative—undertaken in collaboration with the NSW Government's Fixing Country Bridges Program—ensures safer and more reliable transport links, driving long-term benefits for residents, local businesses, and the wider regional economy.

## Overview of the Program

The Bridge Replacement Program aimed to replace 14 aging timber bridges across the Upper Hunter Shire with modern, resilient concrete structures. The program's total funding reached \$11,578,004, with the NSW Government contributing \$10,948,004, and Upper Hunter Shire Council contributing \$630,000. This project aligns with the Shire's strategic goals of enhancing regional access, supporting economic growth, and improving safety for residents and businesses.

## Economic and Social Benefits

The replacement of these bridges has unlocked significant economic benefits for the Upper Hunter region by improving connections to both regional and state road networks. The new infrastructure facilitates better access for farmers, local businesses, and commuters, supporting the efficient movement of goods and services. By replacing outdated timber bridges with durable concrete structures, the program reduces long-term maintenance costs, bringing forward 10 years of backlogged maintenance and 5 years of future maintenance, saving both time and resources for Council and the community.





This initiative also created local job opportunities, employing between 2-6 full-time employees during the planning stages and between 5-15 during construction. The economic impact of these improvements is expected to benefit the region for decades to come by fostering a sustainable infrastructure network that supports local businesses, services, and employment.

**Building Resilient Infrastructure**

The new concrete bridges have been specifically designed to withstand floods, fires, and other natural disasters, ensuring reliable and safe access for rural communities. The bridges also improve the reliability of essential services, bus routes, and transport logistics for the region’s agricultural sector. According to NSW Minister for Regional Transport and Roads, Jenny Aitchison, “These new concrete bridges will be more resilient through floods and fires and will unlock economic benefits by better connecting regional and state road networks.”

By addressing safety concerns and providing more sustainable infrastructure, the Bridge Replacement Program has enhanced road safety and accessibility, ensuring that the Upper Hunter

Shire is well-equipped to meet the growing demands of its population and economy.

**A Decade of Infrastructure Gains**

The finalisation of the program, marked by the opening of Dartbrook Bridge, represents the culmination of a long-term strategic infrastructure investment.

These structures are set to serve the local population for the next century, securing reliable access for rural residents, businesses, and emergency services across the Shire.

The Bridge Replacement Program is a testament to Upper Hunter Shire Council’s commitment to future-proofing its infrastructure. By investing in resilient, long-lasting bridges, Council has ensured that local communities are well-connected and supported by safe, efficient, and sustainable infrastructure. This project not only provides immediate benefits but also sets the foundation for long-term regional growth and economic prosperity.

**Completed Bridges**

- ✔ Little Street Bridge, Murrurundi
- ✔ Warlands Creek Bridges #1–#5, Murrurundi
- ✔ Scotts Creek Bridges #2–#4, Murrurundi
- ✔ Albano Bridge, Rouchel
- ✔ Ashfords Bridge, Moonan Flat
- ✔ Lapstone Gully Bridge, Stewarts Brook
- ✔ Bobialla Bridge, Merriwa
- ✔ Dartbrook Bridge, Aberdeen

Image: Project Manager Chris, Cr Adam Williamson, Mayor Maurice Collison, Hon Jenny Aitchison, Minister for Regional Transport & Roads, Mr Dan Repacholi MP, Deputy Mayor James Burns, GM Greg McDonald, Cr Tayah Clout, Cr Ron Campbell, at the Dartbrook Bridge official opening.





# Responsible Governance

Providing efficient and responsible governance in order to effectively serve the community.

## Community Priorities

5.1

Effectively and efficiently manage the business of Council, while encouraging an open and participatory Council with an emphasis on transparency, community engagement, action and response.

5.5

Community is effectively engaged, can provide opinion and contribute to decisions that plan for the present and future of the Upper Hunter Shire.

5.9

Ensure Council is a great place to work by supporting Council employees in maximising their contribution.

5.2

Council is focused on innovation and continuous improvement to ensure a high quality of service which is aligned with business needs and community priorities.

5.6

Develop and maintain effective reporting systems that enable Council to measure and report on performance.

5.10

Encourage and build strong partnerships between the Community, business and all levels of government to support implementation of the CSP 2032 and to deliver the Community priorities.

5.3

Effective financial and asset management to ensure council's long-term sustainability.

5.7

Effective management of risk underpins all Council decisions, service delivery and behaviours.

5.11

To participate and encourage regional coordination and planning between Councils and other organisations.

5.4

Open and effective communication methods and technology are utilised to share information about Council plans, intentions, actions and progress.

5.8

Develop leadership skills and build networks through a range of formal and informal opportunities

5.12

Provide timely and effective advocacy and leadership on key community issues and priorities.

