

City of Storytellers

Cultural Plan 2026-2036



City of
Newcastle

This 10-Year Cultural Plan has been prepared in alignment with the City of Newcastle's broader strategic and policy framework. It has been developed in coordination with related City strategies and plans to ensure a coherent set of priorities, objectives and actions over the planning horizon to 2036. The Plan also aligns with relevant State and Commonwealth policy directions, including the NSW Government's *Creative Communities* 10-Year Arts, Culture and Creative Industries Policy and the Australian Government's National Cultural Policy, *Revive*.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Awabakal and Worimi peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Newcastle. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the ongoing cultural and creative practices that continue to shape this place.

First Nations storytelling is the foundation of Newcastle's identity and must guide our shared cultural future.

Installation view, Renae Lamb, Dabuyarra munrun: A story of life, legacy, and connection, 2025, Newcastle Art Gallery, Australia © the artist. Photo: Lachlan Matheson.





Message from the Chief Executive Officer



Newcastle's creative sector has been growing twice as fast as the rest of our economy. As City of Newcastle looks ahead, we are carrying that momentum forward as a central part of how our city grows.

Arts, culture and creativity fuel our imagination and sense of belonging. Our cultural workers are the storytellers who shape how we see ourselves and our city, keeping Newcastle vibrant, connected and future focused. Their work unfolds on Country that has always been creative: the lands and waters of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, whose living cultures continue to inspire, guide and ground Newcastle's creative spirit.

Recent growth affirms that investing in creativity delivers real returns. In 2023–24, Newcastle's arts, culture and creative industries contributed around \$565 million in direct value added to the local economy, more than double their contribution two decades earlier. City of Newcastle is proud to have helped drive this momentum through record capital investment and a \$33.5 million annual operational budget for our cultural institutions. This support is complemented by diverse grants and funding opportunities, as well as the attraction of new events and partnerships to our city.

The results are visible across Newcastle. The expansion of the Newcastle Art Gallery, once a project stalled for years, is now complete, adding 1,600 square metres of new cultural floorspace to house the city's \$145 million collection. The New Annual festival continues to grow, drawing 50,000 attendees in 2025. 60% of the program features local artists, with more than half the events free and family friendly. At the same time, McDonald Jones Stadium and the Civic Theatre are drawing national audiences, with *The Rocky Horror Show* selling more than 30,000 tickets in 2024, 60% of them to visitors from outside the city. Just four blocks away, the revitalisation of the Victoria Theatre is expected to add a further 900 seats to the city's cultural and night-time offering.

This is the creative city CN is building: local talent backed, barriers removed, and national reach achieved.

Our 10-Year Cultural Plan builds on this foundation. It faces hard truths, including the space squeeze, the cost of living, and the need to make creative work sustainable in a fast-growing city. Newcastle's creative economy is thriving, but the people behind it need greater stability to stay. This plan makes clear that culture is not a side issue. It is core infrastructure.

CN will continue to advocate for a Creative Land Trust, embed affordable housing in new developments, further expand community and cultural floorspace, and keep cutting red tape through initiatives such as our Accelerated DA pathway. This work is already helping cultural workers, venues and businesses turn ideas into action faster.

This plan puts culture where it belongs, at the centre of city life. Because a creative Newcastle does not just reflect who we are, it shapes who we become.

Jeremy Bath
Chief Executive Officer
City of Newcastle

Executive Summary

This plan provides Newcastle with a clear, coordinated and long-term approach to culture, one that matches the depth of creativity already present across the city and supports it to flourish.

As an enabler, advocate and champion for culture locally, City of Newcastle (CN) has developed this plan to bring clarity to its role, stability to the sector, and confidence to the city's cultural practitioners. It responds to the on-the-ground conditions experienced every day by cultural workers, organisations and communities, including the need for more accessible spaces, more sustainable pathways, stronger inclusion, and a cultural identity that reflects who Newcastle truly is. Recent milestones, including the expansion of the Newcastle Art Gallery, the growth of the creative workforce, and last year's New Annual festival drawing 50,000 people, show the creative energy already underway. This plan exists to harness that momentum deliberately, collaboratively and with a long view to 2036.

To build this plan, CN worked closely with almost 70 cultural practitioners, cultural organisations and community leaders. Their insights sharpened CN's direction and grounded the work in lived experience. Stakeholders spoke about the opportunities ahead, including a cultural identity that reflects the city's diversity, deeper First Nations leadership, stronger neighbourhood-level participation, and a more vibrant night-time environment. They also identified the pressures shaping their day-to-day work, such as the shortage of affordable, fit-for-purpose spaces; rising living costs; uneven access for multicultural communities, LGBTIQ+ people, young people and people with disability; and the difficulty of sustaining creative work in a rapidly growing city. This input reinforced and refined the direction of the plan and helped shape actions that are ambitious, practical and grounded in real-world conditions.

The vision that emerges from this work - grounded in Country, powered by imagination and open to the world - reflects both the cultural character Newcastle is known for and the one it continues to grow into. The mission that follows places creativity at the centre of city-making, guided by First Nations knowledge and delivered through accessible spaces, equitable participation and strong, enduring partnerships.

To achieve this, the plan is structured around four strategic pillars. The first strengthens the City's role as enabler, advocate and champion by improving and simplifying access to support, opening clearer partnership pathways, and elevating diverse creative leadership across programs and governance. The second addresses Newcastle's most urgent cultural challenge, the shortage of suitable spaces. This includes advocating for a Cultural Land Trust, unlocking under-utilised CN assets, and planning for new cultural and community floorspace across high-growth neighbourhoods such as Broadmeadow. The third pillar focuses on sustainable creative careers and industry development by embedding affordability into policy settings, learning from successful CN programs such as UpStage, strengthening grants and professional development, and positioning Newcastle as one of Australia's leading creative hubs. The fourth pillar strengthens cultural life across the city by expanding late-night and festival activity, streamlining approvals, supporting local businesses, and ensuring cultural participation is woven into neighbourhood life and the night-time economy.

