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CONTACT

1300 793 267

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CONNECT

PUBLISHED BY:
Hunter Business Publications Pty Ltd
ABN: 15 112 838 945
PO Box 853, Hamilton NSW 2303
Phone: (02) 4062 8133

PUBLISHER and EDITOR:
Garry Hardie
Mob: 0414 463 125
garry@HBRmag.com.au

ART DIRECTOR:
Sandie Collie
sandie@HBRmag.com.au

CONTENT MANAGER:
Jason Duncan
jason@HBRmag.com.au

PRINTING:
NCP Printing
Phone: (02) 4926 1300
sales@ncp.com.au
www.ncp.com.au

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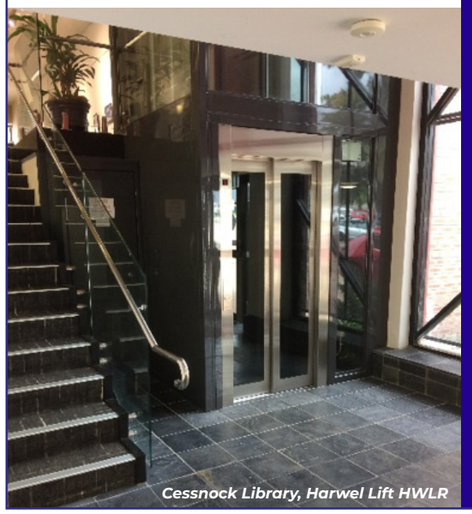
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With rising interest rates, persistent inflationary pressures, falling confidence and global uncertainties, it is only natural for business owners to be wary of market conditions and look for ways to cut costs.

Australia is not in a recession but there are definitely economic challenges at the moment.

But we must also be wary of not falling into a self-fulfilling prophesy scenario with the measures we take to ride out difficult times actually reducing profitability.

In some areas we must outlay expenditure to improve profitability.

It is unwise to totally put up the shutters and be oblivious to market opportunities that may exist.

This is even more important with the rapid rate of change being experienced in business and life in general.

Change often brings challenges to businesses and these should be addressed. But change also brings opportunities. And sometimes we need to make expenditure up front to take advantage of these opportunities.

Another expenditure item that is often reduced is marketing. The typical scenario we see is a business significantly reduces its marketing expenditure and then sales fall. They may even feel like this reduced rate of enquiries proved that they made the correct choice in reducing expenditure on marketing to help with the bottom line. But was the reduction in marketing a major part in the fall in sales?

It can be a tricky line when times are tight but many businesses survive and even thrive through tough times by investing in their marketing.

So what else can be done in challenging economic conditions?

First and foremost make sure the business fundamentals are strong as this will set a strong foundation no matter what the prevailing market conditions.

Look at ways to increase productivity, strategically address expenses, have a strong customer focus, make sure staff morale doesn't flag, improve quality to stand out from competitors, improve collection processes and consider if debts can be better refinanced.

You may also look at your pricing. Customers never like increased prices but sometimes a relatively small price increase can help significantly, particularly if margins are small.

Laying off staff should be a last resort. You are likely to lose valuable experience, possibly customer allegiance and may reduce staff morale. Also you may not be able to take on additional work if it comes your way and take advantage of market conditions when they improve.

Challenging economic times can be difficult for many businesses but you should not make knee-jerk reactions but make considered actions based on data and a proper consideration of the benefits and possible disadvantages of any measures you put in place.

Garry Hardie
Editor and Publisher

ON THIS MONTH'S COVER

A project image courtesy of Nadin West Joinery.

PROGRAMMED TURNPOINT CONFIRMED FOR NEW HUNTER CHAMPIONSHIP COURSE

Capital Corporation has appointed Programmed Turnpoint to construct the championship 18-hole golf course at Lovedale Farm, the 240-hectare residential, resort and golf development on Wine Country Drive in the Hunter Valley. The course sits at the heart of the master-planned community, with more than half of the site retained as fairways, bushland, parks and water features.

Founded in 2002, Programmed Turnpoint has built more than 17 golf courses across Australia and overseas and currently maintains more than 12 courses nationally. The business employs more than 100 staff across 13 sites, and brings golf architects, construction managers, golf course shapers, agronomists and irrigation specialists to every project it delivers, from initial earthworks through to grow-in and ongoing course maintenance.

Among Programmed Turnpoint's notable projects are The Cliffs on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, the $20 million destination golf course set to open this year, Magenta Shores on the NSW Central Coast, regularly rated among Australia's top 50 courses since opening in 2006, and Cape Wickham on King Island, Tasmania, which ranked No.2 in Golf Australia Magazine's Top 100 Golf Courses in Australia 2026 ranking.

Lovedale Farm's golf course is set for completion in late 2028, alongside the first 200 homes in Stage 1. With 85% of the first release already sold, momentum continues to build across the development.

Jim Hunter, Managing Director at Capital Corporation, said Programmed Turnpoint's track record made them the right partner to deliver Lovedale Farm's golf course.

"Programmed Turnpoint's experience with courses like Cape Wickham and Magenta Shores gives us real confidence in the calibre of golf course we'll deliver at Lovedale Farm. This is a significant step in bringing our vision for the Hunter Valley's finest golf address to life."

Lovedale Farm will comprise 500 residential lots, a 300-key resort and day spa, a dining precinct and a world-class 18-hole championship golf course. H&E Architects has been appointed to design the project's 1,200 square metre clubhouse, which will sit alongside the course as the social heart of the community.

NEW MANUFACTURING OPPORTUNITIES WITH HIGH SPEED RAIL

The Australian Government has started the process to develop a hi-tech Advanced Manufacturing Facility (AMF) to support High Speed Rail, boosting economic productivity and creating new jobs and skills opportunities for generations to come.

The AMF will bring together advanced manufacturing, technology and precision engineering to produce the majority of the construction elements needed for the Newcastle to Sydney High Speed Rail project, which is in the Development Phase. It will drive economic productivity, creating new opportunities for jobs, new skills and new manufacturing supply chains.

The Australian Government's High Speed Rail Authority has called for Expressions of Interest to develop the AMF, and a search for land near the proposed rail corridor.

The AMF represents an opportunity to change how Australia delivers major infrastructure, manufacturing repeatable components in a controlled environment to achieve quality and consistency, reduce waste, support safer workplaces and provide greater certainty over cost and delivery.

The facility's goals extend beyond supplying components for the railway: the AMF can support stronger domestic supply chains and help develop skills and expertise that can strengthen other parts of Australia's infrastructure and manufacturing sectors.

The AMF will also help create new career opportunities for people in areas like the Hunter Valley who have been affected by job changes caused by the energy transition.

The Authority has already brought on board leading Australian and international industry partners through an early contractor involvement process to help shape the project's development, including world class tunnellers and global high speed train manufacturers.

Through the procurement process, the Authority will work with industry to explore the shape of the facility and identify practical ways to lift productivity. It is seeking organisations that bring expertise, experience with proven technology and experience applying it.

THE MUTUAL BANK OPENS NEW CESSNOCK BRANCH

The Mutual Bank has celebrated the official opening of its new Cessnock branch at 93 Vincent St on 29 September 2026, marking another milestone in its long-standing commitment to helping regional communities thrive.

At a time when many regional bank branches have closed, The Mutual Bank says it continues to believe in being present, accessible and connected in the communities it calls home. For more than 138 years, the bank has grown alongside Hunter families, local businesses and community organisations, with branches that offer more than banking services.

As the gateway to the Hunter Valley, Cessnock is a thriving hub for local businesses, tourism and emerging residential communities. Establishing a branch in Cessnock strengthens The Mutual Bank's ability to support Customers and businesses across the region, while deepening its presence in an area with strong long-term potential.

The new branch will provide a modern and functional environment for customers, while creating another local base for the bank's team to build relationships, support businesses and serve the community.

"Regional communities deserve access to banking services that are personal, local and built around their needs. Cessnock is growing, and we want to grow with it. We have already begun building relationships with local organisations that understand this community deeply, and we are proud to stand alongside Customers, businesses and community groups as they help shape Cessnock's future," The Mutual Bank CEO Mark Williams said.

The Mutual Bank has already begun building strong community connections in Cessnock, establishing community partnerships with Carrie's Place, Cessnock Minor Rugby League and Hunter Region Business Hub in the lead-up to its official opening.

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST OPEN FOR HUNTER TRAIN MANUFACTURING

Work to rebuild train manufacturing in the Hunter is underway, with the expression of interest now open for manufacturing firms to design and build the next fleet of NSW suburban passenger trains.

This kickstarts the Minns Labor Government's $12 billion program to build a state-owned train manufacturing facility, which will shore up a 30-year pipeline of domestic train manufacturing in the Hunter, supporting hundreds of local jobs and rebuilding a capability that was sent offshore by the former government.

The new generation of trains will be the most advanced fleet ever built in NSW, featuring next-generation control system, advanced communication systems, remote diagnostics and fleet monitoring, enhanced interiors and accessibility, real-time journey updates, connection information and travel guidance.

Passengers can expect to see the first new locally built suburban trains, which will replace the Tangaras, operating in the early 2030s followed by the replacement of the Millennium and OSCAR fleets into the 2040s, and the Waratah fleet in the 2050s.

All manufacturers, local or international, will be required to support local manufacturing and jobs in accordance with the NSW Government's 50% local content for rolling stock contracts.

The government is progressing assessments of the potential locations for the new state-owned train production facility, including a former coal mine at Teralba and the Broadmeadow Locomotive Depot near where the original Tangara fleet was manufactured. A final decision is expected before year's end.

The Future Fleet Program is expected to support up to 780 workers in construction and approximately 550 ongoing jobs in the facility and supply chains.

The EOI is open until 10 November.