## Responsible Governance

### Strategic Objective Report

5.1

**Effectively and efficiently manage the business of Council, while encouraging an open and participatory Council with an emphasis on transparency, community engagement, action and response.**

Throughout the term, Council maintained a strong commitment to effective governance and transparency:

- Regular monthly Council and committee meetings, along with quarterly Community Advisory Committee (CAC) meetings, provided a consistent platform for decision-making and community input, ensuring robust governance.
- Council actively encouraged public participation, allowing community members to engage directly in decision-making processes. This emphasis on open governance promoted both transparency and accountability.
- Over 140 media releases were issued during the shortened term, complemented by a significant increase in digital engagement. Council's Facebook page had a net gain of over 2,100 followers, with an estimated reach of over 625,000 enhancing community outreach.

- Since the launch of our new website, we have observed a strong upward trend in user activity. There was a significant initial spike in engagement, followed by consistent growth in active users over time. In the past 30 days, the website has attracted 7.8K active users, with 1.7K users in the last 7 days and 366 users in the most recent 1-day period. This steady user engagement highlights the positive response to the new website's functionality and design.
- Key public notices and development applications were instantly published on Council's website, allowing for timely community access and input on important matters such as development proposals and public space consultations. This shift to digital publication not only eliminated the delays associated with traditional newsprint advertising cycles but also empowered teams responsible for these notices to post them directly. By streamlining the process and reducing reliance on the communications department, this approach created a more efficient workflow, ensuring information was made available to the public swiftly and accurately.

5.2

**Council is focused on innovation and continuous improvement to ensure a high quality of service which is aligned with business needs and community priorities.**

Council remained committed to continuous improvement and innovation, responding to evolving community needs:

- The Audit, Risk, and Improvement Committee (ARIC) played a crucial role in reviewing Council operations, ensuring risk management and process improvements were aligned with community priorities.
- Council advanced its digitisation efforts with the introduction of mobile-responsive digital forms, significantly enhancing the customer experience. These forms have streamlined user journeys, enabling residents to submit requests and access services more efficiently. Additionally, the digital forms platform has improved community engagement by facilitating user surveys, gathering valuable feedback, and ensuring a more direct connection with residents. This shift toward digital solutions highlights Council's dedication to modernising service delivery.



- Council also launched a redesigned website, improving accessibility and user interaction. The new platform, built on a platform utilised by many NSW councils, leverages collective user insights to drive ongoing improvements. The responsive, device-neutral design has simplified access for all users, enabling seamless navigation across devices. The user-focused CMS has empowered staff to maintain up-to-date content, ensuring that important information is readily available and enhancing the website’s capacity to scale with future needs.

**5.3 Effective financial and asset management to ensure Council’s long-term sustainability.**

The 2024-25 draft budget reflects a modest 2.9% increase in operating expenditure, showcasing Council’s commitment to efficiency amid a high inflationary environment.

As part of an Organisational Management Restructure, Council removed or downgraded senior positions, achieving annual savings of \$624,000. This restructure has been banked into Council’s Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP), contributing to long-term sustainability.

A business service review is ongoing, aimed at delivering additional revenue streams, cost savings, and operating efficiencies. This review, focused on a user-pays system without reducing service quality, has already realised annual savings of \$125,000 and generated an additional \$200,000 in revenue.

Council has also entered into Voluntary Planning Agreements (VPAs), generating significant community contributions, with funds earmarked for future infrastructure improvements that will reduce ongoing maintenance costs.

In response to storm and flood damage, Council secured over \$5 million in funding from the Infrastructure Betterment Fund and National Disaster Declaration, enabling essential repairs and ensuring the Shire’s infrastructure is resilient to future needs.

**5.4 Open and effective communication methods and technology are utilised to share information about Council plans, intentions, actions and progress.**

Council effectively harnessed digital platforms to foster communication with the community:

- Over the period from 10 January 2022 to 25 September 2024, facebook page has seen a marked increase in reach and engagement. The total reach surpassed 625K, with 95.7K three-second views (a 35.5% increase), and a total of 24 days and 2 hours of content watched (a 15.3% increase). Content interactions surged to 59.9K, representing a 100% growth. While one-minute views dropped by 24.4%, overall audience engagement remains strong, supported by a net gain of 2.1K followers (up 274.9%) and a follower growth rate of 5.13%. Notably, the majority of our reach comes from non-followers, accounting for 616K out of the total 625.6K reach, indicating significant exposure beyond our existing follower base.
- The website redesign in October 2022 improved access to critical documents and resources, offering a more inclusive and responsive online environment. By implementing a government CMS, Council benefitted from collective insights shared across NSW councils, allowing for continuous user experience improvements. The platform supports scalability, ensuring that the website can evolve alongside emerging community needs. Enhanced search functionality and streamlined navigation have made it easier for residents to find information and services efficiently.

- Council also transitioned to digital forms, streamlining communication with residents and improving service delivery, further contributing to efficient interactions with the community.

**5.5 Community is effectively engaged, can provide opinion and contribute to decisions that plan for the present and future of the Upper Hunter Shire.**

Community engagement has been a cornerstone of Council’s governance:

- Council consistently published public notices and consultations, with an average of 33 public notices per quarter to encourage community input on development applications, public space projects, and civic matters. This feedback directly influenced decisions shaping the future of the Shire.
- The adoption of mobile-responsive digital forms further increased community participation, simplifying the process of providing feedback and ensuring broader engagement.

