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From the Editor



The Federal Budget to be delivered in May presents an opportunity to make some real reform to strengthen the Australian economy given the ALP's massive election win in 2025, coupled with it being the first Budget in the electoral cycle. It provides the perfect opportunity to put in place measures that provide long-term benefits without the temptation to offer short term sugar hits for an election.

The Australian economy certainly needs reforms, and it is pleasing that Treasurer Jim Chalmers has

identified that the Budget will focus on productivity, tax reform and spending.

Productivity is a key driver of economic growth and real wage growth but after good growth in the 1990s, has been fairly stagnant over recent decades and not improving. Since 2020, productivity has increased by an average of just 0.2% pa.

The reasons for the fall in productivity growth are complex and the solutions need to be multi-faceted, including workplace laws, training and tax reform. The latter being one of the Treasurer's stated aims for the coming Budget.

The truth is that tax reform is a very difficult process politically. Many voters will focus on perceived disadvantages and the benefits can take some time to fully materialise. But with the next

scheduled election being two years away and the Government holding such a large majority, now is the time to make some significant changes that will benefit the economy for years to come.

The Australian tax system is complex and many taxes impose a significant compliance burden on business. Removal of some of these taxes could result in a significant boost to the GDP even if there needs to be increases in the rate of the more efficiently collected taxes.

Successive Governments have been too scared to even consider looking at changes to the GST system, although modelling has suggested it could provide a major boost to the economy.

The third stated aim by the Treasurer, spending restraint, is also becoming more important each year. Apart from the inflationary pressures excessive Government spending creates, the Australian Government now has a debt of around \$1 trillion and the interest on servicing this debt is approaching \$20 billion a year.

The Federal Budgets are forecast to continue to be in deficit for some years to come, meaning this debt will grow further. Even a small increase in interest rates to service the debt will result in a significant impact on future budget bottom lines.

We will await with interest the release of the 2026 Federal Budget and hope that the Government will be brave enough to embrace true reform that will produce lasting benefits for the prosperity of the nation.

Garry Hardie
Editor and Publisher

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Minister Conroy inspects construction progress at Kongsberg Missile Factory

On 17 February KONGSBERG, together with Newcastle Airport (the Developer) and Multiplex Construction (the Builder) welcomed the Minister for Defence Industry, the Hon Pat Conroy MP, and Federal Member for Paterson, Meryl Swanson MP, to its missile factory at the Astra Aerolab Defence & Aerospace Precinct in Williamstown, NSW. This visit highlights the significant progress in establishing a sovereign guided weapon manufacturing capability in Australia.

Minister Conroy and Ms Swanson toured the construction site and received a comprehensive briefing on construction progress, key milestones, workforce growth, and the planned production timeframes of KONGSBERG Naval Strike Missiles (NSM) and Joint Strike Missiles (JSM) for the Australian Defence Force.

The Kongsberg Missile Factory will create a world-class missile manufacturing and maintenance capability in the Hunter region, supporting local jobs, skills development, and long-term industrial resilience.

John Fry, Managing Director of Kongsberg Defence Australia said the visit demonstrated tangible progress in delivering on the Government's commitment to sovereign guided weapons capability, strengthening Australia's industrial base and deepening strategic cooperation between Australia and Norway.

"The establishment of a missile manufacturing capability at Williamstown marks an important milestone in strengthening Australia's defence industry and ensuring we can produce and sustain critical capabilities at home as well as being a key node in the company's global missile production network," Mr Fry said.

Linc Horton, CEO of Newcastle Airport said the progress of this project strengthens advanced manufacturing in the Hunter.

"We're really pleased with the progress being made on



Kongsberg Defence Australia's new manufacturing facility at Astra Aerolab, which is strengthening advanced manufacturing in the Hunter and helping build Australia's sovereign capability. This investment will create skilled jobs and further positions the region and Astra Aerolab as a centre for defence industry growth".

Construction of the Kongsberg Missile Factory in Williamstown is the first defence project in New South Wales for the global contractor Multiplex.

"Multiplex is proud to commence work on this highly secure facility, drawing on our proven record of delivering complex government projects across Australia. With an established presence and strong networks in the Hunter, we look forward to expanding our work with local communities and businesses, and supporting sustainable employment pathways through the project and beyond," said NSW Regional Managing Director for Multiplex, David Ghannoum.



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Carrie's Place opens new office and launches Carrie's Coffee

Carrie's Place Domestic Violence and Homelessness Services is opening its new office location alongside the official launch of Carrie's Coffee, an innovative social enterprise designed to create meaningful employment and skill-building opportunities for people impacted by domestic and family violence.

The move to the new premises in Maitland, strengthens Carrie's Place's commitment to providing safe, accessible, and trauma-informed support for women, men and families across the Hunter region. The expanded space allows for increased service capacity, improved accessibility for clients, and closer proximity to key referral services that enhance wrap-around support.

The launch of Carrie's Coffee marks a new chapter in the organisation's mission to empower people on their path to independence. Through the training program and mobile coffee operations, participants will gain hands-on experience in customer service, barista skills, hospitality operations, and employability training—helping build confidence, financial independence, and long-term stability.

Carrie's Place acknowledges the generous support of:

- **Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation** – funding the purchase and fit-out of the mobile coffee van, establishing a strong operational foundation for the social enterprise,
- **Glencore** - providing critical support for personnel and training costs, ensuring the delivery of safe, consistent, trauma-informed supervision
- **Early Bird Coffee** – supplying discounted start-up consumables, enabling the enterprise to commence operations sustainably while maintaining a high-quality product.



Their investment ensures that participants have access to high-quality training, supportive supervision, and real-world work experience that reduces barriers to employment while ensuring a safe, trauma-informed learning environment.

\$200 million over 55s community for Cessnock

Construction has commenced on a new 300-home land lease community that will transform Cessnock's former Stonebridge Golf Course into a vibrant over 55s lifestyle destination.

The launch of The Hermitage represents a \$200 million investment in the Hunter region and will be the largest new community of its type in the Cessnock area. It will also be the first land lease community for Principle Living, expanding the company's presence in the region following the success of its Blueheath at the Bower community in Port Stephens.

The former Stonebridge Golf Course, which has been closed since 2019, will be brought back to life as part of the project. Further details, including the number of holes, par and public access times, will be released later in 2026. The existing clubhouse will be retained and refurbished.

The Hermitage will span 37 hectares and feature a host of resort-style facilities. Alongside the golf offering, residents will enjoy exclusive use of a private clubhouse, indoor pool, wellness gym, lawn bowls, pickleball courts and pocket parks. There will also be a dedicated parking area for caravans.

Buyers will be able to choose from a range of architecturally designed two- and three-bedroom homes set across three unique landscaped precincts with some homes offering picturesque golf course views. The Hermitage will operate under a land lease model, where residents own their home but lease the land it sits on via a long-term agreement. This allows residents to enjoy the benefits of home ownership without the cost of buying the land, paying stamp duty and may be eligible for rent assistance.

Civil works on The Hermitage have already started after the appointment of leading NSW construction company Daracon. Work on the first homes is expected to commence in the next few months with first residents moving in by early 2027.



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Newcastle to Sydney high-speed rail reaches development phase

The Federal Government has announced the next major milestone for Australia's High Speed Rail with the beginning of the development phase for High Speed Rail between Newcastle and Sydney.

This is a significant step in the delivery of faster, more reliable rail transport that will reshape how those in the Newcastle, Hunter and Central Coast region live, work and travel.

High Speed Rail between Newcastle and Sydney will cut travel times to around one hour from Newcastle to Central Sydney, with travel from the Central Coast to either Sydney or Newcastle reduced to just 30 minutes.

The current time from Newcastle to Sydney is around 2 hours and 40 minutes, which is about the same time as the first train services in 1887, albeit with fewer stops.

Stations are expected to be located at Newcastle, Morisset, Gosford and Sydney.

The \$659.6 million, two-year development phase will ensure that Line 1 is construction ready. As recommended by Infrastructure Australia, it is the detailed work required to lock in the design, approvals process, scope and cost to ensure major construction contracts can be awarded.

This disciplined approach to planning and construction sequencing is necessary to deliver a project of this size. As part of the Development Phase a range of potential public and private financing options will also be assessed. This work will inform a future Government investment decision once project scope, cost and risk are finalised.

They also released the business case for the project prepared by the High Speed Rail Authority.

The business case assesses this project will boost the Australian



economy by \$250 billion over the next 50 years and produce over 99,000 new jobs, supporting sectors like construction, advanced manufacturing and tourism.

Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government Catherine King said "High Speed Rail between Newcastle and Sydney will change the way people live, work and travel in our country's most populous region. It will connect the Newcastle and Central Coast communities to Sydney in a way that has never been done before.

"The Albanese Government is focused on delivery. This development phase will lay the foundations for delivery of High Speed Rail between Newcastle and Sydney, ensuring we secure the rail corridor and undertake detailed planning before we start building.

"Carefully planned, costed and detailed preparation takes time, but it means when construction starts, it is built to last."



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Hunter projects win at 2026 Regional Architecture Awards

The very best in regional architecture were acknowledged at the Australian Institute of Architects' 2026 Regional Architecture Awards held on 13 February at Yarrilla Place in Coffs Harbour with a number of Hunter projects taking out awards.

The Australian Institute of Architecture said this year's awarded projects reflect a profession championing work that is innovative, contextually grounded, and deeply connected to place. A rigorous judging process was undertaken by three juries of peers. Winners demonstrated thoughtful responses to the unique opportunities and challenges of regional communities, from climate resilience and sustainable growth to heritage stewardship and cultural recognition.

