

Overview

Between 25 February and 19 April 2026, City of Newcastle (CN) sought community feedback on the draft Cultural Plan 2026–2036 (the draft Plan), which sets out how CN will support, invest in and celebrate arts, culture, and creative industries over the next decade.

It's a practical roadmap for creating the conditions for creativity to thrive by supporting artists and cultural workers, protecting and growing creative spaces, and making culture accessible to everyone, everywhere.

The draft Plan was developed through an extensive co-design process involving consultation with artists, cultural workers and organisations through interviews and workshops. It is also supported by the most substantial economic analysis of Newcastle's creative sector ever undertaken, as well as best-practice research from leading creative cities nationally and internationally.

Our engagement

During the public exhibition period, the community could provide feedback by:

- completing our online survey
- participating in our quick poll
- sending a submission via email
- visiting our pop-up information stalls

The breakdown of submissions by each feedback channel is outlined below.



81

online survey
responses



79

quick poll
votes



7

written
submissions



2

workshops



198

in-person
conversations

Our reach

During the engagement period, a communications campaign informed the community of the project and promoted the opportunity for people to provide feedback.

Have Your Say

4,017

webpage visits

Draft Plan downloads

595

downloads via Have Your Say

In-person participation

198

conversations across
4 pop-ups



A media release was issued on 25 February 2026, with 119 media contacts notified.



Promotion via CN's newsletters, including Newcastle Connect, Newcastle Museum and Newcastle Libraries.



Direct email to key stakeholders across creative and cultural sector.



Paid advertising with Hunter Hunter and Newcastle Live.



Social media campaign featuring a mix of video and static posts across CN-owned social media channels.

- Organic impressions: 287,000
- Paid impressions: 215,150

Who we heard from

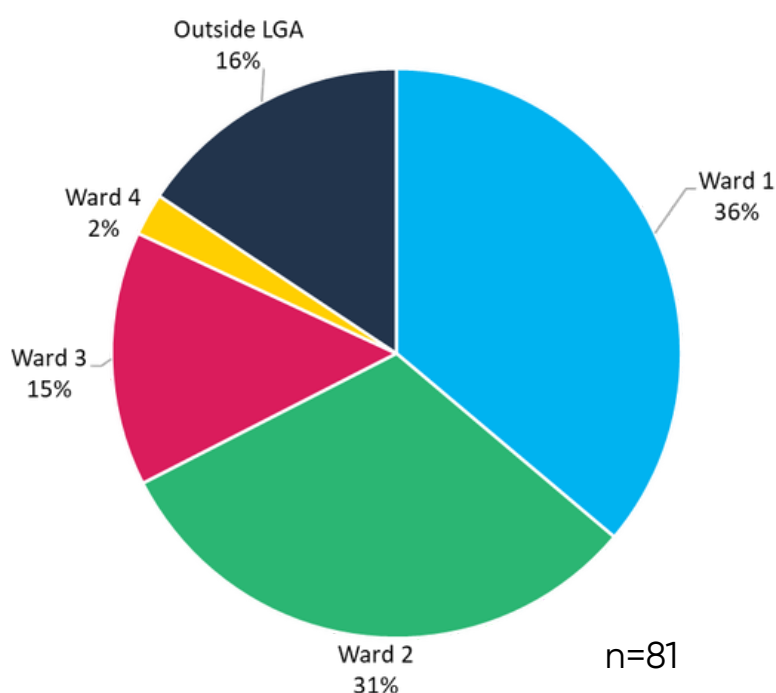
To ensure a comprehensive and inclusive consultation process, we encouraged participation from a diverse range of participants. Below is a breakdown of survey responses by location, age, and connection to Newcastle's cultural life.

Suburb	Total
Adamstown	6
Adamstown Heights	1
Cooks Hill	1
Georgetown	1
Hamilton	3
Hamilton East	1
Islington	4
Jesmond	1
Kotara	2
Maryville	3

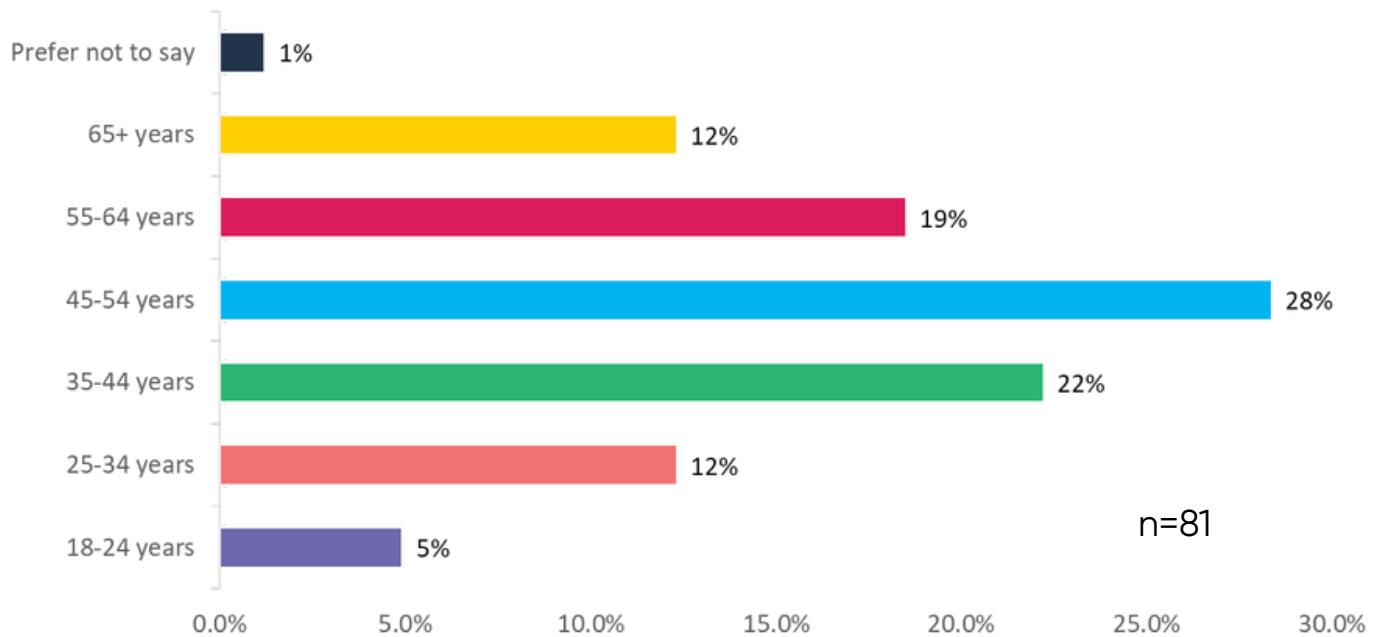
Mayfield	5
Mayfield East	3
Mayfield West	1
Merewether	9
New Lambton	3
New Lambton Heights	1
Newcastle	7
Newcastle East	2
Newcastle West	2
North Lambton	1

Shortland	1
Stockton	1
Tarro	1
The Junction	1
Tighes Hill	1
Wallsend	2
Waratah	1
Wickham	3
Outside LGA	13

Ward breakdown



Which age group do you belong to?



