



Future-proofing the Hunter

Voices from our community

A REPORT PREPARED BY HUNTER RENEWAL & HUNTER JOBS ALLIANCE



We have to understand the pace of change that will occur in the makeup of industry in the Hunter Valley over at least the next ten years, and plan for, and reposition ourselves to take advantage of these changes.

I'm excited that with our highly skilled, innovative and diverse labour force, we can attract new business to our region – business types perhaps we haven't even thought of yet, and so make the Hunter Region a place known for things other than just coal mining.

We have done this before – compare us now to how the region was when it was reliant on the BHP operation. We already have the experience and expertise to transition to a new and exciting future.

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)



HUNTER Renewal

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Executive summary

In May 2021 then-Deputy Premier John Barilaro announced that New South Wales would establish a Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund and statutory Hunter Expert Panel to fund and oversee diversification and assist the region's adjustment to changing coal markets. This is a welcome development for the Hunter.

Between August and October 2021, Hunter Renewal and the Hunter Jobs Alliance convened five workshops complemented by an online survey to gather community input, ideas and priorities for this new body and funds. This report collates and distills the priorities and concerns of ordinary people and workers around the Hunter region.

Our engagement with people of the region shows that, overwhelmingly, people understand and accept that change is coming and that leadership by government, informed and directed by local knowledge, is necessary to weather that change.

Participants in the workshops and survey reflect the range of interests and perspectives of locals, including workers in sectors that will be affected by structural change in the coal industry, people working in social services, education and health, people invested in community organisations and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and a variety of life experiences. What they had in common was a willingness to engage in the work of making a positive future for the people and communities of the Hunter region.

"I worked in mining for 15 years so I know what's happening. Many of the services companies have been planning for years. They have already started to do the work."

Muswellbrook workshop participant

The most common issues of concern were job security, protection of the environment and climate change, and the urgency of transition planning. More broadly, participants in our workshops highlighted existing challenges and fears: housing affordability and homelessness, the importance of public and accessible vocational education, existing inequality, and environmental problems such as air pollution and land degradation.

We asked participants to discuss and rank 22 ideas and recommendations from work already undertaken to consider the challenge of diversification in the region. Of these ideas, ten priorities emerged. The top three were:

1. A local authority to coordinate and fund job creation and community support
2. Fund flagship projects that create jobs
3. Expand TAFE and vocational education.

These top three priorities reflect overriding community needs and concerns: locally-driven coordination and community support, job-creation, education and skill-building. The remaining seven priorities focus on practical skills and initiatives to sustain local economies, business and people's adaptability:

4. Market the Hunter to attract investment
5. Start community-owned energy networks
6. Build pilot projects for new industries
7. Create rules for mining and power companies to protect workers
8. Free training for mine and power station workers moving into new roles
9. A long term fund for land and water management after mine rehabilitation
10. Grants and training for local businesses to diversify.

The process found people understand the challenges facing the Hunter region and want planning and action to address these challenges that are equitable and community-driven. They are ready and willing to take part in the work of the Hunter Expert Panel and Royalties for Rejuvenation program.

The feedback is abundantly clear. This process and report demonstrate people's desire to have a seat at the table to collaboratively plan for the region's future.



“

We have great engineering, ports, power, and logistics all available in the Hunter. It's just about how to transition the workforce across. There are big opportunities and I'm impressed with the momentum.

Muswellbrook workshop participant

Introduction

In late 2021, Hunter Renewal and the Hunter Jobs Alliance convened five workshops and an online survey to gather input and ideas from the community about the priorities for the soon to be established Hunter Expert Panel and Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund.

Participants joined from Wonnarua, Awabakal, Darkinjung and Worimi country, in Cessnock, Singleton, Muswellbrook, Maitland, and Lake Macquarie LGAs, and the survey allowed input from Hunter residents more broadly. In all 314 people from across the region have contributed to this report.

Background to the workshops and survey

Hunter Renewal is a community outreach project established in 2017 to speak with people in the region about economic diversification and their priorities for the future. The Hunter Jobs Alliance is a coalition of thirteen local and statewide unions and environmental advocacy groups in the Hunter working together for new sustainable economic opportunity for workers and the broader community.

The Voices of the Hunter Valley workshops were conceived to give ordinary Hunter people a chance to have a say. The purpose of the workshops was two-fold:

- Gather community priorities and perspectives to inform decisions about Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund and the Hunter Expert Panel;
- Ensure the community has access to information and opportunities to be involved in transition planning.

Due to COVID the workshops were conducted online, targeted to communities in the region most impacted by changes to traditional industries: Cessnock, Singleton, Muswellbrook, Maitland, and Lake Macquarie. Invitations were sent to supporters of Hunter Renewal, to members of Hunter Jobs Alliance affiliates, and to community organisations and small businesses in the local areas of focus. Registration was open to all, and the events were also promoted on Hunter Renewal and Hunter Jobs Alliance websites and Facebook. The online survey mirrored the workshop activities and was promoted more widely in the Hunter region.

Participants

Of the 314 unique participants 111 took part in one of the five workshop and 203 completed the survey. Participants included people involved in local organisations like Rotary, PCYC and the CWA, church and charity groups, business owners and business and investment advocates, people who work in social services, housing services, drug rehabilitation or caring support, workers from power stations and mines, health and education, manufacturing and mining services, young people, retirees, professionals, government representatives and rural landholders.

Process

To design the workshops and survey, facilitators considered 30 reports and plans addressing the Hunter's future planning and diversification. From these reports, 155 separate ideas were drawn, and then distilled into 22 key proposals in four broad categories:

- Planning and coordination;
- Growing and diversifying the economy;
- Supporting the community through change;
- Supporting workers through change.

Workshop and survey participants chose their top priorities for transition initiatives from this set of proposals. A table showing the full list is on page 27. Background information was provided to help respondents make informed decisions. They were also given the opportunity to add their own ideas.

WHAT WE HEARD

“Keeping the community informed regularly as to what is happening is key. If the community is not behind it and they haven’t heard about it then it will fail.”