Jury Chair of Chairs, Bill Tsakalos LFRAIA reflected on the breadth of this year's awards program, saying "I have been amazed at the quality of submissions presented in 2026.

"The new regional submission structure showcases the strength and depth of architectural skills and the valuable contribution our profession makes to improving the built environment beyond the Sydney metropolitan area.

"Those entering the pool for state awards should be strong contenders."

NSW Chapter President, Elizabeth Carpenter FRAIA, stated that: "All of the selected projects this year demonstrate a remarkable clarity of intent, a commitment to simplicity in detailing, a deep care for their environment, and a profound respect for context.

"Their material palettes are restrained yet inventive, proving that richness in architecture can be achieved through precision and purpose.



St Bede's Catholic College by SHAC, winner of the Educational Architecture Award

A portrait of a smiling man with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark jacket over a blue polo shirt. He is standing in front of a wooden structure, possibly a construction site. The image is part of a HIA advertisement.

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"Design Excellence demands rigour at every scale. This is evident in the considered siting of a building within its landscape and equally in the resolution of a single junction detail.

"Nothing is incidental. Across every project, there is a powerful and deliberate connection to the landscape—so strong, in fact, that it emerges as a defining theme in this year's Regional Awards.

"This year saw a record number of entries. While not all received awards, every submission deserves recognition for its contribution to strengthening and enriching the built environment of the communities in which these projects stand."

Multi-award winning local architects SHAC were again winners, taking out the Educational Architecture Award for Stage 2 of St Bede's Catholic College at Chisholm. SHAC said that the second stage of this four-stage Masterplan is a physical manifestation of their key ordering principles: transition, flexibility, efficiency and sustainability. Collaboration with teachers, mentors, pedagogy and regional values informed the translation of these principles into the built environment.

Highlighting their expertise in education projects, SHAC also received Commendation in this category for Lake Cathie Public School and Newcastle Grammar School Park Campus - Stage One Development.

The Regional Medallion was won by Austin McFarland's First Steps Count Child and Community Centre in Taree. In a big night for this project, it also received an award in Public Architecture as well as Sustainable Architecture.

The David Boyle Award (Central Division) was taken out by Swansea Heads House by Anthrosite. It also won the Interior Architecture Award as well as Residential Architecture – Houses (New).



“All of the selected projects this year demonstrate a remarkable clarity of intent, a commitment to simplicity in detailing, a deep care for their environment, and a profound respect for context.

“Their material palettes are restrained yet inventive, proving that richness in architecture can be achieved through precision and purpose.

NSW Chapter President, Elizabeth Carpenter FRAIA

Other local projects that took out awards at the 2026 Regional Architecture Awards included:

- Surf Check by Incidental Architecture which took out the Timber Award as well as picking up an award in the Residential Architecture – Houses (New) category
- 42 Honeysuckle Drive by Bates Smart, winner of the Commercial Architecture Award
- Fort House by Curious Practive, a winner in the Residential Architecture – Houses (Alterations and Additions) category

Winners have the opportunity to progress to the NSW Architecture Awards and then to the Australian Architecture Awards.



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Newcastle Airport achieves record quarter as international growth accelerates

The final quarter of 2025 delivered Newcastle Airport's highest ever passenger results for any quarter. A total of 340,778 passengers travelled through the terminal in October, November and December, ending a successful year for the airport which included the completion of the expanded terminal and new direct flights to Bali, Perth and Hobart.

December alone saw 111,007 passengers capping off a milestone period that confirms the airport's vital role in regional travel and economic growth. The Airport is on track to achieve 1.334 million passengers by the end of FY26, a record number for the airport and Hunter Region.

This milestone comes as international services expand. Direct flights to Bali have launched successfully and from 29 March 2026, passengers will be able to travel from Newcastle to Singapore via Bali, a critical connection to one of Asia's most important hubs.

Newcastle Airport CEO Linc Horton said the results reflect both strong demand and the confidence of travellers in the region.

"In a case of build it and they will come; the Hunter is proving that the new terminal and greater connectivity is exactly what the region ordered.

"Passenger demand continues to exceed expectations and this record quarter highlights the Hunter's readiness for more direct international services," Mr Horton said.

"We have the terminal, the infrastructure and the catchment. To help reach State and Federal tourism objectives, what we need now is strategic partnership from both governments to help unlock the next wave of air connectivity for the Greater Hunter and our extended catchment."

To build on this momentum, Newcastle Airport has submitted a proposal to the NSW Government for co-investment in new aviation routes and feasibility for an airline base on site.

Under its NSW budget ask, Newcastle Airport has proposed a co-funded five-year Newcastle Airport Accelerated Aviation Growth Fund to the NSW Government. This fund would unlock an additional 1,000,000 airline seats into NSW annually. Designed to directly support the NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2035 target of 8.5 million new airline seats, the program will accelerate international and domestic connectivity into the Hunter, stimulating visitor growth, regional investment and job creation.

At the federal level, Newcastle Airport is focussing on supporting the safe and scalable expansion of international operations, supporting Australia's sovereign capability, looking at sustainability via greener air travel and moving to close the gap in the region's logistics network.

Custom designed homes at Lovedale Farm

Capital Corporation has announced a partnership with Eden Brae Homes to deliver custom designed homes at Lovedale Farm, the landmark master planned golf estate taking shape in the Hunter Valley wine region.

As part of the collaboration, Eden Brae Homes has constructed the Lovedale Farm display home, which will officially open to the public on Saturday 21 March. The 4-bed, 4-bath, 292 sqm display home is one of a collection of homes custom designed specifically for the project. It features a generous master suite with 3 m ceilings, dedicated golf buggy parking, and a farmhouse kitchen complete with a butler's pantry. Premium upgrades that further enhance the home include an outdoor kitchen, walk-in wine display and gas fireplace.

The opening will give off-the-plan buyers, future residents and the broader community the opportunity to step inside the home, experience the design and finishes firsthand, and learn more about the homes and land now available at Lovedale Farm.

Jim Hunter, Managing Director of Capital Corporation, said the



partnership builds on a strong history of successful collaboration between the two groups.

"This is not our first collaboration. Capital Corporation has partnered with Eden Brae Homes across several successful communities, including Fairway Views and Fairway Gardens neighbourhoods at Kellyville," Mr Hunter said.

"Lovedale Farm represents a continuation of that proven partnership, underpinned by a shared focus on quality, delivery and creating places people are proud to call home. We are pleased to be bringing that experience to the Hunter Valley."

Arthur Ilias, General Managing Director of Eden Brae Homes, said the Lovedale Farm display home showcases the lifestyle and craftsmanship buyers can expect and marks an exciting new chapter for the project.

"Lovedale Farm presents a rare opportunity to create homes that are custom designed for their setting, with refined layouts, quality inclusions and a strong connection to the way people want to live in the Hunter Valley," Mr Ilias said.

Port of Newcastle becomes Major Partner of McDonald Jones Stadium

Port of Newcastle has forged a multi-year agreement with Venues NSW as a Major Partner of McDonald Jones Stadium, supporting the Hunter region's most loved events and experiences.

Executive Manager Corporate Affairs, Lucas Coleman, said the significant partnership reinforces the Port's commitment to investing in the region's growth, livability and community spirit.

"For more than 220 years, Port of Newcastle has connected the Hunter to global markets, so we are thrilled to partner with another local icon that shares our passion for our region, and for connecting the people and places that make it great," Mr Coleman said.

"McDonald Jones Stadium is Newcastle's home of world-class sports and entertainment, which has already played host to some of the biggest international sporting and musical acts like the Wallabies, the Matildas, Elton John, Paul McCartney, and P!nk.

"Funding from our partnership will assist Venues NSW in attracting even bigger and better events, uniting fans, families, and visitors, and driving future economic growth in our region."

McDonald Jones Stadium Venue Manager, Dean Mantle, said the venue was thrilled to welcome the Port of Newcastle as a Major Partner.

"We're excited to welcome the Port of Newcastle to the McDonald Jones Stadium family as our Major Partner," Mr Mantle said.

"The Port of Newcastle is an integral part of the Hunter community, and we're looking forward to working together."

The partnership with Venues NSW is one of the ways Port of Newcastle proudly contributes to a vibrant and thriving community, including sponsorship of the Newcastle Jets and its \$100,000 annual Your Port, Our Community grants program.



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\$500,000 boost for expanded Newcastle Art Gallery

City of Newcastle has kicked off 2026 with a \$500,000 boost from the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation as final preparations occur before the opening of the \$48 million expansion project. The donation is the result of community fundraising by the Foundation and follows the signing of a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with City of Newcastle.

City of Newcastle CEO Jeremy Bath said the organisations were dedicated to the future of the expanded Gallery, which celebrated its full reopening in February.

“Since being established in 1977 the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation has played an integral role in supporting the growth and success of the Gallery through advocacy, fundraising and contributions to its nationally significant collection,” Mr Bath said.

“This \$500,000 donation follows \$12.5 million raised over many years for the Gallery’s expansion and demonstrates the Foundation’s ongoing dedication to its success, which is reinforced by a memorandum of understanding between our two organisations.

“We look forward to gathering together with the Foundation and our community next week to celebrate the full reopening of the Gallery, which will mark the completion of the largest capital works project and most significant commitment to cultural infrastructure in City of Newcastle’s history.”

Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation Deputy Chair Ian Andrews said the community contribution via the Foundation was the catalyst for securing support from all levels of government.

“The initial \$10 million commitment in 2020 was made possible through the Valerie and John Ryan Bequest, together with community fundraising over many years, and we are proud to have raised more than \$2.5 million since launching the expansion fundraising campaign in early 2022,” Mr Andrews said.