By 2036, this plan aims for a Newcastle where First Nations storytelling is central; where multicultural communities, LGBTIQ+ people, young people and people with disability more visibly shape cultural life; where creative spaces are accessible, affordable and well distributed across the local government area; where cultural workers have sustainable careers and can afford to remain in the city; and where cultural participation thrives across communities, ages, and day-to-night activity. It imagines a city where creativity is not an add-on to how Newcastle grows, but a driving force, strengthening identity, deepening belonging, boosting economic resilience and enriching everyday life.

This is a plan defined by partnership, civic leadership and local pride. It builds on a decade of cultural momentum, addresses real structural pressures and sets a clear, coordinated pathway for the next ten years. Above all, it ensures that Newcastle in 2036 is a city shaped by imagination, confident, distinctive and reflective of the people who call it home.



Plan on a Page

1

PILLAR 1

CN as an Enabler, Advocate & Champion.

This pillar strengthens the City's role as enabler, advocate and champion by improving and simplifying access to support, opening clearer partnership pathways, and elevating diverse creative leadership across programs and governance.

- Investing in CN's cultural workforce by recruiting new roles to support the implementation of this plan, and by giving our 60 full-time directors, curators, digital leads, producers, and designers the tools to act as creative connectors and champions for local talent.
- Enabling clear access to CN support by creating a simple "front door" for guidance, partnerships, facilities, and funding information – and advocating internally across Council to embed culture in decision-making.
- Championing fair and transparent opportunity through clear partnership and commissioning pathways – using open calls, published criteria and proactive outreach to emerging and under-represented creatives.
- Enabling sector capability and resilience through professional development – including grant-writing support, philanthropy and fundraising workshops, digital skills training and forums linking creatives with producers, funders and industry partners.
- Championing First Nations leadership by expanding traineeships, mentoring and employment pathways across CN venues – and advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visibility across the city's cultural life.
- Enabling and championing First Nations creative practice across CN venues, festivals, and civic events.
- Championing diverse creative voices by developing targeted partnerships and pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people and other under-represented groups and advocating for equity in cultural participation and leadership.
- Advocating for cultural infrastructure by working with state and federal government to match housing targets with new cultural and community floorspace.
- Championing an open, listening culture through the Community & Culture Strategic Advisory Committee to ensure CN's role evolves with the needs of the sector.

2

PILLAR 2

Spaces & Places.

The second pillar addresses Newcastle's most urgent cultural challenge: the shortage of suitable spaces. This includes advocating for a Cultural Land Trust, unlocking under-utilised CN assets, and planning for new cultural and community floorspace across high-growth neighbourhoods like Broadmeadow.

- Developing a clearer evidence base on the needs and types of space our communities require across our network of community halls and facilities.
- Enabling delivery of cultural and community infrastructure as part of urban renewal at Broadmeadow. Preliminary sites already identified include within Hamilton North, Broadmeadow Town Centre, and the Locomotive Heritage Precinct. This approach ensures new spaces are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted later.
- Continuing to collaborate with the NSW Government on the creation of a Creative Land Trust that can secure and expand affordable cultural floorspace in Newcastle.
- Continuing to make it easier and more cost-effective for cultural workers to deliver free-entry, street-based community events by building on resources such as off-the-shelf traffic management plans and the CN street-events guide.¹
- Completing an LGA-wide floor space and employment survey. This will allow CN to measure how much floorspace creative industries have gained or lost during the life of this plan and beyond.

1. Plug and Play media release CN

3

PILLAR 3

Creative Workforce & Industry.

The third pillar focuses on sustainable creative careers and industry development – embedding affordability into policy settings, learning from successful CN programs like UpStage, strengthening grants and professional development, and positioning Newcastle as one of Australia's leading creative hubs.

- Providing ongoing funding for the delivery and growth of the New Annual festival over the life of this plan.
- Actively supporting the development of affordable housing within Newcastle through CN's Affordable Housing Contributions Scheme and by furthering efforts to reach CN's 15% affordable housing target across the LGA.
- Supporting the creation of more than 1,200 new jobs in the broader creative sector by embedding the creative economy as a core driver of Newcastle's economic diversification, local talent retention, and city vibrancy. In addition to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, CN will work with strategic partners to better understand industry needs and necessary support. This looks like CN collaborating with organisations such as Business Hunter, the University of Newcastle and the Hunter Creative Alliance to monitor trends and emerging opportunities.
- Facilitating a nationally significant industry forum that supports local cultural workers grow their professional networks and showcase their work.
- Reviewing our grants programs for culture and creativity, with a focus on supporting the sector at all stages of career development and embedding local talent and content into all major CN events, festivals and venues.

4

PILLAR 4

City Life & Vibrancy.

The fourth pillar strengthens cultural life across the city, expanding late-night and festival activity, streamlining approvals, supporting local businesses, and ensuring cultural participation is woven into neighbourhood life and the night-time economy.

- Processing more DAs, more quickly through our innovative Accelerated Development Application pathway. Already one of the fastest in the state, CN will increase awareness of the scheme to get the doors opens at more galleries, live performance spaces, and small venues.
- Considering the feasibility of one or more Special Entertainment Precincts to encourage live music and performance while balancing amenity, safety and land-use priorities through data-led community consultation.
- Partnering with the NSW Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner to pilot Vibrancy Reforms that support after-dark activation across key precincts.
- Expanding late-night cultural and creative programming to extend city life beyond traditional trading hours, diversify the nighttime offer, and improve perceptions around safety and amenity.
- Embedding safety, inclusion and accessibility in nighttime design by improving lighting, transport options and public-space management so Newcastle's after-dark cultural life and economy remains vibrant, diverse and welcoming for all.