UGL TRANSPORT RENEWS MAINTENANCE AGREEMENT WITH ONE RAIL AUSTRALIA

UGL Transport has renewed its long-term maintenance agreement with One Rail Australia, extending a partnership that has supported the safe and reliable movement of freight across Australia's east coast for more than 15 years.

The five-year contract, with options to extend, covers maintenance and overhaul services for the majority of One Rail Australia's locomotive fleet, including rotables, engines and bogies.

The agreement will support specialised rolling stock maintenance and manufacturing jobs at UGL Transport's Hunter Valley Maintenance Centre and Broadmeadow workshops in Newcastle.

"One Rail Australia plays an important role in Australia's freight network, helping move critical goods safely and efficiently across the country," said UGL Transport Chief Executive Officer Ian Quarrie.

"We are proud to continue supporting their operations through our maintenance and overhaul expertise, backed by the skills and dedication of our people.

"Our relationship began more than 15 years ago when UGL Transport delivered Australian-made locomotives built at our Broadmeadow workshops in Newcastle. Today, we continue to maintain and overhaul those assets, demonstrating the enduring value of our engineering and manufacturing capability."

150 MILLION INVESTMENT IN WATER SECURITY FOR LOWER HUNTER

Hunter Water is proposing to invest more than $150 million to strengthen long-term water security for the Lower Hunter through the replacement of a critical section of the Chichester Trunk Gravity Main (CTGM). The proposed project is now on public exhibition, with community members invited to review the plans and provide feedback.

The project will replace a 12 km section of the CTGM between Brookfield Tunnel and Burmi Creek, near Clarence Town. Since being constructed in 1923, this critical asset has reliably supplied drinking water to the Lower Hunter for more than 100 years and is now proposed to be renewed to strengthen water security, improve network resilience and support the region's growing needs well into the future.

The proposed replacement pipeline will be larger, with an increase in diameter from 900 mm to 1050 mm, improving network capacity and helping support long-term water security across the region.

The feedback received through this process will help inform planning and decision-making as Hunter Water continues to refine the project and its delivery.

Extensive investigations have informed the proposed route, with Hunter Water selecting an alignment that diverts around Columbey National Park to reduce impact on native vegetation, threatened species habitat and environmentally sensitive areas. Much of the replacement pipeline in this area would be installed underground within an existing powerline easement, helping minimise impacts on surrounding landowners and the environment.

Subject to approvals and consideration of feedback received during the exhibition period, construction is expected to commence in 2029 and be completed over several years.

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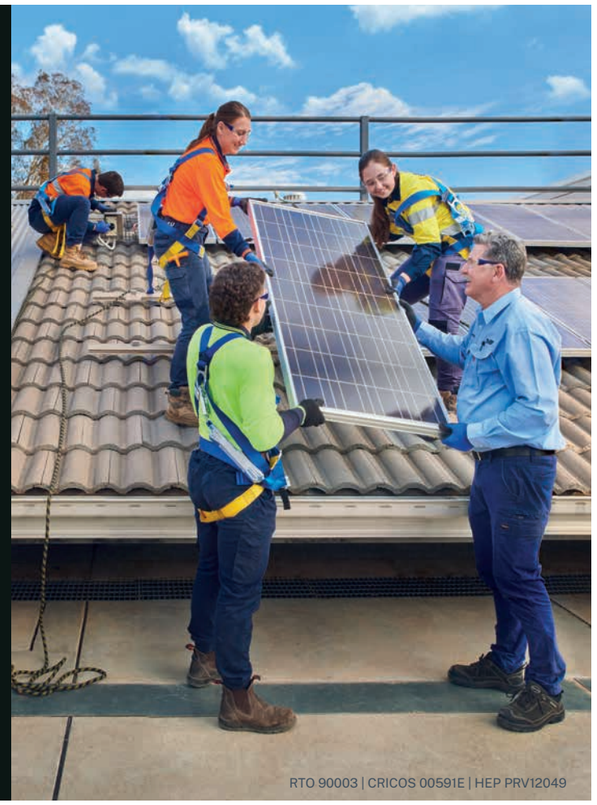

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$20 MILLION VISION FOR NEWCASTLE'S HISTORIC STATION

A $20 million investment by Ashbridge Capital could see Newcastle's former railway station restored and reimagined as a significant new hospitality destination. The proposal would deliver a substantial restoration and adaptive reuse of one of Newcastle's most recognisable heritage landmarks - preserving the character and architectural significance of The Station while creating a new destination for the city.

Dating back to 1858 and occupying a prominent 10,670 sqm site, The Station has been part of Newcastle's urban fabric for more than 160 years. The investment seeks to protect that history while opening the building to a new generation of uses.

The investment follows the NSW Government's announcement that Ashbridge Capital had secured a 99-year lease over The Station, with plans to restore and activate the heritage buildings as a tourism, retail and hospitality precinct.

The plans would establish five hospitality opportunities across the ground and first floors, supported by extensive outdoor dining and a considered restoration of the existing heritage buildings.

The plans would create four ground-floor hospitality tenancies ranging from approximately 157 sqm to 282 sqm internally, together with substantial covered outdoor dining areas. A 274 sqm first-floor hospitality and function space is also proposed, incorporating a function room, lounge, bar areas and kitchen.

Collectively, the venues have been planned to accommodate approximately 995 patrons, creating the potential for a significant new dining and hospitality precinct between Newcastle's East End, harbour and beaches.

Hudson Retail Group has been appointed to lead the hospitality leasing campaign, with the operator mix intended to be curated across the precinct.

NEW DATA CENTRE PROPOSED FOR KURRI KURRI

AirTrunk is proposing a new data centre at Kurri Kurri's former aluminium smelter. The proposed multibillion dollar data centre would create more than 350 ongoing local jobs for decades to come, including 250 on-site roles and more than 100 off-site jobs supporting the facility. Several thousand additional jobs are expected during construction.

Kurri Kurri was chosen as it has the land, power, connectivity and skilled workforce needed to support critical digital infrastructure. The proposed site is located within an established industrial area, more than 500 metres from the nearest home, with access to existing power infrastructure and proximity to renewable energy being developed in the Hunter. The region also has the skilled workforce needed to support both construction and the long-term operation of a data centre.

As part of the proposed development, AirTrunk has engaged with Cessnock City Council and submitted a draft offer to directly contribute more than $37 million to support the delivery of district infrastructure. This includes more than $12 million towards Council's broader-catchment share of the proposed Loxford District Sporting Facility and Multipurpose Community Facility.

AirTrunk is also developing a Community Energy Program that could provide nearby eligible households with a $200 annual deduction on their electricity bills.

NEWCASTLE ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Newcastle's outstanding engineers and engineering projects were recognised at the Newcastle 2026 Engineers Australia Excellence Awards held at Newcastle City Hall on 16 September.

Each of the winners and their respective teams will go on to represent Newcastle at Engineers Australia's Excellence Awards Gala Dinner 2026 held at Melbourne Town Hall on Thursday 12 November. Achievement award winners are recognised as the national winner for their awards.

Engineers Australia Newcastle General Manager Helen Link congratulated the finalists, adding that their contributions "demonstrate the extraordinary contribution engineering makes to our communities, our economy and our quality of life."

"For generations, engineers have helped shape Newcastle through mining, manufacturing, energy, transport, ports and heavy industry," Ms Link said.

"Each of the nominated projects and engineers demonstrate the breadth, creativity and impact of engineering across this region."

Ms Link said the event also showcased the strength of the Newcastle engineering community to come together and support each other.

"These awards are more than accolades," Ms Link said. "They provide a platform for our winners and finalists to champion the profession, share what excellence looks like and inspire the next generation to imagine what they too might achieve through engineering."

"Collaboration sits at the heart of our profession, and it is through diverse teams, diverse in gender, culture, experience, industry and professional discipline, that we achieve our best outcomes."

Award winners:
Project of the Year - John Hunter Health and Innovation Precinct – Northrop Consulting Engineers
Acknowledgement for Community Impact - Lismore City Council EPAR Flood Recovery Roads and Bridges Design Partner
Acknowledgement for Safety by Design - Hexham Straight Widening Alliance
Acknowledgement for Delivery Performance - Clarence Regional Aquatic Centre
Professional Engineer of the Year - Brooke Griffin FIEAust CPEng NER – Boeing Defence Australia
Emerging Professional Engineer of the Year - Dr. Uzair Khan, **MIEAust CPEng NER** - Power Control Engineers
Outstanding Nominee - Lilly Großstück MIEAust CPEng NER , Advitech
John Connell Gold Medal - Professor Mark Stewart FIEAust CPEng NER APEC Engineer IntPE(Aus) University of Technology Sydney

Dr Uzair Khan from Power Control Engineers, winner of the Emerging Professional Engineer of the Year award

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HUNTER BUSINESS AWARDS

Singleton manufacturer Morgan Engineering was named Business of the Year at a glittering 2026 Business Hunter Awards ceremony on 11 September, capping off a standout year for the fast-growing company, which collected four awards.

Morgan Engineering's success was one of several highlights from a gala evening at NEX Newcastle attended by more than 600 business and community leaders, as Business Hunter celebrated its 140th anniversary and the culmination of an awards program that attracted a record-breaking 300-plus entries.

Other notable winners included the University of Newcastle Professor Alan Broadfoot, who received the prestigious President's Award, Burton Automotive, which was honoured with the Contribution to the Region Award, and industrial safety technology company SAPHI, which was inducted into the Business Hunter Hall of Fame while also claiming the Excellence in Innovation Award.

Morgan Engineering impressed judges with its solid growth strategy, which has seen the business expand from 80 to more than 130 employees, coupled with a strong commitment to workforce wellbeing and career development, including a significant investment in apprentice training. Morgan also won the awards for Excellence in Large Business, Workplace Health and Wellbeing, and Young Business Leader.