“Thanks to the prudent investment of donor funds over several years, the Foundation is pleased to be able to contribute a further \$500,000 to honour its \$13 million goal.

The elected Council and members of the Foundation’s Board unanimously endorsed the new MoU at their respective meetings in December last year.

The MoU recognises the historical and cultural importance of the Gallery as custodian of the most valuable public art collection in Australia outside of a capital city, which provides a time capsule of Australian art dating back more than 200 years and is worth \$145 million.

It acknowledges the work undertaken by City of Newcastle and the Foundation to preserve and promote the Gallery and reflects the shared strategic priorities of the two organisations, including financial support of exhibitions and programming, and the long-term sustainability of the Gallery as a leading cultural institution.

The expansion project is supported by \$5 million from the Australian Government under the Regional Recovery Partnerships and \$5 million from the New South Wales Government under the Regional Recovery Package, as well as \$13 million from the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation.

NSW Government to trial council developed system that slashes DA times by 50%

The NSW Government has provided funding of \$2 million to City of Newcastle for a DA approval process that has seen the council slash its DA times by more than 50%.

The Accelerated Development Application (ADA) system significantly reduces assessment times for low-risk, decision-ready development applications, cutting the average turnaround to less than 10 days.

The Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI)

has awarded City of Newcastle \$2 million to develop a framework for the rollout of the ADA model, beginning with a trial phase at several councils seeking to speed up determination of DAs.

City of Newcastle’s Chief Executive Officer Jeremy Bath said the NSW Government was to be congratulated for looking to his council for advice on how to help other councils whose DA processing times are just too slow.

“City of Newcastle has developed an innovative process for fast tracking determination times for DAs without compromising quality or increasing staffing numbers,” Mr Bath said.

Executive Director of Planning and Environment Michelle Bisson said the program’s success is built on collaboration, innovation and a shared commitment to improving the development approval process.

“City of Newcastle is leading the way in innovating development assessments to set a state-best benchmark recognised by the NSW Government for its efficiencies and broader potential,” Ms Bisson said.

“Since creating and implementing the ADA in 2022, City of Newcastle has been consistently ranked the fastest-performing council in the state for DA determinations.

“For low-risk applications such as minor home renovations, councils can now issue approvals in less than two weeks. The system allows planning teams to dedicate more time to complex projects, improving overall turnaround times.

“The ADA system has already been successfully implemented at Muswellbrook Shire Council and Upper Hunter Shire Council through a \$1 million joint grant from the NSW Government, demonstrating its scalability and impact.

Since its launch in 2022, City of Newcastle’s ADA system has processed more than 1,300 applications, reducing undetermined DAs by 52% with an average of less than 10 days to process many low-risk applications.

City of Newcastle’s ADA pathway covers 10 types of developments. Most applications determined are residential, including alterations and additions, single dwellings and secondary dwellings. The system improves the quality of information lodged and uses an eligibility checker to quickly determine if an application can be assessed through ADA. The higher efficiency frees up council staff for more complex DAs, increasing capacity for merit assessment and responding to site constraints. This results in improved development outcomes and timeframes.

The Mutual Bank teams up with NRLW Stars

The Mutual Bank is proud to announce a new partnership with two of the Hunter’s leading women in sport - NRLW stars Yasmin Meakes and Olivia Higgins.

Both athletes are standout performers for the Newcastle Knights and proud Jillaroos representatives, carrying their Hunter roots onto the national stage. As respected leaders in women’s sport, Meakes and Higgins now join The Mutual Bank as official partners.

Yasmin Meakes, captain of the Newcastle Knights, has represented Australia in both Rugby Union and Rugby League. Raised in Cardiff South, she previously spent several years teaching in Scone, building strong ties within the local community. She is now a teacher at Newcastle High and is also the cofounder of Future Fierce Academy, empowering young female athletes.

Olivia Higgins is a three-time NRLW premiership winner and representative for NSW and Australia. A Raymond Terrace local and teacher at Newcastle High, she works alongside Meakes through Future Fierce Academy to support the development of young women in sport.

This partnership strengthens the Bank’s longstanding commitment to supporting local talent, empowering women in sport, and investing in the communities it proudly serves.

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Outstanding local students recognised through Mayoral Academic Scholarships

Port Stephens Council has announced the recipients of the Mayoral Academic Scholarship Program, celebrating outstanding local students as they prepare to commence tertiary study this year.

The Mayoral Academic Scholarship Program, which is now in its 16th year, has supported over 180 students from across Port Stephens. This achievement has been made possible through strong partnerships among the Council, the Mayor, and local businesses.

Mayor Leah Anderson said the standard of applicants this year was exceptionally high.

The program provides \$2,000 scholarships. It is proudly sponsored by local businesses that offer recipients both financial assistance and the opportunity to connect with industry leaders across Port Stephens.

Mayor Anderson said the strength of this year's interview process led to a new milestone for the program.

"This year we've selected three additional students, who inspired the selection panel and as a result will also be formally recognised with a \$1000 contribution towards their studies," Mayor Anderson said.

Recipients of the Mayoral Academic Scholarships will pursue a wide range of study areas, including marine and Antarctic science, medicine, engineering, biomedical, radiation and medical science, midwifery, physiotherapy, paramedicine, criminology, education, law, media and communications and business - reflecting the diverse aspirations of young people across the region.

Mayor Anderson thanked the local businesses that continue to invest in the future of Port Stephens.

The Mayoral Academic Scholarship recipients were formally recognised at a presentation event held at Nelson Bay Golf Club on 12 February 2026.

The business-partnered \$2000 scholarships recipients included Destiny Atutahi, Zo Beks, Anique de Vries, Lily Genders, Kate Gibson, Charlie Hartmann, Ashley Horne, Alexander Hopwood, Lacey Jones, Breanna Kempf, Elisha Lai, Bronte Micheli, Mikaylee Parsons, Stephanie Prouse, Jackson Skaines, Taylor Smith, Samantha Sutton and Asher Telfer.

Mayoral Contribution \$1000 recipients were Suzy Cole, Jorja Lamb and Ethan van Lonkhuyzen.

New high speed response vessel for NSW

Port Authority has unveiled a new 10 m state-of-the-art marine response vessel that has been designed and constructed under the craftsmanship of local master marine builders in Newcastle.

When completed, the new vessel will join Port Authority's Sydney Harbour and Port Botany response teams and, with twin 300-horsepower outboard engines and 870-litre fuel capacity, it will be ready to support crews in fast, reliable emergency response and patrol duties around port waters.

More than twenty local specialist shipbuilders and maritime experts have been working closely with the Port Authority team to deliver this vessel over the past several months.

Port Authority of NSW Acting Group Executive of Assets Catherine Blaine said the new vessel showcases the quality of shipbuilding skills in Newcastle and Port Authority's focus on investing in maritime assets to support frontline maritime operations.

"Port Authority is proud that this build also supports regional jobs, apprenticeships and advanced manufacturing capability, strengthening NSW's maritime sector and demonstrating the value of retaining world-class skills in regional communities."

"Our people have played a key role in the design and customisation of this vessel, ensuring it reflects the practical requirements, safety focus, and innovation that define Port



Port Authority unveils new high-speed response vessel
- credit Port Authority of NSW

Authority's operations.

"Once construction and on water testing is complete, the vessel will travel to Sydney to join Port Authority's operational fleet supporting our crews to undertake important work including navigation aid maintenance, pollution response, general patrols and response to a wide range of reporting or identified maritime issues and incidents."

The Whiskey Project Group CEO Darren Schuback said they are building world-class vessels in Newcastle, powered by the skill, precision and pride of their local workforce.

"The Whiskey Project Group is proudly building advanced maritime manufacturing capability that showcases the depth of talent in our community."

"Every new NAiAD vessel represents real investment in high-skilled jobs, hands-on opportunities for apprentices and long-term careers in the maritime industry. We're proud to be part of Newcastle's manufacturing story and by backing local people, growing capability, we're helping to secure Newcastle as one of Australia's key manufacturing heartlands."

While its core purpose remains consistent with existing response vessels, the new build delivers enhanced performance, improved safety features and updated technology:

- A reinforced, marine-grade aluminium hull and level-flotation foam to maximise stability, buoyancy and safety at speed.
- A collar system and high-performance suspension seating further reduce impact in rough conditions.
- Integrated navigation and communications suite that delivers real-time situational awareness.
- Twin high-performance engines that deliver speeds of up to 42 knots (approximately 77 kph).

Let us know
about your **New
Appointments!**

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2026

HUNTER INVESTMENT PROSPECTUS

YOUR NEXT SMART BUSINESS,
INVESTMENT & LIFESTYLE
CHOICE

Published by Hunter Business Publications Pty Ltd, the **Hunter Investment Prospectus** is an important promotional project for the Region that is distributed as a high-quality hard copy as well as online.

View a copy of the 2026
Hunter Investment Prospectus
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SUPPORTERS

The **Hunter Investment Prospectus** is only made possible by the following organisations that have supported this project and are active supporters of the growth of the Hunter Region.