Singleton workshop participant

“I was born and bred in Singleton and worked in the power station for the last 40 years. I have kids and grandkids in the Hunter area. The coal is going to stop flowing, thermal coal power is going to stop being generated so I want to set the future up for my future generations. There’s a lot going on in the power industry at the moment, and people are pretty scared about what the future holds for them.”

Cessnock workshop participant

“It is important to have this talk about transition as one about opportunity rather than what is stopping us, because people are worried about losing their jobs and their whole culture. For so many in the Valley it is about what they do, what their grandparents did, and it’s about putting food on the table. It’s culture. We need to change with respect and dignity.”

Maitland workshop participant

Thank you!

There are a great number of people who have contributed to this report, most importantly the participants of the workshops and those who took the time to fill out the survey. Thank you for your time, candour and dedication. We would like to especially thank Kimberley Crofts, PhD candidate at UTS, for help in designing and running the process; our volunteer facilitators from each of the workshops: Jai Allison, Janet Murray, Allan Evans, Pete Coughlan, Jo Lynch, Courtney Eckert, Jo McNeil, Callan Lawrence and Steve O’Brien; and our volunteer callers, data analysts, scribes and writers Rod Anderson, Martin Scurrah, Joy Nason, and Lucas Kennedy.

Next steps

Hunter Renewal and the Hunter Jobs Alliance will provide this report to the NSW Government to provide insight into the community’s views about the priorities of the Hunter Expert Panel and Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund. We intend to engage proactively in these processes, and continue engaging with our members and supporters and the broader community to ensure ordinary people have a seat at the table.

Top concerns

We asked people to tell us what concerned them about the region's future. Here's what they told us*.

**Economic futures
beyond mining
11.4%**

**Welfare
of future
generations
6.3%**

**Job security
15.3%**

**Urgency of
transition planning
13.5%**

*Percentages indicate weighting within the top fourteen concerns.

**Protection of
the environment
& climate change
23.7%**

**Food &
water security
6.6%**

**Energy security
3.6%**

**Housing
affordability
4.8%**

**Lack of access
to training/
education
3.9%**

**Lack of access
to transport and
connectivity
2.7%**

2.1%

Accessibility
of health and
community
services

No
confidence
in regional
leadership for
transition

Mental health
issues related
to job loss

Lack of
community
involvement
in transition
planning



A local authority
is urgent in my mind...
Coordination is key,
there is an appetite and
support for it from a
majority of stakeholders.

Cessnock workshop participant

Top priorities

The following emerged as the top priorities among the 314 people who took part in the workshops and the survey.

17%

A local authority to coordinate and fund job creation and community support

14.9%

Fund flagship projects that create jobs in new industries

13.9%

Expand TAFE and vocational education

8.4%

Market the Hunter to attract investment

8.4%

Start community-owned energy networks

8.1%

Build pilot projects for new industries

7.9%

Create rules for mining and power companies to protect workers

7.5%

Free training courses for mine and power station workers moving into new roles

7.2%

A long term fund for land and water management after mine rehabilitation

6.7%

Grants and training for local businesses to diversify

CATEGORIES

- PLANNING & COORDINATION
- BUSINESS & INDUSTRY
- SUPPORTING WORKERS
- SUPPORTING COMMUNITY

Percentages indicate weighting within the top ten, not the 22 concepts used across the workshop and survey. Please see table on page 27 for a list of all 22 concepts.

A local authority to coordinate and fund job creation and community support

There is wide support for a Hunter Valley Authority to set out a clear roadmap for how we will deal with change.

A local coordinating authority is essential

Along with some concern about losing out in transition, there is excitement around the opportunities that change brings. If the process is thoughtfully planned, it will allow the community to feel secure, involved and optimistic.

Participants recognised that someone needs to coordinate the many moving parts of our economy, to ensure the Hunter can take best advantage of opportunities that arise. For example when new industries open their gates, we need to ensure local people are ready to step into these jobs. A transition authority could coordinate with training organisations to develop and deliver relevant training programs to prepare the local workforce in the right timeframe.

Input from all sectors of local communities will be essential to guide the transition process. This will generate a wide range of ideas and facilitate excitement about the region's future. The survey and workshops themselves have demonstrated that people want to be involved.

In June 2021, the Hunter Jobs Alliance proposed a model for a statutory Hunter Valley Authority. The authority should be tasked with delivering a defined set of functions in collaboration with other agencies, programs and stakeholders. More information can be found on the Hunter Jobs Alliance website.

Scepticism about effective, efficient, and equitable transition

People made it clear that a transition done right means nobody is left behind. Optimistic participants noted that these changes are an opportunity to create an inclusive and sustainable regional economy and society.

There is doubt that \$25 million per year is sufficient to undertake the task at hand. In the Maitland workshop one person said “\$25 million is not a lot of money. How are they going to fund all the things that need

to be done in the Hunter community?“. Numerous participants suggested the initial funds be used to develop a plan and get things going, but a substantial commitment of more funding is needed.

While government leadership is essential, there is wariness of corruption, bureaucracy and waste. Transparency, genuine and diverse community involvement, and accountability mechanisms will offset these concerns.

Coordination among stakeholders is essential

Coordination by a transition authority should aim to ensure diverse interests and aspirations are included, not just local elites. As a workshop participant from Muswellbrook said: “You need local participation, and a government body to coordinate. Everything then can flow from this”.

A clear process for community engagement with the authority should be established. Participants felt that transition initiatives depend on community involvement. The region's interdependencies can only be properly understood with representatives from a diverse range of groups.

For example we found some Hunter residents are impatient and feel we may be missing opportunities to diversify the region's economy and move towards renewable energy. One workshop participant said: “We should be starting on planning for decarbonising industry. We have the overlay of climate change and we have to do something about it everywhere, we have to start thinking about it now”.

Others, have concerns about what switching to renewables will mean for heavy industry: “I am an electrician at Tomago Aluminium and wonder if there is going to be enough base load power to keep the smelter running when the coal powered power stations shutdown.”