Business Hunter CEO Bob Hawes said their success reflected the strength and capability of Hunter businesses competing on a national and international stage. "To see a home-grown manufacturing business take out four awards, including Business of the Year, is a tremendous achievement and a testament to the quality of businesses operating in our region," Mr Hawes said.

"This year's awards attracted more than 300 entries, the largest number in our 140-year history, and the calibre of finalists and winners demonstrates the innovation, ambition and resilience that continue to drive the Hunter forward."

Meanwhile, Burton Automotive's Contribution to the Region Award acknowledged its longstanding partnerships with community organisations, including its enduring support of Surfest, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Professor Broadfoot was recognised for a career spanning leadership roles with Ampcontrol, the Newcastle Institute for Energy and Resources and the University of Newcastle, where he has played a pivotal role in fostering collaboration between industry and research while helping position the Hunter as a leader in innovation and advanced industry.

Business Hunter President Glenn Thornton said Professor Broadfoot's influence on the region would be felt for generations.

"Alan has played a pivotal role in shaping the Hunter's future through his leadership, vision and commitment to collaboration between industry and research," Mr Thornton said.

"He is a trusted adviser, mentor and advocate for our region, and a highly deserving recipient of this year's President's Award."

The awards recognised exceptional business leadership across the Hunter in a range of categories.

Jandy McCandless, General Manager Housing and Impact at Hume Community Housing, was named Business Leader of the Year for her work delivering programs and partnerships that have improved housing, community wellbeing and social outcomes across the region.

Elliot Watson, Managing Partner of Watson Wealth, received the parallel award for small businesses (up to 20 employees) for driving significant business growth while strengthening the firm's workplace culture and community engagement.

The Kristen Keegan Young Business Leader Award went to Brody Nowlan from Morgan Engineering. Nowlan joined the company as a 16-year-old apprentice fitter machinist and has risen through the organisation to become Workshop Operations Manager, overseeing four operational departments and 67 employees.

Business Singleton was crowned Outstanding Local Chamber, claiming yet another gong for the town to add to Morgan Engineering's four awards.

Whiteley Corporation was the winner in the Excellence in International Business category. Australian-owned Whiteley is a global infection prevention and hygiene company delivering innovative cleaning, disinfection and infection control solutions. Judges recognised its patented technologies, clinical research and regulatory expertise, alongside an established presence across 35 global markets. Its international growth demonstrates the global reach of specialised innovation developed by an Australian business.

Mr Thornton said this year's record participation reflected a thriving and confident regional business community.

"The diversity of winners, finalists and entrants shows the incredible breadth of talent and enterprise that exists across the Hunter," he said.

"From manufacturers and technology innovators to community leaders and family businesses, these awards celebrate the people and organisations helping create a stronger future for our region."

Winners of aligned categories will progress to the Business NSW Awards in Sydney on October 30. The 2026 Business Hunter Awards were sponsored by Newcastle Permanent.

Winners

Business of the Year – Morgan Engineering
Outstanding Business Leader (21 employees and over) - Jandy McCandless, Hume Community Housing
Outstanding Business Leader (under 20 employees) - Elliot Watson, Watson Wealth
Kristen Keegan Young Business Leader - Brody Nowlan, Morgan Engineering
President's Award - Professor Alan Broadfoot
Excellence in Large Business - Morgan Engineering
Excellence in Small Business (6-20 employees) - Soqual Creative Agency
Excellence in Medium Business - AVE Technologies
Excellence in Micro Business - Seed People Consulting
Outstanding Community Organisation - Hunter Melanoma Foundation
Excellence in International Business – Whiteley
Outstanding New Business - Strata Tech Solutions
Excellence in Innovation - SAPHI – Shellshock AI
Excellence in Sustainability - Lake Macquarie City Council
Employer of Choice (under 20 employees) - Spectrum Comms
Employer of Choice (21 employees and over) - BeamBookkeeping
Outstanding Local Chamber - Business Singleton
Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion - Hall & Wilcox
Excellence in Workplace Health and Wellbeing - Morgan Engineering
Contribution to the Region - Burton Automotive Group
Outstanding Visitor Experience - Oakvale Wildlife Park
Outstanding Employee - Claudia Tolhurst, Hunter Melanoma Foundation

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AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST INTEGRATED WELLNESS RESORT AT POKOLBIN

Minor Hotels, a leading global hotel owner and operator, has announced Avani Cypress Lakes Resort, a premium lifestyle and wellness resort set to launch in phases from October 2026 in Pokolbin. The development will bring together the existing Oaks Cypress Lakes Resort and adjoining Elysia Wellness Retreat across 340 acres, creating what will become Australia's largest integrated resort wellness precinct.

Avani Cypress Lakes Resort will be the largest Avani property in Australasia, offering 204 rooms and suites across two distinct accommodation experiences. Facilities will include an 18-hole golf course, AvaniWell spa and wellness centre, 24 meetings and events spaces, two concept-led restaurants, a pool bar and all-day dining.

The resort's phased transformation will introduce three pickleball courts, an outdoor cinema, a pool bar with a DJ booth, Pilates reformers and outdoor cold-plunge pools. New dining concepts will include Chakraya, a restaurant inspired by the flavours and culinary traditions of Sri Lanka.

The resort will also offer a range of flexible packages for hotel guests and Hunter Valley residents, bringing together AvaniWell programmes, AvaniKids activities, golf, hot-air balloon experiences and resort accommodation.

Avani Cypress Lakes Resort will introduce AvaniWell to Australia, following the concept's launch at Avani+ Hua Hin Resort in Thailand in 2024. Designed as a flexible alternative to the traditional wellness retreat, AvaniWell enables guests to incorporate wellness into a wider resort stay or take part in a more structured programme.

The existing Elysia Wellness Retreat will be transformed into AvaniWell at Cypress Lakes Resort, integrating 70 wellness suites, a magnesium pool and 26 treatment rooms with 10 Pilates reformers, infrared saunas, outdoor cold-plunge pools and spaces for seminars and group sessions. The facility will offer multi-day wellness programmes alongside individual treatments, classes and day-spa experiences. It will be accessible to resort guests, day visitors and members of the local community.

Once complete, Avani Cypress Lakes Resort will feature Avani's global brand experiences, including flexible wellness programmes, meetings and events designed to encourage participation and connection and AvaniKids activities centred on movement, creativity and time outdoors.

The resort's 24 meetings and events spaces will be supported by programmes that can incorporate yoga, wellness sessions, golf, pickleball and outdoor activities into traditional business itineraries.

The resort's redevelopment will be delivered in phases, with the first new facilities opening in October and completion scheduled for the third quarter of 2027.

FIRST REFURBISHED TANGARA RETURNS TO PASSENGER SERVICE

Almost 40 years since the first Tangara trains rolled out of the factory in Newcastle, they are now re-entering timetable service after an extensive refurbishment, extending their lifespan by over a decade and boosting reliability on the network.

At the start of September the first of 55 refurbished Tangaras operated in passenger service. This marks a major milestone for the $447 million Tangara Life Extension program which is underway at Auburn and Flemington in Sydney, and Cardiff in the Hunter. Three more refurbished Tangaras will enter service before the end of Q1 2027, with production ramping up throughout 2027 via an additional production line at Cardiff.

The refurbishment includes updating interiors and fittings, upgrading the onboard operating system, installing internal destination displays and CCTV, upgrading public address systems including digital voice announcements, installing new safety and accessibility features such as, flip up seating for priority wheelchair spaces, improved passenger emergency help points and the installation of internal emergency door release system.

DESIGN ANTHOLOGY MARKS 20 YEARS AND FOURTH YEAR OF ISO 9001 CERTIFICATION

For two decades, Design Anthology has helped turn ambitious product ideas into manufactured reality. This year, the industrial design and manufacturing business celebrates its 20th anniversary - a milestone that arrives alongside another significant marker of the company's commitment to quality: its fourth consecutive year holding ISO 9001 certification.

Design Anthology has built its reputation on a simple premise: great products are the result of great process. Over the past two decades, the firm has guided clients through the full arc of product development - from early concept sketches and engineering feasibility through prototyping, testing, and full-scale manufacturing.

That longevity is notable in an industry where design trends, materials, and manufacturing technologies shift constantly. Design Anthology's ability to adapt - while staying grounded in disciplined design and engineering fundamentals - has allowed it to grow alongside its clients rather than simply serve them.

"Twenty years in this business means we've seen technologies come and go, seen industries transform, and seen countless products go from a sketch on a napkin to something sitting on a shelf or a factory floor," said Josh Jeffress, Co-Founder/Director of Design Anthology.

"What hasn't changed is our commitment to doing the work right - for our clients and for the people who ultimately use what we design."

That process discipline is reflected in Design Anthology's ISO 9001 certification, which the company is marking its fourth consecutive year holding. For a design and manufacturing business, ISO 9001 certification is more than a compliance checkbox - it's a framework that shapes how projects move from concept to production. Maintaining the certification requires ongoing audits, documented processes, and a culture of accountability at every stage of a project's lifecycle.

"Achieving ISO 9001 certification is one thing. Maintaining it, year after year, is what really demonstrates that quality isn't a one-time initiative - it's built into how we operate," Jeffress said.

"Our clients trust us with products that carry their name and their reputation. This certification is our way of backing up that trust with a documented, repeatable process."

Rounding out its quality credentials, Design Anthology has also been independently reviewed and certified by JOSCAR - the Joint Supply Chain Accreditation Register, an accreditation system widely used across the aerospace, defence, and security sectors. JOSCAR verifies suppliers against a rigorous set of compliance, financial, and security standards, giving major buyers in these industries a trusted, centralised way to confirm that a supplier's operational, financial, and security practices hold up to scrutiny.

As Design Anthology enters its third decade, the company says its focus remains on the fundamentals that have carried it this far: strong design thinking, engineering rigor, and manufacturing partnerships that turn great ideas into products people can actually hold, use and rely on.