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BAE Systems
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Port Stephens Council
Zeal Futures

For queries or feedback regarding the **2026 Hunter Investment Prospectus**, please contact:

Hunter Business Publications Pty Ltd P: +61 2 4062 8133 E: info@HBRmag.com.au W: www.HBRmag.com.au

COMING EVENTS

20 March 2026, 7:00 am – 2:00 pm

HIA

HIA Golf Day

Venue: Rydges Resort Hunter Valley

Cost: \$850.00 – \$975.00

<https://hia.com.au/awards-and-events/events/golf-day/hunter-nsw/2026/golf-day-lovedale-mar20>

25 March 2026, 6:00 pm – 11:00 pm

Business Hunter

Hunter Nexus, proudly sponsored by Newcastle Airport

Venue: Great Hall, The University of Newcastle

Cost: \$165.00 – \$198.00

<https://events.humanitix.com/hunter-nexus-or-march-2026>

26 March 2026

Business Hunter

CEO Connect, hosted by Sparke Helmore

<https://www.businesshunter.com/hunter-business-events/our-events>

27 March 2026, 12:00 pm – 3:00 pm

Maitland Business Centre

Women in Business featuring Kim Payne

Venue: Maitland Town Hall

Cost: \$150.00 – \$160.00

<https://maitlandbusiness.com.au/event/women-in-business-2026/>

21 May 2026, 8:00 am – 9:30 am

HunterNet

Future Manufacturing Forum – Total Cost of Ownership Series

Venue: HunterNet Office

<https://hunternet.com.au/event/future-manufacturing-forum-total-cost-of-ownership-series-2/>

29 May 2026, 7:00 pm

Hunter Region Business Hub (The Hub)

Hunter Region Business Excellence Awards

Venue: Ben Ean, Pokolbin

Cost: \$160.00

<https://www.hunternet.com.au/business-community/awards/>

ARE YOU ORGANISING A COMING BUSINESS EVENT?

We would be pleased to receive basic information as above for consideration for inclusion in a coming issue of **HBR**.

Advertising opportunities in **HBR** and the **HBR** email newsletter are also available.

Please email garry@HBRmag.com.au



WHAT YOUR P&L REVEALS ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP

Andrew Redding
ARC Business Development

The wrong definition

Most people would define leadership as the ability to manage and motivate a team, attract great people, communicate clearly and build a winning culture. Yes, but they're just *some* aspects of leadership. Leadership also means you know your numbers and protect the business financially. The leaders who don't aren't just missing part of what great leadership is; they're walking a tightrope.

Owners who consistently lead well have one thing in common that rarely gets talked about: *they have an intimate knowledge of their numbers*. Not just at a surface level. They actually understand them, see the story they tell, and make strategic decisions from them. That understanding, and having their finger on the pulse of the business, creates real leadership.

What financial chaos actually costs you

When a business's financials are unclear — cash flow unpredictable, margins unknown, the owner stressed every time payroll comes around — that stress doesn't stay in the finance department. It follows the owner into every conversation, every meeting, every decision. It's a weight they carry constantly.

In this state, leading your team and doing the important things to move the business forward cannot be the priority. You're too overwhelmed to think clearly and take action. You're in survival mode: solving today's problem, managing today's anxiety. Thinking long-term with a clear head is near impossible under that kind of financial pressure.

Lack of financial clarity doesn't just hurt your bottom line. It actively prevents you from showing up the way your business needs you to.

You can't give what you don't have

A team needs a leader who's present, focused, and calm. Those things are near impossible to do when you're stressed about money. The irritability, the distraction, and the reactive decision-making are something your team experiences with you, even if you're not aware of it. Over time, it erodes the trust and culture you're trying to build.

This is why having a complete financial system is a leadership decision, not just a financial one. The two are more connected than most owners realise.

Five numbers

Understanding your financial position doesn't mean you need to be a numbers guru or have an accounting degree. For most businesses, it comes down to five key numbers: total income, direct costs, gross profit, overheads and net profit. Knowing those five things lets you make confident, strategic decisions. The stress drops, for everyone, and you get back the mental space that financial pressure was consuming.

What becomes possible

When owners have financial clarity, they become better leaders. Not because they've learned a new technique, but because they're less distracted. They make decisions based on what the numbers show, not what feels most urgent. They plan ahead instead of reacting.

That reclaimed time and attention goes into growing the business: developing people, increasing sales, delivering services profitably. These actions compound, and the goals set when the business first started finally become achievable.

Creating this financial clarity is one of the core things we focus on inside SPARC. The P&L, it turns out, isn't just a financial document. It's a fairly accurate map of where your current leadership stands.

For further information contact ARC Business Development on 0400 538 332, email support@arcbusinessdevelopment.com.au or visit www.arcbusinessdevelopment.com.au



Andrew Redding is the founder of ARC Business Development. He has built and exited multiple 7-figure businesses across various industries. He works directly with business owners, educating and supporting them to apply ARC's 10 Fundamentals of Business; which build structured, profitable, and sustainable businesses. His focus is on execution over theory.

YOUR BUSINESS IS
MAKING GOOD MONEY.
SO WHY IS THERE
SO LITTLE PROFIT FOR YOU?

You're working hard, revenue is coming in, but your bank account doesn't show it. And you have no idea why.

Most business owners are **one simple financial system** away from knowing exactly where their money is going.

SCAN THE QR CODE
TO LEARN THE PROVEN
PROFIT VISIBILITY SYSTEM.

DELIVERING RESULTS | DRIVING CHANGE

2026 EMPLOYMENT LAW ESSENTIALS FOR HUNTER EMPLOYERS

Kyle Scott
Australian Business Lawyers & Advisors

As 2026 gets underway, employers across the Greater Hunter region are facing a year where employment law stops being about what's coming, and becomes about what's here. After several years of rapid, complex and often overwhelming legislative change, 2026 is the year the rubber hits the road. The reforms employers have been preparing for (or avoiding) are now fully live, and the way the Fair Work Commission and courts apply them is becoming clearer.

Below are the essential developments Hunter businesses need to keep on their radar.

1. Flexible work: The big issue of 2026

Flexible work requests under section 65 of the Fair Work Act are expanding rapidly. More employees qualify, refusals are tightly constrained, and the Commission can now review and rule on decisions. Expect more requests, often AI-enhanced and highly detailed. Employers should:

- Follow the statutory process precisely.
- Engage meaningfully with requests.
- Document the basis of any refusal thoroughly.

This area is set to grow even further once the national Working From Home test case delivers its outcome.

2. Psychosocial hazards: Believe the hype

What once felt like a "soft" compliance obligation is now a real regulatory risk. SafeWork NSW is actively enforcing psychosocial hazard duties, including unannounced visits, improvement notices, and strict compliance timelines. For Hunter employers:

- Treat psychosocial safety with the same seriousness as physical safety.
- Ensure HR and WHS functions are integrated. HR processes can create WHS risks.
- Be cautious about allowing regulators "helpful access"; their role is enforcement, not consultancy.

3. General protections claims are soaring

General protections (GP) claims have jumped significantly in recent years, with a 57% increase compared to the three-year average. More than half of applicants are ineligible for unfair dismissal, meaning GP claims are now the "go-to" option for many employees, and AI is making that easier. Key takeaways for employers:

- GP claims are cheap and simple to lodge, but expensive to contest.
- The reverse onus of proof remains a major risk. Employers must prove the decision was not made for a prohibited reason.
- Clear record-keeping is essential: who made the decision, when they made it, and why.

The Commission is also shifting to a more streamlined conciliation style: fewer submissions, shorter conferences, and a sharper focus on "Will you settle?" Employers should expect more claims, shorter conciliations, and pressure to resolve.

Your *Local* team

Experts make things simple

abla Australian Business
Lawyers & Advisors



Caitlin Vincent
Associate Director

Dominic Mather
Associate

Claudia Simmons
Associate

Kyle Scott
Director

Kate Thomson
Associate Director

Rod Harrison
Principal Associate

When your business has a workplace, employment or industrial relations legal issue, get in touch with the team who work only for employers and are experts in this field.

Call today for a complimentary consultation.

ablawyers.com.au

WORKPLACE & EMPLOYMENT

4. The rise of AI-shaped employment issues

AI use among employees has moved from novelty to norm. Workers are increasingly turning to generative AI to draft complaints, performance responses, flexible work requests and even general protections applications. The result? Communications that are more polished, more legally assertive and often more strategically framed than in the past. For employers, this means:

- Expect higher-quality complaints and claims, even from unrepresented employees.
- Be prepared for more complex, more formal internal processes.
- Ensure HR teams know how to distinguish genuine employee responses from AI-generated narratives — and manage both appropriately.

5. A new era for enterprise bargaining

Reforms to enterprise bargaining are beginning to bite, especially in sectors active in the Hunter, including manufacturing, construction-adjacent trades and care services. Key developments:

- Multi-employer bargaining is no longer theoretical; it's now being used in industries like early childhood education and electrical contracting.
- The Fair Work Commission has increased power to insert terms into agreements to satisfy the BOOT, even without employer consent.
- Employers with expired agreements may be compelled to bargain when requested.

If bargaining hasn't been a recent priority for your business, 2026 may change that.

For Hunter region employers, the message is clear: invest in compliance, tighten documentation, and prepare for more employee-driven claims and negotiations. The businesses that fare best will be those that stay proactive, informed and well-supported.

Stay informed by subscribing to updates at <http://www.ablawyers.com.au> and get in touch if anything in this article has raised concerns for you.



Kyle Scott, is based in the Newcastle office of Australian Business Lawyers & Advisors (ABLA). Kyle leads the team of experts in workplace, employment and industrial relations law. ABLA has been involved in significant test case proceedings and consultations testing the latest IR Reform legislations. Acting only for employers, the team have a unique understanding of workplace dynamics in a complex regulatory environment

IMMIGRATION, LEADERSHIP AND HR: A WORKFORCE ISSUE, NOT A PAPERWORK EXERCISE

Ndi Ruppert
Ruppert Legal Pty Ltd

For many Hunter businesses, migration is no longer a “nice to have”. It is a leadership and HR issue that sits at the centre of workforce planning. Skills shortages remain real across construction, manufacturing, engineering, health and trades.