A local authority needs to be immersed in the community to understand and properly balance different perspectives. Participants could see that the process is complex, and an authority needs to be grounded in the needs and concerns of community to best match real opportunities with the resources and reality on the ground.

WHAT WE HEARD

“If we don’t have adequate planning as we transition out of fossil fuels there is a very real prospect that some people will be left high and dry, not just people who work in the fossil fuel industry, it’ll be entire communities.”

Cessnock workshop participant

“The most important thing is involving the local community in designing the transition. Unless you take the locals with you on the journey, so that they own the changes, it will not be successful.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

“Collaboration is important...people who work in industries that pollute need to know that we care about them. We need to include them.”

Singleton workshop participant

“We have to step out of our way to make sure that First Nations people are more involved in [transition planning].”

Singleton workshop participant



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The Latrobe Valley Authority

In 2017, the Hazelwood power station in the Latrobe Valley Victoria closed, and hundreds of workers lost their jobs. The Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) was established with an immediate focus on support for workers, incentives for businesses to employ more people, and investments in community facilities and events.

As the LVA was established in reaction to the closure of Hazelwood, the opportunity to plan ahead of time was missed. The LVA has since been working to increase workers and employers’ skill base in growth sectors. Along with initiatives to build business capability, maximise local procurement, competitive advantage, and improve the sustainability of community organisations, the LVA is focused on leveraging infrastructure investment to create employment in the region’s growth industries of the future.

Fund flagship projects that create jobs

People strongly support public funding of flagship projects, to provide jobs for local people and demonstrate opportunities in new industries.

Job creation with tangible projects needs to be a priority

With the scheduled closure of four power stations over the next 14 years and a projected contraction of jobs in mining over time, workshop participants were eager to talk about how people in the Hunter will make a living in the future.

There is a fear that leaving the future to the market will create uncertainty and instability in the economy and people's lives. In Lake Macquarie, we heard: *"The decline in the thermal coal sector could happen much more quickly than imagined due to investors and financiers seeking green investments. This risks seeing a gap between the loss of resources-related jobs and those from emergent industries"*

Putting public funds towards new industries was a very popular idea. People saw a need to be proactive, to fund projects that will stabilise employment, the economy and demonstrate the region is open for business.

Excited for the possibilities, but need to find the best fit

People are excited to shape the Hunter economy in a new direction. Widespread support for renewable energy comes with the hope it can bring local manufacturing jobs in industries such as electric vehicles, batteries and wind turbines. Other growth opportunities consistently identified included adventure tourism, wine and agriculture, retirement communities and environmental conservation and mine rehabilitation.

Whatever the possible projects that may exist, people saw the importance of choosing carefully. Projects to fund would make best use of the existing workforce skills. Hence, a skills audit and workforce development planning is seen as necessary to effectively assess potential projects.

A strong preference for local, sustainable businesses

People preferred that funding for business or industry go to home-grown, local ventures, rather than outside companies. This is because locally-owned businesses are seen to be more attuned to the needs of the community. With all the opportunities in clean technology, people also had a strong preference that the industry be focused on sustainability.

WHAT WE HEARD

"A flagship project is very important to fund because it lifts morale, but it has to be carefully chosen: a project that other industries can cluster around, one that uses and further develops the skills of the existing workforce, and one that engages with existing local businesses, small and large."

Maitland workshop participant

"We could do much better than having companies from overseas reaping the benefits. Instead we could have locally-owned and innovative industries that could really provide a renaissance [for the Hunter]."

Cessnock workshop participant

"There could be jobs in manufacturing related to fly ash for people who work in or live near power stations, and ideally people would be re-trained if they wanted to accept a job in the coal ash manufacturing reuse plant — they wouldn't have to move away."

Cessnock workshop participant



ABOVE: Drayton coal mine, coal ash dams, and Bayswater power station in the background.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Manufacturing structural lightweight aggregate from legacy coal ash

Reusing the coal ash held in dumps at the four Hunter coal-fired power stations opens new possibilities. The ash dredged out of these dams can be manufactured into structural lightweight aggregate (man-made sand and gravel) for use in the production of lightweight structural-grade concrete. The mechanical and chemical processes of 'cleaning' the ash allows for the cost-effective manufacturing of a range of other specialised products for road construction.

This product mix allows the manufacturers to empty the Hunter ash dams over two decades, enough time to develop the manufacturing processes further. Subsequently, other waste products like glass, tyres or plastics can take the place of coal ash.

Economic modelling based on an existing business case has shown that manufacturing structural lightweight aggregate at the five operating ash dams in NSW (four of which are in the Hunter) can create some 3,000 permanent full-time jobs. The manufacturing processes involve technologies and equipment that are common in mining, which means that the workforce to operate these new factories is readily available in the Hunter, including the many small and large businesses in the supply chain and the maintenance structure for the equipment.

In addition, structural lightweight aggregate can give the cluster of factories that produce precast concrete products in the Lower Hunter a competitive edge, because they can offer lightweight products of equal strength.

Expand TAFE and vocational education

To prepare us for a new economic future, participants strongly supported expanding TAFE and vocational education. As a beloved public institution, TAFE is the favoured body for delivery. Planning is necessary to ensure people have access to the courses they'll need as the economy changes.

Increase funding and courses

At every workshop around the region, TAFE was seen as the key institution for preparing workers and the community as a whole for the challenges ahead. There is great concern about TAFE budget cuts and the closing of Scone TAFE, and what this means for our ability to adapt to a new economic environment. People felt that resources should be restored to TAFE to expand opportunities more generally and to develop trained persons for a more diversified economy. In addition to preparing workers for roles in new industries, a strong TAFE could help address skills and workforce shortages in certain sectors such as the care economy.

Public education to address disadvantage

One reason TAFE was so strongly supported is that it is seen as a key way to address disadvantage in the region. There is a sentiment that moving towards private training institutions results in a greater user-pays culture in education and unequal opportunity.