What is culture?

When we talk about culture, CN uses a broad and inclusive definition. Culture includes the arts – live performance, music, visual arts, literature, screen and digital work – but it is also the creativity expressed in community halls, libraries, neighbourhood gatherings, festivals, and everyday participation.

The community told us: culture is the way we tell stories and create shared meaning.

Importantly, we also recognise that this plan is delivered in the context of the oldest, continuous, living cultures – those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. CN acknowledges that our local government area sits on the lands of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, and through this plan we recommit ourselves to embedding cultural heritage protection and promotion in our work every day.

In preparing this plan, we also kept front of mind the wide range of experiences that make up our city’s cultural life. These are things like:

- The local band playing its first gig at a pub in Mayfield.
- The school group visiting Newcastle Museum.
- The dance class in the Fletcher Community Centre.
- Catching a Broadway musical at the Civic Theatre.
- Newcastle Pride holding Fair Day in Gregson Park.
- Opening night of a new show at the Newcastle Theatre Company.
- Mayfield Mosque holding an open day.
- Listening to your favourite author at the Newcastle Writers Festival.
- Enjoying a new piece of public art on your journey to work.



Defining the arts, culture and creative workforce

Newcastle’s arts, culture and creative workforce is a vital part of this picture. In preparing this plan, CN has undertaken the most extensive economic analysis of the sector to date. To do this, we have:

- Identified Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Employment types using a standardised definition.
- Used both the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) and the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) to build a reliable picture of the workforce and the people who power it.

We know from this analysis that across Newcastle, the creative workforce includes artists, designers, musicians, performers, architects, film and screen workers, software developers, curators, as well as thousands of people behind the scenes who bring cultural experiences to life.

Table 1: Employment types within the arts, culture and creative industry locally.

INDUSTRY SECTOR	EMPLOYMENT TYPE	CREATIVE SECTOR
Arts, Culture and Creative Industry	Creative Services	Advertising and Marketing
		Architecture and Design
		Software and Digital Content
	Cultural Production	Film, TV and Radio
		Music and Performing Arts
		Publishing
		Visual Arts

Despite strong growth, we also know that this workforce is fragmented and that cultural production is fragile. Our architects aren’t collaborating with our visual artists, and our software engineers don’t recognise our writers on the street. Quantitative and qualitative data also shows that many musicians, performers, and independent practitioners are juggling precarious work arrangements. Supporting this workforce means recognising creativity as both an economic driver and a public good – one that builds identity, attracts visitors, supports wellbeing and makes Newcastle an exceptionally liveable city.

Why Culture Matters

1. It strengthens identity and fosters belonging

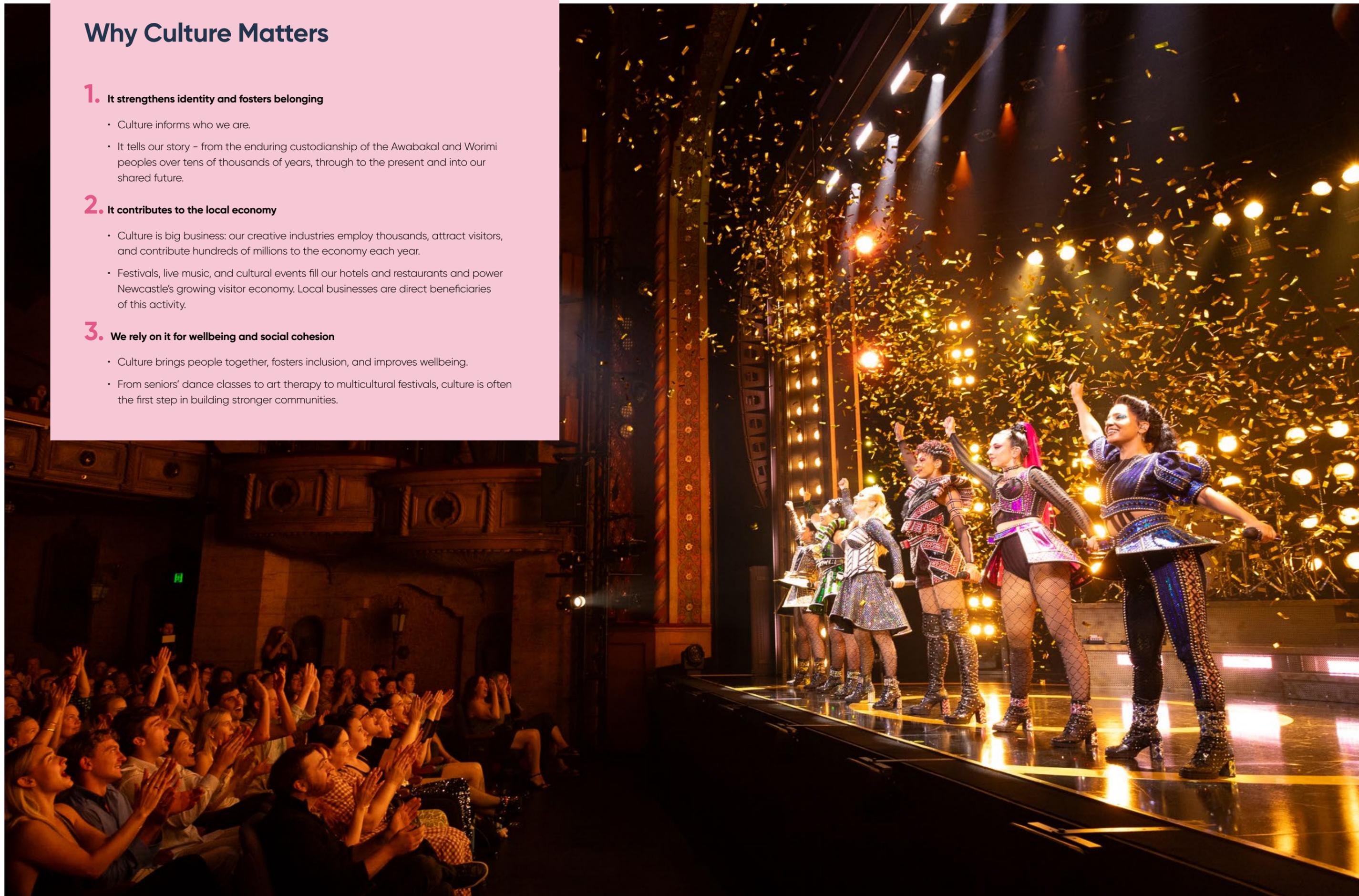
- Culture informs who we are.
- It tells our story - from the enduring custodianship of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples over tens of thousands of years, through to the present and into our shared future.

