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# From the Editor

The latest increase in interest rates is bad news for struggling businesses and consumers already hit by rising costs, particularly in fuel.

With the decision to raise rates by another 0.25%, rates are now the highest they have been post-Covid.

Inflationary pressures basically come from two areas of the economy – excessive demand (demand pull) or rising input prices (cost push).

Rasing interest rates is an effective tool to reduce demand but does nothing to help with rising input prices, in fact it exacerbates it.

It can be argued that currently the predominant inflationary pressure at the moment is from rising input prices.

The risk of continuing to raise interest rates is that it will drive the economy into recession.

Unfortunately, the current wisdom is that interest rates is the only tool we have to control inflation.

One of the reasons that interest rates are used is that their effect is felt almost immediately. Measures to improve the supply side take some time to take effect.

Politically, Governments quite like that the RBA makes independent decisions on interest rates. Although the Government is responsible for a whole range of policy settings that affect inflation, they are not the actual ones that make the decision to raise interest rates and like to stand removed from these decisions. They do of course want to take full credit when interest rates fall.

The argument that needs to be had is if there are other tools that could be used instead of or in conjunction with interest rates to more effectively control inflation.

For some decades it has been discussed that perhaps tax rates could be used. Again, this targets just the demand side again but does have some benefits, particularly if the Government uses the added revenue to pay down debt or invest for the future and not increase spending.

Alternatively, superannuation contributions could be increased, including a compulsory employee payment. Once again this only attacks the demand side.

These measures could potentially be more effective in the long term than simply using only interest rates to combat inflation.

There could be complications in administration, although with most employers using online accounting packages, it would be much easier than it has been in the past.

The other problem is politically, is a Government brave enough to be responsible for raising taxes, particularly when an election is drawing near.

Again it would probably have to be the responsibility of an independent body, but would we want non-elected people to have the power to change tax rates?

The argument about controlling inflation is a complex issue but it is obvious that using only interest rates is only a good solution in an overheated economy where excessive demand is driving increased prices, not when input prices are rising.

It is however an argument that is well worth having.

***Garry Hardie***
***Editor and Publisher***


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## Hunter Melanoma Foundation launches sun safety program

The Hunter Melanoma Foundation (HMF) officially launched the Sun Safe Workplace Awareness Program (SWAP) at Newcastle Racecourse on 1 May, marking a significant step forward in how Australian workplaces protect outdoor workers from UV exposure.

The launch brought together business owners, WHS professionals, industry partners and sole traders to see SWAP firsthand- a practical, online training program built to tackle one of the country's most under-recognised workplace hazards.

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. Outdoor workers are five to ten times more likely to develop skin cancer than indoor workers, yet most workplaces do not have access to formal sun safe training.

HMF built SWAP to change these statistics. The program delivers online learning modules, toolbox talks, sun safety checklists, self-check skin tools, workplace posters, a sample Sun Protection Policy, pre- and post-training surveys, and completion certificates, giving businesses everything they need to embed sun safety into daily operations.

Hunter Melanoma Foundation Executive Officer, Claudia Tolhurst, said SWAP fills a gap that has existed in Australian workplaces for too long.

"SWAP gives businesses and individuals a complete, practical framework to protect their teams from UV exposure. It's not about ticking a compliance box, it's about making sure the people who build our homes, maintain our roads, and grow our food go home to their families with their long-term health intact."

"As a community funded local Foundation, we are proud to be launching such a significant program right here in the Hunter."

Among the first business owners to sign his team up for SWAP is Kyle Farrelly, owner of Farrelly Construction Services. For Kyle, the program is deeply personal, after losing his brother Darren Farrelly to melanoma in 2023.

*Claudia Tolhurst (Executive Officer, HMF), Michael Boyd (Mars Construction), Kyle Farrelly (Farrelly Construction Services), Sue-Ellen Evans (SWAP, Project Manager), Tricia Martin (Nudge On), Dan Repacholi MP & David Garred (Safe Work NSW).*

"I lost my brother in 2023 to melanoma, a melanoma from what we understand could've been prevented if detected early. It is very important to me and my family that we do everything within our means to ensure no other family has to go through what we did."

"In our large construction company which has 400 employees, who predominately work outdoors, it's critical that we take care of our workers, and do everything we can to reduce their exposure to UV and the sun, and therefore their exposure to melanoma and skin cancer."

The SWAP program is available now to workplaces across Australia. Businesses, sole traders, and individuals can sign up at https://hmf.org.au/events/swap/

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## Port of Newcastle sets new record for diversified trade volumes in 2025

Port of Newcastle has delivered its strongest diversified trade performance on record, with more than 11.12 million tonnes of non-coal cargo passing through the Port in 2025.

This milestone surpasses the previous record of 10.13 million tonnes set in 2021, driven by a surge in key export commodities including wheat, along with growing volumes of project cargo supporting major renewable energy projects across NSW and beyond.

CEO Craig Carmody said the record result demonstrates both the strength of the Port's diversification strategy and its expanding role in supporting Australia's energy transition and agricultural supply chains.

"Surpassing 11.12 million tonnes of diversified trade in 2025 marks an important milestone for Port of Newcastle and reinforces our long-term commitment to broadening our trade base," Mr Carmody said.

"These record volumes are more than numbers – they reflect the strength of our partnerships, the commitment of our workforce, and the progress we're making towards a more diversified and sustainable future for our Port and our region."

Wheat exports increased 396% year-on-year to reach 2.9 million tonnes, buoyed by favourable seasonal conditions across northern cropping regions. Exports of meals and grain to destinations including the UAE, Bangladesh, Japan, and Vietnam also grew 19% on 2024 volumes to over 1 million tonnes.

In total, Port of Newcastle handled more than 160 million tonnes of cargo, including more than149 million tonnes in coal exports.

"Coal continues to underpin a significant portion of our trade, providing energy security to our global customers. Change doesn't happen overnight and as markets like Asia continue to diversify, we remain a critical energy export gateway."

The Port recorded 2,340 vessel visits in 2025, including 574 non-coal and nine cruise vessels.

"What many people may not realise is that the Port handles 25 different cargo types, from aluminium, cement, and fuels to fertiliser, steel, and project cargo, which are all helping to drive growth in diversified trade," Mr Carmody said.

"We've seen particularly strong demand for the import and export of machinery and project cargo, with more than 431,000 tonnes moving through the Port in 2025. A major contributor to this was the arrival of wind turbine components for the Uungula Wind Farm within the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone."

Mr Carmody said the record results underline Port of Newcastle's critical role as a key logistics hub supporting government and private renewable energy projects.

"The Port continues to evolve as a critical gateway for Australia's energy future. Over the next decade, this will not only contribute to the Port's ongoing diversification but play an essential role in powering the nation's transformation to cleaner energy."

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## Major Thornton Thoroughfare set for $14 million upgrade

One of Maitland's busiest roads is set for a major upgrade, with over $14 million worth of improvements getting underway next month along Haussman Drive, Thornton.

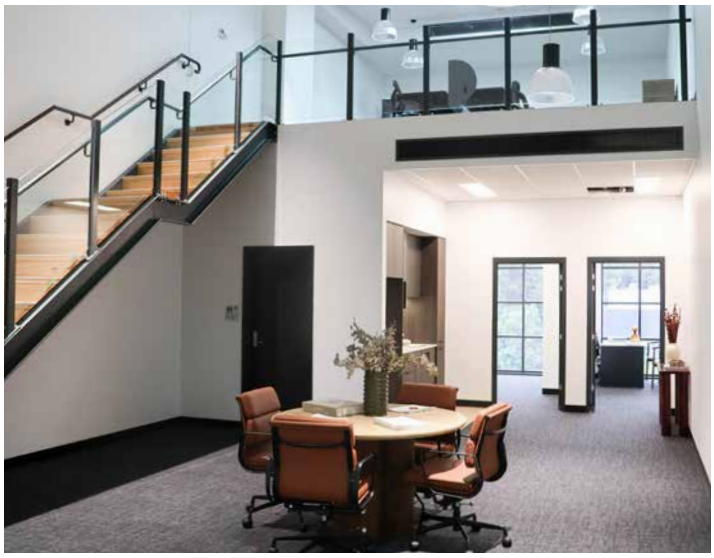
The Federal Government, under the Safer Local Roads and Infrastructure Program, and Maitland City Council are each contributing over $3.74 million towards the $7.5 million duplication of Haussman Drive between Raymond Terrace Road and Taylor Avenue, expanding the road to two lanes each way.