Planning so that the courses meet our changing needs

There was an acknowledgement that if we want local people employed in new industries, training will need to begin before new industries and economic activities are in place. This requires advanced planning and coordination between high schools, TAFE, regional authorities, business and others. TAFE and training institutions need to know in advance what the likely new jobs will be so that it can design courses, recruit teachers, and prepare resources to develop the skills that will contribute to new opportunities.

WHAT WE HEARD

“Training is something that is fundamental to this process. Training and TAFE is the backbone to help people get into a new industry. The whole training, and retraining aspect is essential to the success of a transition. It is problematic when funding keeps getting cut. They are doing the best they can with a shrinking budget.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

“We have a slight problem in expanding TAFE in the next three years if we don't know where employment is heading.”

Singleton workshop participant

“With Scone TAFE shut down, our young people have to travel to Muswellbrook to do courses and, with few public transport options, this is an equity issue... If you don't have a car you can't get to TAFE. People with disabilities are even more disadvantaged.”

Singleton workshop participant

“If we don't provide this type of facility for people to become educated in new skills it means employers may bring new people into the area and our existing workforce will be on the scrap heap because we haven't provided for their future.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The challenge of finding skilled staff

A key finding from the 2020 *Clean Energy at Work* report from the Clean Energy Council was that renewable energy developers and installers are facing difficulties in recruiting skilled and experienced staff.

“There is a high demand for electrical and grid engineers, and construction managers across wind and large solar projects, with developers finding recruitment for these roles challenging. In the last 12 months, two thirds of renewable energy companies that tried to recruit a construction manager had medium to high difficulty (it took more than five weeks to find a suitable candidate).

In the wind sector, there are certain unique occupations that are only occasionally needed but are nevertheless critical to the construction phase. Examples are crane drivers and specialised truck drivers for wind turbines. It can take two years to train in wind farm transportation and the driver may then seek ongoing work in another industry. As operation and maintenance of wind farms becomes an increasingly important role there will also be heightened demand for blade technicians, yet these are already hard to source.

The study also confirmed anecdotal evidence that most small-scale solar businesses face difficulties in recruiting accredited solar designers, electricians, electrical trade assistants and roofers, especially in regional areas, yet these are in high demand. Under some scenarios this demand will see a steady increase” (Clean Energy Council, 2020).



PRIORITY #4

Market the Hunter to attract investment

People supported the idea of a marketing program for potential investors in the region. It could provide information on available incentives, land availability, demonstration projects, workforce skills and advice on navigating the planning system.

Attracting investment to the Hunter

People agreed that if we are to build a new economic future, we will need to attract new investment in the Hunter. To take best advantage of interest in the region, people saw the value in a one-stop-shop, where potential investors can be welcomed, get the full picture on the many advantages of establishing themselves in the Hunter, have their questions answered, and obtain practical advice on liaising with local and state government processes.

Local collaboration is crucial

Participants were clear on the need to not waste public money on merely advertising the region. Further, marketing the Hunter should not mean offering the region, its people and resources for exploitation by outsiders but rather highlighting the region's development potential in cooperation with locals.

WHAT WE HEARD

“If this is about marketing the resources we have here, and what the Hunter has above other regions, then it’s good. If it’s just ‘come to the Hunter’ then not so good.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“We need funding to encourage and entice new enterprises to come to town.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“This would shift emphasis from what Singleton has been to what it could be.”

Singleton workshop participant

PRIORITY #5

Start community-owned energy networks

People supported the idea of community-owned energy initiatives as a way to lessen the risks of increasing electricity prices and to keep the economic benefits of energy production in local communities.

Enthusiasm for renewable energy

There is enthusiasm in the community for producing renewable energy, demonstrated by the popularity of solar panels. However, the ability of some people to participate in this energy revolution is limited by inequality: not everyone owns a roof that they can put a solar panel on. Grants and training to establish community-owned energy networks allows everyone in the community to support renewable energy and reap its cost savings.

Community cohesion and morale building

People noted that the benefits of community-owned energy networks reach beyond the benefits to the environment or the hip pocket. In taking initiative and control over their own energy needs and production, people feel empowered. People in the workshops noted that process of working together to establish a project would build community cohesion and morale. For those reasons, it can help make communities more resilient in the face of changing and uncertain economic times.

WHAT WE HEARD

“Community-owned energy networks are a really exciting initiative and I would love to see something like this in Maitland and put my spare cash to it, and to get involved.”

Maitland workshop participant

“The community can get together and decide where it goes, and get the benefit from it, not like an outside company coming in.”

Singleton workshop participant

“Community-owned energy networks allow people to work together in community groups to solve their own green energy solutions.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant



ABOVE: Solar farm and sheep (Gabelglesia, Creative Commons).

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Goulburn Community Energy Co-operative

In Goulburn, locals have established the Goulburn Community Energy Co-operative. The project was kickstarted with \$2 million from local investors, matched by a grant from the NSW State Government. Capital raising continues and they are opening up investing to outside parties. The co-op is building a solar farm on 2.2 hectares of industrial land.

The solar farm will consist of 4,000 panels generating 1.8Mw which is sufficient to generate power to around 450 homes,

and backed up by a 400 kW battery to store energy and sell when the price is right.

Electricity from the solar farm will be sold back to the grid, with profits split three ways: into dividends, a sinking fund for panel repairs and maintenance, and a fund to pay for electricity bills for Goulburn's disadvantaged people. Construction of the solar farm by Komo Energy commenced in early 2021 and its anticipated completion date will be late 2021.

PRIORITY #6

Build pilot projects for new industries

Provide the means for local businesses to partner with innovation experts so that they can test their ideas.

Supporting new industries is essential to diversify the Hunter economy

People are nervous about where new jobs are going to come from in the Hunter, and see the benefit of government support to test new industries. If successful, these industries could be a part of a new diversified economy, and provide much needed employment to local people.

Support for a system of innovation and research across the Hunter

There was strong support for ensuring that locals have access to the best research institutions and innovation experts such as CSIRO and the University of Newcastle should they wish to start a pilot project. People also stressed the importance of supporting linkages between different research institutions, businesses, and local people with ideas.