2. It contributes to the local economy

- Culture is big business: our creative industries employ thousands, attract visitors, and contribute hundreds of millions to the economy each year.
- Festivals, live music, and cultural events fill our hotels and restaurants and power Newcastle's growing visitor economy. Local businesses are direct beneficiaries of this activity.

3. We rely on it for wellbeing and social cohesion

- Culture brings people together, fosters inclusion, and improves wellbeing.
- From seniors' dance classes to art therapy to multicultural festivals, culture is often the first step in building stronger communities.



Culture by the Numbers

Creative Economy



3,472 full-time jobs in creative workforce (2024)



\$565 million – direct value added to Newcastle's economy (up from \$276 million 20 years ago)



\$398 million in household income (2024)



4.6% – average annual growth in creative industries

Cultural Infrastructure & Investment



\$33.5 million operating budget for cultural institutions



60+ full-time cultural experts at City of Newcastle



1,600m² of new cultural floorspace added through Newcastle Art Gallery expansion



\$3.5 million+ invested in creative sector since 2019 through grants and sponsorships



900 extra seats coming to Newcastle's cultural and night-time offering at the Victoria Theatre

Participation & Reach



50,000 attendees to New Annual festival in 2025



2 million + visitors to Newcastle Museum since its 2011 reopening



400,000+ visitors in 2024 across the Civic Theatre, Civic Playhouse, Newcastle Museum, City Hall and Wheeler Place



Twelfth Night, Shakespeare Under the Stars by Whale Chorus, photographer Lee Illfield

How We Plan

This plan has been developed in alignment with national, state and local policy frameworks to ensure Newcastle's cultural growth contributes to broader social, economic and environmental goals. It responds to the Australian Government's *National Cultural Policy – Revive*, the NSW Government's *Creative Communities and Vibrancy Reforms*, and integrates with the City of Newcastle's key strategic documents including *Newcastle 2040*, the *Economic Development Strategy*, the *After Dark Strategy*, and the *Social Strategy*.



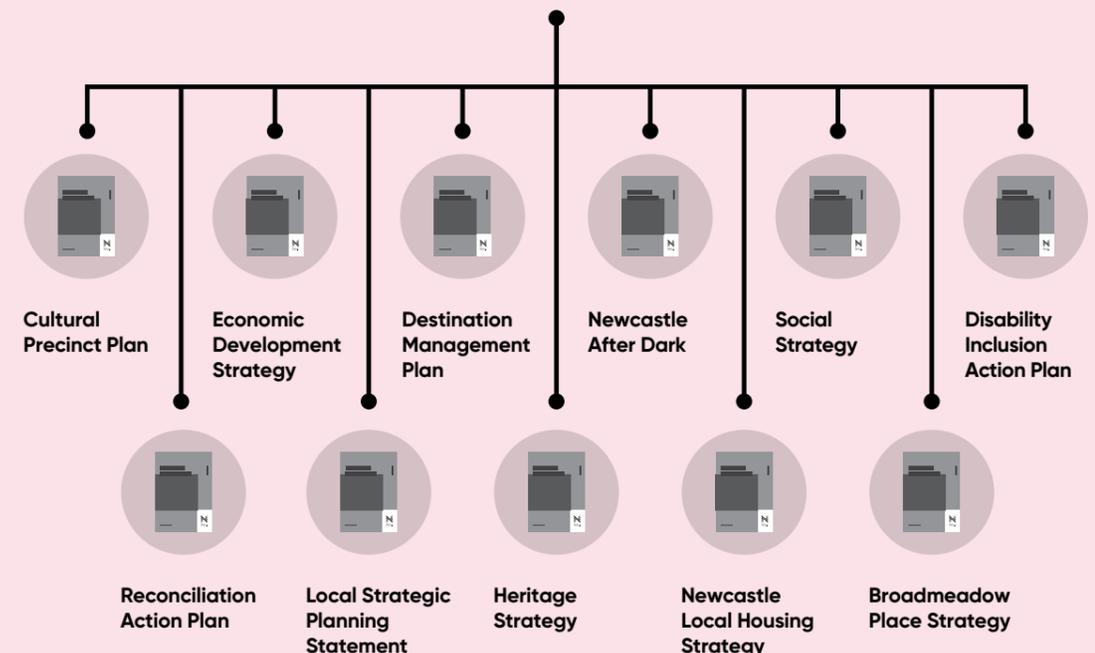
This plan closely aligns with the Australian Government's *National Cultural Policy – Revive*, translating its national vision into local action. Like *Revive*, it puts **First Nations First**, expands **cultural infrastructure and access**, strengthens the **creative workforce**, and embeds **inclusion and participation** across all programs. It advances *Revive's* goals of fair creative careers, vibrant cultural precincts, and coordinated investment through partnerships across government. In doing so, it positions Newcastle as a leader in delivering a thriving, equitable and future-focused cultural ecosystem.