What is your connection to Newcastle's cultural life? (select all that apply)



What we heard

Online survey

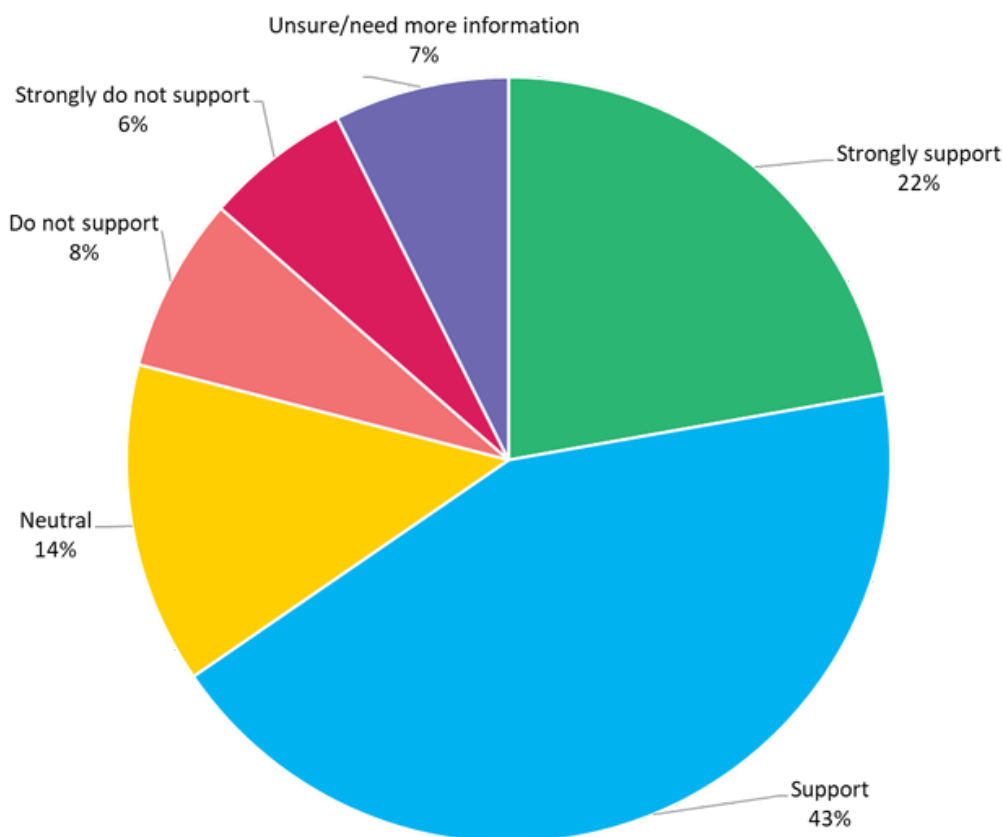
A total of 81 responses were received during the public exhibition period for the draft Plan. Feedback was gathered across six areas: overall support for the draft Plan, resonance of the vision statement, responses to key issues, pillar importance, participation barriers and cultural priorities.

Overall support

The results indicate broad community support for the draft Plan's overall vision and direction, with clear signals about where ambition needs to be matched by accountability and access.

Across the 81 quantitative responses, 65% of respondents either support or strongly support the plan, while 14% expressed some level of opposition. A further 14% were neutral and 9% were unsure or needed more information.

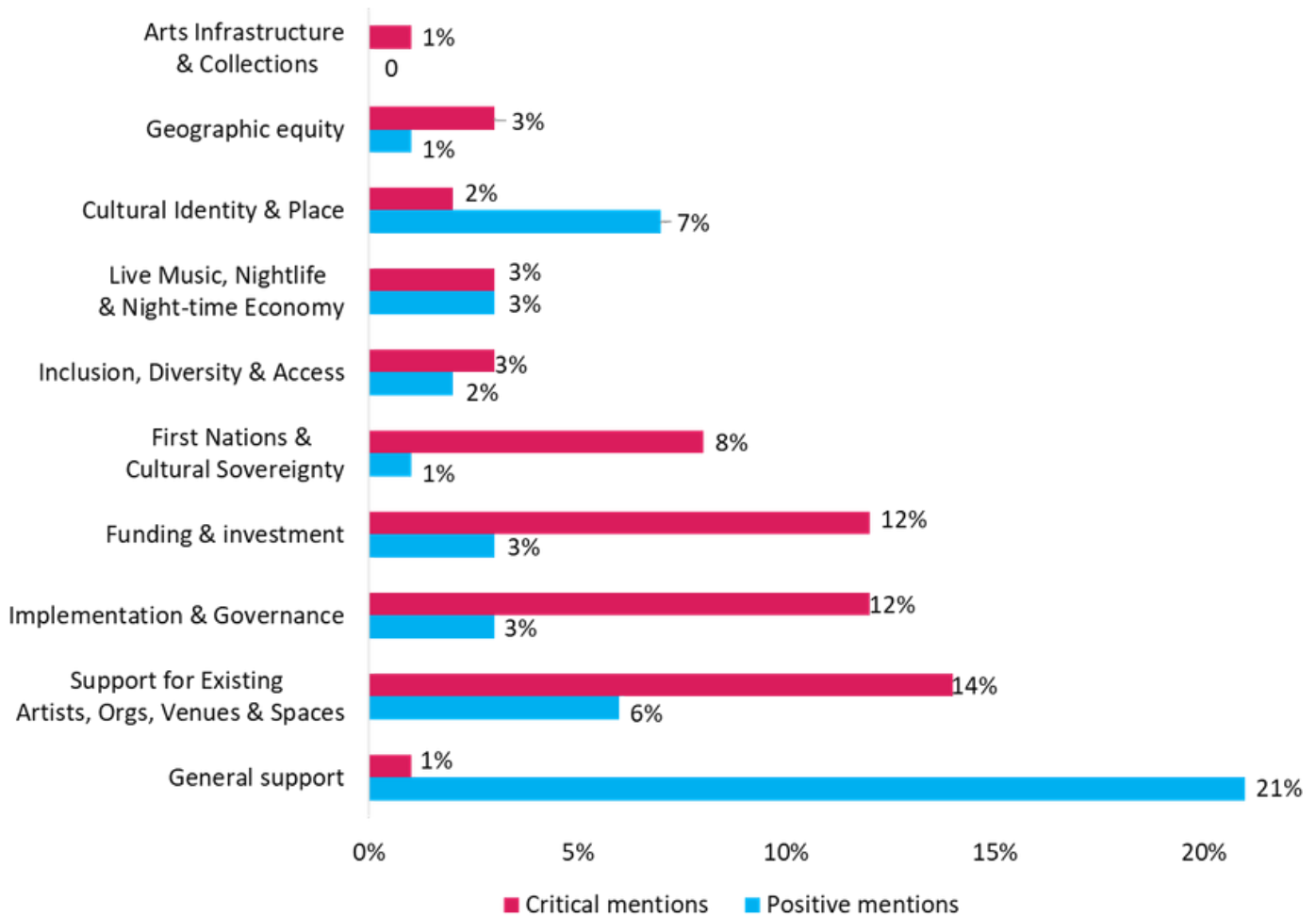
After reviewing the Draft Cultural Plan, to what extent do you support its overall vision and direction?