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STRONGER LOCAL PRESENCE BY NET ZERO ECONOMY AUTHORITY

Net Zero Economy Authority (NZEA) has established a stronger regional presence in the Hunter, bringing more of its team closer to local workers, businesses, and communities.

The local Hunter team is now made up of six employees; four in the Lower Hunter and two in the Upper Hunter. NZEA has a small office space in Newcastle.

The Hunter is a priority region for NZEA because the region faces significant change. Coal-fired power generation is reducing and new industries and opportunities are emerging. NZEA is already working with communities, workers and businesses in the lead up to the closure of the Hunter's Eraring Power Station.

Having a local team means NZEA can build strong relationships with those on the ground and draw on the team's existing knowledge as local residents and community members.

NZEA has already engaged extensively across the Hunter. This includes the recent inaugural Hunter Advisory Committee, where representatives across the region came to share their opinions and updates on the transition in the Hunter.

NZEA Director, Hunter Region, Tanya Peterkin said the local NZEA team is committed to seeing a positive transition in the region.

NZEA HUNTER ADVISORY COMMITTEE INAUGURAL MEETING

On 1 September, the first meeting of Net Zero Emissions Authority's Hunter Advisory Committee (HAC) was held in Kurri Kurri. The HAC was established after feedback from Hunter stakeholders highlighted the need for a formalised engagement structure. It ensures that NZEA's work in the Hunter is informed by regional knowledge, lived experience and stakeholder perspectives. Over 30 participants took part in the day.

NZEA's director for the Hunter Region, Tanya Peterkin, said the first meeting of the HAC saw a range of topics explored. These topics included the closure of major energy assets, emergence of new industries and changing workforce needs.

'Representatives from across the Hunter were very generous with their time and contributions at the HAC.

'We know that representatives want to work together to solidify economic and job opportunities for the region. NZEA will continue to work with HAC members to harness these opportunities,' said Tanya.

The HAC saw speakers from government, industry and education explore the current barriers and opportunities of the energy transition and the broader push for further economic diversification of the region.

The EnergyCo spoke about the large-scale projects that will come out of the Hunter Renewable Energy Zone. Work is being done to simplify procurement processes to ensure local businesses can benefit from larger projects taking place in the region.

Singleton Council spoke about their work around worker transition. Approximately 40% of the Singleton workforce is directly or indirectly employed in the mining industry. The Singleton Council's Industry Growth Series is a targeted workshop and forum series to support local businesses. The series helps businesses identify and access growth opportunities across emerging and established industries. The program launched in September with a focus on Defence. The council have also launched their Industry Pathways Program, providing job seekers and career changers unprecedented access to employers, employees and training providers.

Marcus Hucker from the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development spoke about attracting investment to the Hunter. The Hunter Business Attraction Committee is helping connect local businesses with industry, government and research. The committee provides a service to answer investor queries and align regional stakeholders with investment opportunities.

HAC members include:

- local councils
- First Nations and Land Council representatives
- unions
- local industry

TAFE NSW and University of Newcastle representatives

state and federal government organisations such as EnergyCo and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

organisational bodies such as the Committee for the Hunter and Hunter Jobs Alliance.

The next HAC will be held in the Hunter in February 2027.

REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS INVITED TO HELP SHAPE HUNTER'S FUTURE PROSPERITY

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Hunter has appointed TW Partners to support the development of the Hunter Economic Development & Global Competitiveness Strategy, marking a significant milestone in a major body of work focused on supporting the region's long-term economic prosperity and global competitiveness.

As the Australian Government's regional development organisation in the Hunter, RDA Hunter is leading the initiative to better understand the global economic, technological and demographic shifts that will shape the region's future and identify opportunities to strengthen the Hunter's competitive position over the coming decades.

The strategy forms part of the broader Hunter Global Competitiveness Initiative, a two-year program of research, benchmarking, industry engagement and economic analysis designed to help position the Hunter for future growth, investment and employment opportunities.

Led by Director Todd Williams, TW Partners brings significant experience in economic development, regional competitiveness and strategic advisory projects nationally. Todd is also a former CEO of RDA Hunter, providing a strong understanding of the Hunter's economic landscape and development priorities.

Industry consultation is now underway, with businesses, industry leaders, government representatives, education providers, researchers and community stakeholders invited to contribute through an online survey at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VPQRQDZ

RDA Hunter Chair, Mr Ian Pedersen, said the work represents an important opportunity to take a long-term view of the region's future.

"The Hunter has a strong economic foundation, world-class industries and a proven ability to adapt and evolve. However, as global competition for investment, talent and emerging industries intensifies, it is important that we understand the forces shaping our future and identify where the region can build on its competitive strengths.

"This work is about ensuring the Hunter remains well-positioned to capitalise on emerging opportunities, attract investment and create sustainable prosperity for future generations."

The Hunter Global Competitiveness Initiative will examine how leading regions around the world are responding to economic and technological change and explore lessons that can help strengthen the Hunter's future competitiveness. The resulting strategy will inform investment-ready projects, support evidence-based advocacy and decision-making, and help ensure the Hunter remains an attractive location for investment, talent and industry growth in a rapidly evolving global economy.

HMRI WINS NATIONAL MARKETING AWARD FOR POO PALACE

Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI) has taken out the Australian Marketing Institute's prestigious national Experiential and Event Marketing Award category at the 2026 Marketing Excellence Awards.

For HMRI, Australia's largest regional medical research institute and a Hunter icon for over 25 years, the Poo Palace is proof that sometimes the best way to reach people is with a bit of fun.

3,000+ kids have passed through the Poo Palace buttocks across 100+ sessions in the three years since it was created by HMRI and the University of Newcastle's Gastrointestinal Research Group.

The results speak for themselves, with a 2.67x return on investment in community education value for every $1 invested by HMRI. Since 2023, the Poo Palace has also contributed to significant earned media coverage and social media engagement, and a 4% increase in brand awareness.

Beating a competitive field of finalists from across the country, including Vision Australia's Carols by Candlelight 2025, the award win highlights the Hunter region's leadership in brand innovation and the success of HMRI's community engagement.

HMRI's Head of Marketing and Communications, Mike Collins said, "Behind this award are so many HMRI and University of Newcastle team members who have thrown themselves into making the Poo Palace a success. It shows that science doesn't have to be serious to be meaningful. If we can make research fun, accessible and memorable for local kids and parents, then we're doing something right. We're incredibly proud of what it has become."

HMRI Poo Palace during Science Week

NEWCASTLE CANINE PHOTOGRAPHER NAMED TOP 20 IN INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY AWARDS

Newcastle specialist canine photographer Maree Bendeich has been named among the Top 20 photographers in the 2026 Mono Awards, an international black and white photography competition attracting entries from photographers around the world.

Now in its eighth year, The Mono Awards, presented by Synology and hosted by Australian Photography and Capture magazines, is dedicated to the art of black and white photography. The 2026 competition attracted its largest entry pool to date, with images assessed by an extensive panel of 13 judges.

Maree, the photographer behind Newcastle-based Camera Plus Dog, achieved the Top 20 result with her image "A Cut Above", a striking black and white portrait featuring a local groomer and her Poodle.

The result marks the achievement of a goal more than five years in the making.

"Making the Top 30 in The Mono Awards has been a personal goal of mine for over five years, so to find out that 'A Cut Above' had made the Top 20 was quite surreal," Maree said.

"When you're entering alongside photographers from around the world and your work is being assessed by a panel of 13 judges, having an image recognised at that level is something I'm incredibly proud of."

Maree has more than 15 years' experience behind the camera and has specialised exclusively in canine photography for almost a decade. During that time, her work has received multiple international photography awards and recognition, with her distinctive style combining technical photography skills with an understanding of canine behaviour.

"A Cut Above" features local groomer and dog sport enthusiast Gabbi alongside her beautifully prepared Poodle, with the connection between groomer and dog forming an integral part of the final image. Gabbi spent days preparing her Poodle ahead of the shoot, something Maree says was instrumental in creating the finished portrait.

Behind the accolades is also a busy Newcastle mum who has continued to pursue her photography while raising a family, juggling two careers and navigating significant injuries and physical setbacks.

After more than five years of pursuing a coveted place within The Mono Awards Top 30, Maree says finally seeing her image amongst the Top 20 is a reminder of the importance of continuing to set goals and push creatively.

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Exporting from the Hunter

Exporting is one of the most beneficial long-term growth strategies a company can choose, especially in a country with a relatively small domestic market.

Export businesses find the Hunter is an outstanding location, with excellent transport links, a wide range of available export related services and readily available local assistance from a variety of organisations.

Known as the largest coal exporting port in the world, the port of Newcastle is actually one of the most diversified ports in the country, facilitating trade for over 25 cargoes. The Hunter is also home to Newcastle Airport – one of the leading regional airports in Australia. In partnership with six leading airlines, Newcastle Airport currently offers direct flights to 11 domestic destinations as well as Bali and Singapore, the latter being one of the leading hubs to worldwide destinations.

For those first considering exporting, it can seem to be a complicated next step, requiring access to practical and reliable information and advice on export planning, finance, markets, distribution and marketing, and political, cultural and legal requirements.

The good news is that organisations such as the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and Austrade both have advisers and support services and programs in the Hunter Region. They provide advice to local Hunter businesses on export-related issues, including planning for export, market opportunities, market entry and export grants.

Assistance is also available through a range of commercial businesses, including high-quality freight forwarders.

These combine to provide abundant assistance and training to support and develop Hunter-based businesses to grow and expand as the world becomes a smaller place and competition increases.

Trade diversification stories in new podcast series

Global markets are evolving, supply chains are shifting, and Australian businesses are looking for new opportunities to grow beyond traditional destinations. In a rapidly changing world, trade diversification has never been more important.