This plan also aligns strongly with the NSW Government's *Creative Communities: Arts, Culture and Creative Industries Policy 2024-2033*, particularly in areas of **state-level coordination, creative workforce development and infrastructure reform**. Both prioritise embedding culture in planning and housing policy, unlocking underused buildings for creative use, and improving conditions for artists through fair pay, safety and inclusion. CN's **Cultural Land Trust** advocacy directly reflects *Creative Communities* goal to create affordable, long-term creative spaces, while its focus on regional leadership and night-time vibrancy delivers the policy's vision of a connected, sustainable and creative NSW at a city scale.



Community Engagement

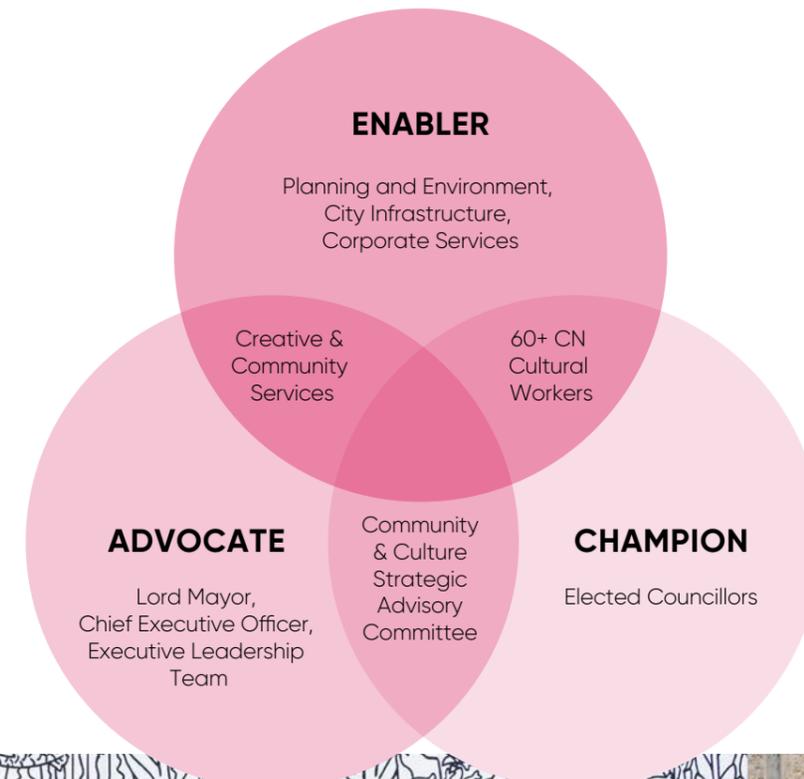


CN's Role

Through discussions with stakeholders, we heard that people want to better understand how CN supports the sector and how we can better work together.

From these discussions, CN understands our role is to be an:

- **Enabler** by providing the resources, tools, and structures to facilitate actions and initiatives.
- **Advocate** by advocating for funding from other levels of government and supporting the integration of cultural priorities within the broader policy and decision-making framework.
- **Champion** by leading initiatives, building visibility, and driving cultural change.





The gallery's rebirth is, at its heart, a community achievement. Local benefactors, artists and visionaries fought through 'the hard years' to make the dream real. Donations, including the extraordinary \$20 million bequest from Valerie Ryan, remind us that the arts here have never been a fringe pursuit, but central to the life of the city.

At the same time, the New Annual festival has returned, scattering stages, exhibitions and performances across the city. From the Spiegeltent in Civic Park to experimental theatre at the Newcastle Ocean Baths, New Annual is redefining how Novocastrians see the places they know so well.

These two milestones are more than cultural events. They are proof that Newcastle has shed its tired image as a rusting industrial relic. The city has embraced a future where culture is a cornerstone of identity and growth."

Editorial, Newcastle Herald – 27 September 2025

Exterior of the expanded Newcastle Art Gallery building at First Night First Look event, 26 September 2025. Photo: Lachlan Matheson.



Our Cultural Landscape Today

Newcastle in 2026 is a proudly creative city. Our community has access to world-class live performance and exhibitions at our flagship venues, and our suburbs are made richer by a range of interesting spaces used for creative production and expression. Almost 3,500 people work full-time in the sector.

The opening of our expanded Newcastle Art Gallery (NAG) - the most significant cultural infrastructure project in the city's history - has placed the city on equal footing with many state capitals. With an additional 1,600 square metres of exhibition space, locals and visitors are now able to see far more of our \$145 million collection.

Culture also thrives outside the city centre. Our community centres are increasingly used as cultural and event hubs, hosting everything from dance classes and theatre rehearsals to multicultural festivals.

The 'New Annual' festival, now entering its sixth year, sits proudly alongside other nationally significant events and festivals locally that showcase our city and its talent to a wide range of audiences. In 2025, over 50,000 people attended one of its events - 60% of which were free and family friendly.

However, our city is also experiencing significant growing pains. Throughout the co-design process that informs this plan, we heard that gentrification, population growth, and cost of living pressures are making it more challenging to live and create here.

Analysis of our venues and cultural infrastructure has shown a mismatch between what we have and what we need. We know from talking to the sector that many cultural workers need more flexible and affordable studios and rehearsal spaces. Smaller music venues remain under pressure from compliance costs and limited certainty, while some of our most distinctive heritage buildings sit under-utilised despite strong community appetite for activation.

We also know that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant long-term impacts on the sector. Research led by the University of Newcastle (UoN) in partnership with the Hunter Creative Alliance (HCA) showed 60 per cent of cultural practitioners reported income loss during the pandemic. Alarmingly, more than half of all respondents also experienced anxiety, stress or depression during that time. This is the long tail of Covid, and we know that these kinds of experiences don't just go away when a lockdown ends.