n=81

Key themes raised in open-text responses

(% of all mentions, total mentions =182)



Of the qualitative feedback, coded across ten themes, most feedback clustered around support for existing organisations, venues and spaces, implementation and governance, and funding and investment. Respondents consistently commented that Newcastle's cultural ecosystem is already active and functioning, and that the primary gap is sustained, structural support for what exists. The absence of hard funding commitments, measurable actions and clear timelines was raised repeatedly, including by respondents who expressed overall support for the draft Plan. First Nations leadership, geographic equity, and live music policy were also recurring themes.

Below is a sample of the comments provided, per each theme.

General support

I strongly support the cherishing of the city's culture and art. Strengthening those who work and practice in these creative fields lays the groundwork for a more national and international city with real draw.

Way too prescriptive, pre-determining & condescending. It is way too glossy & light on substance. It is fundamentally unbalanced & unrepresentative.... Start from scratch.

Support for existing artists, organisations, venues and spaces

The focus on creative spaces, affordable housing and the dire need to properly fund artists through grants opportunities resonated with me. These are at the very core of Newcastle's creative industry.

Cultural economy is already functioning in Newcastle and the primary issue is not a lack of activity, but a lack of sustained support for the organisations and venues and distinguished organisations that are already established. The plan is too broad, and doesn't address or value the volunteers. Please support the venues and organisations that are already existing, we don't need more venues.

Implementation and governance

The plan is comprehensive and grounded in clear, community-derived insights with some strong data to back those up. The plan also seems to have a strong mix of economic, community and artistic initiatives, although it could certainly do with being clearer about the decision making process and key decision makers to be involved over the next 10 years to ensure the execution of this plan stays true to its intention while also adapting to the economic and civic changes from now to 2036.

Support for the vision should not be confused with confidence in delivery. The most consistent message from the sector is that the challenge is not ambition, but implementation. The final Plan must move beyond aspiration and establish clear, durable frameworks for collaboration and investment.

Funding and investment

As a volunteer-run organisation, we know how hard it is to access affordable spaces, navigate grant processes, and build sustainable programs. The plan's focus on clearer funding pathways, professional development support, and unlocking underutilised spaces directly addresses barriers we face every day. If CN follows through on its commitments, organisations like ours stand to benefit enormously.

There is no tangible funding commitment - in hard numbers - as part of this plan. Mentioned is the New Annual Festival, with no commitment to working with local artists. This needs to be written down. In addition, it is CRUCIAL and ESSENTIAL that funding commitments with regards to specific Arts funding are made and met. The language in this draft plan is extremely congratulatory, without having tangible - and trackable - funding objectives.

First Nations and cultural sovereignty

I would like to see greater opportunities to connect with our Indigenous culture and history. I'm not of Indigenous Australian decent but I am very keen to learn more first nations knowledge and celebrate First Nations culture and history. The principles of sustainability, grounding in country and care for country and community really resonates with me.

Firstly, our Cultural Plan needs to be led by a strong First Nations Voice. There needs to be greater transparency during the consultation process to show engagement with mob. There needs to be clear investment in First Nations people year round not just during NAIDOC Week and Reconciliation Week.

Inclusion, diversity and access

What really excites us is that the plan goes beyond tokenistic representation. It talks about embedding diversity in decision-making, funding and space allocation – not just putting a rainbow on a poster. That's the kind of structural change that makes a real difference for our community.

This plan leaves out cultural development in ward 3 and 4. Arts should be where people live not just centralised. This plan ignores class barriers for practitioners as a pillar of diversity.

Live music, nightlife and nighttime economy

I also support the trend recently in encouraging more live music in the Newcastle CBD and would strongly recommend that CN pursues the idea of a Special Entertainment Precinct (SEP) as the plan recommends. I have had too many stories of live music being shut down due to one complaining neighbour or disgruntled resident and it is good to see the arts finally taking precedence, coupled with the new sound restriction laws from the state gov. Long term, if the SEP is successful it would be great to see it applied to some of the other cultural hubs identified in the plan.

Music keeps this city humming and is very much the backbone of the entertainment offering in this town. I cannot understand how it is not featured in more detail as part of a 10-year plan. I don't feel that this should be limited to "nightlife" conversations only and Pillar 4 need to be reshaped and be expansive around the topic of promoting live music options for this city.

Cultural identity and place

For me, Newcastle has always had a unique personality and presence in the country, and an important part of the touring circuit for musicians, both domestic and international. In short Newcastle should aspire to be a "music city", a destination known for nightlife and entertainment with a rich cultural heart that drives it.

It is fundamentally unbalanced & unrepresentative... & it fails the first hurdle by ignoring our modern history. It seems very unNewcastle. Counter-culture us completely ignored, & equally mainstream arts. Chained down by pre-determinism & inherent bias. Start from scratch.