**5.6****Develop and maintain effective reporting systems that enable Council to measure and report on performance.**

Council ensured the ongoing evaluation of performance through robust reporting systems:

- Effective systems for financial reporting, risk management, and KPIs provided Councillors and the community with transparent insights into Council's performance, helping to assess progress and align actions with strategic goals.
- Council has enhanced its approach to performance measurement by streamlining the range of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to focus on four key areas: finance, quality, service, and safety. Each management unit now reports on three core KPIs monthly, with the results presented to Council. This refined approach ensures a clear focus on critical priorities, improves accountability, and enables more effective decision-making based on consistent and relevant performance data.

**5.7****Effective management of risk underpins all Council decisions, service delivery and behaviours.**

Risk management remained central to Council's decision-making:

- The corporate risk register was reviewed quarterly and reported to ARIC, ensuring that key risks were proactively identified and managed, supporting sound decision-making and service delivery.

**5.8****Develop leadership skills and build networks through a range of formal and informal opportunities.**

Council placed a strong emphasis on leadership development:

- Upper Hunter Shire Council is committed to fostering leadership development and strengthening staff capabilities. Over the term, more than 249 training experiences were delivered, engaging a total of 2083 participants across various programs. These initiatives focused on building skills, enhancing workplace safety, and encouraging continuous professional growth, ensuring that staff are equipped to meet the evolving needs of the community and the organisation. Council's investment in training supports the development of a skilled workforce, capable of leading and innovating in local government.
- This investment in training ensured that Council remained an attractive workplace, enabling employees to maximise their contributions.
- Staff were actively engaged in the wider local government industry via various industry events includi

**5.9****Ensure Council is a great place to work by supporting Council employees in maximising their contribution.**

Upper Hunter Shire Council is dedicated to fostering a positive workplace culture and supporting its employees to thrive. With a staff retention rate of 92% over the term, Council has demonstrated its commitment to being a great place to work. Efforts to maintain high retention include providing ongoing professional development opportunities, recognising employee achievements, and promoting a healthy work-life balance.

Council's initiatives have focused on creating a supportive environment where staff are empowered to grow their skills and make meaningful contributions to the community. Regular training programs, flexible working arrangements, and employee wellness activities have helped ensure a motivated and engaged workforce, driving organisational success and service delivery.



**5.10 Encourage and build strong partnerships between the Community, business and all levels of government to support implementation of the CSP 2032 and to deliver the Community priorities.**

Council maintained strong partnerships to align efforts with community and governmental priorities:

- Community Advisory Committees and partnerships with local Chambers of Commerce and various levels of government supported the delivery of the Community Strategic Plan 2032, ensuring alignment with broader objectives.

**5.11 To participate and encourage regional coordination and planning between Councils and other organisations.**

As a member of the Hunter Joint Organisation and through participation in the Committee for the Hunter, Council contributed to regional planning initiatives, ensuring cohesive development across the region.

Upper Hunter Shire Council entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the City of Newcastle, further solidifying its commitment to cross-boundary collaboration. This partnership will enable both councils to explore joint opportunities in strategic submissions, procurement, tourism development, and cultural participation, benefiting both communities through innovation and shared resources.

The MoU sets a framework for annual forums, shared strategic goals, and joint tendering opportunities, exemplifying Council’s proactive approach in leveraging regional relationships to enhance its strategic objectives. This collaboration is a prime example of Council’s broader focus on improving regional

outcomes by advocating for shared issues and ensuring that both Councils benefit from mutual service efficiencies and financial advantages.

**5.12 Provide timely and effective advocacy and leadership on key community issues and priorities.**

Council continued to advocate strongly on key issues affecting the community:

- Through persistent advocacy, Council secured federal funding for the MR358 rehabilitation project, addressing a critical freight link for the Upper Hunter and the Liverpool Plains.
- Additional advocacy efforts led to funding for projects such as the Scone Mountain Bike Trail and various roadworks under the Fixing Local Roads initiative, further supporting the community’s needs.



Hunter Joint Organisation visiting Scone CBD revitalisation



Mayor Maurice Collison opens the new inclusive play space at Amaroo Park, funded in part by a government grant, enhancing accessibility and recreation for all ages in the community.



Highlight

# Grant and Funding Advocacy

For a region with a low ratepayer base and small population like the Upper Hunter Shire, external funding is essential to delivering projects that support infrastructure, economic development, and community well-being. The advocacy efforts of Upper Hunter Shire Council have been vital in securing grants and funding, without which many transformative initiatives would not have been possible. Through proactive engagement with state and federal governments, Council has ensured that essential projects, which would otherwise have been underfunded, are delivered, benefiting the entire community across the quadruple bottom line: social, environmental, economic, and civic leadership.





One of the most high-profile advocacy successes is the MR358 Merriwa to Willow Tree Road project, valued at close to \$50 million. Upper Hunter Shire Council's continued lobbying and pressure on both the state and federal governments ensured that this critical freight and agricultural route remained on the infrastructure agenda. The road not only supports the movement of livestock and agricultural goods but also connects key regional and national highways, making it vital for local businesses and the regional economy. Securing funding for this project, which faced delays and uncertainties, highlights Council's determination to advocate for projects that deliver long-term economic benefits and regional connectivity.