Local labour supply alone cannot meet demand; therefore, Business leaders who treat immigration as a strategic function are better placed to grow, retain staff and stay competitive.

Strong leadership means planning beyond the next quarter. That includes understanding where future skills will come from. Migration should be part of workforce forecasting – alongside training, succession planning and automation.

When leaders involve HR early, visa pathways can align with genuine business needs rather than reactive hiring under pressure. Businesses that leave migration until a role is vacant often face delays, higher costs and lost productivity. Those that plan ahead gain certainty.

HR teams are no longer just managing contracts and compliance. They are managing people across borders, cultures and visa conditions. This requires:

- clear systems,
- right-to-work checks,
- visa expiry tracking, and
- role alignment with sponsorship obligations.

Done well, this reduces risk and builds trust with sponsored workers. Done poorly, it exposes the business to penalties and reputational damage.

Retention matters more than recruitment

Sponsorship is not just about filling a vacancy. It is about keeping talent. Migrant workers are more likely to stay when they feel supported and have a sense of security for their future. That means onboarding, inclusive leadership and clear career / permanent visa pathways.

Leaders who invest in cultural awareness and communication training see better engagement and lower turnover. This is not a “flexible” issue. It directly affects productivity and continuity.

Compliance is a leadership responsibility

Immigration compliance is often delegated; however, responsibility is not. Directors and senior managers remain accountable for sponsorship obligations. This includes ensuring roles are genuine, records are accurate and changes are reported.

Good governance and legal support in this space reflects overall leadership maturity.

A competitive advantage for the Hunter

The Hunter region competes nationally and globally for skills. Businesses that can confidently sponsor, support and retain overseas talent gain an edge. Immigration, when managed strategically, strengthens teams and future-proofs operations.

For leaders and HR professionals, the message is simple: Migration is not just an administrative process. It is a people strategy.

Handled well, it supports growth. Handled poorly, it holds it back.

For further information contact Rupert Legal on (02) 4021 1090, email ndi@ruppertlegal.com.au or visit www.ruppertlegal.com.au



Ndi Ruppert is the principal and founder of Ruppert Legal, a boutique immigration law firm based in the Hunter region. She holds a Bachelor of Business and Law, a Diploma of Legal Practice, and a Master of Laws with Distinction majoring in Human Rights and International Business from the University of Newcastle.

WHY LEADERSHIP CLARITY BEATS LEADERSHIP CHARISMA

Chally Kacelnik and Sam Robinson
LKS Quaero

Leadership advice often sounds a bit fluffy and theatrical: be bold, be visionary, be decisive. Yet most leaders across the Hunter aren't operating on a grand stage. They're often working through uncertain conditions with constrained budgets, competing priorities, and constant change, often with limited room to manoeuvre. This is where clarity matters, and good leaders know that putting on a show of false confidence and charisma is not enough.

At LKS Quaero, much of our work is about helping leaders to navigate complexity when the answers aren't neat and the path forward isn't linear. What we consistently see is that teams don't need leaders to be certain about the future: they need them to be clear and have a justifiable plan.

Clarity is not certainty

Clarity is frequently mistaken for confidence. In reality, it's the ability to articulate what is known, what isn't, and how decisions will be made as circumstances evolve. People are remarkably capable of coping with ambiguity; what they struggle with is confusion.

When clarity is missing, work slows down and decisions are escalated unnecessarily. Frustration grows, even among capable and committed people. Often, this isn't a motivation problem; it's a sense-making problem. When expectations are left up in the air, people fill in the gaps themselves – and they often do so with negative mythologies about the unknown.

Effective leaders also recognise that sharing general information or enthusiasm is not the same as creating understanding through targeted communication. They know that people need to know where they stand in relation to the change, and what it means for their role.

Translating intent into action

Clarity shows up in with consistent leadership. It's visible when priorities are named rather than assumed, when trade-offs are acknowledged instead of avoided, and when leaders explain not just what has been decided, but why.

This often requires slowing down when the instinct is to move quickly. Pausing to clarify expectations at the outset of a change can prevent months of rework later. In our leadership and organisational work at LKS Quaero, we regularly see that the most effective interventions may or may not be complex, but are always precisely communicated. There are clear and documented roles, decision-making authorities, and metrics for success.

Clarity also means being honest about constraints. Saying "yes" to everything is rarely helpful. Naming what will not be prioritised can be just as powerful as articulating what will.

Clarity as an ongoing practice

One of the most common leadership missteps is assuming that clarity, once established, will hold. In reality, clarity decays as the operating environment moves on.

Effective leaders revisit and restate expectations regularly, even when nothing appears to have changed. Silence is often interpreted as endorsement, and outdated clarity can be as destabilising as none at all.

This doesn't require leaders to be inspirational speakers or polished communicators. It requires consistency, transparency, and a willingness to name uncertainty without being immobilised by it. "We don't have all the answers yet, but this is how we'll work through it" offers far more confidence than misplaced certainty. In the grey, leadership is less about being an inspirational figure and more about meaningful presence. Leaders who can help others make

sense of complexity by showing up honestly and consistently are leaders who build momentum and resilience over time.

For more information on our leadership and team culture support, contact LKS Quaero at enquiries@lksquaero.com or (02) 4910 4048.



Chally Kacelnik has wide and deep experience as a management consultant shaping organisational direction and strategy in complex operating environments. Across a range of sectors, she works in organisational transformation and improvement as well as leadership development programming. Chally is LKS Quaero's Principal, Transformation & Leadership.



Sam Robinson is Managing Director of LKS Quaero. He works in leadership development, change management, organisational structure, and culture. Sam helps leaders to succeed by connecting people, relationships, systems, and structures. He has worked across the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors.

PEOPLEFUSION HOSTS ANNUAL NEW YEAR NETWORKING CELEBRATION

The Hunter's business community gathered at the iconic Beaches Hotel in Merewether on 19 February, to celebrate the new year with recruitment specialists from peoplefusion.

The event served as a high-energy networking hub for the region's key movers and shakers. The sunset gathering brought together a diverse cross-section of Newcastle and Hunter Region professionals, from emerging entrepreneurs to CEO's of some of the region's largest businesses. Against the beautiful beach backdrop, guests enjoyed an evening focused on recognising quality local talent, collaboration and growth, and the optimistic outlook for the regional economy in the year ahead.

peoplefusion designed the evening to go beyond traditional networking, fostering genuine connections within the local business ecosystem.

"The start of the year is always a pivotal time for our clients," said Ali Kimmorley, Director at peoplefusion.

"Hosting this event allowed us to bring the community together in a relaxed environment to share ideas and celebrate the talent that makes the Hunter such a powerhouse region."

Attendees included representatives from the engineering, finance, health, and manufacturing sectors. The choice of venue at Merewether underscored peoplefusions' commitment to supporting local icons and providing a truly 'Newcastle' experience.

Discussions centered on development, talent retention, and the evolving landscape of the Hunter regions workforce. The atmosphere was relaxed and positive as guests caught up after the summer break, with many noting the importance of face-to-face connection in an increasingly digital world.



Look before you launch ... your new brand!

Philip Macken
Phillips Ormonde Fitzpatrick

For any business, the cost of launching a new brand is substantial. However, the cost of being dragged into legal proceedings because your new brand breaches someone’s trade mark rights can be crippling!

There are many businesses which have enthusiastically launched, only to be told that they must cease immediately because their brand infringes the trade mark rights of another person. This is a commercial disaster – caused by an easily avoided oversight - which often entails recalling (and possibly destroying) products, going back to square one to identify an alternative brand which can safely be used, and unwanted legal costs – not to mention the reputational damage with customers.

To cite one example, an alternative accommodation business in Melbourne began trading under the name NOTEL. Soon after launch, it was challenged by the Accor group which owns the NOVOTEL trade mark. The new business was forced to change its name and undergo a rebrand.

In Australia, a person who owns a trade mark registration (which is quite different from a business name registration) in respect of that person’s trade mark has a qualified monopoly in that trade mark. This registration can be relied upon to prevent another person from using not just the same name but also a ‘deceptively similar’ name.

This sort of problem arises because businesses often adopt names without having conducted any checks to ensure that there are no trade mark registrations which might be infringed by the use of the proposed name. This is a step which should always be taken before launching a new brand.

So, always look before you launch.

For further information contact Phillips Ormonde Fitzpatrick on (02) 9285 2900, email info@pof.com.au or visit www.pof.com.au



Philip Macken - Special Counsel is a Lawyer and registered Patent & Trade Marks attorney at Phillips Ormonde Fitzpatrick. He has spent most of his professional life, now over 35 years, specialising in the field of trade marks and branding. Before joining Phillips Ormonde Fitzpatrick, Philip had been a partner at an established Sydney-based patent and trade marks attorney firm for many years. Prior to that, Philip had been a founding partner of the patent and trade marks attorney firm within one of Australia’s most prestigious commercial legal firms.



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CSIRO backs Australian startups

CSIRO's ON Accelerate helps researchers turn ideas into real world impact by providing the skills, networks and industry engagement needed to progress their innovation journey.

From AI-driven skin cancer detection to securing water for drought-stricken communities, the latest cohort has been selected for CSIRO's ON Accelerate program.

All the ventures have the potential for big impact on the world stage and were competitively selected for the program, run by Australia's national science agency, CSIRO.

CSIRO's ON Accelerate supports entrepreneurial researchers in tackling complex, national challenges – turning groundbreaking science into solutions with real social and commercial impact.

From unlocking faster, more accessible cancer diagnoses and personalised chemotherapy treatments to ensuring water supply even during droughts, each venture has the potential to deliver meaningful benefits for Australians.