Geographic equity

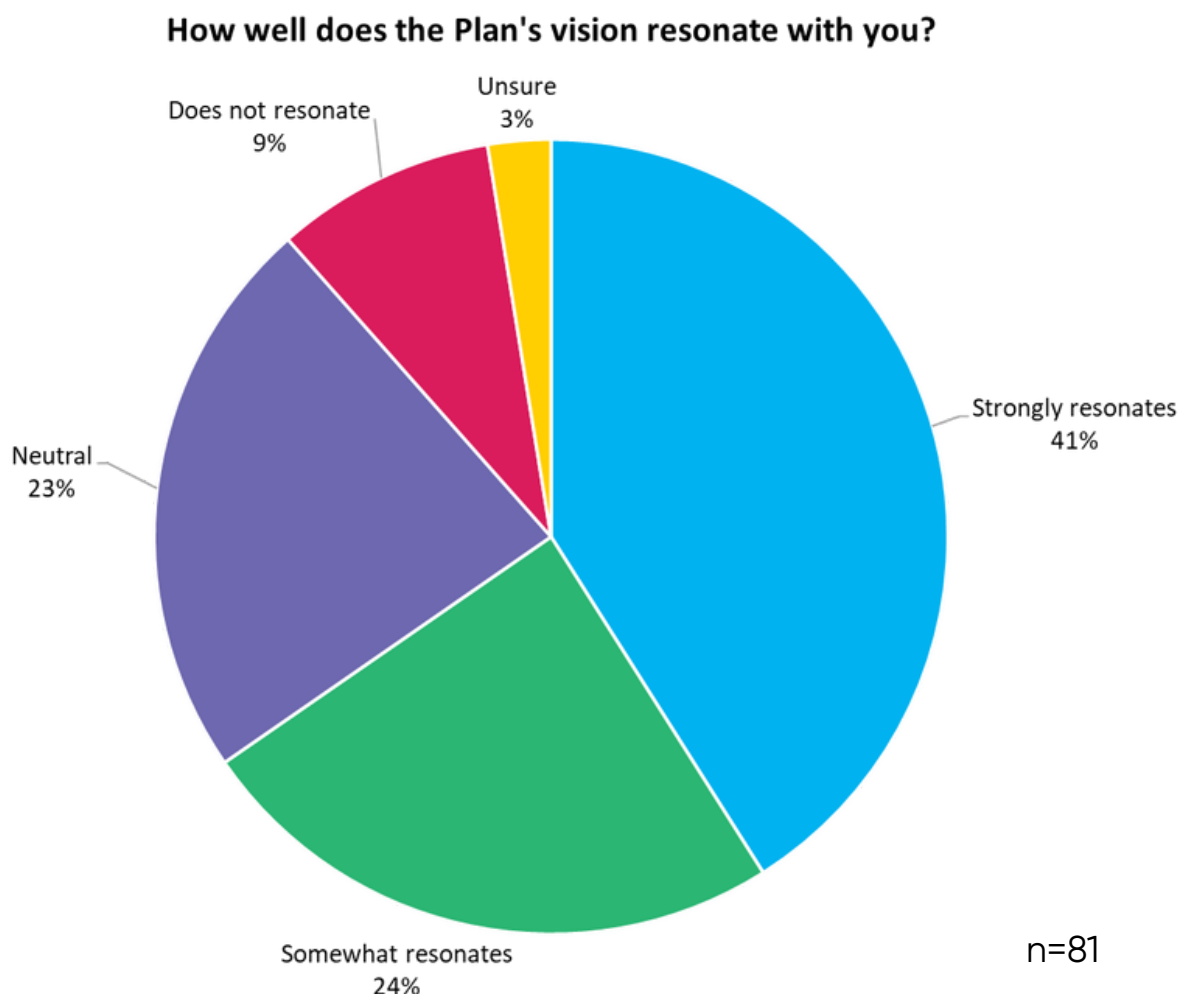
Something we've believed for a long time, culture is infrastructure, not a nice-to-have. The emphasis on distributing creative life beyond the city centre, supporting local talent, and activating under-utilised spaces feels overdue and necessary.

It would great to see further support of district's outside of the CBD – disappointing to see The Throsby are missing from the plan given there are so many creative, hospitality and retail businesses coming up in this area.

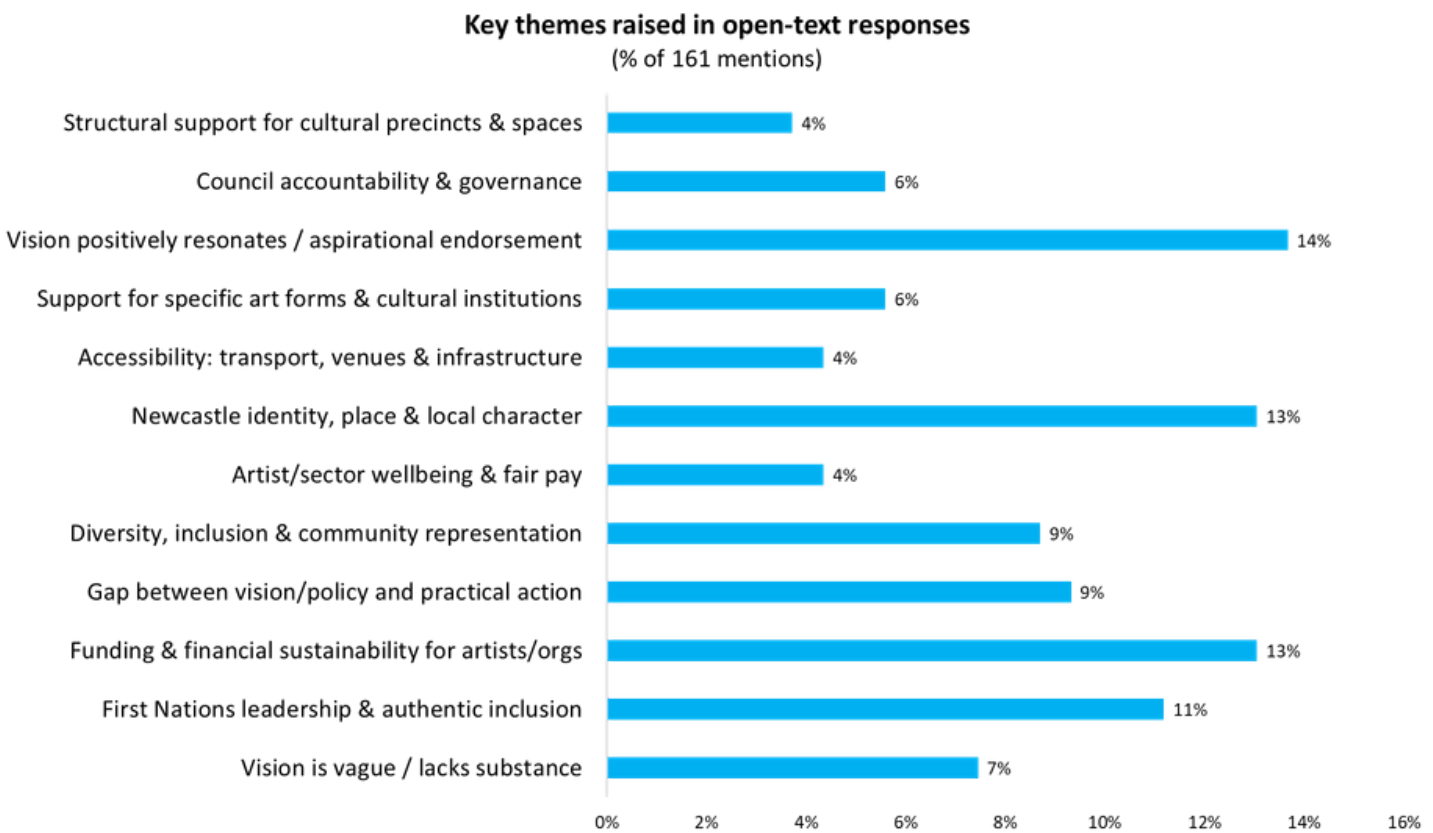
Resonance of the vision statement

**"Grounded in Country, powered by imagination, and open to the world,
by 2036 Newcastle's cultural future will be fearless, funded, celebrated
and sustainable."**

The draft Plan's vision received a mixed but broadly positive response. Just over half of respondents (65%) said it strongly or somewhat resonates. Nearly a quarter (23%) were neutral, and 9% said it does not resonate.