The New South Wales Government and Council are also investing another $6.9 million to construct a roundabout at the intersection of Haussman Drive and Taylor Avenue.

These upgrades will make it easier for motorists exiting Thornton via Taylor Avenue and reduce some of the pressure on peak-hour traffic along Haussman Drive.

As part of the Thornton North development plan, further works are planned for Haussman Drive but are subject to grant funding.

This includes upgrading the Raymond Terrace Road-Haussman Drive intersection with traffic lights and constructing a shared path connecting Harvest Boulevard and Settlers Boulevard, Chisholm to Haussman Drive.



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# K E Y  W E S T

## Hunter builder claims national business honour

A Hunter owned and operated business has been recognised on the national stage, taking out a coveted business award at the 2026 HIA Australian Housing Awards. The Housing Industry Association (HIA) awards were announced on 18 April on the Gold Coast before an audience of industry leaders and homebuilding consumers.

Mable Projects won HIA Australian Start up Business for its dynamic, ethical approach to delivering high quality construction across rural and regional communities. With strong leadership, robust systems and a client first culture, the Scone-based company has achieved rapid, well-managed growth grounded in purpose, innovation and continuous improvement. This category is partnered by American Express Australia.

Mable Projects also received a Highly Commended in the HIA Australian Emerging Builder category, which recognises registered builders who have recently established a residential building business and demonstrated standout competencies, achievements and strong future potential.

Queensland's Mactech Constructions was awarded the industry's highest honour, being named the winner of the 2026 HIA Australian Home of the Year.

HIA Managing Director Jocelyn Martin congratulated the 2026 HIA Australian Housing Awards winners and praised their remarkable achievements.

"HIA is committed to recognising the outstanding achievements and talent amongst our members. The HIA Australian Housing Awards allow us to acknowledge winners for their skill and commitment to quality construction, design and material selection.

"The winning projects redefine what's possible in terms of innovation; they're setting new benchmarks for the industry."

The HIA Australian Housing Awards winners are selected from state-based finalists, with awards in 24 separate categories. The Awards are partnered by leading building products company CSR.

## 2026 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program

On 16 April, the Federal Government released the 2026 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program.

Together, these documents set out the Government's plan to respond to our strategic circumstances and keep Australians safe.

In delivering the 2026 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program, the Government continues its structured approach of identifying the capabilities we need and funding them appropriately.

In recognition of our dangerous and unpredictable strategic circumstances, the 2026 Integrated Investment Program includes an additional $14 billion over the next four years, and an additional $53 billion over the decade, through Defence funding, estate modernisation and alternative financing where appropriate. As a result, Defence spending as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will rise to 3% by 2033 under the NATO approach.

The Federal Government's record increase in Defence investment coincides with major reforms, including the establishment of the Defence Delivery Agency and the Government's response to the Estate Audit, to ensure every dollar of investment is focused on value for money and greater speed to capability.

Not only are these investments acquiring and sustaining the capabilities needed to keep Australians safe, they are also supporting tens of thousands of highly skilled, well-paid Australian jobs directly and across supply chains.

Copies of the 2026 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program are available online at https://www.defence.gov.au/nds

## $1.3 million investment to boost skills training at TAFE NSW Cessnock

TAFE NSW Cessnock will benefit from a $1.3 million joint investment by the Federal and NSW Governments to upgrade training facilities and support growing workforce demand across the Hunter Valley.

A major upgrade to Building B of the campus will expand access to training, lift campus capability, and ensure training facilities keep pace with industry needs.

The upgrade will deliver:

- three drive-up bays to house Mobile Training Units (MTUs), supporting delivery of school-based vocational education and trade taster programs;
- a new fully air-conditioned general-purpose classroom with modern technology and flexible seating to support theory-based learning;
- a flexible practical training room for courses such as floristry, beauty and hospitality, fitted with durable finishes, stainless steel benches, sinks and integrated technology; and
- upgraded audiovisual equipment, improved digital connectivity, lighting, electrical systems, air conditioning and new furniture.

The improved facilities will support expanded delivery of courses in electrotechnology, carpentry and automotive mechanical, giving students more opportunities to train locally.

Supported by the Federal Government's Clean Energy Capital Investment Fund, the project will help ensure students in the Hunter can access training that aligns with local job opportunities across construction, infrastructure, and emerging clean energy industries.

## Plans shared for Gateshead medical precinct

Plans to create a next-generation health precinct for the Hunter region in Gateshead are set to progress following an April Lake Macquarie City Council meeting.

Councillors recommended the rezoning proposal for land surrounding Lake Macquarie Private Hospital be sent to the State Government to authorise the project for public exhibition.

The plans seek to increase building heights and allow for a broader mix of land uses, including medical and allied health facilities, related businesses such as pharmacies, physiotherapy, dental and psychology clinics and other retail opportunities such as florists and cafes.

It would also provide opportunities for medium-density housing, including townhouses and mid-rise apartments, for those keen to live closer to work and transport.

Lake Macquarie Mayor Adam Shultz said with the hospital already approved for future upgrades and expansion, developing the surrounding precinct could provide major benefits for the city.

"This project has the potential to deliver improved health and wellbeing services for our growing and ageing population, job creation, housing diversity and safer pedestrian connections," he said.

"It aligns with the Hunter Regional Plan 2036 and the Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036, both of which designate Gateshead as a future regional health precinct due to its central position, access to schools and transport, and existing investment in hospital and medical facilities."

If the proposal is approved for public exhibition Council plans to directly contact landowners affected by the zoning changes.

Council also recommended adopting a revised Urban and Public Art Policy, which seeks to guide how public art is planned, created, installed and cared for across the city.

Mayor Shultz, Deputy Mayor Colin Grigg and Councillors Madeline Bishop and Kate Warner were recommended to attend the 2026 National General Assembly of Local Government and Regional Cooperation and Development Forum from 23-25 June 2026 and the Australian Council of Local Government on 22 June 2026.

The event provides an opportunity for councils to develop and discuss policy ideas, influence the national agenda, meet federal politicians and hear from experts on issues affecting local government in Australia.

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Total Fitouts Newcastle is a family-owned commercial fitout company delivering high-quality, functional, and visually impactful spaces across the region. Led by husband-and-wife team Jason and Katie, the business combines design, project management, and construction expertise with a hands-on, client-focused approach.

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## We Make It Here – A region ready to shine on local & national stage

Manufacturing across our region continues to evolve and adapt, asserting its place as a vital contributor to Australia's industrial landscape and is entering a period of renewed confidence and visibility.

For more than twenty years, the Hunter Manufacturing Awards have championed and acknowledged the makers, innovators, and problem-solvers who remain a defining strength of our regional economy. Across that time, the Awards have captured countless stories of determination, ingenuity, and the quiet confidence of businesses that make real things and create real impact.

Hunter Business Review has been a proud, long-standing supporter and media partner of the Awards since their inception, helping share these incredible stories across the region.

In 2026, the collective story is expressed through a single, unifying identity and purpose: We Make It Here.

It's a declaration shaped by the manufacturers who design, engineer, fabricate, and produce across the Hunter, Central Coast, New England, and Mid-North Coast. It reflects the capability and commitment of individuals and businesses that invest in their people, strengthen local supply chains, and contribute to the communities they operate in. It acknowledges that world-class outcomes don't need to be sourced from elsewhere — they are created here, through deep expertise, advanced technology, and a strong sense of place.

And while the theme acknowledges place, it also signals something deeper — a sense of ownership, resilience, and pride in building something that lasts. It reflects a sector that continues to invest locally while competing confidently on national and global stages. In 2026, the Hunter Manufacturing Awards shine a spotlight on the people and businesses driving that momentum: the innovators, the problem-solvers, the makers, and the next generation shaping the future of Australian manufacturing.

The Awards themselves experienced significant growth in 2025, with applications up more than 50% on the previous year and the largest-ever Gala Night attendance, reflecting both the strength of the sector and the benefits of the Awards as it enters its 22nd year.