WHAT WE HEARD

“You have to be able to test the waters to see what works. This is one way to incentivise new industries. What are the opportunities for local businesses that may not have been able to start something yet as they don’t have the funding?”

Singleton workshop participant

“My son has a start-up business which will thrive if this region starts investing in the industries of the future. I look forward to my grandchildren having exciting jobs in the new economy.”

Newcastle resident (survey)

“The industry and business community should work closely with university and CSIRO researchers to get local breakthroughs commercialised and manufactured in the Hunter. An industry hub where related businesses can collaborate and share resources could help.” Cessnock resident (survey)

PRIORITY #7

Create rules for mining and power companies to protect workers

People agreed on the necessity to set clear expectations of companies undertaking large scale closures in the Hunter. These would include things like minimum notice, comprehensive redundancy packages, counselling, and a duty to assist with retraining.

Can’t let companies ‘cut and run’

People in the Hunter have a high awareness that large-scale closures can be disastrous for workers and communities, especially if poorly-planned. Workers deserve their entitlements and decent notice so they can make the right choices in their interests. Strict and clear rules to which companies must adhere would reduce anxiety for affected workers. Additionally when these expectations are set, companies can also plan for them.

Funding redundancies is a mining company responsibility

While people were enthusiastic about the availability of coal royalty money to spend on the region they were adamant that it should not be used to fund basic entitlements. Further, it was felt that companies undergoing closures should also fund retraining, and other worker support such as financial and career advice and counselling.

Distrust of government

While agreeing that it was a good idea in theory to set clear expectations of big companies, some participants were deeply sceptical that government would enforce any rules on private business, especially such a big and powerful business as mining.

WHAT WE HEARD

“As long as business knows what the tariffs are they can plan for it, trouble is in Australia companies get away with murder. In other countries it’s not a problem - these are the rules, this is what you have to do. They factor it into their plans, end of story. Here the community has to demand it forcefully.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

“The companies aren’t offering redundancies but just telling workers to take a job interstate. I don’t think many will move, they’ve already got their lives set up.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“As a community we can demand this. And they should provide new training for people before their jobs end.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

PRIORITY #8

Free training for mine and power station workers moving into new roles

To support mine and power station workers through change, participants agreed they should be provided with free courses to help bridge their skills to new roles.

Retraining and re-skilling the Hunter workforce is crucial

Anticipated job losses in mining and energy means some workers will have to find a new way to make a living. It is important these workers are supported through this change. Some, such as electricians, will be able to walk out of jobs in the mines to jobs in other industries. There are others who need substantial retraining to be able to adapt. Courses offered and available to workers needing new jobs should be directly relevant to future employment.

Companies have a responsibility to the region and their employees

Companies have made a lot of money from the Hunter and its people: if closures are planned, funding for retraining should be part of redundancy packages. To assist worker transition, retraining can start before workers are made redundant. Companies should be flexible in allowing workers to attend courses while still employed.

Relevant and high quality training/courses need to be available

Planning and coordination is required to ensure that the right courses are available to the right people at the right time. Workers need to trust that if they take the time to retrain, they will have all the skills required to qualify for new roles in emerging industries.

WHAT WE HEARD

“There is a lack of understanding of how transferable the skills of mining are. I work in the mines and I can only move to central Queensland. If everyone moves then this whole transition is null and void. There will be no one here. We need support for identifying transferable skills.”

Singleton workshop participant

“I’m a miner. Change is coming. Mining companies and unions need to do more to re-educate and reskill. Employees have the time and money if given appropriate avenues.”

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

HCB Solar

In 1948, Michael Haggerston’s grandfather started an electrical business that is still trading in Boolaroo. Michael has taken up the mantle along with his son, Logan, in creating HCB Solar. Michael had this to say about the opportunities for the solar industry in the Hunter region:

“We’ve seen the solar industry grow and grow since 2008. Being at the forefront of the solar sector in the Hunter and working nationally we recognise the opportunities that exist in the Hunter to embrace renewables.”

HCB Solar, under the company name WS Farm, is developing a solar education facility in the Williamstown area close to Newcastle Airport. We see this as a positive start to educate companies that are in the renewable sector to learn in a controlled environment on how to install products before they enter the field. We have had a positive approach from six international companies.

We are committed to seeing this succeed and with government assistance this could grow to be the hub of solar training on the east coast. HCB Solar is well aware of the public’s positive attitude towards renewables and believes up and coming generations will be even stronger.

The Hunter is well positioned to take advantage of the rapid growth of solar and batteries within our region. The future is very positive and we are looking forward to bringing new companies to the Hunter Valley.”



ABOVE: Wambo 3 coal mine near Singleton.

PRIORITY #9

A long term fund for land and water management after mine rehabilitation

Participants saw restoring and protecting environmental resources as highly important and essential to maximise resilience and productivity. People supported putting money aside for environmental monitoring and management, including towards new uses for our natural resources.

Rehabilitation is the mining companies' responsibility

People felt strongly that mine site rehabilitation should not come from public funds. Damaged areas should be restored to the level where it's possible to use the land for new cultural and/or economic activities.

Indigenous-led initiatives to look after natural resources

Managing land and water long term means employing people to look after those natural resources. There was a recognition that First Nations' knowledge would assist greatly with safeguarding the local environment, and support for relevant Indigenous-led initiatives that would look after resources while providing employment for local people.

Many potential uses of former mining lands

Participants wanted to see the imaginative transformation of old mine sites for uses that create and add value while conserving the environment. They suggested sites be used for wildlife restoration, wetlands, botanical gardens, recreation and tourism, or agriculture.

WHAT WE HEARD

"It is important that we support Aboriginal-led business and make sure they are included in this sort of planning, we are on their country and so that should underpin everything that we do."

Cessnock workshop participant

"The only issue with funding land and water rehabilitation is that I don't want there to be a perception by the coal mines that rehabilitating the land is not their job. It is a great idea that just needs to be implemented carefully." Newcastle resident (survey)

"We should aim for clever rehabilitation of mining damage and pollution; so many jobs can be based around protecting and caring for the place we live in." Lake Macquarie resident (survey)

PRIORITY #10

Grants and training for local businesses to diversify

The future of many small and medium enterprises in the Hunter is tied up with the future of coal mining. To protect existing jobs and to create new ones, participants saw the need for local businesses to develop a diversified business model, supported by grants and training.