The Scone CBD Revitalisation Project is another cornerstone of Upper Hunter Shire's success in securing external funding. With over \$10 million sourced from government programs, this project has transformed the heart of Scone into a more vibrant, functional, and attractive town centre. Key upgrades to footpaths, stormwater systems, and public spaces have not only supported local businesses but also enhanced the visitor experience, making Scone a regional hub for both residents and tourists. This project represents a strategic investment in economic revitalisation, fostering growth in retail and tourism sectors, while addressing the infrastructure needs of the growing community.

The Hunter Warbirds Aviation Centre, which benefited from more than \$7.5 million in grant funding, is a prime example of how Council's advocacy has driven significant economic and tourism growth. The centre has established Scone as a must-visit destination for aviation enthusiasts, bringing in tourists from across the country. The success of this project has not only elevated the region's profile but also delivered ongoing economic benefits through increased visitor traffic, local spending, and job creation. This project reflects Council's ability to leverage government funding

to enhance the region's unique offerings and secure long-term tourism and economic gains.

Council's advocacy extends beyond infrastructure to social and community projects. Following significant flood and storm damage, Council successfully secured more than \$5 million in funding from the Infrastructure Betterment Fund and National Disaster Declaration. This funding was critical in restoring and enhancing community assets, ensuring that vital infrastructure was rebuilt to withstand future challenges. Through this funding, Council addressed immediate recovery needs while also future-proofing the region's infrastructure, demonstrating a long-term commitment to community safety and resilience.

Recognising the importance of youth engagement and wellbeing, Council successfully secured funding through the NSW Regional Youth – School Holidays initiative and other programs, delivering over \$20,000 for youth activities. In addition, a major investment of \$800,000 was made in the construction of the new Murrurundi Youth Centre, alongside the development of recreational facilities like the Scone Mountain Bike Trail. These projects not only promote healthy lifestyles but also foster social inclusion and strengthen community ties, providing spaces where young people and residents can connect, engage, and enjoy shared activities.

Cultural and aesthetic improvements have also been prioritised, thanks to grants like the Stronger Country Communities Fund, which supported

projects such as the Merriwa CBD Activation and the Niagara Café Mural Restoration. These initiatives have enhanced the visual appeal of the Shire, attracting visitors and potential investors while also instilling a sense of pride and belonging among residents. They demonstrate how strategic use of external funding can provide both cultural and economic benefits, reinforcing the Shire's attractiveness as a place to live, work, and visit.

Council's success in securing Resources for Regions funding has been equally important for driving economic growth. This funding supported upgrades to the White Park Equine Facility and the Campbells Corner Restoration, two major infrastructure projects that play key roles in promoting tourism and economic activity. The Upper Hunter Branding Strategy, funded by the same grant, has laid the groundwork for a cohesive and strategic approach to promoting the Shire, ensuring that its unique character and strengths are leveraged to attract new businesses, visitors, and residents alike.

Upper Hunter Shire Council's proactive advocacy for grants and external funding has been the cornerstone of its ability to deliver projects that enhance community infrastructure, drive economic growth, and foster social cohesion. Through persistent efforts, Council has secured the financial resources necessary to support long-term development across the Shire, ensuring that even with a small ratepayer base, the community continues to thrive.







# Financial Performance

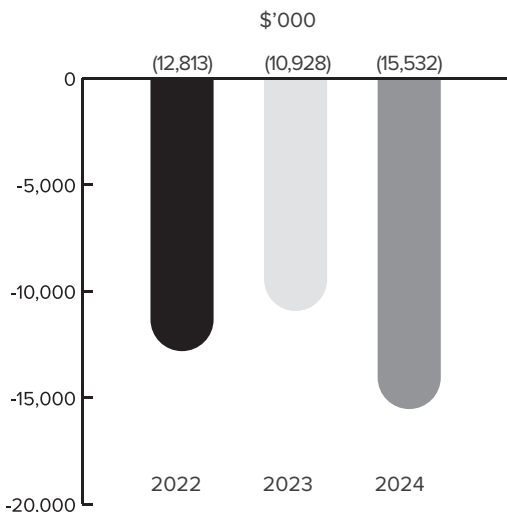
Upper Hunter Shire Council's financial performance demonstrates a proactive approach to managing resources and infrastructure investments, while addressing challenges in operating efficiency and financial sustainability.

# Expenditure & Income

Council oversees approximately \$1.37 billion in assets, which include critical infrastructure such as roads, parks, bridges, community and recreational facilities, drainage, and essential services like childcare, aged care, and swimming pools. Income is generated through various streams, including property rates, government grants, user fees, charges, and investment returns.

Expenditure covers a broad range of areas such as wages, construction, maintenance, materials, grants to community organisations, and other essential services. The focus remains on delivering high-quality services and infrastructure that meet the evolving needs of the Upper Hunter community.