That's why the Australian Trade and Investment Commission has launched The Next Market with Austrade, a podcast exploring real stories of trade diversification, practical lessons from business and industry, and the people, partnerships and ambition driving export growth.

Host Kirsten Diprose speaks with founders, exporters, CEOs, industry experts and business leaders who are navigating international markets and finding success in new and emerging destinations.

Guests discuss navigating export challenges, adapting for international markets, building strong commercial foundations, finding the right balance between diversification and focus, and more. This isn't just a podcast about trade – it explores leadership, innovation, decision-making, and personal experiences that shape successful businesses and strengthen industries.

Whether listeners are exploring their first export destination or looking to diversify into new markets, these stories offer practical insights into building an Australian business with global reach.

This podcast is powered by the Accessing New Markets Initiative, a $55 million program helping Australian businesses diversify and grow their exports, jointly designed and delivered by Austrade and industry.

The first three episodes of the first season are now live, with new episodes released every month.

Jay Meek, General Manager, Trade Diversification Taskforce said ""We work with incredible exporters who have a wealth of stories to share, from inspiring founder journeys to overcoming challenges and building resilient businesses. The Next Market with Austrade brings those experiences directly to listeners, helping inspire other businesses and strengthen the collective knowledge that shapes Australia's trade diversification efforts.

The Accessing New Markets Initiative (ANMI) is the latest in a series of Government investments supporting exporters to diversify their markets. Managed by the Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade), ANMI helps Australian businesses build trade resilience by diversifying into new markets and capitalising on growth opportunities in established ones.

Through the Trade Diversification Network (TDN), eligible national peak industry bodies are working with Austrade to design strategic activities that address the specific needs of their sectors. This deep collaboration will also shape how Austrade and industry work together beyond ANMI, identifying long term strategies to better support exporters.

Global supply chains:

Be ready for the next disruption

For Hunter businesses, global supply-chain disruption is no longer a once-in-a-while problem. It's become part of the operating environment.

Freight is still moving, of course; however systems are less predictable, more expensive, and more affected by decisions made far from regional Australia. Rather than waiting for things to get back to "normal", businesses need to think about how they can keep operating, and keep customers happy, when the next delay arrives.

As global trade becomes increasingly unpredictable, Kane Dyson, CEO of Dyson Logistics, says preparedness has become a competitive advantage.

"The reality is that disruption has become a permanent feature of global trade. The businesses that perform best are the ones that stay informed, plan ahead and build flexibility into their supply chains."

Geopolitical risk is the most obvious pressure. Conflict and insecurity across major trade lanes have pushed carriers to reroute vessels, adding time to voyages and tying up capacity. Austrade's June 2026 freight report noted that about 10 per cent of global container capacity remained affected by Red Sea disruption, while schedule reliability was sitting at just 37-39 per cent. For Australian exporters, that means higher costs, longer transit times and plenty of uncertainty.

Trade policy is adding another headache. Tariff changes, export controls and stricter customs requirements can change the cost of sourcing goods almost overnight. Thomson Reuters' 2026 Global Trade Report found that 72 per cent of surveyed trade professionals saw United States tariff volatility as the most significant regulatory change.

The takeaway is simple: good customs and compliance processes now matter just as much as negotiating a sharp freight rate, but according to Dyson, many businesses underestimate the impact compliance can have on the supply chain.

"A customs issue or regulatory change can create delays and costs that far outweigh procurement savings. That's why the right advice and processes matter."

Then there are the risks that receive less attention until something goes wrong: extreme weather, cyberattacks and suppliers under financial pressure. A flood, port closure or compromised technology provider can bring production to a halt, even when a direct supplier looks secure.

That matters in the Hunter, where manufacturing, mining services, energy, construction and food production all rely on equipment, components and export markets.

Businesses cannot remove every global risk, but they can make disruption easier to manage. Start by mapping the suppliers and products the business cannot operate without. From there, consider a second source for critical inputs, review safety-stock levels, explore alternative ports or transport options, and agree on an escalation plan with logistics partners. Better visibility of orders, vessel movements, and inventory also helps teams act sooner and give customers realistic updates.

For years, the standard approach was to chase the lowest cost and keep inventory lean. The better model today balances efficiency with options. That might mean holding a little more stock, approving another supplier or investing in better systems and advice. Those choices can feel costly when everything is running smoothly, but they quickly pay off when competitors cannot deliver.

Staying informed is also critical to building supply chain resilience, Dyson says.

"One of the things our clients tell us they value most is our Global Movements newsletter. We regularly share updates on global freight conditions, freight rates, customs and compliance

changes, and other developments that could affect supply chains. The more informed businesses are, the more options they have when market conditions change."

The Hunter businesses best placed to grow will be the ones that bring logistics, procurement and trade compliance into everyday commercial conversations, rather than treating them as back-office functions. Global supply chains are unlikely to become simple again any time soon. But certainty is not the goal. Being prepared, staying informed and adapting faster than the market can give local businesses a real edge.

For further information contact Dyson Logistics on (02) 4322 2246, email info@dysonlogistics.com or visit www.dysonlogistics.com

Three key questions to ask yourself before you decide to export

1. Do you have the right resources?

Expanding or investing overseas takes a lot of work. So, to be successful, you'll need access to the right expertise and resources. To help you avoid costly mistakes, ideally, you'll need the right employees in place or have contacts with export experience who can support you with insights for your industry and knowledge of your target markets.

You should also be realistic about the time frames involved. Typically, it can take between one and three years from making the decision to export to having your overseas operations up and running – and for income to start flowing in. In the meantime, you'll need to have finance in place to cover the costs of setting up and growing your business in a new market.

Visit the Austrade website for more information which steps to take to get your business exporting.

2. What's your export strategy?

Before you start exporting, it's worth taking time to create an export strategy as part of your overall business plan. If not, you may find yourself overwhelmed by all the potential markets, buyers or partners, and lose focus on the end goal.

Your export strategy should outline your target market and demographics, as well as logistics and the financial resources to use to fund growth overseas. For each market, you may also want to research and identify distributors, competitors, local partners, and any regulatory requirements you'll need to meet.

To learn more about how to become a successful exporter, download the free eBook Preparing for Export Growth at https://www.exportfinance.gov.au/resources/ebooks-and-guides/preparing-for-export-growth/

3. Do you understand your target market?

It's one thing to understand the opportunities a market can offer. But it's another thing to also understand what risks you might be faced with that could be the difference between your business's success and failure in exporting.

Demand from a solid customer base is critical. The first step is to research whether a market is compatible with the products or services you offer and understand the best distribution model for international success. Ideally, this means visiting the country or scheduling virtual meetings to meet with potential partners and distributors to understand its economic and political context. If you want to keep up to date on the different opportunities and risks of doing business around the world, read Country Profiles https://www.exportfinance.gov.au/risk/

You'll also need to consider how best to position your product or service to stand out from the competition. Because every market is different, it's important to understand the local profile, consumer trends, and price points – and develop or modify your product or service accordingly.

For further information contact Export Finance Australia on 1800 093 724, email info@exportfinance.gov.au or visit https://www.exportfinance.gov.au

D&C Projects strengthens Hunter presence with new Newcastle office

D&C Projects has strengthened its commitment to Newcastle and the Hunter with the opening of a new office at 283 Hunter Street, supporting the continued growth of its local design and drafting team.

Opened in June 2026, the Newcastle office represents the next stage of D&C Projects' expansion in the region, following the establishment of a home-based Hunter studio in January 2024.

In just over two years, that local presence has grown into a team of five design and drafting staff, working across a diverse range of projects throughout Newcastle and the broader Hunter.

Director Craig Drever said establishing a permanent office was a natural progression for the business.

"Opening the Hunter studio in 2024 gave us the opportunity to establish ourselves locally, build relationships and better support our clients across the region," Craig said.

"As the team and our project workload grew, moving into a permanent office in the centre of Newcastlewas the next logical step."

D&C Projects provides a complete range of design and drafting services, supporting projects from early design concepts through to detailed construction documentation.

The Hunter team is currently involved in residential alterations and additions, multi-unit housing, industrial, commercial, hospitality and health projects, with the ability to support projects of varying sizes and complexity.

"One of our strengths is being able to provide the full scope of service from design through to construction documentation," Craig said.

"We work across projects big and small, and our focus is always on practical design, quality documentation and clear communication throughout the process."

The move to 283 Hunter Street also provides D&C Projects with a stronger local base from which to work closely with clients, builders, consultants and other industry partners.

For Craig, being physically based in Newcastle is an important part of D&C Projects' commitment to the Hunter.

"We don't just want to work on projects in the region; we want to be part of the local business and design community," he said.

"Having our team based here allows us to be accessible, responsive and more connected to the people we work with."

D&C Projects has ambitious but measured plans for its Hunter operations, with a goal to double the size of the local team over the next five years.

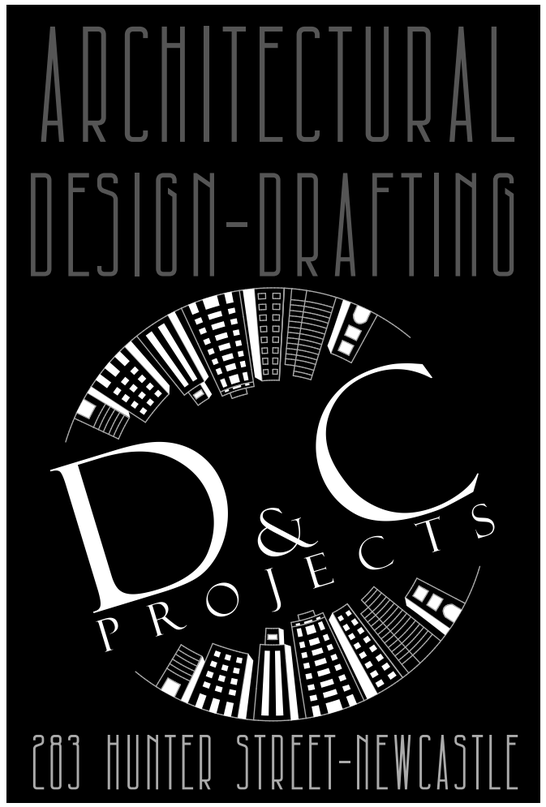
That growth is expected to create further local employment while allowing the Newcastle office to take on a broader range of projects and strengthen its capabilities.