Importantly, the UoN/ HCA-led research also pointed to systemic issues that pre-dated the pandemic and remain relevant today: we understand there are perceptions that more could be done to advocate for the sector (69 per cent felt it was lacking), limited access to affordable rehearsal and exhibition spaces, and a sentiment that grant processes often exclude small or independent cultural practitioners. These findings align with what we heard through engagement for this plan: the pressing need for affordable, collaborative spaces, simpler and more inclusive funding streams, and stronger local champions.



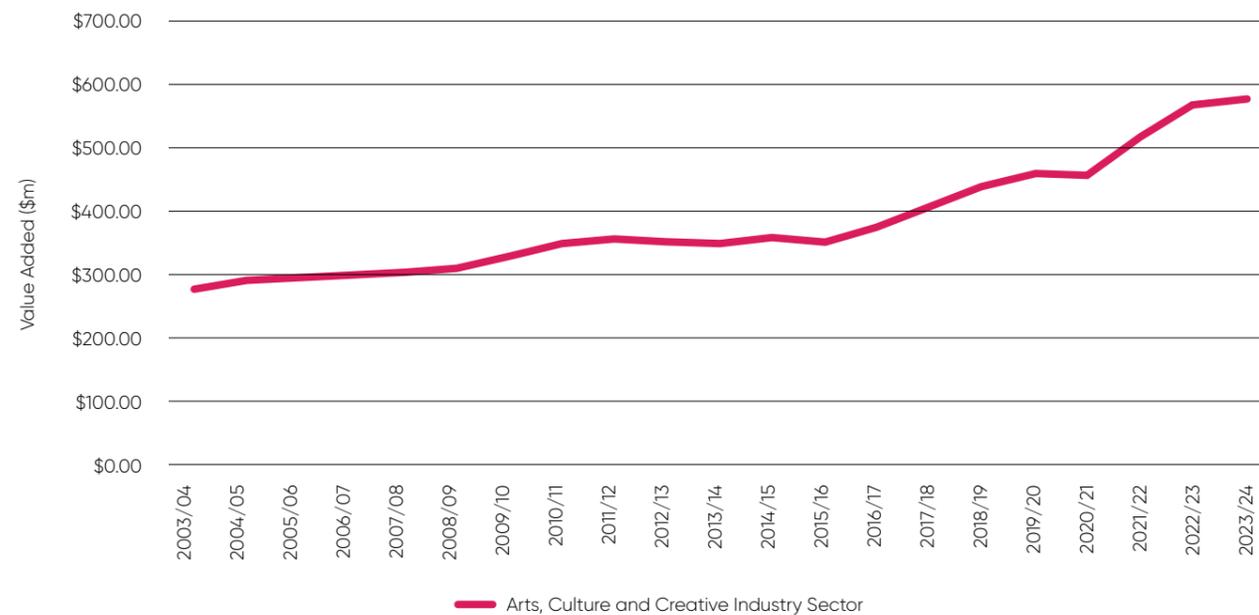
SOAK, New Annual 2025, photographer Ange Maloney

People and Creative Work

Newcastle's creative sector is growing at twice the rate of other industries. Between 2004 and 2024, the direct value added to the local economy by the arts, culture and creative industry sector doubled: increasing from \$276 million to \$565 million. Digital design and software are booming, while music and live performance still carry the city's soul. As of 2024, almost 3,500 people were employed full-time in the sector locally. This is forecast to grow by a further 1,200 jobs by 2036.²

However, our creative workforce is both highly skilled and under strain. More than 80% of creative workers hold post-school qualifications, yet incomes remain low and inconsistent, with many people juggling unrelated jobs to sustain their practice. Rising housing costs compound this pressure: where affordability was once a comparative advantage, rents now consume over 60% of median creative income. Without attention to affordability challenges, much of the vitality that animates our city risks being compromised or lost.

Figure 1 Value Added by Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector (\$m) - City of Newcastle, 2003-04 to 2023-24