It was also the first year that winners automatically advanced as finalists in the inaugural Australian Manufacturing Awards, delivered in partnership with Industry Update. This national pathway continues in 2026, ensuring excellence from across all participating regions is recognised nationwide.

The 2026 Awards recognise achievement across the breadth of the sector — innovation, sustainability, product design, digital transformation, export, diversity, leadership, apprenticeships, and more. The program remains one of the few platforms that celebrates both established industry leaders and emerging talent, from start-ups to apprentices to global exporters.

Registrations and applications for the Hunter Manufacturing Awards 2026 are now open, inviting businesses of all sizes to showcase their achievements and share their stories.

Participating in the Awards offers more than recognition. It opens doors to new opportunities, strengthens visibility, and positions businesses as leaders within a sector that continues to drive economic growth across the region.

Finalists will be announced on 1 October, with winners celebrated at the Gala Awards Night on 30 October 2026.

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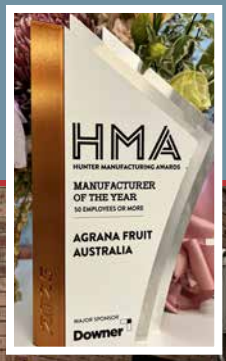

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## Contactless vehicle rental launched

Newcastle Car Rentals, a local startup, has bypassed the traditional rental desk model by implementing a 100% digital, contactless experience at Newcastle Airport. Customers use their smartphones to access the fleet 24/7, enabling a 'tarmac-to-tarmac' transition in under five minutes.

This technology facilitates a truly 24-hour operation, allowing customers to collect their chosen rental vehicles at any time, day or night.

To maximise customer convenience, Newcastle Car Rentals offers strategic pick-up zones across the region. Currently, vehicles are available 24/7 from Newcastle Airport, Newcastle Interchange, Birmingham Gardens, and Raymond Terrace.

To support the growth, the business has selected late-model MG3 and MG ZS vehicles. By focusing on both the economy and small SUV segments, they are providing a more economical and convenient way for travellers and locals to move around the Hunter region.

Newcastle Car Renntals recently hit the milestone of 100 completed trips with an overall 5.0-star rating, signaling a strong market appetite for digital-first transport solutions in Newcastle.

Newcastle Car Rentals founder Sujay Vasist said "At its core, Newcastle Car Rentals is a hybrid mobility service that blends high-tech logistics with local accessibility. Unlike traditional agencies that rely on physical storefronts and manual paperwork, our operation is built on a 'virtual desk' framework.

"We utilise Turo, the world's leading peer-to-peer car-sharing platform, as our primary booking and security engine. This partnership allows us to offer the big brand' safety net while maintaining our boutique, local identity.'"

## $3 million boost drives groundbreaking koala research in Port Stephens

The future of Australia's koalas is being reshaped in Port Stephens, with groundbreaking, world-leading research now underway at the Port Stephens Koala Hospital – made possible by a $3 million election commitment delivered by the Federal Government.

In April Member for Paterson, Meryl Swanson MP, visited the hospital to inspect progress on the cutting-edge project targeting two of the biggest threats to koalas: chlamydia and koala retrovirus.

Funded through the Australian Government's Local Environmental Projects Program, the investement is powering a three-year research program that will study a cohort of 100 koalas using advanved diagnostic technology – including CT, X-Ray, ultrasound and qPCR blood analysis.

At the heart of the project is a state-of-the-art 128-slice CT scanner, enabling rapid, high-resolution, full-body imaging and detailed 3D modelling of koalas like never before.

This technology is a game-changer.

For the first time, researchers will be able to establish species-specific benchmarks for koala health and disease- critical to early detection, improved treatment, and ultimately, finding a cure.

The scanner also allows koalas to be imaged with minimal handling and without sedation, significantly reducing stress and risk to the animals while improving safety for handlers.

The funding has also enabled the recruitment of specialist veterinary staff, expanded facilities, and ongoing operation of critical clinical equipment – ensuring the hospital continue its vital work through to the project's competion in March 2028.

Importantly, findings from the program will be shared nationally, contributing to broader efforts to protect and recover koala populations across Australia

## 40th anniversary for North Construction & Building

North Construction & Building is celebrating 40 years in business. Established in 1986 by Michael and Merle North, the company has since grown into a 100% employee-owned business committed to building with trust in regional communities.

Today, North operates from Tuggerah and Newcastle as well as Orange, Tamworth and Brisbane, delivering high-quality projects in the commercial, education, health and infrastructure sectors.

Reflecting on the milestone, Matthew Cook, Executive Chairman, said, "Reaching 40 years is a significant milestone that speaks to the trust and stability we've built with our clients, subcontractor partners and communities."

"Our history is about the relationships we've fostered since 1986, and we plan to continue this into our future."

John Melvin, Chief Executive Officer, added, "Forty years in this industry requires more than just technical skill; it requires strong relationships with our delivery partners."

"Whether we're building a Koala Sanctuary in Port Stephens or an iconic recently completed library in Gosford or a childcare centre in Brisbane, our relationship-focused approach always aims to deliver excellence with our partners."

"As an employee-owned business, our people have always been our greatest strength," said Nicole Redmond, Head of People, Culture and Corporate Services.

"Reaching 40 years is a proud moment for the entire North family, and there's no better way to celebrate than by seeing our commitment to excellence reflected in the next generation."

"By investing in our apprentice and cadet programs and building a culture of trust and respect, we're actively building the future of the construction industry."

North is hosting subcontractor and project partner events throughout the year, as well as a 40th Anniversary Gala Event at Crowne Plaza Terrigal Pacific in November.

# Lovedale Farm records $21.4 million in sales in three weeks

Capital Corporation has announced that its Lovedale Farm residential, resort and golf project has secured $21.4 million in sales in just three weeks since the opening of its display home, underscoring the appetite for premium lifestyle property in the Hunter Valley countryside.

The sales milestone has been driven by a diverse mix of buyers, including owner-occupiers and investors from Sydney, Newcastle and the local Hunter region, purchasing both land-only lots and house and land packages across the development.

The result builds on the momentum generated at the display home opening on 22 March, which attracted more than 460 attendees.

Lovedale Farm continues to attract strong interest from buyers seeking a premium lifestyle offering at a compelling price point. The development's vision, a championship golf course, future epicurean village and access to the Hunter Valley's celebrated wine country, has resonated with a broad buyer profile, from first-time investors to those looking to make the move and call the Hunter Valley home.

Jim Hunter, Managing Director of Capital Corporation said "The response since opening our display home has been fantastic. To reach $21.4 million in sales in just three weeks speaks to the genuine demand for a landmark community of this calibre in the Hunter Valley. We're seeing buyers from across the region and beyond, including investors who recognise the long-term value, and owner-occupiers who simply want to live somewhere truly special.

"Lovedale Farm is two decades in the making, and the market's response is everything we hoped for. We're excited to see these first buyers become part of the Lovedale Farm story from the very beginning.

Spanning 240 hectares on Wine Country Drive in Lovedale, the $1 billion development is expected to deliver approximately 1,250 jobs during construction and inject more than $300 million into the local economy. The first 200 homes and championship 18-hole golf course are anticipated for completion in late 2027.

Capital Corporation has also lodged development plans for the Lovedale Farm golf clubhouse, set to become a vibrant hub for residents and the wider Hunter Valley community. Further releases are planned for later this year.

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## Revitalisation of Shepherds Hill Cottage enters final stage

A new chapter in the history of Shepherds Hill Cottage is one step closer, with final touches underway to transform the 130-year-old building into a café with Newcastle's most stunning views.

Work on the adaptive re-use of the former military mess hall atop King Edward Park has been underway since late 2025, transforming the site into a new hospitality space while maintaining its strong historic character.

Expected to open in coming months, Eddie's at Shepherds Hill café will be helmed by local hospitality duo Noah Leonard and Blake Gontier, who bring experience from popular Hunter Valley venues Arthur's Pantry, Mr O Wholefoods and Ronnie's Pokolbin.

Chair of City of Newcastle's Asset Advisory Committee Councillor Declan Clausen said exploring new uses for the site was an important way to keep it open and accessible for the community.

"Shepherds Hill is an iconic coastal landmark that has played an important role in the history of this city," Cr Clausen said.