Education and training for businesses to help with diversification

Existing businesses need to be resilient if they are to survive an uncertain economic future. Many do not have the knowledge of how to do this. Education and training for these businesses is an important part of the picture, to ensure they succeed and are able to continue to employ Hunter people.

Create the conditions for small businesses to grow

Small business is seen as an important part of the employment puzzle in the Hunter, and there is support for grants to help existing small businesses and startups. There was support for a boost for Aboriginal-led business, and developing entrepreneurial abilities in local people.

WHAT WE HEARD

“You are better to spend money on the businesses already here rather than trying to get new businesses to come here.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“It’s not going to be one great big thing that comes to our rescue. With the right amount of government support we can stimulate job creation through small businesses.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“I was born in Muswellbrook. Before the coal mines there were little industries everywhere, maybe we have to get back to that.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“80% of business headquarters are located where the founders live ... it’s about creating the environment that makes people want to create a business, if they live in Cessnock they will create that business in Cessnock.”

Cessnock workshop participant



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Amcontrol

“Amcontrol is Australia’s largest privately-owned electrical engineering company leading advanced global manufacturing of award-winning innovations, products, solutions and services to the resources, infrastructure and energy sectors. Amcontrol works with its customers, employees and community in the evolving industrial landscape to make a meaningful and sustainable improvement to people’s lives around the world.

As the world adjusts to the global pandemic with a renewed focus on sovereign manufacturing and a carbon reduced future, our new strategic plan aims to strengthen our position as one of Australia’s leading advanced manufacturers of renewable energy solutions. Amcontrol’s modelling of the power generation sector several years ago identified the need to diversify our revenue sources. Interestingly our move to expand from a substantially coal-based revenue base has opened opportunities in areas we had not previously considered. As a result, thermal coal will be less than 20% of our revenue.

Amcontrol is investing heavily in research and development in the renewable energy space with over 25 dedicated R&D engineers employed through a collaborative partnership with The University of Newcastle. There is an immense benefit of industry and government bodies uniting, bringing great minds, capabilities and ingenuity together for the benefit and sustainability of our community and economy, and all done right here in Australia. The immense skill and expertise that we have in the Hunter Region form a platform for a sustainable large employment sector that can be a long term powerhouse for New South Wales.”

Rod Henderson, Managing Director & CEO, Amcontrol



“

If we get this right, the entire region could benefit on so many levels and lead the way as a sustainable and prosperous region, which could be an example for other regions worldwide.

Newcastle survey participant



Other issues people raised

We collated over 1,200 comments from Hunter region people in the workshops and survey about what is important to them. These comments didn't solely focus on the nominated priorities. Below is a snapshot of other regional priorities.

Environment & Climate

"We want to see a thriving future for our future generations. We are all concerned about what we will be leaving for them. We talk about this a lot [among friends]." Cessnock workshop participant

Change is needed to avoid the worst of climate change. This includes rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, water restrictions. Any transition process will need to take into account the likely impacts of climate change and include measures to strengthen resilience.

Air quality and pollution from mining and its impact on the health of humans and livestock. There is an expectation that as the mines and power plants close air quality will improve and there will be less danger from pollution of Lake Macquarie.

Concern for habitat destruction due to housing development. Some people are excited at the prospect of a growing Hunter. Others feel there is a need to regulate housing developments to avoid suburban sprawl, habitat destruction and loss, by promoting affordable and sustainable, high-density housing.

Health, Care & Community Services

People are concerned about inadequate health services. Given the uncertainties associated with transition and change, plus the disruption from lost jobs, changes in demand for businesses and the impacts of climate change will all generate stress and anxiety and generate mental health issues.

Energy justice. Allowing wide access for people to be able to take advantage of new renewable energy alternatives like solar power will mean green alternatives are not confined to the wealthy.

Concern that job losses related to an unplanned transition will put pressure on under-funded community groups. Unplanned transition will make problems like homelessness worse, putting more pressure on community organisations and non-profits. These organisations need increased funding to support a fair transition and to ensure that nobody is left behind.

Housing Affordability

Access to affordable housing is an issue, especially in areas where high wages have driven up rents. Building more affordable and sustainable housing is essential, but must not create further problems through poor insulation and inability to access renewable energy.

Homelessness. There is already widespread homelessness in some communities in the region. This has been exacerbated by treechangers and people with good mining jobs pushing up housing prices. This creates a steep gap between the haves and have-nots in the community. Unless something is done in advance to address this situation, the closure of coal mines and power plants will increase the homelessness problem.

Transport and Connectivity

Improving infrastructure to attract and grow new industries. While the existing rail, road and port infrastructure provide a good basis for developing the region, especially for manufacturing, it needs to be upgraded. This should be funded out of existing or expanded government budgets, not from the royalties fund.

Transport infrastructure to increase equity and access to employment and training opportunities. An upgraded public transport system to connect the towns of the Hunter is needed, in combination with facilities for active transport (e.g. cycling and walking) to access jobs and services.

Arts & Culture

Engage artists to tell the story of change. There is interest in supporting artistic activities and arts projects that tell the story of the Hunter's history and future, and portray who we are and what we represent. This is a way to support the arts industry that has suffered greatly under COVID.

IDEAS PRESENTED IN THE WORKSHOPS & SURVEY



Energy-Intensive Industries

A range of views exist on the energy transition path for existing heavy industry. Whilst some feel excited about sectors like aluminium smelting switching to renewable energy, workers in the industry are concerned about whether this is even practicable or might result in job losses. In any case participants recognised it would require large investment, and therefore had reservations about such funding coming from the \$25 million Royalties for Rejuvenation fund.

Support for development of new, decarbonised industries. New jobs should be “clean and green”, providing healthy and sustainable livelihoods across the region.