The thematic coding of open-text responses (161 total mentions across 12 themes) adds important nuance to the quantitative picture.



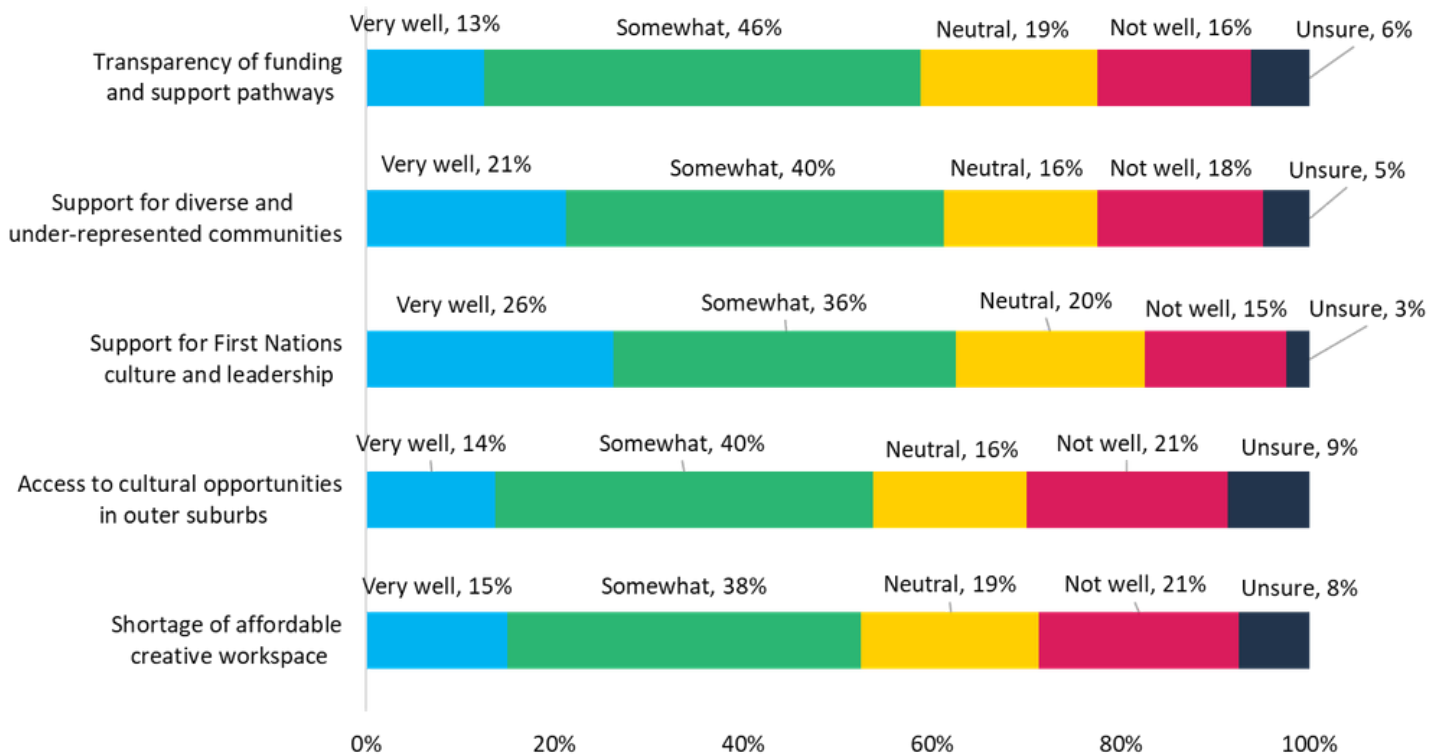
The most frequently raised theme was positive endorsement of the vision (14%), reflecting genuine enthusiasm for the draft Plan's ambition and direction. However, this was matched almost equally by concerns about funding and financial sustainability for artists and organisations (13%) and Newcastle's identity, place and local character (13%), suggesting that while many respondents welcome the vision, they want it anchored in hard commitments and a more specific sense of what makes Newcastle culturally distinct.

First Nations leadership (11%) attracted substantive and at times divergent feedback, with the majority of mentions calling for structural embedding of First Nations leadership. The gap between vision and practical action (9%) and diversity, inclusion and representation (9%) were also recurring themes.

Responses to key issues

As shown below, respondents were asked how well the plan addresses five specific issues. Across all five, the most common single response was "somewhat," suggesting the community sees the draft Plan as a step in the right direction but not yet a complete answer to these challenges.

How well do you think the Plan responds to the following issues?



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Support for First Nations culture and leadership received the highest proportion of "very well" responses (26%). Shortage of affordable creative workspace and access to cultural opportunities in outer suburbs drew the highest rate of "not well" responses (21%), pointing to a gap between community need and perceived Plan response.