"This project has focused on highlighting the cottage's historic character while bringing new life to the site, and it's exciting to think the community will soon be able to enjoy the space and celebrate its heritage as part of everyday life."

Acting Executive Director Corporate Services Kathleen Hyland said City of Newcastle is committed to protecting the State significant site.

"We understand the importance of preserving and enhancing places like Shepherds Hill Cottage to create ongoing connections between our city's past and present," Ms Hyland said.

"This is why City of Newcastle has invested more than $1 million into the careful restoration of the heritage-listed building, under the guidance of a specialist architect.

"Revitalising the cottage with the infrastructure needed for it reopen as a café and restaurant, while also highlighting its unique history with heritage interpretation signage, will ensure it remains an important, accessible part of Newcastle's story for generations to come."

Construction on the project is being overseen by a heritage consultant, who has helped guide work on the new dining space, commercial kitchen, amenities building and interpretive signage upgrades.

This phase of the project is supported by a $465,000 grant from the NSW Government's Crown Reserves Improvement Fund.

The 182 sqm building sits at the mid-point on the popular Bathers Way coastal walk and has one of the best vantage points in Newcastle, with expansive views of the Pacific Ocean and the coastline from Port Stephens to Dudley.

Shepherds Hill Cottage forms part of the Newcastle Recreation Reserve and Shepherds Hill Defence Group Military Installations precinct listed on the NSW Heritage Register.

The Cottage, battery observation post and gun emplacement were originally designed to defend Newcastle's burgeoning coal port, later serving as a command position throughout World War II. It is the only coastal defence site in Australia crewed simultaneously during World War II by the Royal Australian Navy, Army and Air Force.

## Maitland City Council to proceed with strategic property sale

Maitland City Bowls, Sports & Recreation Club (Club Maitland City) has made a strategic approach to Maitland City Council to purchase the land and buildings at 12 Woodberry Street, Rutherford that is currently tenanted by Kookaburra Korner Early Education Centre.

At the meeting held on 17 March 2026, Council resolved to proceed with the sale, that will allow Club Maitland City to lodge a substantial Development Application for renovations to the Club.

The opportunity presents a win-win scenario for all three parties, with Club Maitland City agreeing to fund and construct a brand new not-for-profit Early Education Centre nearby for Kookaburra Korner to move to, prior to the demolition of the existing centre.

Council's Executive Manager Finance, Kelly Arnott says, "this strategic sale will have a direct positive impact on Council's budget, not just from the funds from the sale but also the ongoing cost savings that will be achieved by no longer having to maintain, and ultimately renew or replace, this ageing asset."

Ian Martin, CEO of Club Maitland City says "acquiring the Kookaburra Korner property is a mutual partnership ensuring that high quality childcare is operating in the West Maitland area. In the coming years a new childcare centre offering at minimum the same not-for-profit capacity will be built, resulting in even better experiences with the same dedicated daycare team,"

A Kookaburra Korner spokesperson, Judy Mitchell says, "we're grateful for the support from both Club Maitland City and Council to ensure that we can still provide this not-for-profit service for local families."

The current Kookaburra Korner lease will transfer to Club Maitland City on settlement.

## MidCoast Council backs major events to boost economy and showcase the region

MidCoast Council is supporting a range of major sporting championships and conferences that are set to bring visitors to the region and deliver flow-on benefits for local businesses.

Through targeted event sponsorship, Council is investing in activities that generate economic benefit by attracting competitors, delegates and spectators who stay, dine and shop locally — helping support local jobs and operators.

The sponsored events include:

- U14 Hockey State Championships - 10-12 April at Taree Hockey Complex
- CWA State Conference - 3-7 May at Club Forster
- Bowls State Carnival - held in May at various bowling venues across the region
- Vikings Senior Challenge - held in March each year at the Tuncurry Sports Fields
- Central District Rowing Association Championship - held in March on the Manning River
- NSW Triathlon Club Championships - held in Forster each February

Mayor Claire Pontin said Council's approach is focused on supporting events that deliver tangible benefits for the community.

"Council is proud to support events that bring people to our region filling local accommodation, cafes, clubs and retail businesses and delivering real value for our community," she said.

"These events also showcase our region as a great place to visit, compete and host, helping to build our reputation and attract future events."

Council's sponsorship program prioritises events that demonstrate strong visitor appeal and clear economic impact, while also delivering positive community outcomes through participation, volunteering and local pride.

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## Coulsons Creek Road Official Opening

Upper Hunter Shire Council has announced the official opening of the Merriwa to Willow Tree Road (MR358), also known as Coulsons Creek Road, restoring an important transport link between the Upper Hunter and Liverpool Plains following nearly 5 years of closure.

The $48.3 million project was jointly funded with the Australian Government providing $38.6 million and the NSW Government $9.66 million. The road was severely damaged in 2021 when a major natural landslip caused extensive ground movement that undermined the pavement, damaged drainage structures and compromised the stability of the surrounding escarpment. Since that time, Council, engineers and contractors have worked through detailed investigations, complex design processes and a significant civil construction program to rebuild the road to a far higher standard of resilience and safety.

Throughout the reconstruction, the steep terrain posed major challenges and required a complete rethink of the road's stability systems. Large-scale excavation was undertaken to remove unstable material, and comprehensive drainage improvements were introduced to handle the significant volume of water that flows down the escarpment during heavy rainfall. Shotcrete was applied across critical embankments and gullies to strengthen the slopes, while upgraded hairpin drainage was installed to capture and redirect fast-moving stormwater.

Across particularly unstable areas, gabion retaining walls were strategically constructed to tie the pavement and surrounding landscape together, secure the drainage network and provide ongoing protection against smaller landslips. These structural elements work in combination with newly anchored slopes, rock mesh, rebuilt pavement layers and improved road geometry to create a safer, more durable route for motorists.

## New contractor appointed for Wollombi Road upgrade project

In April Cessnock City Council appointed a new contractor for the Wollombi Road Upgrade Project.

Daracon has been engaged to deliver a single works program for the full length of the planned upgrade. The works are designed to increase road capacity, reduce traffic congestion and improve pedestrian access.

Once completed, this upgrade will also unlock the release and development of approximately 3,500 new homes in Bellbird North.

The project is funded through State and Federal grants for infrastructure and housing initiatives, developer contributions and contributions from Hunter Water.

To strengthen governance, Council has established a Wollombi Road Reference Group as an additional layer of oversight, which will receive ongoing project updates and support communication with the community.

Cessnock City Council Director of Works & Infrastructure Paul McLachlan said the engagement of Daracon marked a key milestone for recommencement of construction works.

"The engagement of Daracon to support delivery of this vital upgrade is an important step in rebuilding momentum on the project," Mr McLachlan said.

"The community can expect to see construction activity gearing up throughout April now that a contractor has been engaged, following recent enabling works."

"Cessnock City Council will be working closely with Daracon to ensure value, quality and delivery milestones are met."

Cessnock City Mayor Dan Watton welcomed the establishment of Wollombi Road Reference Group, of which he is a member.

"The establishment of the reference group provides an additional layer of assurance and transparency as Council leads the delivery of this major infrastructure project," said Mayor Watton.

The project is jointly funded through a combination of state, federal and local programs. This includes the NSW Accelerated Infrastructure Fund, the Commonwealth's Housing Support Program – Enabling Community Infrastructure, the State Voluntary Planning Agreement Funding Program, developer contributions and support from Hunter Water.

Council has approved a budget increase for the Wollombi Road Upgrade Project. The adjustment includes $8.7 million in allocated developer funds, $3.9 million in State VPA contributions, and an additional $3.5 million from Hunter Water for watermain works.

## $500,000 to improve disability access at Sails Holiday Park in Belmont

Sails Holiday Park is expanding its inclusive tourism experiences in Lake Macquarie, creating affordable and memorable holiday options for people with disability and their families at the popular waterfront destination.

Supported by a $500,000 investment from the NSW Government, the project will deliver new accessible camping and caravanning accommodation at Belmont.

Delivered in partnership with Lake Macquarie City Council, the upgrades include two accessible cabins, an accessible safari tent and a family safari tent, improved accessible pathways and wheelchair-friendly ramps, a communal outdoor BBQ area, as well as a swimming pool hoist and aquatic wheelchair.