### Operating results before capital grants and contributions



### 2021/2022

Council sustained an operating deficit before capital grants and contributions of \$12.8 million for the 2021/2022 year which has been an increasing trend over the last 4 years. A number of factors have contributed to this decline including an increase in infrastructure write-downs following revaluations, continued pressure on a number of Council's business operations, additional costs attributed to maintenance and care of MR358 (whilst awaiting rehabilitation), an increase in the cost of road infrastructure repairs and maintenance and the loss sustained from Water Fund operations through increased maintenance of the water infrastructure network.

### 2022/2023

Council sustained an operating deficit before capital grants and contributions of \$10.9 million for the 2022/2023 which was a minor improvement on the 2021/2022 year. Council's operations continue to be hindered by increasing cost of their operational expenses in order to provide the community with satisfactory services. These increasing costs are driven by the spike in the Consumer price index (CPI) post COVID-19 of between 5 and 10 percent year on year since 2021/22, especially in the road maintenance and construction industry, for which Council's revenue streams have not maintained the same incremental effects. It is noted that Council's business enterprises have continued to struggle during the 2022/2023 year which has placed additional pressures on Council cash reserves.

### 2023/2024

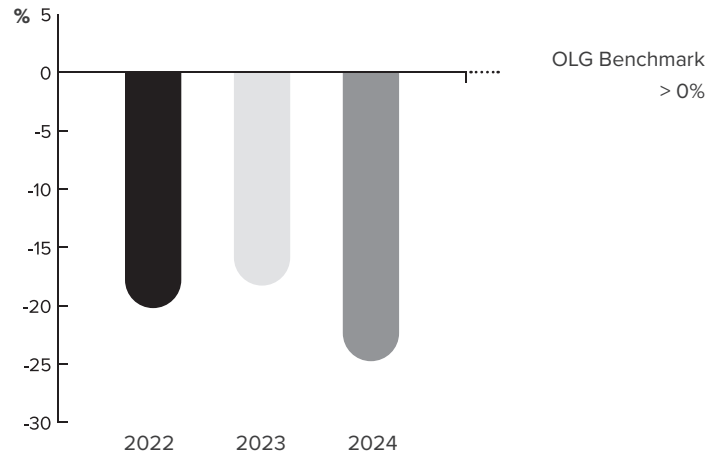
Council sustained an operating deficit before capital grants and contributions of \$15.5 million for the 2023/2024 year which was a decline from the 2022/2023 year. Although Council's operations continue to be hindered by inflationary effects on its operational costs, which have remained buoyant during 2023/2024, the primary reason for the decline within the operating ratio was due to the increase in depreciation on Council's major infrastructure classes by \$3m following a change in write-down methodology over the last two years and the net loss on the disposal of assets within the roads, bridges, water & sewer infrastructure. Similarly to the previous year's, it is noted that Council's business enterprises have continued to struggle during the 2023/2024 year which continues to place undue pressures on Council cash reserves. Council continues to look at options through increased fees and/or operational functions for these struggling business in order to minimise the current losses stained.



# Achieved Performance Measures & Benchmarks

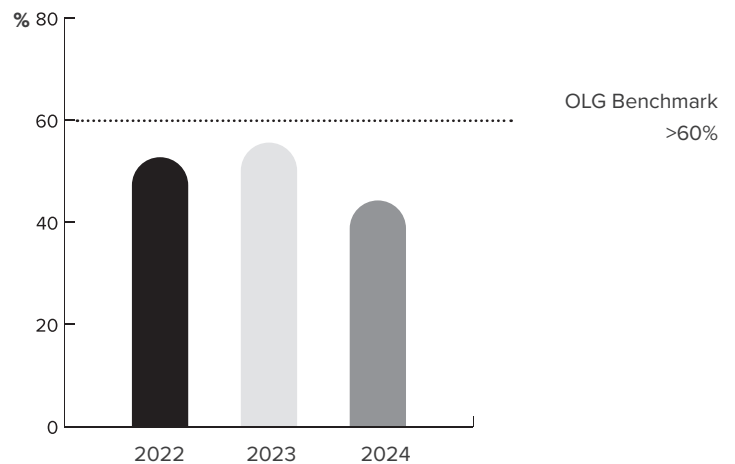
## Operating Performance Ratio

Council's operating performance ratio remained below the benchmark (>0%) for the 2022–2024 period, reflecting ongoing financial pressures and higher operating costs. The ratios for 2022, and 2023 were -20.21%, and -18.28%, respectively, with a further decline to -24.76% in 2024. This trend indicates that total operating revenue, excluding capital grants and contributions, was not sufficient to cover operating expenses. Council is actively working on strategies to improve this ratio through cost-saving measures and revenue growth initiatives.