"We have a great foundation with the team we have today, and we want to build on that sustainably, "Craig said.

"That means continuing to deliver good outcomes for our clients, attracting talented people and developing a team that has a genuine long-term future in the Hunter."

From its beginnings as a home-based studio in January 2024 to a growing team in the heart of Newcastle, the new office marks an important milestone for D&C Projects.

"We see a lot of opportunity in the Hunter and are excited about what the next five years will bring," Craig said.



Avoiding court: The rise of ADR in construction

Sarah Hammond
Charlotte Coakes-Jenkins
Moray & Agnew Lawyers

Like groceries, fuel and insurance, the cost of going to court is rapidly rising. Lawyers, barristers, filing fees and experts all come at a price, but that's not the only cost.

The distraction from 'business as usual', lost time, and the sometimes years of associated stress, make litigation unattractive for many in the industry. Even a win in court is often hollow, with difficulty enforcing a judgment against a company that may have been bled dry by the process. This, combined with persistently high levels of insolvency in the industry, has driven the popularity of alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

Recent changes to the AS4000 contract, a foundational contract for literally thousands of construction projects in Australia each year, reflect the industry's appetite to choose how disputes are resolved, often removing courts from the equation altogether.

The options

There is no 'one size fits all' method for resolving disputes, but four options have gained traction in Australian construction in recent years.

Adjudication: Since the introduction of the Building and Construction Industry Security of Payment Act 1999 (NSW) this statutory process has grown steadily in popularity. It's quick, relatively inexpensive and conducted entirely in writing. Rules of evidence don't apply, there's no sitting in a witness box or face-to-face confrontation, and it can be effective at securing cash flow. However, its tendency to favour contractors can often have a nuclear effect on client relationships, and the strict timeframes can trip up first timers.

Mediation: A confidential negotiation, facilitated by an impartial mediator and with a focus on resolution, mediations are popular where there's a hope of preserving the relationship, or where difficult personalities can benefit from the early intervention of a trained third-party mediator. Most courts will require parties to attempt mediation before being allowed a trial date, so lawyers will commonly recommend mediation at an early stage.

Expert Determination: Adopted as the default ADR process in standard GC21 government contracts in NSW, expert determination has grown in popularity since. It allows technical disputes to be decided by an independent third-party expert, often with the benefit of detailed evidence and submissions.

Arbitration: The most formal ADR method, arbitration resembles court but is privately determined by an arbitrator with more flexible procedures than a courtroom. It is popular on international or cross-jurisdictional projects, or where confidentiality is paramount, but costs can rival those of litigation.

A natural fit

It's no surprise that the construction industry is a natural fit for ADR. Disputes can be technically complex, cash flow is often paramount to project success, and certain courts (particularly lower-level courts like the Local Court) are ill-equipped to handle the timely resolution of these disputes.

Recent changes to AS4000 (the latest edition being AS4000:2025) recognised this, giving contracting parties options to decide how best to resolve disputes in the context of each project.

The former 'only arbitration' clause now includes five ADR avenues that parties can choose from:

- **Traditional pathway:** Negotiation → Arbitration or Litigation
- **Mediation pathway:** Negotiation → Mediation → Arbitration or Litigation
- **Expert determination pathway:** Negotiation → Expert Determination → Arbitration or Litigation
- **Long way:** Negotiation → Mediation → Expert Determination → Arbitration or Litigation
- **Prevention pathway:** Negotiation → Dispute Avoidance Board → Arbitration or Litigation.

Looking Ahead

From legislation, on-the-ground experience, and industry standards, the construction sector is moving disputes out of the courtroom whenever possible. The AS4000:2025 recognises that one size does not fit all, and that giving parties ownership of the dispute process can lead to better outcomes.

Understanding the options available, reviewing dispute resolution clauses before signing, and seeking legal advice early are key ways to stay out of the court room.

For further information contact Sarah Hammond on (02) 4911 5464, email: shammond@moray.com.au or Charlotte Coakes-Jenkins on (02) 4911 5400, email: ccoakes-jenkins@moray.com.au

Sarah Hammond is a Partner at Moray & Agnew. **Charlotte Coakes-Jenkins** is a Paralegal at Moray & Agnew. Moray & Agnew's Construction & Projects team provides end-to-end legal support across Australia's construction and development industry. An integrated approach ensures continuity of advice, strong risk management and commercially grounded outcomes at every stage of the project lifecycle.

Hunter & Central Coast housing targets depend on winning the battle for tradies

The ability for regional NSW to build more homes will increasingly depend on winning the battle for skilled tradies, with housing competing against infrastructure, energy and emerging industries for an already stretched workforce, according to a new report from the Housing Industry Association (HIA).

Australia's Future is Built by Tradies, warns Australia's residential building industry is already around 83,000 skilled workers short.

HIA Executive Director Hunter, Craig Jennion said the national shortage was being felt particularly strongly in Australia's largest regional economy as the Hunter undergoes structural transitions.

"Regional NSW needs more homes, but ultimately we need the people to build them," Mr Jennion said.

"Residential builders are increasingly competing for skilled workers with major infrastructure projects, renewable energy projects and data centres.

"Everyone wants the electrician, the carpenter and other skilled tradespeople, but we are all drawing from the same limited workforce.

"For housing, that matters. When builders can't find the workers they need, homes take longer to build, costs rise and getting more keys into the hands of homebuyers becomes harder.

The HIA report calls for governments to elevate trade careers, improve apprenticeship attraction and completion, better support the small businesses that employ apprentices, strengthen school-to-trade pathways and expand workforce capacity.

It also calls for greater regional training opportunities, strategic skilled migration where shortages cannot be filled locally and improved recognition of overseas trade qualifications.

Mr Jennion said NSW had an opportunity to make skilled trades a much bigger part of its workforce strategy.

Recent building approval data saw housing approvals across the Hunter & Central Coast strengthening, with 6,714 dwelling approvals recorded across the two regions, an increase of 5 per cent in the past financial year.

"This is fantastic news. However, we know that an increase in the number of dwellings under construction places additional pressure on the availability of trades.

"To overcome this, we need to expand the support programs available to trade businesses because these businesses are critical to training Australia's future workforce.

"We also need to change the way we talk to young Australians about careers.

"University will remain the right choice for many, but an apprenticeship should not be treated as the second choice.

"Tradies can earn while they learn, develop skills that will remain in demand and have a genuine pathway to running their own business.

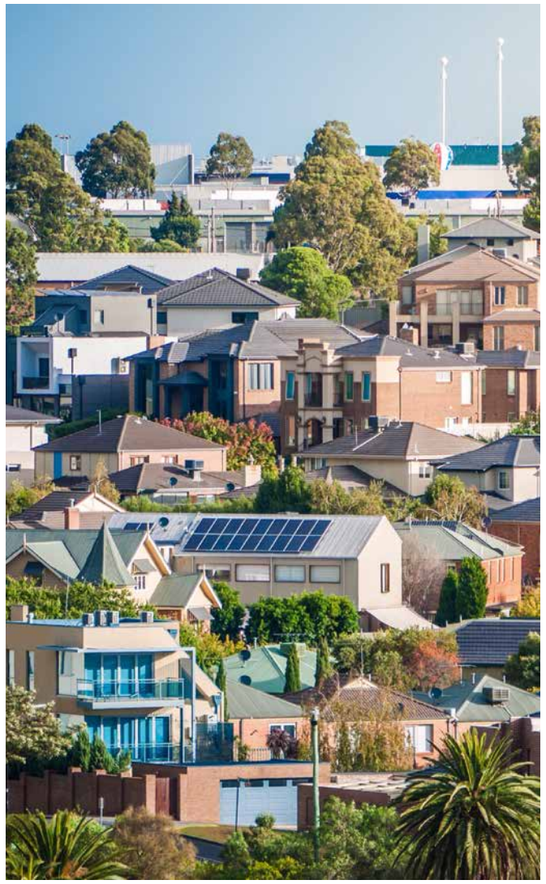
"And in an economy being reshaped by AI, those practical skills are only becoming more valuable.

"Technology can help design a home, prepare an estimate or manage a project. It still cannot turn up on site and build the house.

"The Hunter and Central Coast have ambitious plans for housing, infrastructure and economic growth. Those plans all depend on people with the skills to deliver them.

"If we want to build more, we need to train more.

"The future of the Hunter and Central Coast is built by tradies."



2026 Newcastle Excellence in Building Awards

Master Builders NSW celebrated the achievements of the best builders for 2026 at the annual Newcastle Excellence in Building Awards.

The prestigious event showcased the exceptional talent, craftsmanship and innovation of residential, commercial and civil construction firms across the Hunter, Central Coast, Manning, Oxley and Tamworth Regions.

This 2026 Commercial Builder of the Year, Residential Builder of the Year, Young Builder of the Year, Apprentice of the Year and the leading woman in construction were also announced.

Held at NEX Newcastle on 4 September, the gala evening brought together the region's leading industry professionals for an evening of celebration, connection and recognition, with guests enjoying an outstanding night of networking, dining and entertainment.

More than 200 projects collectively worth over $1.25 billion were assessed for their quality by a distinguished panel of judges including Matthew Haine, Matthew Sainsbury, Paul Hickson, Geoffrey Douglass, Barry Grianger, Wayne Deane and the Women in Building and Associated Services Committee.