The accessible cabins and safari tent include adjustments like access ramps, automatic doors and blinds, motorised adjustable kitchen benchtops and accessible bathrooms.

Since its opening in late 2023, bookings for the inclusive cabins and safari tent have increased by nearly 22% year-on-year, with over 800 travellers making use of the facilities.

The project aims to foster a stronger sense of belonging for visitors to the park and reinforces the importance of designing tourism experiences that support all abilities and age groups.

Creating accessible tourism experiences gives regional NSW tourism operators an opportunity to target people of all abilities in the growing travel market.

A Tourism Research Australia report forecast NSW to experience annual growth of 3.4% each year from until 2029 in visitor nights for domestic travellers.

# COMING EVENTS

**21 May 2026, 8:00am – 9:30am**
**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/

**27 - 28 May 2026**
**New.E and HunterNet**
The Hunter New Energy Symposium
Venue: Newcastle City Hall
Cost: $750.00
https://hunternewenergy.com.au/events/2026-hunter-new-energy-symposium/

**28 May 2026, 5:00pm – 7:00pm**
**HIA**
Industry Trade Night
Venue: Club Forster
Cost: $25 - $50
https://hia.com.au/awards-and-events/events/trade-night/hunter-nsw/2026/hia-information-session-mayfield-may19

**29 May 2026, 7:00pm**
**Hunter Region Business Hub (The Hub)**
Hunter Region Business Excellence Awards
Venue: Ben Ean, Pokolbin
Cost: $160.00
https://www.huntervalleyhub.com.au/business-community/awards/

**2 June 2026, 12:00pm – 1:30pm**
**Newcastle Business Club**
June 2026 - Diversity in the workplace & creating inclusive cultures
Venue: Newcastle Cruising Yacht Club
Cost: $75 - $95
https://newcastlebusinessclub.com.au/event/june-2026-diversity-in-the-workplace-creating-inclusive-cultures/

**3 June 2026, 7:00am – 9:00am**
**Business Hunter**
Business in Focus | Find your edge: building a business that stands out
Venue: Crystalbrook Kingsley
Cost: $66 - $77
https://crowdcatcher.com/e/tickets/business-in-focus--find-your-edge-building-a-business-that-stands-out-tickets-2mJdXU2gY0?session=645678ef-a6c9-493d-b987-6e80a9205d3e

**13 June 2026,12:00am – 5:00pm**
**Business Hunter**
Business Hunter Race Day
Venue: Newcastle Racecourse
Cost: $250 - $2300
https://crowdcatcher.com/e/tickets/business-hunter-race-day--tickets-3pxHA58kvs?session=ff46bd79-d1e5-4387-b55c-8f31fee6bd3c

**18 June 2026, 7:30am – 9:30am**
**HIA**
Industry Outlook Breakfast
Venue: South Merewether
Cost: $120 - $240
https://hia.com.au/awards-and-events/events/industry-outlook/hunter-nsw/2026/industry-outlook-breakfast-merewether-jun18

**18 June 2026, 8:30am – 5:00pm**
**1000 Feet Deep**
Hand Head Heart Masterclass
Venue: 1000 Feet Deep
Cost: $597
https://events.humanitix.com/hand-head-heart-masterclass-thu-june-18th-2026

**27 July 2026, 1:30pm – 6:15pm**
**The University of Newcastle**
Newcastle Industry Open Day
Venue: Brennan Room, Callaghan
Cost: Free
https://events.humanitix.com/newcastle-industry-open-day

**26 - 27 August 2026**
**Hunter Defence**
2026 Hunter Defence Conference
Venue: Rydges Hunter Valley
https://www.hunterdefence.org.au/hdc2026/

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# Flexible work requests: the legal minefield every Hunter employer needs to navigate

***Kevin Vierboom***
***Fourtree Lawyers***

The law changed in 2023. The consequences are only becoming clear now.

It starts with what seems like a simple conversation. An employee, perhaps a parent returning from parental leave, or a worker managing a health condition, asks if they can work from home two days a week, or shift their hours to accommodate school pick-up. Most managers respond instinctively, with either a quick yes or a sympathetic but firm no. Both responses can now expose your business to legal risk.

Amendments to Section 65 of the Fair Work Act came into effect in June 2023, but for many employers the changes felt abstract until now. The Fair Work Commission has begun handing down its first decisions under the new provisions, and the outcomes are instructive. Employers who assumed a polite refusal was enough are finding otherwise. For Hunter Region businesses that haven't updated their processes since the law changed, the time to act is now.

**Who can make a request?**

The category of eligible employees is broader than many businesses realise. Employees with at least 12 months of continuous service can make a request if they are a parent or carer of a school-age child or younger, a person with a disability, aged 55 or older, experiencing family or domestic violence, or providing care to an immediate family or household member who requires support.

In practical terms, a significant portion of your workforce may qualify and many may not even know it yet.

**Why this matters now**

Prior to the amendments, an employer could refuse a request on "reasonable business grounds" with relatively little explanation required. The process was largely informal, and disputes rarely went anywhere.

That has changed substantially. Employers now must:

- Respond to the request in writing within 21 days
- Genuinely try to reach an agreement with the employee before refusing
- State detailed written reasons if refusing - "operational requirements" alone is no longer sufficient
- Advise the employee of their right to dispute the decision with the Fair Work Commission

Critically, the Fair Work Commission now has jurisdiction to arbitrate disputes where parties cannot reach agreement and can order an employer to grant a flexible arrangement if the refusal was not based on legitimate reasonable business grounds.

**The traps employers fall into**

At Fourtree Lawyers, we are seeing businesses across the Hunter make the same avoidable mistakes.

The most common:

- **Trap 1** - Responding verbally or informally with no written record of reasons

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- **Trap 2 -** Refusing without genuinely exploring alternatives or a trial arrangement
- **Trap 3 -** Missing the 21-day deadline, which is deemed an automatic refusal
- **Trap 4 -** Failing to tell the employee about their right to take the matter to the Fair Work Commission

There is also a subtler risk. If a refusal is later found to have been made without genuine consideration, it can form part of a broader adverse action or general protections claim - which carries penalties and reputational risk well beyond the original request.

**What "reasonable business grounds" actually means**

The Act provides examples of reasonable business grounds for refusal: the arrangement would be too costly, would require other staff to be hired or have their hours changed, would impact customer service, or would be impractical given the nature of the role. However, these are starting points and not automatic justifications.

In each case, businesses must be able to demonstrate the actual impact on their specific operations, not just assert it. A manufacturer in Tomago with a genuine shift dependency has a very different position to a professional services firm in Newcastle CBD where hybrid work is industry-standard. Context matters, and your written reasons need to reflect it.

**What should Hunter Region businesses be doing now?**

There are practical steps every employer should be taking regardless of size.

First, ensure your HR policies and manager training reflect the updated Section 65 obligations, many businesses are still operating on pre-2023 procedures. Second, introduce a simple internal process so that any flexible work request is escalated, documented, and responded to within the 21-day window without exception. Third, before refusing any request, take legal advice on whether your stated grounds are sufficient - the cost of a 30-minute consultation is considerably less than a Fair Work Commission conciliation or arbitration.

Finally, consider whether a genuine trial arrangement might serve both parties. A three-month trial with a review clause often resolves a dispute before it becomes one and frequently produces better workforce outcomes than a flat refusal.

Have an employment law question?

***For further information contact Fourtree Lawyers on 1300 529 444 for 24/7 legal assistance, or visit www.fourtreelawyers.com.au***

***This article is intended as general information only and does not constitute legal advice. For advice specific to your circumstances, please contact a qualified employment lawyer at Fourtree Lawyers.***

**Kevin Vierboom** is the Principal Solicitor at Fourtree Lawyers. Kevin represents both employers and employees in the Fair Work Commission and Federal Court, providing balanced, strategic advice across a wide range of workplace disputes. He regularly appears for clients in mediations, conciliations, arbitrations, hearings and disciplinary matters, and is known for his practical, solutions-focused approach. Kevin holds a Master's degree in Commercial Law.

# Found or forgotten? Why AI representation risk is the new business blind spot

***Renee Gersteling***
***Iconic Marketing***

For years, businesses treated digital visibility as the goal: show up on Google, keep the website updated, stay active on social media, and assume the job was done. That assumption no longer holds.