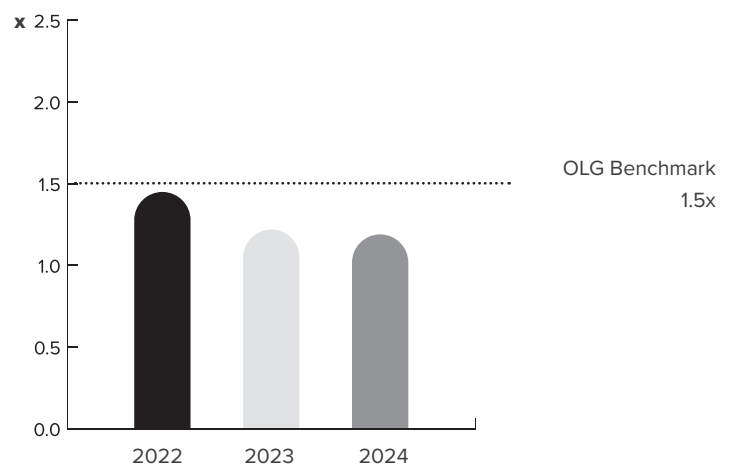
## Own Source Operating Revenue Ratio

The own source revenue ratio fell short of the benchmark (>60%) for all years from 2022 to 2024, ranging from 52.77% in 2022 to 44.30% in 2024. Due to significant stimulus funding provided by the State and Federal Governments meeting this criteria was a challenge for Council. Once this abnormal funding ceases Council will need to strengthen its financial resilience by reducing dependence on external funding sources. Efforts to boost revenue from fees, charges, and local business activities are underway to improve this ratio.



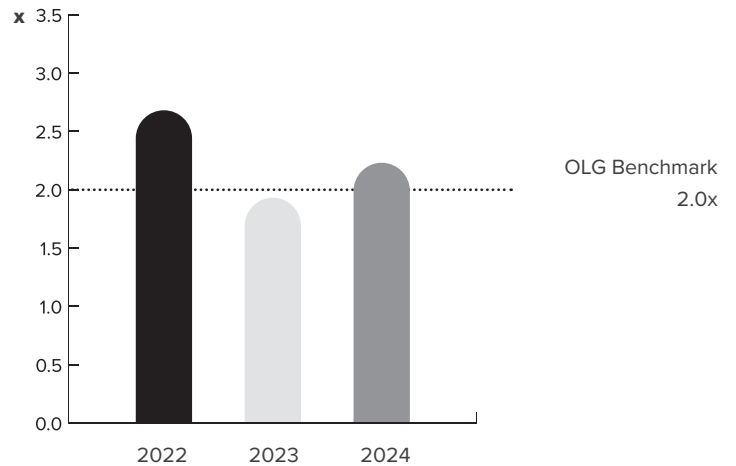
## Unrestricted Current Ratio

Council's liquidity ratio was below the benchmark (1.5x) for all three years, with a ratio at its lowest point of 1.19 in 2024. The decline is attributed to Council's continued financial operational deficits, before capital grants and contributions, which has diminished the current assets over current liabilities. Strategies are being implemented to enhance liquidity by managing liabilities and optimising cash flow.



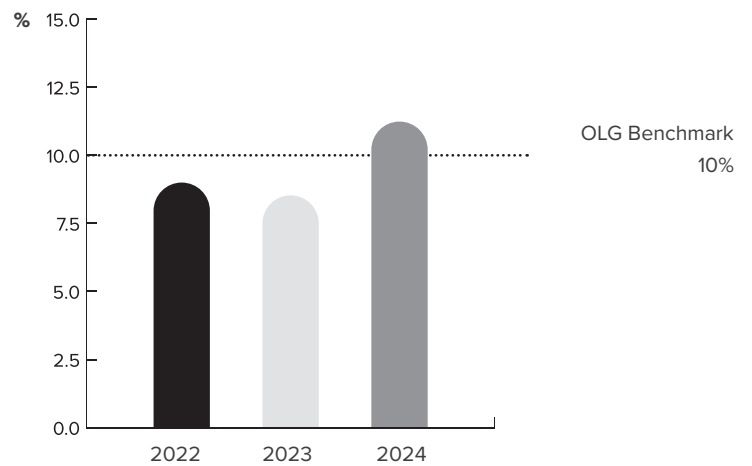
**Debt Service Cover Ratio**

The debt service cover ratio exceeded the benchmark (2.0x) in 2022 before falling below in 2023 (1.93) then recovering in 2024 to 2.23. Council does have a high leverage position in respect of debt from new borrowing entered into in 2019 to 2022. However, Council has not borrowed over the last three years and has expired two loan facilities during this time. Council continues to manage its debt portfolio responsibly to ensure long-term financial sustainability in the future.



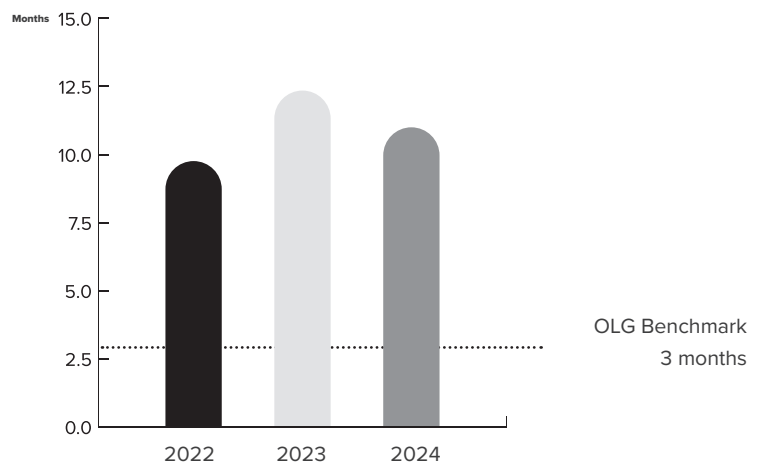
**Rates and annual charges outstanding percentage**