Other Industries

There’s general support for the development of manufacturing businesses in the Hunter that can be sustainable and competitive.

Tourism should be supported because the region has a rich history ideal for Indigenous and heritage tourism, and beautiful natural resources ideal for ecotourism and the wine industry. This requires investment, but also training and advice about how to develop sustainable tourism initiatives.

Agriculture. There is a strong interest in diversifying agricultural and livestock activities through innovative and competitive activities that preserve biodiversity, sustainability and resilience, and contribute to regional food security.

Local priorities

Cessnock

In Cessnock, there is stress and concern about social, environmental and economic pressures already present in the community, and about vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. Participants shared a sense of the inevitability of change and anxiety about the future.

“There’s so much fear about losing jobs.”

“My main concern is that people slip through the cracks. Even though the Hunter Valley is the most beautiful place to live in the world, we have people who are hungry, homeless and without a lot of hope.”

“Getting counselling, advice, and support makes a huge difference because people can start to re-envision their lives.”

“The Hunter is more than just coal mining—tourism is a major industry—but there is a lot of infrastructure that is still needed to support that, for example transport.”

Singleton

In Singleton, there is profound concern about how the community and economy will manage coming change. Yet, there is also enthusiasm to get going, and a strong desire for enabling the community to collaborate with government at the state and local level on this work. There was a strong focus on skills. Both the need for free and expanded vocational education, and for research into and recognition of the skills base already present in the mining industry. The mining workforce needs targeted programs centred on transferable skills and the practicalities of job-shift.

“There needs to be better coordination, but it should come from the community, through council, and then up to government for support.”

“We want to drag the wages and conditions up to what is paid in the mining industry. People say that it is great that we are looking after people in the care sector, but we won’t attract people from mining into the care sector without investment.”

“If we’re making grants to community organisations, vulnerable groups should be prioritised and Aboriginal groups especially.”

Muswellbrook

In Muswellbrook there was concern about the real challenge of wages and how people working in mining would be assisted to maintain their levels of income. People are confused about transition—wary of the terminology—and uncertain about what jobs may be coming and how much they will pay. Reskilling and vocational education were a top priority and participants reflected on the importance of using the skills already strongly present in the region.

Supporting existing businesses should take priority over attracting new business from outside, and small local business over large multinationals. Grants or incentives for business attraction won’t work unless there is the physical and social infrastructure present to support new opportunities, particularly internet, transport, education and health.

“You want to give what is already in your community a leg-up first and then see what else is out there.”

“To create compelling and enticing activities for developing new land uses or enterprise to town you have to have good infrastructure — internet, transport, training, health.”

“The mining workforce will need to have wages that are equal to what they have now or they will leave [the region].”

“[We need] some type of priority for those who are looking for jobs, prioritising people who have lost jobs in the local mines to get the jobs that are around.”

Maitland

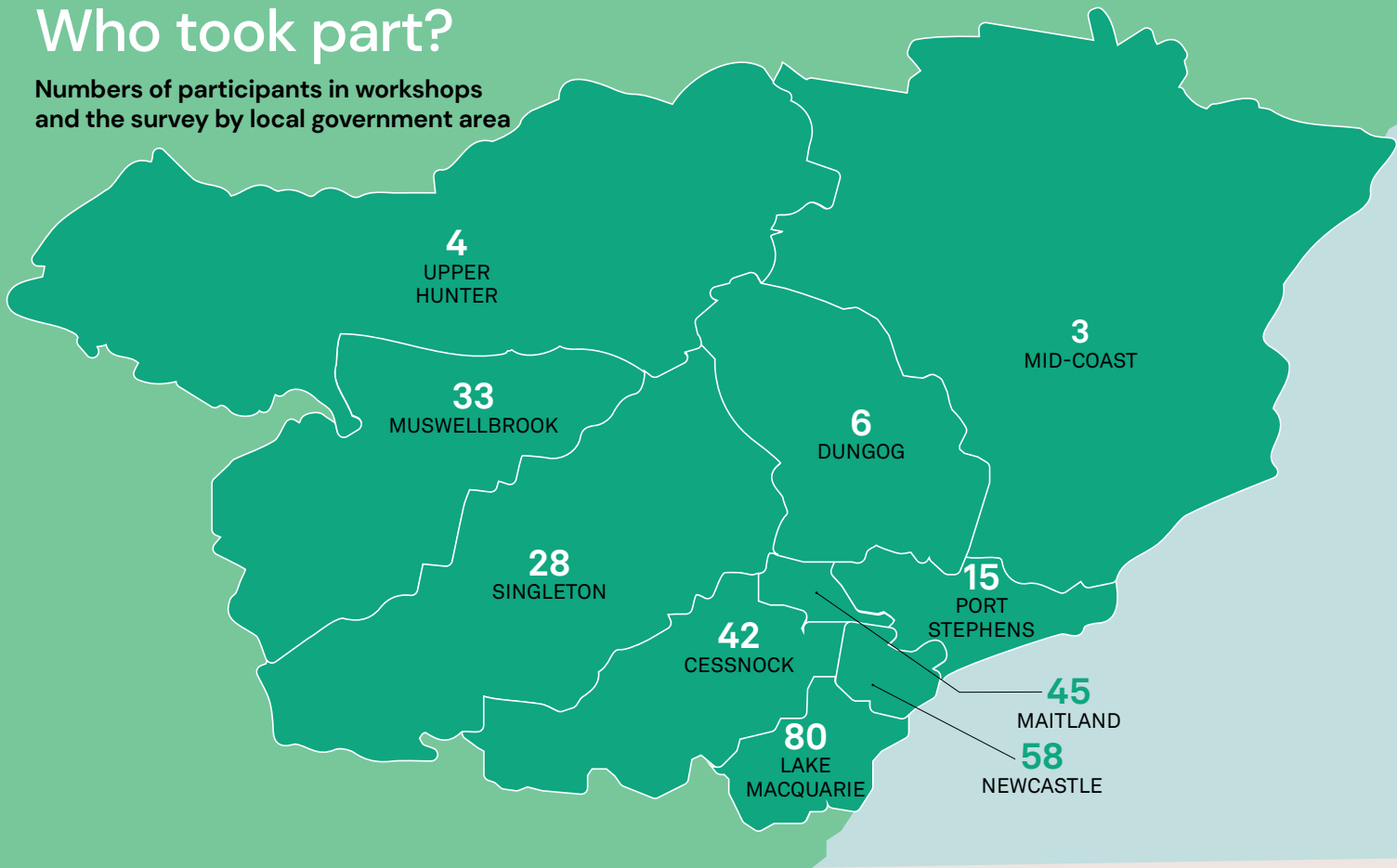
In Maitland, problems with housing affordability and homelessness were raised again, as was the underfunding of TAFE and the need for public transport. Regarding the region’s future, there was a shared sense that it was possible to manage change positively, but scepticism that this would happen.