Today, buyers are using AI-powered platforms to research, compare, and shortlist businesses before they ever visit a website or make an enquiry. They are asking for recommendations, requesting summaries, and narrowing their options in seconds.

That shift changes the game because AI does not just retrieve information. It interprets it.

And when that interpretation is wrong, incomplete, generic, or skewed towards competitors, your business has an AI representation risk problem.

AI representation risk is the risk of your business being misread before a buyer ever contacts you. Your services may be described inaccurately. Your point of difference may be missed. Your expertise may be flattened into something generic. In some cases, competitors are surfaced more clearly or more credibly than you are.

Most businesses do not even realise it is happening.

That is what makes this such a serious blind spot. You are not losing the opportunity at conversion. You are losing it much earlier, at the point where AI helps shape the buyer's first impression.

This is not just a marketing issue. It is a commercial one.

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Business owners often assume that if their website is live and their Google Business Profile is accurate, they are covered. They are not. AI systems build their view of your business from a much broader signal environment.

When those signals are weak, vague, outdated, or contradictory, AI fills the gaps. And gap-filling is where representation risk begins.

Reducing that risk starts with your website. It must state clearly what you do, who you do it for, where you operate, and why your business is different. If your offer is buried under vague or generic wording, buyers will struggle to understand it quickly, and AI systems will too.

Next, audit your public business information. Check that your business name, services, contact details, locations, and descriptions are consistent across platforms. Remove outdated information where possible. Old signals can continue shaping AI responses long after they stop reflecting the business accurately.

Then test your category, not just your brand name. Ask AI tools to recommend businesses in your field and region. Look at who appears, how they are described, and what proof points are cited. That is the competitive frame buyers are seeing whether you are paying attention to it or not.

There are also more advanced ways to strengthen AI understanding of your business. A properly structured Wikidata entry can help reinforce your business as a recognised entity. Businesses should also stop thinking in Google-only terms. OpenAI says ChatGPT's web search may send queries to Bing. If your business data is weak, missing, or outdated there, you are leaving part of how AI interprets your business to chance.

In the past, businesses competed to be seen. Increasingly, they will compete to be understood correctly.

***For further information contact Iconic Marketing on 0490 485 441, email reneeg@iconic.marketing or visit www.iconic.marketing***

**Renee Gersteling** is the founder of Iconic Marketing, a Newcastle-based consultancy specialising in strategy, digital marketing, and AI Representation Risk. She works with Australian businesses to strengthen how they are found, interpreted, compared, and trusted in an increasingly AI-shaped buying environment.

# Using promotional products in your marketing mix

Promotional products are essentially customised items that companies can brand and offer to customers and other parties. From apparel to office products and kitchenware, promotional items have become a staple in modern business. These products can help provide latent impressions over time, familiarising potential customers with a company's brand and offerings.

Promotional marketing using branded, tangible products is one of the most effective, inexpensive methods of advertising available. Promotional products can help a company distinguish itself from its competitors by leaving a strong impression on customers and making it easier for them to identify the brand in a purchasing situation.

If you want consumers to remember your brand logo or slogan, printing it across an item they will use in everyday life is one of the most cost-effective and fail-safe methods to achieve brand recall.

According to Promotional Products Association International, the following promotional products are the most popular and effective, based on estimated lifetime impressions:

- **Outerwear** — Jackets, rain slickers, and windbreakers can achieve an estimated 6,100 lifetime impressions.
- **T-Shirts** — Items like t-shirts can achieve an estimated 3,400 lifetime impressions.
- **Headwear** — Products like hats, visors, and similar headgear achieve an estimated 3,400 lifetime impressions.
- **Bags** — Backpacks, tote bags, and drawstring bags can achieve an estimated 3,300 lifetime impressions.
- **Writing Instruments** — Products like pens, notebooks and pencils can achieve an estimated 3,000 lifetime impressions.
- **Polo Shirts** —Items like polo shirts can achieve an estimated 2,300 lifetime impressions.
- **Desk Accessories** — Trays, bookends and organisers can achieve an estimated 1,450 lifetime impressions.
- **Drinkware** — Products like mugs, water bottles and glassware can achieve an estimated 1,400 lifetime impressions.
- **Umbrellas** — Items like umbrellas can achieve an estimated 1,100 lifetime impressions.
- **Power Banks** — Power banks for charging electronic devices can achieve an estimated 900 lifetime impressions.
- **Calendars** — Products like calendars can achieve an estimated 850 lifetime impressions.
- **USB Drives** — Products like USB flash drives can achieve an estimated 700 lifetime impressions.

How do consumers respond to promotional products? According to the Promotional Products Association International:

- 82% of consumers respond positively to companies that give out promotional products.
- 80% of consumers have an immediate reaction when they receive a promotional product from a company they have never heard of.
- 75% of people say they would rather receive a promotional product than any other form of advertising.
- Consumers says they are 2.5 times more likely to have a positive opinion of promotional products compared to online advertising.
- 79% of promotional product recipients go on to research the company.
- 95% of consumers that own a promotional jacket can later recall the name of the advertiser.
- 81% of consumers will keep a promotional product for more than one year.
- Office workers hold onto promotional products for more than four years on average.
- 70% of consumers wished they received promotional products from companies more often.


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# SEO myths and what it means for your business

***Rachel Fraser***
***Powerful Perceptions***

Most business owners rely on their websites to show up online. They know SEO is important but might not really understand what it entails, or how it works. SEO simply stands for Search Engine Optimisation and it's a broad term encompassing all the tiny signals that influence a search engine to show your website when people search for a subject or product.

Sadly, plenty of people get sucked into the SEO trap: pouring money into 'experts' to 'Do their SEO'. It's a conversation that I've had with too many times. "So what exactly is your current person doing for 2k+ a month?" The answer – "They 'Do my SEO'".

The 'Fast and Loose' way is expensive, ethically questionable, and doesn't provide any longevity. Once you stop paying for revolving farmed backlinks, they quickly turn toxic and drop you into all sorts of trouble! Or you can play the long game, where you optimise functionality, use technical best practices, build relationships, provide useful information and earn your place in the search rankings. This way takes time, effort and authenticity, but the good news is, the time and money you put into it won't be suddenly cut off once you stop paying the magicians who 'Do your SEO'.

While we don't have time to delve into all the aspects that healthy SEO relies on, we can bust a few of the biggest SEO myths to save you money and frustration.

**Myth: SEO is some kind of invisible magic**

The SEO with longevity, the type that won't get you banned from google when you stop paying isn't voodoo and the changes are visible. Healthy SEO comes from a combination of things including structure, content, navigation, loading speeds and credibility signals. Keeping your website up to date, fast and with new, well written articles and fresh photos is a legitimate and visible way to improve your SEO.

**Myth: Any old platform will do**

I'm not at all against some good old Aussie DIY, but an out of the box, drag and drop website won't live up to the claims, nor will it grow with your business.

I cannot stress enough the importance of quality hosting and a good foundation. A well-built, fast, one page website can run rings around a sloppy 6 pager.

**Myth: Words don't matter**

Words matter. It's a simple concept, but one that in the Instagram era seems to be as elusive as my work life balance. It's great to have stunning photos on your website, but if you don't share the stage with words, you will NOT show up when people search for those words. Sure, we can do a few things behind the scenes, but if you insist on a website that looks like an Instagram feed, please don't ask me why you're not showing up in search.

**Myth: Buying backlinks builds credibility**

Yes, quality, relevant backlinks are important, but BUYING fake ones is bad. Chances are, this is what old mate the SEO magician is doing when they 'Do your SEO'. These backlinks are usually bought from link farms, (websites specifically and only built to sell links). The problem with bad backlinks is that once search engines uncover that they are just a shell, they will blacklist them and penalise anyone linked to them. Enough spammy or toxic backlinks will lower your chances of showing in search and a few more will get your domain blocked completely. When you stop paying the monthly fee that gets these updated, you are left with toxic links, and therein lies a world of pain.

**My advice?**

If need help showing up in search, meet with a genuine professional who understands marketing your industry. Create a strategy together, ensuring search brings quality over volume. Focus on the people you want to work with; the ones who will value your services most. If someone offers you instant results from bought backlinks, run for the hills!