Council's has maintained a satisfactory hold on its outstanding rates and annual charges over the 2022 and 2023 years post COVID-19, however with the increasing cost of living experienced within the economy Council has seen an increase above the benchmark of 10% in the 2024 year. Council has increased its presence in the debt recovery process over the last three to six months which will assist in addressing to increase in the indebtedness. Although Council does hold a charge over the land for rates outstanding, it is mindful of the economic climate and does consider hardship provisions upon application.



**Cash Expense Cover Ratio**

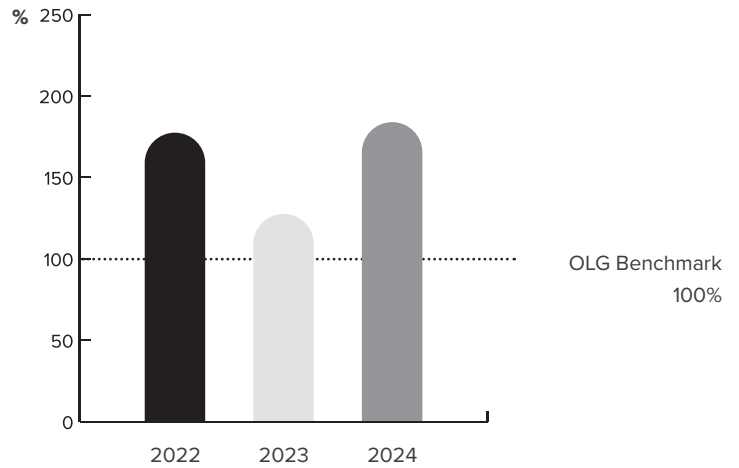
Council consistently maintained a cash cover ratio above the benchmark (3 months), indicating healthy cash reserves to cover immediate obligations. The ratio peaked at 12.35 months in 2023 and remained strong at 11.00 months in 2024, providing a buffer for any unforeseen expenses.





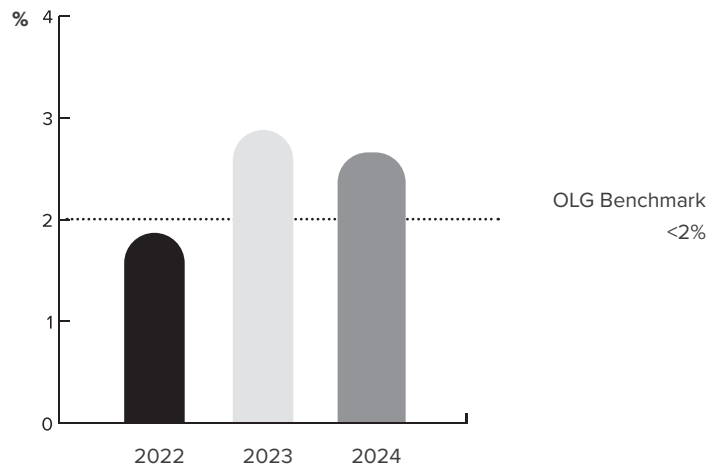
**Buildings and Infrastructure Renewals Ratio**

The renewals ratio consistently exceeded 100%, indicating that Council was investing more in asset renewal than the annual depreciation. The ratio reached 183.98% in 2024, showing a proactive approach in addressing the infrastructure renewal gap. This renewals ratio has however been influenced by the both State and Federal Government stimulus funding over the last three years.



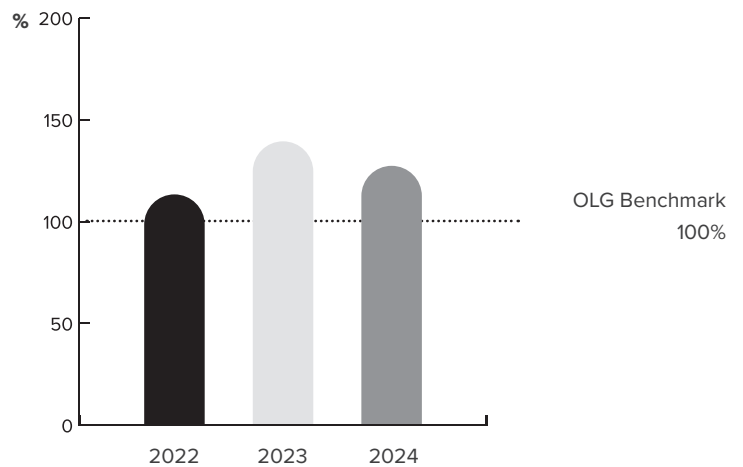
**Infrastructure Backlog Ratio**

Council's infrastructure backlog ratio exceeded the benchmark (<2%) in 2023 (2.88%) and 2024 (2.66%), indicating a need to address the growing backlog of infrastructure maintenance. Investment in infrastructure renewal and prioritising critical projects will be key focus areas to reduce the backlog and improve service levels.