Tennille Eyre, ON Innovation Program Director, said addressing Australia's innovation gap and creating positive change is at the heart of the program.

"There is a gap that persists for Australian innovators," said Tennille.

"Whether it's commercialisation knowledge, entrepreneurial skills, a network of investors or even self-confidence, ON Accelerate is designed to close the gap and help them take the next step."

"These teams are tackling challenges that matter right now. We help accelerate the path from lab to market."

Together, ON alumni have secured over \$800 million in funding, spanning \$371+ million in commercialisation grants and \$433+ million raised by new ventures.

The selected teams included two from the University of Newcastle.

Energy Diversions is designed to turn costly mine rehabilitation into revenue generating infrastructure through repurposing mine voids into long-duration energy storage.

Hydro Harvester, also from the University of Newcastle, ensures that there can be water supply in regional Australia even during a drought. Turning air into water, Hydro Harvester's engineering solution is efficient, affordable and scalable.

The group's team leader, Dr Priscilla Tremain, reflected on their community focus.

"Australia is a vast country, and many remote and Indigenous communities do not have the infrastructure needed for reliable supply of even something as essential as water," said Dr Tremain.

"By providing reliable access to water, our technology can support the continued viability of these communities and empower local cultural governance, Indigenous knowledge systems, environmental restoration and economic independence."

Besides addressing critical drinking water shortages, this solution also has enormous potential for agriculture and industry, supplying water for livestock and crops, renewable fuels processes and helping make data centres more sustainable.

The selected teams will pitch their ventures to investors, government stakeholders and industry supporters on stage at ON Translate 2026, CSIRO's flagship innovation event, to be held 11 June in Melbourne.

\$3.25 million FEED Grant to accelerate MGA Thermal's industrial uptake

MGA Thermal has been awarded \$3.25 million in funding from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) to support up to five Front-End Engineering and Design (FEED) studies for industrial partners seeking to deploy MGA Thermal's breakthrough thermal energy storage technology.

The funding - provided under ARENA's Powering the Regions: Industrial Transformation Stream - will heavily subsidise FEED study costs, significantly reducing early-stage financial barriers for industrial and manufacturing customers exploring opportunities

to shift away from fossil fuels with MGA Thermal.

The FEED program will enable detailed engineering, costing, and integration assessments for thermal storage systems across a range of industrial heat applications. The initiative will accelerate commercial adoption of MGA Thermal's technology and support Australian Industrials in cutting both energy costs and carbon emissions.

Mark Croudace, CEO of MGA Thermal, said the ARENA support is a strong endorsement of the company's technology and its significant role in Australia's industrial transformation.

"This funding represents continued traction for MGA Thermal and provides an opportunity for industrial partners looking to decarbonise their operations.

"ARENA's backing gives industry the capacity to move forward with technical and commercial certainty enabling investment in thermal storage projects. We're excited to work with forward thinking Industrials who are ready to lead their transition."

The FEED studies will focus on industrial facilities with significant process heat requirements, where thermal storage can displace fossil fuel consumption.

Will Furness, Business Development Manager, said the funding directly addresses one of the biggest barriers to industrial decarbonisation: early-stage capital constraints for development activities.

"For many industrials, a challenge is securing the budget required to properly evaluate technologies. ARENA's support lowers the cost of FEED studies and allows us to work closely with partners to build robust, site-specific business cases that demonstrate the commercial and operational value of thermal storage. It's a catalyst for real, near-term action."

MGA Thermal commenced FEED studies in early 2026, with outcomes expected to inform final investment decisions for multiple industrial decarbonisation projects across Australia.

Krosstech unveils SURGISTOR?

Krosstech has before launched SURGISTOR?, an industry-leading brand setting a new standard for medical and aged care storage. SURGISTOR? brings together the renowned SURGIBIN? and SURGISPAN? product lines, uniting premium basket and shelving solutions under one name for healthcare and aged care professionals across Australia.

Purpose-built for the unique challenges of medical and care environments, SURGISTOR? delivers integrated wire storage systems that prioritise safety, hygiene, and operational efficiency. The comprehensive range includes robust wire bins, baskets, ergonomic modular shelving, and innovative designs to streamline workflows, support infection control, and protect critical medical supplies.

"Healthcare and aged care providers are under increasing pressure to optimise space, control infection, and respond to evolving day-to-day demands," said Jonathan Davis, National Solutions Manager – Krosstech.

"SURGISTOR? answers this need by combining the flexibility of SURGISPAN?'s modular shelving with the performance of SURGIBIN?'s advanced basket systems, delivering a single solution that adapts and grows with any facility."

SURGISTOR product lines are manufactured using high-durability, easy-to-clean materials, ensuring long-term function and strict compliance with hygiene standards. The modular systems allow facilities to expand and customise their storage as needs develop, supporting both day-to-day efficiency and long-term investment.

Trusted by Australia's leading hospitals, clinics, and care facilities, SURGISTOR? continues Krosstech's commitment to innovation, reliability, and customer-focused solutions. With unmatched durability, adaptability, and user-friendly design, SURGISTOR? is set to become the preferred choice for healthcare and aged care storage nationwide.

The SURGISTOR? Catalogue is now available to download from the Krosstech website or as a printed version upon request.

MORE THAN 140 YEARS OF INNOVATION IN THE HUNTER

Innovation has been part of **Varley** Group's DNA for more than 140 years, starting right here in the Hunter. From those early beginnings, the company has grown into one of Australia's most diverse and future driven engineering and manufacturing groups. While the scale of the organisation has changed, the mindset has not. Innovation continues to guide the way Varley thinks, designs and delivers solutions for industries across the country.



At the core of **Varley's** approach is a culture that encourages problem solving, curiosity and continual improvement. Engineers, tradespeople, designers and technical specialists work side by side, sharing ideas across disciplines and drawing on decades of experience to develop smarter, more effective outcomes. Whether the challenge involves complex defence capability, specialised transport assets, digital systems, through life support or industrial projects, the same innovation first thinking applies.

The result is practical innovation that improves safety, efficiency, performance and resilience for customers working in demanding environments.

Just as importantly, innovation at Varley also reflects a long standing commitment to the Hunter. Investment in local talent, apprenticeships, training pathways and industry partnerships ensures that the region continues to play a central role in Australia's sovereign industrial capability.

This culture is strengthened by **Varley's** ability to combine traditional engineering craftsmanship with emerging technologies. Advances in digital design, precision manufacturing, systems integration, electrification, diagnostics and cyber capability are now shaping the next generation of Varley projects.

For **Varley** Group, innovation is not an initiative or a strategy. It is the way the business has operated for more than a century, and it remains the foundation for how the organisation will continue to grow. From the workshop floor to national scale projects, innovation is both the heritage and the future of Varley.



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World-leading MRI upgrade boosts research capability at HMRI Imaging Centre

Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI) has unveiled a major upgrade to imaging capabilities with the installation of a new Siemens Healthineers MAGNETOM Cima.X Fit MRI scanner at the Hunter Medical Research Institute Imaging Centre, strengthening the region's capacity for world-class medical research.

Professor Frances Kay, HMRI Chief Executive Officer and Institute Director, said the upgrade would transform what researchers can achieve in the region, and what the community can expect from HMRI-affiliated research.

"This upgrade at the HMRI Imaging Centre will make a real difference for the people in our community who generously take part in research, and for the teams working every day to take healthy further," Professor Kay said.

"Faster scans, clearer images and advanced AI analysis mean we can learn more in less time and ask better questions, all while keeping people's experience at the heart of what we do, right here in the Hunter New England region."

The new scanner is one of the most advanced 3T whole-body MRI systems available globally, delivering faster, higher resolution scans. This reduces the time participants spend in the scanner while producing sharper, more detailed images, helping researchers and clinicians see deeper into the human body, including at the microstructural level.

The upgrade will strengthen research across a wide range of health priorities, including brain cancer, dementia, neurological disease and chronic conditions, with a focus on Indigenous health and Indigenous-led research. It will support earlier detection and more precise characterisation of disease, helping accelerate translation from research to real-world care.

Its capabilities include advanced imaging contrasts, AI-powered image reconstruction and processing, and an innovation platform that supports secure collaboration with imaging centres across Australia, enabling research beyond standard MRI techniques, and accelerating discovery and clinical translation.

The MRI asset is owned by the University of Newcastle and operated by HMRI. The upgrade has been jointly funded by HMRI, the Mark Hughes Foundation, the University of Newcastle, and the National Imaging Facility (NIF) via the Australian Government Department of Education (NCRIS), with HMRI providing ongoing operational support for the facility.



CSIRO unveils \$3 million upgrade to flagship renewable energy lab

On 25 February CSIRO, Australia's national science agency, officially launched the \$3 million upgrade of its Renewable Energy Integration Facility (REIF) at its Energy Centre in Newcastle, significantly expanding Australia's capability to test, validate and commercialise technologies needed for a more sustainable, reliable and secure electricity system.

The expanded facility includes a suite of advanced capabilities, including the ability to simulate microgrids and grid faults, test inverter performance under real-world conditions and run large-scale experiments combining solar, batteries and electric vehicles.

One of its standout demonstrations is vehicle-to-grid technology, which uses electric vehicles as flexible batteries to store excess solar energy and return power to the grid during peak periods.

CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Doug Hilton, said the new facility provides a powerful national capability at a time of rapid change in our electricity system.

"The Renewable Energy Integration Facility provides industry, researchers and system operators with an independent laboratory to test how technologies such as wind, solar, batteries and electric vehicles can integrate safely and reliably into the grid," Dr Hilton said.