***For further information contact Powerful Perceptions at 0499 908 397, email rachel@powerfulperceptions.com.au or visit www.powerfulperceptions.com.au***

**Rachel Fraser** is a Director and Head Marketer at Powerful Perceptions. Rachel is passionate about small business growth through strategic marketing and industry partnerships. Her business, Powerful Perceptions, works regularly with more than 20 local businesses and organisations in both the industrial space and tourism arena.

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# Environmental approvals: Education is the catalyst for better outcomes

***Emma Montgomery***
***Andrew Mack***
***Talis Consultants***

Environmental approvals are often perceived as an unnecessary burden before real work can begin. In reality, the approvals process is rigorous for a reason: to properly understand environmental risk and protect the environments and communities in which assets operate. An approval is, in many ways, a valuable and hard-won outcome, and it should be treated as such.

Too often, however, the depth of information, analysis and intent that underpins an approval fades once it is granted. As projects transition into delivery and operations, this knowledge is not always translated in a way that is accessible to those responsible for implementing it.

This can result in misalignment between what is approved and what is actually undertaken onsite.

A common example is an operational site that holds a valid approval and environmental management plan, yet begins receiving audit findings or increased regulatory scrutiny years later. On paper, requirements appear to be met. In practice, day-to-day activities have often drifted. Typically, this reflects a disconnect between what was approved and what is occurring onsite.

These issues rarely arise from intent or negligence. Instead, they are more often the result of limited understanding of why approval conditions were developed and the risks they were designed to manage.

Environmental compliance is frequently viewed narrowly as the need to meet statutory or licence conditions. While compliance is essential, it represents only part of the intent. Statutory requirements are deliberately designed as practical risk management tools to protect both the environment and operational continuity. When their purpose is not fully understood, shortcuts or informal adaptations, often made with good intentions, can unintentionally result in non-compliance or environmental impact.

This is where targeted environmental education delivers real value. When operators understand the history of an approval and rationale behind its conditions, compliance becomes purposeful rather than procedural. Requirements are applied more consistently, risks are identified earlier, and environmental management becomes embedded at all levels of the organisation.

Environmental compliance will always require effort, because the environments and communities in which we operate matter. Environmental education is not optional to effective compliance; it is fundamental to managing risk and ensuring approvals remain fit for purpose as operations evolve.

Environmental consultants can support operators build this capability through practical, asset-specific education. By helping teams understand not just what is required, but why, approvals can be implemented consistently and effectively over the life of an asset.

***For further information contact Talis Consultants on 1300 251 070, email emma.montgomery@talisconsultants.com.au or visit www.talisconsultants.com.au***

**Emma Montgomery**
Bachelor of Applied Science (Environmental Science) and Master of Primary Teaching, is a Senior Environmental Consultant at Talis Consultants, specialising in environmental approvals, compliance and operator education across the asset lifecycle.

**Andrew Mack** is a Director and National Environment Lead at Talis Consultants and has qualifications in environmental engineering and law. He has accumulated experience of more than 30 years and specialises in approvals, compliance and statutory advice across a range of industries and projects.

# NSW powers up electric Vehicle access

The NSW Government is making the shift to electric vehicles easier for drivers by rolling out more public chargers, backing more electric trucks and training the workforce needed to keep them on the road.

The 2026 NSW Electric Vehicle Strategy has been released to help reduce emissions and make EVs and their cost-of-living benefits accessible to more people, with a focus on closing charging gaps in regional, remote and suburban areas.

With global fuel prices under pressure and ongoing uncertainty in international markets, accelerating EV uptake has never been more important.

Switching to an EV can cut fuel costs by up to $3,000 a year, or eliminate them entirely when paired with home solar, while reducing maintenance costs by around 40%.

In NSW, there is growing interest in EV uptake with sales making up 15.6% of new car sales.

Backed by $100 million in funding, the 2026 NSW Electric Vehicle Strategy sharpens the focus on five priority areas:

- **Fast chargers where they're needed most**
  Expanding the fast charging network with a focus on regional remote and suburban blackspots, so EV drivers outside city centres are not left behind.
- **More kerbside chargers**
  Rolling out more kerbside charging infrastructure to help EV drivers who cannot charge at home, including apartment residents.
- **Electric trucks on the road sooner**
  Expanding the EV Fleets Incentive Program from small to medium-size trucks, allowing organisations to electrify their delivery and service fleets.
- **A skilled EV workforce, especially in the regions**
  Investing in training for around 2,000 mechanics in regional NSW, where access to courses is limited and travel distances longer, to safely service EVs and charging infrastructure.
- **Clear, reliable information**
  Strengthening central sources of information to help drivers, businesses, councils and owners' corporations understand their options and access support.

To date, the NSW Government has funded more than 3,300 EV chargers in more than 1,200 sites across metropolitan, regional and remote NSW.

Applications are now open for eligible councils to build capability and plan for further public charging rollout under a $3 million program, recognising their key role in supporting local access to EV infrastructure.

Fleets and truck operators can also currently apply for grants to electrify vehicles and install charging infrastructure.

The Government is also boosting the electrification of transport by:

- Transitioning more than 8,000 public transport buses to zero-emission technology.
- Powering rail, light rail and metro networks with 100% renewable electricity since 2025.
- Installing EV chargers at commuter car parks at major transport hubs.
- Running a two-year trial to enable zero-emission heavy vehicles on state roads.
- Delivering EV skills training across 13 TAFE NSW micro-skills courses, and training emergency service workers to respond to EV incidents.
- Launching EV Road Trips across regional NSW.

# Capital is already reshaping the transition, what it means for regional businesses

***Jean-Paul da Costa***
***Corporate Carbon Group***

There is a tendency to talk about the energy transition as something that is coming. In reality it is already underway, and one of the clearest signals is where capital is moving.

Across Australia and globally, private and institutional capital is increasingly being directed into low-carbon infrastructure and carbon projects underpinned by frameworks that support emissions reduction alongside continued industrial activity, including the Safeguard Mechanism and the Australian Carbon Credit Unit (ACCU) scheme.

This is not being driven by policy alone. It is being driven by investors, lenders and partners who are reassessing risk, return and long-term viability.

In our experience, the shift is less about short-term cycles and more about a structural change in how capital is allocated.

For regions like the Hunter, this matters. The Hunter is one of Australia's most significant industrial and energy regions, with deep exposure across mining, manufacturing, logistics, power generation and agriculture. As capital reallocates, these sectors are directly affected, not in theory, but in how projects are financed and future growth is assessed.

One of the clearest changes is the growing emphasis investors place on transition readiness. Lenders and capital partners are looking beyond immediate returns and asking more detailed questions about how businesses are positioned over the medium to long term, to remain viable, competitive and aligned with Australia's net zero trajectory. This means emissions expectations and risk management are now part of the investment conversation.

At the same time, demand for high-integrity projects is rising. Whether in carbon, energy, agriculture or broader land-based sectors, there is a clear preference for opportunities that demonstrate transparency, durability and measurable outcomes. This is shaping not only where capital flows, but also the types of partnerships being formed.

For businesses on the ground, this has practical implications. Access to capital is becoming more closely linked to how well a business understands and responds to these shifts. In some cases, this will influence financing conditions. In others, it will affect who businesses can partner with, or which projects are viable.

Importantly, this is not only about risk. There is a growing opportunity for regional businesses to unlock new revenue by participating in carbon markets, integrating with emerging energy infrastructure and demonstrating a credible transition strategy to attract capital. There is a natural fit in combining carbon project income, energy generation and agriculture on the same land assets. Stacking them improves the commercial viability of holdings while contributing to measurable transition outcomes.

The Hunter is well placed in this regard. With its industrial base, productive agricultural land, and scale to play a central role in Australia's next phase of development, the question is not whether the transition will happen, but how businesses position themselves within it.

This does not require every business to become an expert in carbon markets, energy policy or agricultural diversification. It does require an understanding of how the commercial environment is shifting, and how those shifts will influence capital, partnerships and long-term competitiveness.

The transition is already being funded. For regional businesses, the opportunity is to recognise that shift early and move with it.