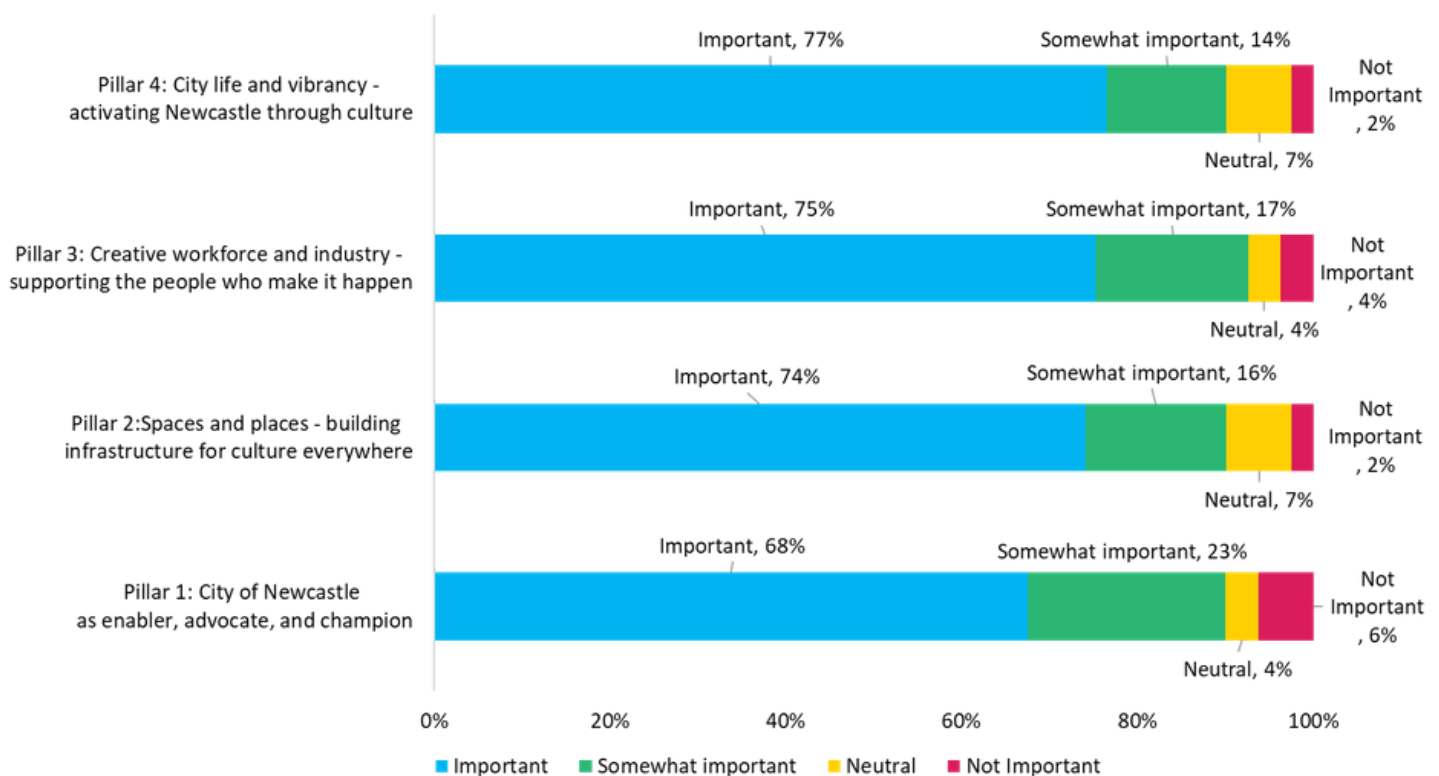
Strategic pillar importance

All four strategic pillars received strong community endorsement, with between 67% and 76% of respondents rating each as important.

Pillar 4 (City life and vibrancy) and Pillar 3 (Creative workforce and industry) rated highest, followed closely by Pillar 2 (Spaces and places). Pillar 1 (City of Newcastle as enabler and advocate) was also strongly supported, though it attracted the highest "not important" response of the four pillars (6%).

The overall pattern indicates community investment across all four pillars, but with an expectation that aspiration be matched by operational commitment.

The Draft Cultural Plan is built around four strategic pillars. How important is each pillar to you?

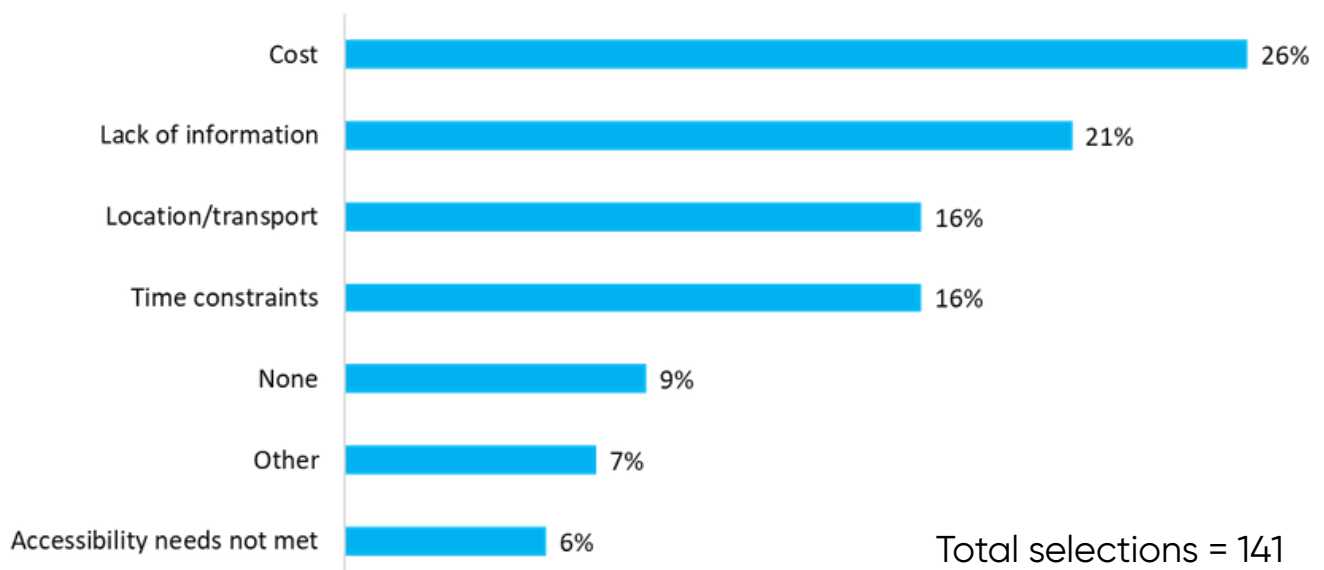


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Barriers to participation

Cost is the most cited barrier to participation in Newcastle's cultural life (26%). Lack of information (21%) and location or transport constraints (16%) are the next most significant, followed by time constraints (16%). Only 9% of respondents reported no barriers at all.

Are there any barriers that prevent you from participating in Newcastle's cultural life? (select all that apply)



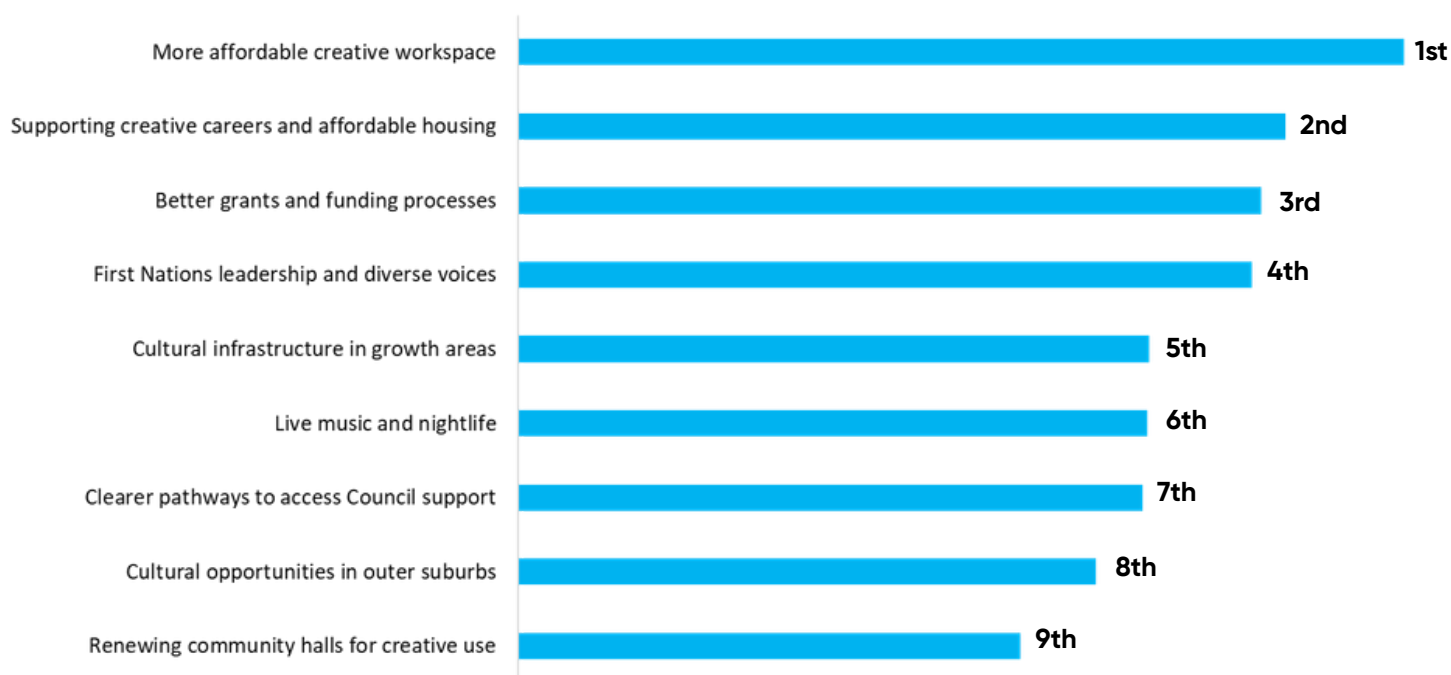
'Other' responses add important nuance:

- Working musicians identified parking and loading access in the CBD as a practical but underacknowledged structural barrier.
- Organisations raised concerns about regulatory and planning constraints limiting programming at scale, particularly within heritage sites and the night-time economy.
- Several respondents highlighted the absence of clear, consistent pathways into Council support, with access often depending on informal relationships rather than transparent systems.
- Rising production, staffing and compliance costs were also flagged as systemic pressures affecting both organisations and audiences, with some respondents questioning whether the Plan adequately acknowledges these realities.

Community priorities

What's most important to you for Newcastle's cultural future?

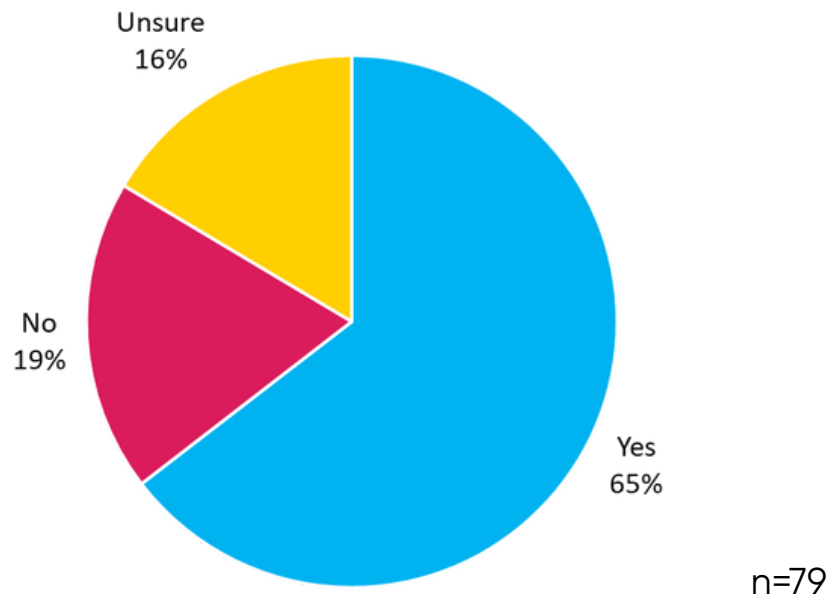
Participants ranked items in order of priority



The top two priorities – affordable workspace and affordable housing for creative workers – point to economic precarity as the dominant concern shaping how the community experiences cultural life in Newcastle. Better grants and funding processes ranked third overall and was the most frequently chosen fourth preference, suggesting it is a broadly shared concern.

Quick Poll

Quick poll: Do you support the overall vision and strategic pillars of the draft Cultural Plan 2026 - 2036?



Written submissions

CN received seven pieces of detailed, written feedback from key stakeholders, agencies and community members. Feedback was provided by the NSW Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner and Sound NSW, The Hon John Graham (Special Minister of State, Minister for Transport, Minister for the Arts, and Minister for Music and the Night-time Economy), The Sydneysider's Committee for Sydney, Newcastle Pride, Ashbridge Capital (as developer of The Station), Clyde Street Arts and one individual community member. These detailed pieces of feedback offered valuable insights, technical perspectives and community-based viewpoints on the pillars and actions outlined in the draft Plan.

A summary of the feedback received is presented below:

NSW Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner and Sound NSW

- Offers broad support of the draft Plan and specific recommendations to strengthen alignment with state-level strategies, including the NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategy, the Contemporary Music Strategy and the Night Worker Action Plan.

The Hon John Graham, Special Minister of State, Minister for Transport, Minister for the Arts, and Minister for Music and the Night-time Economy.

- Notes close alignment with NSW Government's 'Heartland: A Plan for Regional NSW Arts, Culture and Creative Industries 2026-2035' (Regional Plan), which is underpinned by 'Creatives Communities', the NSW Government's 10-year, integrated policy for arts, culture and the creative industries.
- Congratulates CN on its commitment to bolstering a sustainable and growing creative sector and the significant contribution that arts, culture and creative industries make to Newcastle's identity, community and economy.
- Affirms continued consideration for the establishment of a Creative Land Trust and welcomes the opportunity to work with CN to identify and assess options to hold creative production space in perpetuity.

Clyde St Arts (The Big Fat Feedback Party - 17 March 2026).

- Two submissions were received following a sector feedback event hosted at Clyde St Arts on 17 March 2026, attended by 148 participants. The first provided a comparative policy analysis of overall feedback against the draft Plan; the second focused specifically on First Nations perspectives raised during the event.

General feedback submission:

- Confirms broad support for the draft Plan's vision but raises significant scepticism about its implementation and delivery. The key conclusion was that the plan is designed as a strategic framework, but the sector is asking for an operating system which includes embedded support roles, regulatory reform, micro-level funding, and sustained support for existing precincts.
- Notes the contradiction between the draft Plan's positioning of Council as an enabler and participants lived experience of red tape and administrative barriers. Calls for streamlined approvals and removal of administrative burden.
- Advocates for existing cultural ecosystem and highlights the need to prioritise the independent arts sector over new large-scale initiatives.
- Calls for urgent interventions for cultural production spaces.
- Rejects tying cultural strategy to tourism ROI and economic justification in grants applications. Affirms that culture should be valued as a lived experience and community identity, not as an economic driver.
- Advocates for regulatory reform of live music and calls for CN to align with the NSW Government's shift toward incentivised and subsidised live music model, including the establishment of a Special Entertainment Precinct.
- Calls for micro-grants, core operational funding and payment for artists' time during application processes.