"As Australia transitions to a cleaner, more electrified economy, we need the confidence that new energy technologies can operate safely and reliably across the system. This upgraded facility strengthens Australia's capability to test exactly that.

"The facility will support more efficient use of electrical infrastructure, ultimately helping improve energy affordability for Australian homes and businesses."

CSIRO Energy Systems Research Program Director Dr John Ward said the new laboratory will help Australia tackle both local and global challenges in the energy transition.

"The Renewable Energy Integration Facility allows us to simulate and stress test real world grid conditions, giving us deeper insight into how inverter based technologies like solar and batteries perform as their share grows across the electricity system," Dr Ward said.

"Australia faces unique challenges – from long, remote distribution networks and record levels of rooftop solar, to increasingly volatile weather and rising demand from energy-intensive data centres.

"This facility allows us to work side by side with industry and market bodies to design innovative solutions.

"The facility also supports Australian innovation and manufacturing by providing a rigorous, independent environment to evaluate new technologies before they reach market," he said.

The facility is open to external industry and research organisations for collaboration and commercialisation projects that help address energy sector challenges. Expressions of interest should be directed to EnergyEO@csiro.au.

Australian start-ups and small to medium enterprises are encouraged to explore support through CSIRO's Kick Start Program.

The Renewable Energy Integration Facility upgrade was made possible with funding from the Department of Education's Trailblazer Universities Program.

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NSW Mines Rescue: a century of protecting

As NSW Mines Rescue marks its centenary this year, the organisation continues to uphold a simple but powerful purpose: To protect the health and safety of the NSW coal industry.

“At NSW Mines Rescue, work health and safety is the foundation of everything we do,” said Lachlan Grant, State Operations Manager.

Established in the wake of the 1923 Bellbird Colliery disaster in the Hunter Valley, the organisation was formally created under the Mines Rescue Act 1925. The first Mines Rescue station in NSW was built at Abermain in March 1926, with stations built at Argenton, Bellambi and Lithgow shortly after.

A century later, Mines Rescue has evolved from a reactive emergency response service into a leader in prevention, preparedness and education.

“Mines Rescue was originally established to provide emergency response services to the NSW coal industry and that remains our primary role, but today we offer a broad range of safety training across mining, government, utilities and community groups”, explained Lachlan.

As a leading Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Mines Rescue delivers training to equip workers with the skills they need to stay safe and prepared for any challenge.

“Our expertise extends beyond the mining industry and caters to various training needs. From first aid and working at heights, to confined space entry, firefighting, risk management and emergency management, we ensure that workers are not only trained but also equipped with the confidence to handle potentially hazardous situations,” Lachlan said.

Mines Rescue trainers bring decades of real-world experience from mining and emergency response agencies. Purpose-built facilities feature underground training galleries, fire cells, confined space areas and heights towers, blending classroom learning with immersive, hands-on experience.

“Our methods deliver results. Workers are better prepared; risks

are managed more effectively and workplaces become safer,” he said.

One hundred years on, Mines Rescue remains more than a training provider. It is a trusted partner in safety, protecting workers today and into the future.

University graduates invited to launch careers with Glencore

Applications are now open for Glencore’s 2027 Graduate Program, offering university graduates the opportunity to launch their careers with one of Australia’s leading resources companies.

Open to graduates in engineering, environmental science, geology, accounting, health and safety, human resources and IT, the program begins in February 2027 and provides a strong foundation for long-term careers in the mining industry.

The two-year program combines hands-on site experience with structured development, mentoring from industry leaders and access to a strong professional network, along with a competitive salary and comprehensive benefits.

Since 2020, 668 graduates have joined Glencore’s Australian coal and metals operations, gaining practical experience while contributing to major regional projects and local communities.

Glencore Coal Human Resources Manager Michelle Montgomery said the Coal Graduate Program was designed to give graduates real responsibility, strong support and early exposure to operational environments.

“Our Graduate Program gives emerging professionals the chance to learn, grow and thrive in a supportive and challenging environment, while building strong foundations for long-term careers.”

“Beyond technical skills participants develop confidence in communication, teamwork and leadership, all underpinned by a strong safety culture, integrity and responsibility for solving real challenges. These focus areas directly link to Glencore’s core values.

“Graduates are supported with relocation costs if required, and assistance with accommodation and living expenses is also available.”

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Ark Energy secures second LTESA

ASL, acting as the NSW Consumer Trustee for the NSW Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap, has awarded Ark Energy's Bowmans Creek Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), proposed for Stage 1 of the Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, a Long-Term Energy Service Agreement (LTESA) in the latest competitive tender for long duration storage projects.

Tender Round 6, designed to support the delivery of high-quality electricity infrastructure that is in the long-term financial interests of NSW electricity customers, was open to projects that can be operational by 2034 and dispatch at their registered capacity for a minimum of eight hours.

The Bowmans Creek BESS would provide a power capacity of up to 250 MW and energy storage of up to 2,000 MWh over eight hours. It is proposed to be co-located with Ark Energy's 335 MW Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, which was approved in 2024 for a location about 30 km north of Singleton in the NSW Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone. Ark Energy intends to seek approval to add the BESS as a modification to the wind farm and install it within the south-western section of the project area.

The BESS proposal's community investment commitments include community development funding of \$300,000 pa for the life of the LTESA and \$600,000 for initiatives to grow the local supply chain over the next five years, including \$250,000 to upskill the local workforce through education initiatives, \$250,000 to develop the local First Nations supply chain and workforce, and \$100,000 to facilitate First Nations education programs.

If constructed at the same time as the Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, which is expected to generate more than 200 construction jobs, the BESS will require an additional 50 construction jobs. If constructed separately it will require approximately 150 construction jobs.

Mining spending and jobs hit new records in the Hunter

Results from the NSW Minerals Council's latest annual Member Expenditure Survey have confirmed mining's continued critical economic role in the Hunter with record regional spending and the highest number of Hunter mining supplier businesses in six years.

In the last financial year, participating mining companies also supported over 16,000 jobs in the Hunter. While a slight decrease on the previous year, this is still near record levels and almost 5,000 more jobs than when the survey was first taken over a decade ago.

\$9.4 billion of direct mining spending was injected into the Hunter economy in the last financial year – an increase of around \$600 million on the previous year and the highest survey result ever reported. Since the survey was first conducted, mining's direct spending in the Hunter has more than doubled from \$4.6 billion to \$9.4 billion.

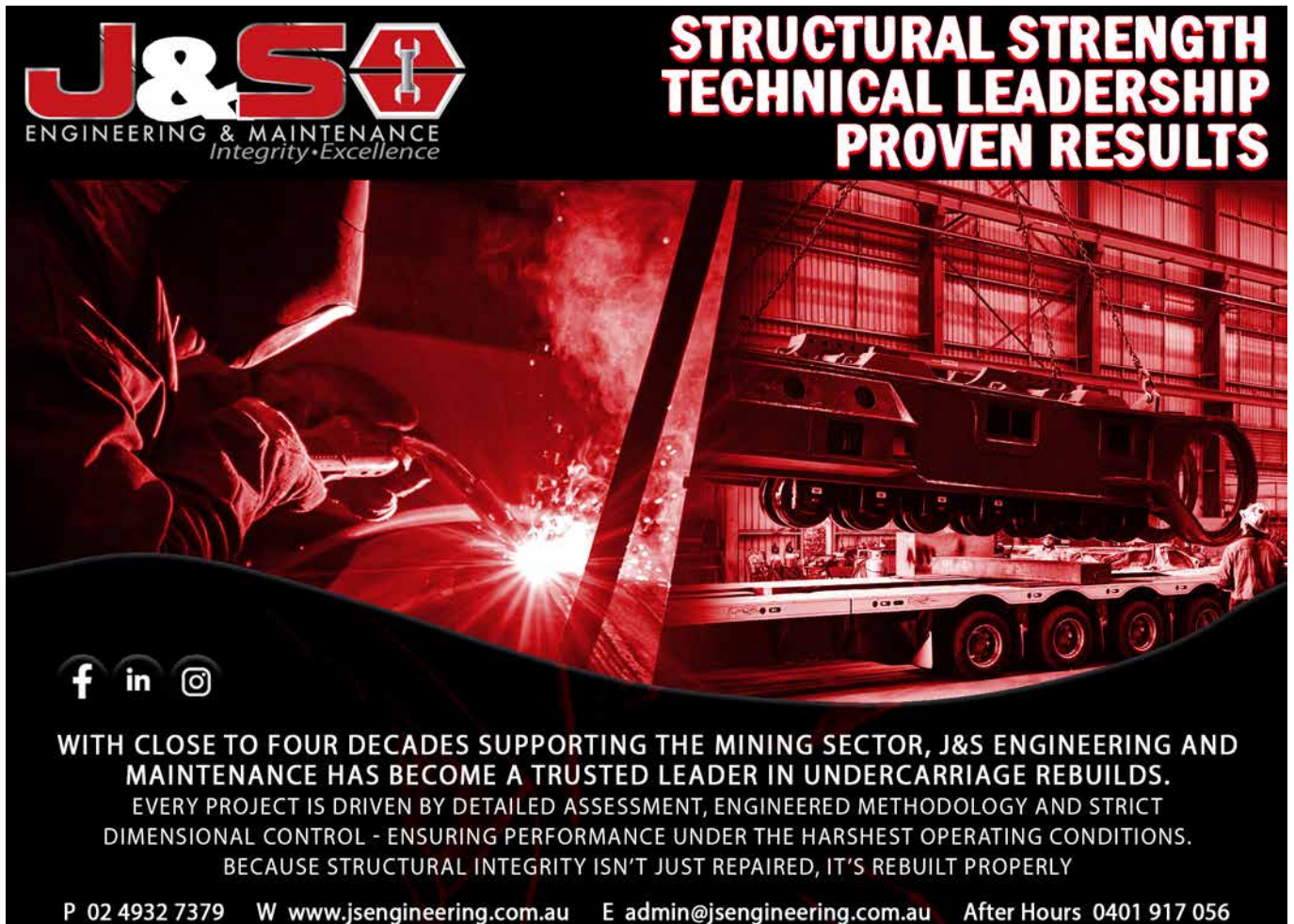
This \$9.4 billion of direct mining spending in the Hunter last financial year included almost \$2.3 billion on wages and salaries, and over \$7 billion for goods and services purchased from almost 3,410 mining supplier businesses across the Hunter region.