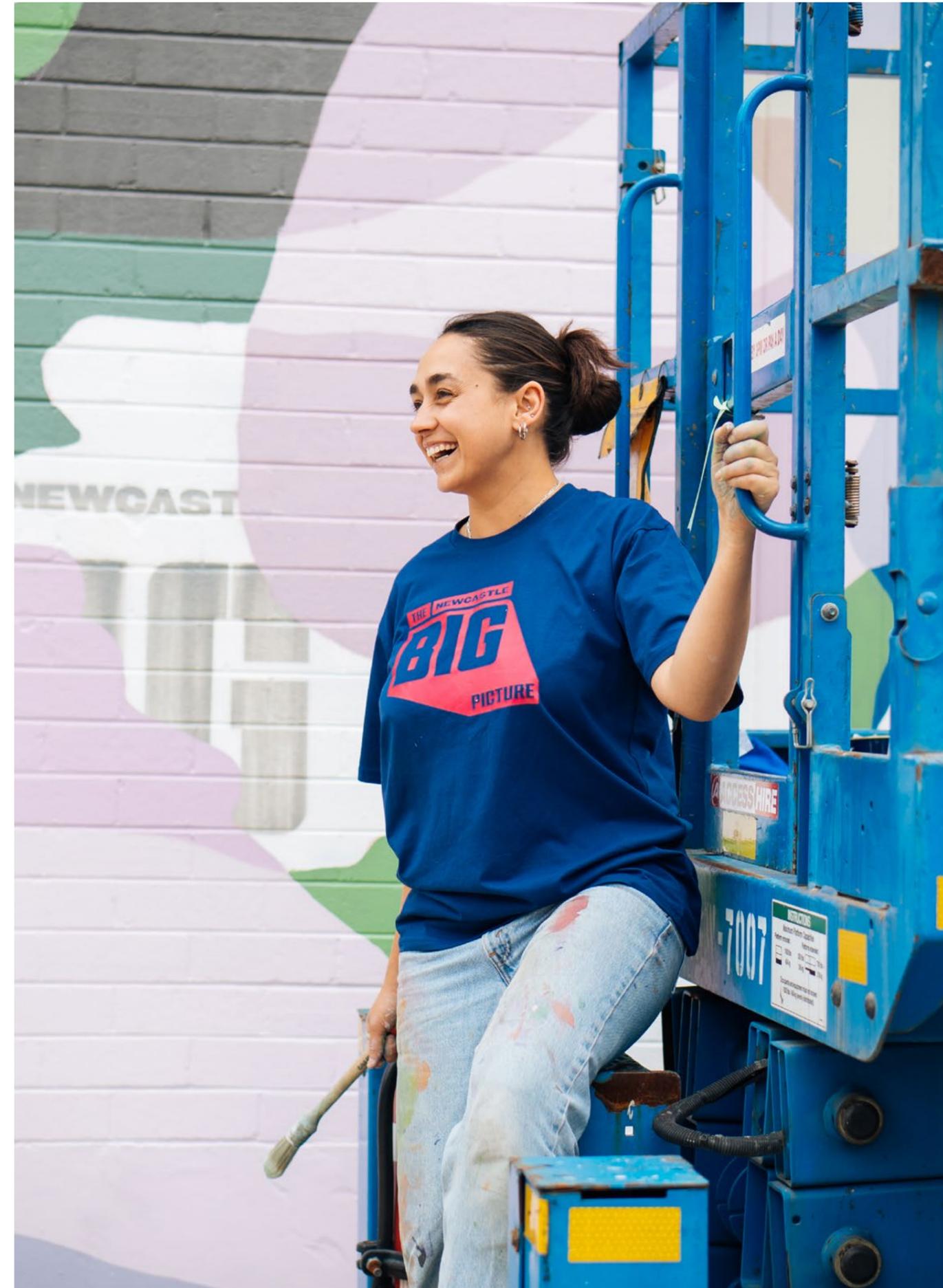


Source: Bull & Bear Economics (2025)22229

- **More than \$565 million dollars** is contributed annually to the local economy by culture and creativity. This is forecast to increase to \$749 million by 2036.³
- Almost 3,500 people employed full-time by the creative industries locally in 2024.
- Jobs are highly skilled - more than half of Newcastle's creative workers hold university degrees.
- But work is uneven: many digital and design workers are full-time and stable, while musicians, performers, and writers often juggle short contracts, casual shifts, or underemployment.

This story mirrors many cities our size: a professionalised digital sector on one side, and a precarious but passionate live performance sector on the other. Both need nurturing if we want Newcastle to remain a city where people can make a living through creativity and new ideas.

2. See Bull+Bear forecast in Appendix.
 3. See Appendix - Bull+Beac economic inputs (2025)



Jasmine Craciun, The Big Picture Fest 2024, photographer Lee Illfield



The Spaces We Share

Cultural infrastructure is more than just galleries, libraries, and theatres. It also includes studios, artist residencies, festivals, and fit-for-purpose public space.

When we talk about supporting and improving our 'cultural infrastructure', CN understands that this means operating at many different scales so we can support the full creative process. This could include:

- Unlocking otherwise vacant space for cultural production.
- Identifying CN-owned facilities that could be made fit-for-purpose for cultural organisations and creative expression.
- Advocating to State and Federal governments to align new housing growth with new community and cultural floorspace.

Other forms of 'cultural infrastructure' in our city include:

Community facilities

There are **33 community spaces** across our city (20 of which are CN-owned). This sounds like a lot, but we also know that:

- Some spaces, due to their age and condition, fall below the minimum size benchmark of 400m², limiting what they can host.
- Usage is patchy: *Maryland Neighbourhood Centre* thrives at close to 70% capacity, while others like the *Carrington Community Centre* are empty almost 90% of the time.
- Across the venues network, average utilisation is only 27.7%, indicating that most community spaces are under-used for a range of reasons.
- Staffing matters: the best-used centres are those with staff onsite, offering active programs and a welcoming face.

Our community halls and centres are heavily used for playgroups, martial arts, seniors' programs, dance classes, and social gatherings. These affordable, small-scale assets play a vital role in social equity by providing accessible, low-cost spaces where diverse groups can gather, connect, and participate in civic and cultural life. Although they are the quiet workhorses of Newcastle's social life and inclusion, this reliable demand also limits regular and one-off access to these spaces during the afterschool and evening peak periods.

Cultural facilities

Alongside these local spaces, Newcastle boasts **41 dedicated cultural facilities**, of which 8 are CN-owned. These include our flagship assets:

- **Civic Theatre (and Playhouse)**
- **Newcastle Art Gallery**
- **Newcastle Museum**
- **Fort Scratchley**
- **City Hall**
- **War Memorial Cultural Centre/City Library - Lovett Gallery**

Other facilities include the Newcastle Entertainment Centre (NSW Government), a range of facilities and spaces owned and operated by the University of Newcastle, 8 non-government owned theatres, and 14 co-working spaces.

Although not in the local government area, we also recognise that the **Murrook Cultural Centre** in Port Stephens local government area is an important part of this landscape.

Housing Affordability

Housing affordability is one of the most pressing challenges facing Newcastle. For many people, building a career locally is being challenged by the cost of keeping a roof over their head.

Economic analysis shows that during the 2010s, the gap between the median incomes of creative workers (nationally) and the median cost of rent in Newcastle narrowed considerably. This tells us that some of the economic conditions that made initiatives like 'Renew Newcastle' work are gone.