Maitland people felt workers facing redundancy need support not just with training and job opportunities, but socially, financially and personally. The first thing people working in mining needed to see was job creation, and there was no reason why diversification should be seen as undermining the mining industry.

“I am worried about the political aspects of transition and how we can make it less about conflict and more about ideas.”

Who took part?

Numbers of participants in workshops and the survey by local government area



“My recall from BHP closure was that those who took up counselling benefited from it. This assists people through the path of moving from one employer to another, or to take up the opportunity to retire.”

“First there needs to be jobs. There cannot be advice if there are no jobs to go to. Governments are very happy to create another advisory industry and then there is nothing left for the workers. It needs to come later in the process.”

“I get to see some of the adults who have lost their jobs and we often can’t meet their health needs because we don’t have the staff.”

“Yes, the mines are wrecking our land but I get to benefit from the resources that they provide us every day.”

Lake Macquarie

In Lake Macquarie, participants expressed a sense that the area was lagging, with housing, vocational education and the arts already under-funded. There was sentiment, too, that the region is behind in transition planning and preparation, and there was a passionate desire to get to work on this. Many participants were aware of the “shovel-ready” potential of re-using coal ash from the dumps where it is stored at Eraring and Vales Point power stations. People with experience of the “boom and bust” of

the resources sector, closure of the steel works, and restructuring in electricity generation had clear ideas about the need for coordination, planning and support to help individual workers and the broader community prepare and respond to changes.

“There’s been a lot of dishonesty pointed toward the coal miners, they need honesty ... I’m worried that coal companies will walk away and leave us with bloody great holes to deal with.”

“I worked for TAFE for 27 years. Driving between Newcastle, Muswellbrook and Scone and over those years I saw a lot changes in the coal industry and how that affected all the other business and the kinds of people that could live in Muswellbrook because of the changes in air quality, and the cost of rents.”

“I come from a family that has strong mining connections but I now work for a domestic violence charity and I see how inequality of opportunity through all different regions and how it impacts families for generations.”

“We don’t have to have boom and bust: it can be handled differently if there are rules for companies that they have to form pools of employment, perhaps with other companies, so that people can be moved to different jobs within the region.”

What else we heard

“The poor state of the environment in the Hunter, in view of the climate crisis, leaves the region vulnerable to the huge economic costs that will be incurred by natural disaster. Improving the quality of biodiversity in hand with renewable technologies is a major priority.”

Maitland resident (survey)

“In terms of what is the most immediate and urgent issue, it’s workers being put off and not even getting their entitlements. Everything else comes behind that. Yes it’s nice to have financial counselling, but it doesn’t help a hell of a lot if you haven’t been given redundancy pay. You’re scrambling to put food on the table, pay your mortgage or rent.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

“Women must be equally represented in all planning groups.”

Cessnock resident (survey)

“Planning for a fair transition to a better society. This should always be the objective.”

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)

“We need access and equity, community at all levels, government and non-government involvement, as well as input from community groups.”

Lake Macquarie workshop participant

“Free vocational training for displaced workers removes the threat of no job and gives people opportunities to embrace change.”

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)

“It starts from where we are. Building on what we have is important.”

Singleton workshop participant

“If all the local authority is doing is reacting to government-led priorities then it is a little bit limiting. The government also needs to listen to the local authority and act on that. It needs to be a two-way flow.”

Muswellbrook workshop participant

“We need a co-ordinated approach to industrial development and skills requirements to ensure we can attract and foster the new industries which will prosper as we move towards net zero emissions.”

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)

"I'm worried if we do as we have always done, we are signing our grandchildren into a world of heat, food scarcity and terrible air, and a greater division between the wealthy and the poor."

Lake Macquarie resident (survey)

"We need to economically and socially leverage our unique advantages – proximity to existing large power infrastructure for new battery manufacturing and battery power stations, huge potential renewable energy sources, a port, potentially sustainable farming and forestry in carbon capture and organic food." Newcastle resident (survey)

"My daughter owns a business in both Scone and Muswellbrook and I am concerned that there will not be industries/population for her business to be viable."

Muswellbrook resident (survey)

"I hope there can be funding for renewable and other projects so that workers can re-skill and participate. Keep local people working towards something for their own, and their community's future." Maitland resident (survey)

"If workers can commence vocational education now they would be supported psychologically because they could see the pathway to future prospects."

Maitland workshop participant

"As a young person, I personally have great concerns about the trajectory of climate change and the lack of reasonable action taken by those who could make the biggest difference ... the Hunter absolutely has the potential to pioneer in the energy sector with a green perspective. Australia, as it lends the keys to young people, is going to live or die from how it deals with the real, physical problems of climate change."

Maitland resident (survey)

"There is a lot here about opening up land for new enterprises and industries. A lot of the land surrounding the mines is natural habitat and we need to assess and consider the habitat avenues. We have ignored these things for so long. We need to consider the long-term effects on the environment from opening up all this land." Lake Macquarie workshop participant

"Analysis is clear that what works is when companies, the community, and the government come together to plan and that this plan is executed."

Maitland workshop participant

"With a boom in the landcare industry I could find better opportunities for better paying jobs to support myself and my future family."

Newcastle resident (survey)