Hansen Yunken was a big winner on the night, taking home Commercial Builder of the Year. They also won the major award of the Best Use of Glass for Cessnock High School – Block H and Quadrangle Storm Damage Restoration.

Hansen Yuncken also won three other commercial award categories: Innovation & Environmental Sustainability for University of Newcastle Gosford Central, Public Buildings - $40 million - $50 million for Newcastle Art Gallery Expansion and Public Buildings - over $60 million for University of Newcastle Gosford Central.

The Residential Builder of the Year was MADE Architectural Constructions. They also won the award for Contract Homes - over $6 million for a Parkway Residence in Bar Beach.

Other major winners included: Paterson Builders in the category Best Use of Timber, Bricks and Stone for Avoca Beach House, Skelcon in the Best Use of Bricks category for Knights Boarding House, New Lambton; Kingston Building in Best Use of Timber for Cessnock High School – Block H and Quadrangle Storm Damage Restoration; Haley Tibbetts for the Women in Building Award; Copper Electrical for Residential Subcontractor of the Year Copper Electrical; Formation Joinery for Commercial Subcontractor of the Year; and Tom White for Young Builder of the Year.

A special Recognition Award for 'Lifetime of Service to the Construction Industry' was presented to living legend Barry Grainger by Master Builders NSW CEO Matthew Pollock.

The success of the awards was made possible through the support of sponsors, including Newcastle Master Builders Apprentices, Cbus, Master Builders Insurance Brokers, Alinta Energy, Deco, TRUECORE Steel, Kia Australia, Wests Group Australia, Dahlsens, Brickworks, Keystone Lawyers, CertLane Building Certifiers, NHS, Pitcher Partners and Universal Media Company.

MAJOR WINNERS

Best Use of Timber, Bricks and Stone: Paterson Buildersfor Avoca Beach House
Best Use of Bricks: Skelcon for Knights Boarding House in New Lambton
Best Use of Timber: Kingston Building for Cessnock High School – Block H and Quadrangle Storm Damage Restoration
Best Use of Glass: Hansen Yuncken for University of Newcastle Gosford Central
Women in Building Award: Haley Tibbetts
Residential Subcontractor of the Year: Copper Electrical
Commercial Subcontractor of the Year: Formation Joinery
Young Builder of the Year: Tom White
Residential Builder of the Year: MADE Architectural Constructions
Commercial Builder of the Year: Hansen Yuncken

For the full list of winners please see visit the Awards web page at www.mbansw.asn.au/newcastle-excellence-building-awards

Multi-award winners Hansen Yuncken

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"Having our construction and furniture specialists working collaboratively under one roof means everything is coordinated from the start, helping clients avoid the delays, rework and compromises that can occur when multiple contractors are working independently" says NOI Managing Director, Jock Whyte.

On every project we appoint an experienced Project Manager to run the construction phase with our own internal tradespeople, alongside a Commercial Furniture Specialist who looks after everything from custom joinery to the final piece of furniture, be it desking, storage or seating. The two work together from the very first meeting, ensuring the construction and fit-out are planned as a single integrated project, rather than split between two separate entities.

Some clients like to be involved in every decision. Others prefer to focus on running their business while we take care of all fit-out related work in the background. We're comfortable working either way, and our process is specifically designed to suit both.

A complete transformation in Maitland

The highly regarded Newcastle buyer's agency Chamberlain Brown contracted us to undertake a transformation of a building they own in Maitland, and we delivered the whole project as a turnkey package.

Our construction team managed the design and private certification, the removal of existing walls, ceilings, doorways and floor coverings to start with a clean slate. From there we built new internal offices, a meeting room and quiet spaces using a mix of plasterboard and glazed walls under new plasterboard and suspended grid ceilings. The mechanical, hydraulic, electrical and fire services were all reconfigured to suit the new layout.

With the build complete, our furniture team delivered and installed all new workspace furniture, fittings, custom joinery and acoustic features, bringing the space together as one finished workplace. The project was completed on time and on budget.

"We used Newcastle Office Interiors to complete a major commercial renovation project and couldn't be happier with the result," says Matt Chamberlain of Chamberlain Brown. "We had a dedicated site manager who kept us updated on progress and the project was delivered on time. The fit-out was delivered to an exceptionally high quality, and I must also make a huge shoutout to Sam who delivered above & beyond with our soft furnishings".

Beyond the Hunter

Our roots are firmly local, but we complete multiple projects annually around the country for long-standing and new clients alike.

"Many of our national partnerships began with a single local project. By delivering quality outcomes and a seamless client experience, we've earned the trust that drives repeat business, referrals and multi-site opportunities." Jock says.

If you're planning a fit-out or refurbishment, we bring over 20 years of experience and that single, dedicated team to guide you through every stage.

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Hunter winners at NSW EISSI Awards

There were three Hunter winners at the NSW Excellence in Surveying and Spatial Information (EISSI) Awards presented on 19 September at Sydney's Hyatt Regency.

Each year, representatives from the Institution of Surveyors NSW (ISNSW) and Consulting Surveyors NSW (CSNSW) collaborate to orchestrate the prestigious NSW Excellence in Surveying and Spatial Information Awards. Now entering its 28th year, this awards ceremony serves as a platform to honour the outstanding accomplishments of organisations and individuals within the surveying and spatial information profession throughout the state.

Key objectives of the awards are to:

- recognise and acknowledge excellence in the surveying and spatial information industry.
- celebrate excellence before an audience of industry peers.
- encourage activities which create a stronger, larger and more relevant industry.
- embrace the achievements of the industry and its related industries and professions.
- see the industry grow and mature through its achievements in innovation, business and project management.

The major local winner was Daracon who took out Project of the Year for Coulsons Creek Road MR358. The project also won the Infrastructure and Construction award.

The award-winning Coulsons Creek Road project involved restoring a critical transport route that had been closed for almost five years following a major landslip. Delivered for Upper Hunter Shire Council, the complex rehabilitation works stabilised the site, repaired extensive damage and re-established a vital regional connection between the Upper Hunter and Liverpool Plains Shires.

Other Hunter winners were Monteath & Powys who took out the Extra Dimension & Innovation category for NSW Rail Bridge Retransoming and John Holland Group, winner of the Surveying Project Management award for Belmont Desalination Plant – Tunnelling and Offshore Works.

Inaugural HIA Hunter Building Women Awards celebrate industry leaders

The achievements, leadership and contributions of women in the residential building industry were recognised on 28 August at the 2026 HIA Hunter Building Women Awards.

The inaugural awards were announced in front of an audience of the Hunter region's leading residential builders, trade contractors, designers, manufacturers and industry professionals, gathering to celebrate the outstanding women helping shape the future of the industry.

HIA Hunter Executive Director, Craig Jennion, said "the awards continue to showcase the growing influence of women across all areas of residential construction and business".

"The HIA Hunter Building Women Awards recognise the exceptional women who are driving innovation, leadership and positive change throughout the residential building industry," said Mr Jennion.

"From tradeswomen and business owners to mentors, administrators and executive leaders, these award winners demonstrate the depth of talent, professionalism and dedication that exists across our industry."

The HIA Building Women Awards celebrate the achievements and advancement of women in the building industry while recognising organisations and individuals who champion inclusion, innovation and professional development.

This year's awards highlighted the diverse career opportunities available within residential building and the important role women play in strengthening business, supporting communities and contributing to the continued success of the industry.

The prestigious 2026 HIA Hunter Building Woman of the Year Award was awarded to Holly Bourke from Bourkelex Electrical, recognising her outstanding contributions to the residential building industry and leadership within the sector.

Holly is an inspiring electrician, business owner and leader who has built a thriving electrical business servicing Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. As Director and Head Electrician, she combines technical expertise with strong leadership, driving business growth, improving operational efficiency and mentoring the next generation of tradespeople.

A passionate advocate for women in trades, Holly actively encourages and mentors young women entering the industry.

Holly was also named the HIA Hunter Tradeswoman of the Year.

HIA also recognised outstanding achievement across a range of categories, including Elizabeth Powell of MARS Building for Administration Executive and Zoe Pohlmann of Your Home Designs for Business Mentor/Leader.

Sharon Hill of McDonald Jones Homes received the Executive Leadership award, and Kellie Williams of Patioworld Central Coast & Sydney North named the winner of Professional Business Woman.

Highly Commended awards were presented to Tabytha Hipwell of Baxco Homes for Administration Executive, and Meegan Kelly of Buildcert for Executive Leadership.

"In recent years we have seen more women pursuing rewarding careers across every area of residential construction, and these awards are an opportunity to celebrate their achievements and inspire the next generation," said Mr Jennion. "We congratulate all winners and finalists on their achievements and thank our industry partners for their ongoing support of these important awards," concluded Mr Jennion.

2026 HIA Hunter Building Woman of the Year Holly Bourke

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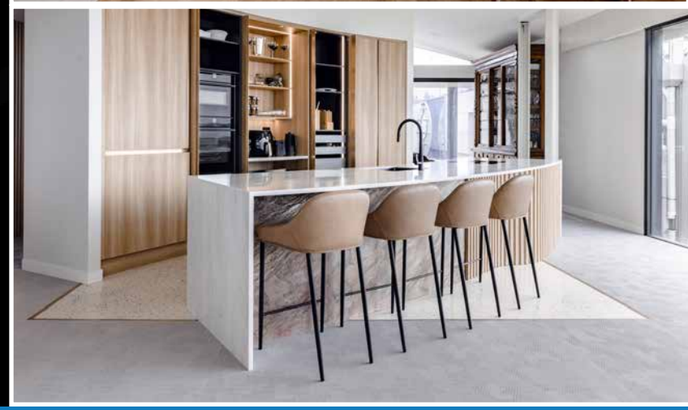

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Funds unlock solid foundation for future Lake Mac development

Tim Browne, Pat Conroy, Adam Shultz and David Antcliff at a Belmont development site

Funding to manage the cost of stabilising former mining voids is set to unlock development across prime Lake Macquarie land.