***For further information contact Corporate Carbon Group on 1300 227 206, email info@corporatecarbon.com.au or visit www.corporatecarbon.com.au***

**Jean-Paul (JP) da Costa** is Chief Commercial and Growth Officer at Corporate Carbon Group (CCG) one of Australia's leading carbon project developers. He leads CCG's commercial strategy and investment partnerships, driving capital growth and market expansion for high-integrity carbon and climate projects.

# First massive renewable energy components leave Port of Newcastle for Uungula Wind Farm

Port of Newcastle has marked another milestone as the leader in renewable energy logistics, with the first oversize and/or overmass (OSOM) wind farm movement from its Multipurpose Terminal to the Uungula Wind Farm in Central West New South Wales.

The delivery is an important milestone for the Port, which has played a central role in receiving and storing the massive renewable energy components.

Since the first shipment in August last year, Port of Newcastle has handled more than 800 components, including over 400 tower sections and 170 turbine blades.

CEO Craig Carmody said the first OSOM deliveries highlighted the critical role the Port plays in enabling and supporting major renewable energy projects.

"We've worked closely with Squadron Energy across vessel discharge, laydown, storage and load-out to prepare these oversized components for transport to site at Uungula," Mr Carmody said.

"This milestone demonstrates Port of Newcastle's capability as Australia's premiere port for the management of all complex, heavy-lift project cargo and coordination of its safe and efficient movement through the supply chain.

"Port of Newcastle is not only supporting Squadron Energy on the Uungula project, we are enabling the next generation of renewable energy developments right across New South Wales."

It's anticipated 700 deliveries will be required over a 12-month period to transport the components from storage at Port of Newcastle's Multipurpose Terminal to Squadron Energy's Uungula Wind Farm in the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone (REZ).

The initial OSOM delivery also marks the first use of the Port to REZ route to move oversized renewable energy componentry.

"Utilising the Port to REZ route for the first time highlights both the unprecedented scale of this rollout and the coordination required across port, road and project partners to make it work," Mr Carmody said.

"Port of Newcastle is proud to work alongside the NSW Government to support its ongoing investment in port-to-project infrastructure, ensuring the right connections are in place to enable the next phase of renewable energy development."

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# $17 million to accelerate decarbonisation of heavy industry

MGA Thermal has secured $17 million in new investment for its breakthrough long-duration thermal energy storage technology.

The funding round introduces IP Group Australia as a new investor, alongside existing investor Main Sequence. It brings total capital raised to more than $50 million and positions MGA Thermal for rapid expansion.

As part of the investment, Shane Meaney of IP Group Australia will join MGA Thermal's Board, bringing extensive experience in scaling climate-tech ventures across global markets.

"MGA Thermal is addressing one of the most critical challenges in the energy transition: delivering reliable, low-cost, industrial-scale storage for renewable heat," said Mr Meaney.

"Industrial heat is the next frontier of decarbonisation – MGA's technology delivers it 24/7 for less.

"We're excited to support the team moving into full commercial deployment and look forward to partnering closely with MGA Thermal through this next phase of growth."

The funding accelerates MGA Thermal's transition from pilot deployments to full commercial rollout, enabling the company to expand its workforce, fast-track customer projects, and scale manufacturing capacity over the next two years.

IP Group Australia brings a global portfolio of energy and deep-tech ventures, and a proven model for helping climate-tech innovators scale from first-of-a-kind deployments to global commercial markets.

CEO of MGA Thermal, Mark Croudace, says the new funding is a powerful endorsement of his team and technology.

"We are entering a period of rapid scale-up - expanding our commercial capability, growing manufacturing, and delivering projects that help industry decarbonise at speed," Mr Croudace said.

"Partnering with IP Group, alongside continued support from Main Sequence, gives us the global reach and deep-tech expertise we need."

***MGA Thermal CEO Mark Croudace and new director Shane Meaney of IP Group Australia***

# Batteries continue to dominate NEM connections as pipeline grows

A surge in grid-scale batteries is driving strong growth in the pipeline of new generation and storage projects seeking to connect to the National Electricity Market (NEM), with total proposed capacity now nearing today's installed levels.

The Australian Energy Market Operator's (AEMO) latest Connections Scorecard shows 67.3 GW of projects progressing through the NEM connection process, compared with around 73 GW of existing NEM generation and storage capacity (excluding consumer energy resources). Batteries account for around half of the total pipeline capacity.

AEMO tracks new generation and storage projects as they move through the connection process each quarter, from initial application through to registration and commissioning to full output.

AEMO Group Manager, Onboarding and Connections, Margarida Pimentel said the overall project pipeline has increased 33% from 50.5 GW at the end of Q1 2025 to 67.3 GW in Q1 2026.

"There is positive momentum across the connections pipeline, with strong growth in projects progressing through the early stages of the application process," Ms Pimentel said.

"Projects in application stage, where the performance of project design is assessed, increased by 51% over the past year, from 19.7 GW to 29.8 GW, with 18 projects totalling 5.5 GW in the March quarter alone," she said.

Ms Pimentel said it was critical that projects continued to move through registration and commissioning to deliver energy and capacity to the market.

"We're seeing a continued trend of projects taking longer in the proponent implementation phase, due to prolonged funding uncertainty, project ownership changes, supply chain and resource constraints, and design modifications," Ms Pimentel said.

"What's important is that these projects continue through to registration and commissioning to full output, so they can support reliability and the transition of the power system," she said.

This new capacity will help meet an anticipated 28% rise in electricity demand by 2035, while also offsetting the planned retirement of 11 GW of predominantly coal-fired power stations over the next 10 years, including Eraring, Bayswater and Vales Point (NSW), Yallourn (VIC), and Callide B (QLD).

By technology type over the past year, standalone battery capacity in the pipeline increased from 20.5 GW to 33.2 GW, while grid-scale solar rose from 17.7 GW to 20.7 GW and wind from 8.32 GW to 9.75 GW. Hydro remained stable at 3 GW, while gas capacity decreased by 74%, from 0.9 GW to 0.2 GW, with the Hunter Power Station commissioning to full output.

Batteries now comprise 49% of total capacity in the NEM connections pipeline, with around 74% of battery projects being grid-forming.

For the March 2026 quarter, eight projects totalling 1.4 GW received application approvals, eight projects totalling 1.5 GW were registered, and five projects totalling 1.4 GW reached full output.

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At a party, a woman admonished her husband, saying, "That's the fourth time you've gone back for ice cream and cake. Doesn't it embarrass you?"
He shrugged and answered, "Why should it? I keep telling them it's for you."

How many telemarketers does it take to change a lightbulb?
Only one, but they have to do it while you are eating dinner.

An old man sees two burglars break into his garage
He quickly calls the police and says:
"Please send a police car, there are two burglars in my garage!"
"I'm sorry sir. We don't have any available units. Please lock your doors and remain inside."
The man just says 'Okay' in a calm voice and hangs up. He waits one minute and then call the police again:
"Hello. I just called regarding two burglars in my garage 1 minute ago. Don't worry about them anymore. I just shot them both."
He hangs up and sits down in his couch. Three minutes later there is an ambulance and two police cars in his driveway.
From his window he sees the police force enter the garage, and shortly after drag the two burglars out of there.
One of the police officers then knocks on his door, and as the old man opens, the police offer says:
"Excuse me sir, but didn't you say that you had killed two burglars in your garage?!"
To which the old man responds in a grumpy voice: "Yes. Yes I did. And didn't you say that you didn't have any available units!"

Did you hear about the guy who died when a periodic table fell on him?
The official cause of death was "exposure to the elements".

The teacher asked a kid why he wasn't paying attention in class. "I bet you can't even name two types of water bodies!"
He replied, "Well, dam."

A woman in labour suddenly shouted, "Shouldn't! Wouldn't! Couldn't! Didn't! Can't!"
"Don't worry," said the doc. "Those are just contractions."

Women say they want a man who is "funny" and "spontaneous."
But you knock on their window at midnight wearing a clown costume and suddenly it's all screaming and throwing things and police sirens.

A cop asked James, "Do you know how fast you were going?"
James told him, "I was just trying to keep up with traffic."
The cop looked around and said, "There is no traffic."
James replied, "That's how far behind I am!"

## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Stopping advertising to save money is like stopping your watch to save time" - *Henry Ford*

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