**Asset Maintenance Ratio**

The asset maintenance ratio remained above the benchmark (100%) throughout the 2022–2024 period, reflecting Council's commitment to maintaining and renewing infrastructure. The ratio stood at 127.35% in 2024, demonstrating an ongoing focus on asset management to support service delivery and community needs.



# Looking ahead.

As we enter a new term, Upper Hunter Shire Council is committed to building on the strong foundations established in recent years while adapting to the emerging needs and challenges of our community. The refinement of our **Community Strategic Plan (CSP)** will ensure alignment with the changing priorities of residents, and the pursuit of a **Special Rate Variation (SRV)**, informed by comprehensive community consultation, will support our long-term financial sustainability. As always, Council will continue to advocate vigorously for external funding and grants to secure our region's fair share of resources, ensuring that we can deliver high-quality services and infrastructure despite our small population base.

## **Community: A Connected and Supported Population**

### Where We're Headed

Upper Hunter Shire Council will continue to foster community wellbeing and cohesion by enhancing services for children, families, and older residents. We are committed to providing high-quality facilities for young people and improving access to support services for carers and individuals with special needs. Community safety and inclusivity will remain key priorities, with ongoing partnerships to enhance services for people with disabilities and efforts to improve Aboriginal heritage recognition and preservation.

### Challenges

With a population projected to slowly decrease by 2031, retaining young families and adults of parenting age will be crucial to maintaining a vibrant community. The ageing population will also require ongoing attention, particularly in areas such as independent living support and ensuring adequate service provision for older residents. Additionally, ensuring that digital blackspots are reduced and that residents across our geographically large Shire have access to timely information remains a critical challenge.

## **Environment: Protecting and Preserving our Natural Assets**

### Where We're Headed

In the coming years, Upper Hunter Shire Council will focus on environmental sustainability and climate resilience. This includes implementing strategies to minimise the environmental impact of new developments, enhancing biodiversity protection, and promoting the conservation of our precious agricultural and equine industries. Our commitment to sustainability will guide our policies on land use, balancing development pressures with the need to maintain the rural character of the Shire.

### Challenges

Ongoing challenges include mitigating the impact of climate change, preserving valuable agricultural land from development, and addressing the loss of biodiversity. The need to balance the demands of development with environmental conservation will be a critical focus as we work towards sustainable outcomes. Additionally, ensuring housing diversity and reducing pollution from development activities will remain key objectives as we continue to grow.



# Looking ahead.

## **Economy: Boosting Local Businesses and Driving Economic Growth**

### Where We're Headed

Upper Hunter Shire is positioned to grow its local economy by promoting business diversity, revitalising commercial hubs, and advocating for the equine, agricultural, and renewable energy sectors. Through the Place Branding Initiative, Council will strengthen the region's identity, attracting tourism, investment, and events. Our support for local business chambers, tourism operators, and event organisers will continue, fostering an environment conducive to job creation and economic expansion.

### Challenges

Securing new investments in our Shire's rural industries, local businesses, and tourism will be key to economic growth. Land use conflicts, particularly between agriculture, equine, and mining interests, present ongoing challenges. Council will need to carefully navigate these conflicts to ensure the prosperity of the Shire's industries while protecting neighbourhood amenity. Growth must be balanced with sustainable practices to ensure long-term economic vitality.

## **Infrastructure: Maintaining and Upgrading Essential Services**

### Where We're Headed

Infrastructure development remains a critical focus for Upper Hunter Shire Council, with ongoing investment in road and bridge networks, public spaces, and essential services such as water and sewerage systems. Our extensive road network, including a high number of unsealed roads, will require significant attention. Projects such as the bridge replacement program and ongoing upgrades to the Scone CBD will play pivotal roles in maintaining connectivity and economic vibrancy.

### Challenges

The geographical spread of the Shire creates high operational costs, particularly for road maintenance and access to services in remote areas. Ageing infrastructure continues to pose a significant challenge, requiring ongoing investment in renewal and upgrades. Securing the necessary funding to maintain and enhance our road, water, and sewer networks, while meeting community expectations, will be an ongoing priority for the coming term.

## **Governance: Advocating for the Region and Strengthening Financial Stability**

### Where We're Headed

Governance efforts in the next four years will focus on refining the CSP with the newly elected Council, ensuring it reflects the evolving needs of the community. Council will also pursue the SRV application process, guided by community feedback, to support long-term financial sustainability. Efforts will continue to strengthen partnerships with state and federal governments, ensuring that our advocacy efforts secure critical funding for projects that benefit the region across the quadruple bottom line.

### Challenges

Maintaining financial efficiency in a small regional community with limited ratepayer funding will require creative solutions, including increased advocacy for grants and external funding. Council must continue to balance service provision with financial sustainability, while responding to community expectations for transparency, engagement, and responsiveness.





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