First Nations focus submission:

- Questions Elder leadership and authority in the draft Plan's development.
- Questions why Awabakal, Worimi, Mindaribba and Biraban Local Aboriginal Land Councils had not been embedded as key partners in the draft Plan's development and decision-making.
- Calls for sustained investment in First Nations cultural production and ongoing Elder panels to guide decision-making as the draft Plan develops.
- Identifies gaps in the draft Plan, including cultural integrity in First Nations spaces, cultural protocols with Awabakal and Worimi Peoples, and diversity in funding to community.

The Sydneysider, Committee for Sydney

- Strongly supports Newcastle's draft Cultural Plan 2026–2036, particularly its commitment to delivering a Creative Land Trust to secure affordable production space for the creative sector.
- The Committee frames this as a direct "win" for its own advocacy – its Making it in Sydney report had flagged the same space/affordability issue and recommended a Creative Land Trust as emerging best practice, which it then helped develop through a feasibility study (with Fern Group and others, 2025) commissioned by the NSW Government and City of Sydney.
- The Committee notes that while Sydney's affordability crisis took years to peak, Newcastle is "quickly working its way up to comparable challenges," and welcomes Newcastle getting ahead of the problem by embedding the CLT approach early in its 10-year plan.

Newcastle Pride

- Strongly supports the City of Newcastle Cultural Plan 2026–2036, welcoming it as one of the most genuinely inclusive pieces of cultural policy seen from CN and praising the recognition of Newcastle Pride's Fair Day as a named example of culture in the city alongside institutions like the Civic Theatre and Newcastle Museum.
- Welcomes the practical benefits the plan could deliver for volunteer-run organisations – clearer funding pathways, professional development, access to underutilised spaces and stronger partnership structures.
- Calls for the Plan to go further in five areas: commit to measurable outcomes; affirm cultural spaces as life-saving, not just beneficial, for LGBTQIA+ people; co-design alongside LGBTQIA+ organisations in night-time/public space design; recognise community-led, event-focused groups with governance, grant writing and capacity-building support; commit to meeting LGBTQIA+ inclusion and safety standards for CN-supported events.
- Invites early collaboration and partnership with CN.

Ashbridge Capital (as developer of The Station)

- Strongly advocates for the formal recognition of The Station as a designated Special Cultural Precinct within the final Cultural Plan.

Community member

- Supports the overall vision and direction of the draft Plan and welcomes its recognition of First Nations storytelling as foundational to Newcastle's cultural identity.
- Recommends stronger, explicit mechanisms for Traditional Owner governance, co-design, consultation, and accountability, with local Awabakal cultural authority clearly prioritised in First Nations programming and decision-making.

Workshops

In addition to earlier engagement, two targeted workshops were held to gather deeper feedback from key stakeholder groups. The first was a dedicated First Nations stakeholder engagement program; the second was a structured feedback session with the Community and Culture Strategic Advisory Committee.

Both workshops were held in May 2026, following the close of the public exhibition, and sought to complement the broader survey findings with more detailed qualitative input.

First Nations Stakeholder Engagement

Additional First Nations stakeholder engagement was undertaken in May 2026, involving direct conversations with eight stakeholders across three in-depth sessions with Wannangini Pty Ltd, Worimi Sovereignty, and Awabakal Descendants and Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. The engagement was facilitated by an independent consultant.

The independent facilitator noted the following key themes:

- Culture as inseparable from Country: Participants described culture as a living relationship with Country, not a standalone arts or heritage matter. Caring for Country and caring for culture are deeply connected.
- Recognition of Traditional Owners connected to Country: Participants emphasised that Aboriginal Peoples are not a single cultural group and that knowledge, language, stories, and responsibilities are connected to distinct Countries. The Plan should use language that recognises Traditional Owners in ways that are respectful, accurate and locally grounded.

- Careful language and culturally-informed representation: Written documents can unintentionally simplify, misrepresent or incorrectly record cultural knowledge, particularly in relation to public signage, dual naming, and historical interpretation. Traditional Owners should be directly involved in framing cultural narratives and commitments.
- Cultural continuity, safe spaces and intergenerational knowledge-sharing: Participants raised the need for spaces where Traditional Owners can gather, practice culture, share knowledge and support younger generations. The Creative Trust model was identified as a potential mechanism to protect and provide long-term cultural space.
- Public art, storytelling and interpretation: Participants identified public art, installations and First Nations-led storytelling as important ways to communicate the significance of Country and place. Artist-led interpretation by Traditional Owners from Country was identified as a potentially more authentic and culturally-grounded way of recognising significant sites.
- Integration rather than siloing of First Nations actions: There was support for weaving First Nations priorities throughout the plan rather than isolating them in a standalone pillar, demonstrating that First Nations culture, partnership and accountability are part of the whole cultural life of the city.
- Coordination across Council initiatives: Council engages with First Nations people across multiple streams, including public art, cultural planning, gallery programming, engagement processes and advisory structures. Improved coordination would reduce duplication, consultation fatigue and fragmented conversations with the same people across different teams.
- "City of Storytellers" framing: The "City of Storytellers" framing was supported as a useful way to hold Newcastle's layered histories and cultural identities together.

Community and Culture Strategic Advisory Committee Workshop

A feedback session held with the Community and Culture Strategic Advisory Committee on 11 May 2026 was structured around two questions posed to each committee member: what one change would you make to the draft Plan, and what is critical to ensure the vision is executed?

The independent consultant noted the following key themes:

- First Nations as a foundational organising principle.
- Measurable actions: Members noted that the Plan could be enhanced by quantifiable success measures, though it was noted that this may be a next phase of work.

- Clearer articulation of planning and connected work: Members called for a visible reporting and alignment framework showing how the Plan connects to Newcastle 2040, the Operational Plan, and other council strategies and relevant strategies from other tiers of Government.
- Ecosystem visibility: The Plan could be enhanced by practitioners at different levels (independent, community, intermediate, commercial) seeing themselves represented in the draft Plan. A brief framing section or diagram mapping the layers of the cultural ecosystem was suggested.
- Multicultural communities: Members noted multicultural communities should be given more specific recognition and acknowledge the need for long term relationship building.
- Live music and cross-plan transparency: The committee noted confusion about where live music sits given it is addressed through a separate CN plan. A brief cross-reference was suggested to reduce the perception of fragmentation.
- Sector development and education: The university and TAFE sectors were flagged as underutilised sites for sector development and capacity building, particularly regarding talent attrition at the secondary-to-tertiary transition.

Next steps

City of Newcastle will thoroughly analyse all feedback received through this consultation. A summary of findings will be made publicly available in a Public Exhibition Report, which will be presented to Council in mid-2026.

Your feedback will directly inform the final Cultural Plan 2026-2036. We are committed to keeping the community updated throughout this process and thank all participants for taking the time to share their views.