The Australian Government has committed $10 million to the Lake Macquarie Mines Grouting Fund to help cover the cost of filling underground voids left by historic coal mining, giving property owners and project proponents the confidence to move ahead with development.

Lake Macquarie Mayor Adam Shultz said the funding would help unlock development opportunities in areas that had long been constrained by subsurface conditions.

"This is a huge win for Lake Macquarie which will provide confidence to invest in our city and stimulate opportunities for new housing, jobs and prosperity in our community," he said.

"By tackling the legacy of underground mining, we're removing one of the biggest barriers to investment and growth in our city."

The framework for the fund was established in 2025, with Australian Government investment now unlocked to enable the fund to operate.

The fund provides financial assistance when the cost of mine grouting goes over a set cap.

Lake Macquarie City Council Chief Executive Officer David Hughes said the funding would be a major benefit to the community.

"This investment gives developers greater confidence to move forward with projects that support housing and economic growth in Lake Macquarie," he said.

"It will support new housing, jobs and investment in key centres while helping our city grow in a planned and sustainable way."

Council's Director Development Planning and Regulation David Antcliff said that higher-demand centres such as Belmont, Charlestown, Glendale and Morisset were subject to extensive underground mining.

"These works will give the market confidence to move ahead with projects that create jobs, stimulate the local economy and deliver long-term benefits for our community," Mr Antcliff said.

Member for Shortland, Pat Conroy said the fund would help get more homes built by removing uncertainty for developers, covering additional grouting costs when mine filling work was more expensive than anticipated.

"This fund is about building more homes, creating more jobs, and giving communities the confidence to grow. That's why the Albanese Labor Government is investing $10 million in the Mines Grouting Fund, helping unlock projects that have been held back for too long."

"We are committed to increasing housing supply, and initiatives like the Mine Grouting Fund are an important part of removing barriers that have delayed development."

"The Mine Grouting Fund will provide the certainty needed to unlock development, support investment and help deliver infrastructure that our growing community needs."

Dantia CEO Tim Browne said the Australian Government funding was crucial to driving ongoing investment and growth in Lake Macquarie's urban centres.

"This support helps level the playing field for Lake Macquarie compared with areas not impacted by historic mining, creating conditions that encourage new industries, investment and jobs," he said.

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The 2026 edition can be read online at http://www.hunterinvest.com.au

Prefab gets a Legal Identity: Inside NSW's Building (Approvals and Practitioners) Act 2026

Lou Stojanovski
Keystone Lawyers

The Minns Labor Government introduced the Building (Approvals and Practitioners) Act 2026 to NSW Parliament on 6 May 2026, billing it as nation-leading reform.

Three aims: support the uptake of MMC, streamline building approvals, and introduce stronger penalties for certifiers. The Government frames the Bill as critical to delivering safe, high-quality homes at the scale and pace the state's housing needs demand – and to making building disputes quicker and easier to resolve without costly court proceedings.

1. MMC in law – a national first

The Act makes NSW the first Australian jurisdiction to:

- Recognise MMC in law by defining "prefabricated buildings"
- Integrate MMC into the approvals system
- Guarantee consumer protections for prefabricated home buyers

The Commonwealth Productivity Commission estimates MMC can cut costs by up to 20% and deliver homes up to 50% faster than traditional methods. The intent is confidence: lift both industry and consumer trust in MMC so homeowners and builders treat it as a first choice.

2. One statute for building approvals

The Act amalgamates the currently fragmented legislative framework into a single piece of legislation. The consolidation will:

- Remove duplicative designs for the same building elements – an estimated $330,000 saving per apartment block
- Establish staged approvals, so construction can begin, and people can move in as early as possible
- Allow minor variations to a development consent – a resized door, an outdoor tap – to be approved where they fit the approval framework
- Operate in an easy-to-use digital environment for industry professionals
- Create singular authoritative source of truth for consumers, regulators and industry

3. A clearer conflict-of-interest test and larger penalties

The Act delivers on a government commitment to restore transparency in the certification sector through clearer conflict-of-interest laws. Certifiers play a crucial role in building approvals, and most do the right thing, the Government says; the Bill will set a clearer test for when a certifier cannot be involved in a development.

- Maximum court-imposed penalties for conflict-of-interest breaches will rise from $33,000 to $1.1 million
- Conviction for a breach will trigger automatic suspension

4. Who is affected

Builders and industry professionals:

Staged approvals will allow construction to begin earlier; minor variations approvable within the framework; no duplicative designs for the same building elements; approvals will run in an easy-to-use digital environment; MMC will offer more options to build faster in a controlled environment.

Homeowners and consumers:

Consumer protections guaranteed for MMC; a single authoritative source of truth for approvals; building disputes quicker and easier to resolve without costly court proceedings.

Certifiers:

A clearer test for when a certifier cannot be involved in a development; maximum penalties for conflict-of-interest breaches rising to $1.1 million; automatic suspension on conviction.

Regulators:

Building Commission NSW will gain oversight tools covering certifiers and newer types of homes; regulators will share the single authoritative source of truth.

For further information contact Keystone Lawyers on (02) 4915 9950, email mail@keystonelawyers.com.au or visit www.keystonelawyers.com.au

Lou Stojanovski is a Director / Lawyer at Keystone lawyers, with 27 years of experience across construction, commercial and property development industries.

Hunter builders strengthen position among nation's largest

"Three leading builders based in the Hunter region have again been ranked among the nation's largest residential builders in the HIA Housing 100 2025/26, sponsored by COLORBOND steel," said Craig Jennion, HIA Hunter Executive Director.

"The annual report ranks Australia's top 100 builders by the number of homes commenced and highlights the significant contribution Hunter companies make to housing supply in New South Wales and nationally."

Leading the local results, NEX Building Group commenced 3,585 homes in 2025/26, moving from fourth to third among Australia's largest home builders. Its 3,491 detached-home starts also made it the nation's second-largest detached house builder.

NEX Building Group, trading predominantly in New South Wales as McDonald Jones Homes and MOJO Homes, commenced 1,742 homes in the state, including 1,726 detached houses. This placed the group second overall in New South Wales and first for detached house starts among the state's largest builders.

Heatherbrae-based Hunter Homes rose to equal 53rd nationally with 245 starts, up from 138 in the previous financial year—an increase of almost 78%. In a significant move they were also ranked the 15th largest builder in New South Wales.

Belmont-based Montgomery Homes was ranked 80th nationally, commencing 151 homes in 2025/26.

"It is a fantastic achievement to see three Hunter-based builders recognised on the national stage. Their results were in response to improving market conditions, that saw new home approvals increase 5% across the Hunter and Central Coast in 2025/26".

"Looking forward these results demonstrate the capability within our region and provide confidence that local builders are ready to respond as demand for new homes grows," concluded Mr Jennion.

Key highlights from the HIA Housing 100 2025/26, sponsored by COLORBOND® steel, show that Australia's largest 100 residential builders:

- Commenced 70,553 homes, up 9.4% from 64,481 in 2024/25.
- Accounted for 35% of Australia's new home market.
- Increased detached house starts by 11% to 52,058.
- Increased semi-detached dwelling starts by 14% to 7,397.
- Increased multi-unit starts by 1% to 11,098.

Almost two-thirds of businesses in the Housing 100 increased their output during 2025/26. Detached homes remained the largest share of activity at 74%, while nine new entrants joined the national ranking.

"Australia's largest home building group in the 2025/26 HIA Housing 100 was Sumitomo Forestry Australia (Henley, Wisdom, Scott Park Group, Metricon), recording 8,038 new home starts in 2025/26 across these four Australian home building businesses.

A factory worker died after falling into a vat of coffee. Paramedics said he didn't suffer – it was instant.

Why do programmers confuse Halloween and Christmas? Because Oct 31 = Dec 25.

Airport police say that the number of people smuggling helium balloons in their luggage is under control.
But cases continue to rise.

Two statisticians were travelling in an airplane from Newcastle to Perth. About an hour into the flight, the pilot announced that they had lost an engine, but don't worry, there are three left.

However, instead of 5 hours it would take 7 hours to get to Perth. A little later, he announced that a second engine failed, and they still had two left, but it would take 10 hours.

Somewhat later, the pilot again came on the intercom and announced that a third engine had died. Never fear, he announced, because the plane could fly on a single engine.

However, it would now take 15 hours to get to Perth.

At this point, one statistician turned to the other and said, "Gee, I hope we don't lose that last engine, or we'll be up here forever!"

A guy goes to the doctor and says, "I keep seeing a werewolf, with big sharp teeth."
The doctor says, "Have you seen a psychiatrist?"
The guy says, "No, just a werewolf."

Dolly Parton once lost a Dolly lookalike contest. So did Elvis and Charlie Chaplin.
To be fair, neither looks much like Dolly.

The dentist told his patient to open wider.
"My goodness!" he said. "You've got the biggest cavity I've seen, the biggest cavity I've seen."
"OK," said the patient, "but I'm already scared enough. Did you need to repeat yourself?"
"I didn't," said the dentist. "That was the echo."

There's this man who always smokes two cigarettes at the same time.

Eventually, one of his friends asks, "What's with the two cigarettes?"

The man replies, "My brother is in prison, and isn't allowed to smoke, so I have one for him as well."

A few months later, his friend sees the man again and he's smoking only one cigarette instead of two. Surprised, the friend asks, "Has your brother been freed from prison?"

The man shakes his head sadly and says, "No, I just quit smoking."

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"If you're competitor-focused, you have to wait until there is a competitor doing something. Being customer -focused allow you to be more pioneering"
- Jeff Bezos

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Brad, Safety Manager
Australian Construction Group

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