This is the highest number of mining supplier businesses in the Hunter for six years.

The \$9.4 billion in direct mining spending in the Hunter is also estimated to have contributed 26% of the GRP of the Hunter region's economy during the last financial year.

"Mining operations in the Hunter have broken local spending records for the second year in a row, while supporting a near record number of local mining jobs, highlighting the importance of mining for local communities and the region's economy," NSW Minerals Council CEO Stephen Galilee said.

"The ongoing strength of the mining industry continues to provide a solid foundation for Hunter economy, and with the right policy settings this can continue for many years to come."



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Hunter apprentices power up Renewable Energy Zone

Five electrical apprentices began work on the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) Network Infrastructure Project in February, marking the start of new careers supporting NSW's transition to renewable energy.

While earning nationally recognised trade qualifications, the Hunter-based apprentices will support work to upgrade poles and wires along the Hunter-Central Coast distribution corridor.

This is the first project of its kind in Australia, with a focus primarily on upgrading existing distribution poles and wires to reduce impacts on the local community and environment.

The distribution corridor will deliver an additional one gigawatt of transfer capacity in the Hunter-Central Coast REZ and is expected to connect approximately 1.8 gigawatts of new renewable generation and storage.

Lincoln Spooner, 18, of Wallsend, is a recent school leaver who previously worked at Coles for two and a half years before signing on to an electrical apprenticeship.

"When I saw the job ad, I thought it sounded pretty good," Mr Spooner said, "I'm going to be learning new skills, there's a vast variety of skills you can learn as an electrician. There's lots of options."

Isaac Byrne, 24, of Newcastle, will also begin his electrical apprenticeship on the project. Mr Byrne completed a Bachelor of Finance and Accounting at the University of Newcastle. After graduating, he worked at the Australian Taxation Office before deciding to pursue a hands-on career in the energy sector.

"After a couple of years working indoors, I realised I wanted to be outside," Mr Byrne said. "I thought, I'll give it a shot."

The Hunter-Central Coast REZ Network Infrastructure Project will see 90% of ongoing jobs filled by local people, once construction is complete in 2028. During the current design and construction phase, 40% of the workforce will be local.



Five new Genus apprentices have begun work on the construction of the Hunter Coast Renewable Energy Zone network infrastructure project

The Hunter-Central Coast REZ stretches from the Upper Hunter in the north to the Central Coast in the south and includes the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Port Stephens regions. The network infrastructure project is being designed, built, financed and operated by Ausgrid.

The project will also create additional demand for workers in local manufacturing, retail, transport and the supply of goods and services. It is expected to generate up to \$3.9 billion in private investment.

The project includes:

- Upgrading approximately 85 km of sub-transmission lines
- Constructing 18 km of new underground fibre optic in the Upper Hunter
- Building two new energy hubs (substations)
- Augmenting existing substations

The project is part of the NSW Government's Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap which aims to power NSW with affordable, clean and reliable energy for everyone.

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Upper Hunter Valley community projects celebrate funding boost

Ashton Coal is investing \$88,000 into community groups across the Hunter Valley region through its Community Support Program in 2026. This funding will be shared across 14 local community organisations that work in the areas of health, social and community, environment, and education and training.

The Ashton Coal 2026 Community Support Program is funding a diverse range of local projects including:

- a stage band project at Australian Christian College - Singleton;
- food and toy appeal at Blackroo Community Indigenous Corporation;
- new equipment for Piranhas Cricket Club;
- the Singleton Art Prize;
- new gear for the Singleton Golf Club – Ladies;
- an outdoor space upgrade at Singleton Heights Pre-School;
- new trauma equipment for Singleton Hospital Auxiliary;
- improved storage for Singleton Neighborhood Centre;
- education and training at Singleton PCYC;
- new technology for Singleton Public School;
- assistance for a stage production by Singleton Theatrical Society;
- new display cabinets for Wanaruah Local Aboriginal and Council.

Also, as part of Ashton and Mount Thorley Warkworths' joint partnership with the University of Newcastle, it will continue to help bring the Science and Engineering Challenge and SMART Science Shows to budding scientists in the Upper Hunter region.

Representatives from Ashton Coal and the successful community organisations attended a presentation on Tuesday 10 February to confirm their donation and celebrate their success.

Ashton Coal Operations Manager, Michael Bartlett, was proud to fund more amazing projects in the community this year. "Congratulations to all the community groups receiving funding as part of our 2026 Community Support Program.

"We are always thrilled to get everyone together to celebrate their success in receiving funding and to discuss how they are going to invest it into their program for the benefit of the people in our community.

"This year we are thrilled to hear that our financial assistance will help purchase new equipment, fund education and training programs, ensure building and technology upgrades can happen, run local events and exhibitions, buy new vital healthcare equipment, and enhance our local schools.

"All of these projects and initiatives will make an important contribution to our community, and we are proud to be able to support them.

"As a key employer in the area, we believe in the value of supporting grass roots groups and organisations to grow and expand, thereby strengthening the Upper Hunter Valley region," said Michael.

Thiess completes Muswellbrook Mine rehabilitation

Thiess Rehabilitation has successfully delivered the rehabilitation of Muswellbrook Mine under a two-year contract with Idemitsu Australia's Muswellbrook Coal Company, transforming the former open-cut mine into sustainable land for future use. This project brings the Thiess founding story full circle, rehabilitating the site where the Thiess Brothers first pioneered open-cut mining in 1944.

Group Manager, Thiess Rehabilitation, Jonathan Miln said: "Completing the rehabilitation of Muswellbrook Mine is a proud milestone for Thiess, representing the final and enduring legacy of the site.

"Drawing on our history at Muswellbrook Mine and leveraging our whole-of-mine-life knowledge as well as operational and technical expertise, our team was honoured to return and take on the responsibility of delivering long-term value to both the land and the local community through its post-mining transition."

Contracted in 2023, Thiess Rehabilitation was engaged to design, develop and deliver tailored, strategic rehabilitation solutions. The project restored 156 hectares to pasture and native ecosystems, relocating more than 12 million bank cubic metres of material across key areas including the coal handling and preparation plant, run-of-mine area and pit one.

To achieve this, Thiess Rehabilitation implemented a safe and efficient operation utilising dozer push, excavator and truck fleets, supported by eight controlled blasts. Civil works included constructing new drainage lined with drop structures and contouring, followed by applying compost and seed to promote long-term land stability and vegetation growth.

Rehabilitation works were completed on schedule, and the team achieved an exceptional safety milestone of 830 consecutive days recordable injury-free.

This project reflects Thiess' rehabilitation capabilities and mining expertise, leaving a lasting legacy for the Muswellbrook community.

From early project development through operational phases, our team of miners and environmental experts apply flexible processes, specialised equipment and extensive experience to deliver safe, sustainable outcomes that meet end land-use objectives, comply with regulatory obligations, and address long-term closure requirements for sites of all sizes, commodities and lifecycle stages.

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A fellow was walking along a country road when he came upon a farmer working in his field.

The man called out to the farmer, "How long will it take me to get to the next town?"

The farmer didn't answer. The guy waited a bit and then started walking again.

After the man had gone about a hundred yards, the farmer yelled out, "About 20 minutes!"

"Thank you. But why didn't you tell me that when I asked you?"

The farmer cocked his head to one side and said, "Didn't know how fast you could walk."

A cruise ship passes by a remote island, and all the passengers see a bearded man running around and waving his arms wildly.

"Captain," one passenger asks, "who is that man over there?"

The captain squints at the island and says, "I have no idea, but he goes nuts every year when we pass him."

A man caught a really bad flu. As he was recovering, his friend came over to bring him some soup to help him feel better. As soon as the friend walked through the door, the man coughed so violently, his false teeth shot across the room and smashed to pieces against the wall.

"Oh, dear," he said, "what am I going to do? I can't afford a new set."

His friend patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll get a pair from my brother for you."

The man thanked him, and the friend said goodbye. The next day, the friend came back with a bright and shiny set of teeth, which fit the man perfectly.

"This is wonderful," said the man. "Your brother must be a very good dentist."

The friend shook his head. "Oh, he's not a dentist. He's an undertaker."

A man walks into a bar and orders a whiskey.

He asks for a straw, and the bartender says, "Don't worry, these glasses are very clean."

The man replies, "Oh, I know. But I just promised my partner I'd never put my lips on another glass of whiskey."

A 60-year-old billionaire got married to a 28-year-old model. When his friend asked him how he did it, he said, "It's simple. I lied about my age."

The friend said, "Ah, so you said you were 40?"

The millionaire shook his head. "No, I said I was 90."

A lion walks into a police station and asks the policeman at the front desk, "Do you have any job openings?"

The policeman shakes his head sadly and says, "No, sorry. Why don't you try the circus?"

The lion gives him a funny look and says, "Why would the circus need a detective?"

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"A problem well stated is a problem half-solved."

- Charles Kettering



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