Simply put: 20 years ago, it was comparatively affordable to rent a place in Newcastle, and this made things like starting a festival, regularly playing in a band, running a poetry night, or opening an art gallery much easier. These economic conditions have changed considerably.

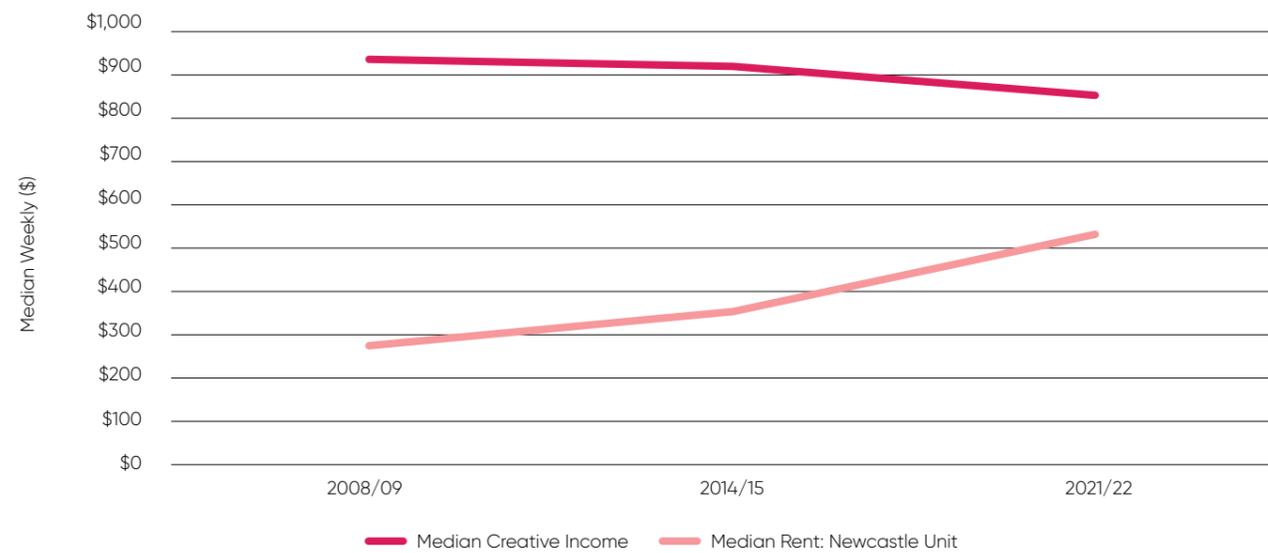
These pressures are not unique to Newcastle. In all major Australian cities, the combination of rising rents and stagnant incomes is pushing cultural workers to the margins. The effect is twofold: established cultural workers struggle to stay, and emerging talent either leaves for more affordable regions, moves overseas, or abandons the sector altogether.

For Newcastle, this is more than a housing issue: it's existential. Without secure and affordable housing, the city risks losing people who make enormous contributions to our identity, vibrancy and future growth.

To combat this, CN has created an Affordable Housing Contributions Scheme for securing affordable dwellings, land, or monetary contributions from new residential and mixed-use developments. This amendment to the Newcastle Local Environmental Plan 2012, finalised in 2025, aims to embed more affordable housing options within growth areas close to transport, jobs, and amenities.

We know more needs to be done, but this is one way CN is helping people who contribute to our city but can't afford market rent.

Figure 2: Median Weekly Creative Income and Median Weekly Rent for Two Bedroom Unit in CN, 2007-08, 2014-15 and 2021-22



Source: Throsby & Petetskaya (2024) & NSW Department of Communities and Justice (2025)

Everyday Participation

Culture in Newcastle isn't just about the big shows. It's also about everyday access - the after-school dance class at Wallsend Pioneer Hall, the art therapy program at Alice Ferguson Centre, the Friday night gig at the Lass O'Gowrie.

Programs across community and cultural spaces are wide-ranging:

- **Elmore Vale Community Centre** hosts everything from Aboriginal supported playgroups to Zumba and food co-ops.
- **Fletcher Community Centre** runs 600+ programs each year - from kids' STEM classes to women's gatherings.
- **Newcastle Museum** offers science workshops, sensory-friendly days, and school holiday programs that bring learning and play together.
- **Newcastle Libraries'** 'Memory Room' and 'Memory Kits' are specifically designed for people living with dementia (and similar conditions), and their families and support workers.

These examples show that when spaces are resourced and activated, they are buzzing. The challenge is aligning what we already have with the ideas and requirements of the cultural sector locally.



Gaps and Pressure Points

- **We know there is a shortage of floorspace across the city when it comes to cultural production.** If we combine the NSW Government's 5-year housing target for Newcastle with its ambitions for 20,000 new homes at Broadmeadow, State-led housing will create demand for almost 6,000 square metres of new community and cultural space.⁴

Put simply: the NSW Government's housing agenda in Newcastle will require the equivalent of a Bunnings warehouse dedicated to community and cultural purposes. This is one of the real-world responsibilities that comes with ambitious State Government targets and renewal.

- **Due to historical reasons, many of our flagship facilities are concentrated in the inner city.** People in Wallsend, Maryland, and Beresfield must travel further to see a Broadway show or major exhibition. At the same time, some fast-growing parts of the inner-city such as the West End and Wickham lack the sort of community facilities available in the suburbs.
- Although facilities like the Fletcher Community Centre are relatively new, **many City-owned halls and centres are ageing and in need of refurbishment.**



Gina Chick and Benjamin Law at the 2025 Newcastle Writers Festival opening night, photographer Max Mason-Hubers

⁴ Newcastle SIS Needs Assessment, page 94

In summary:

- Newcastle's creative workforce is growing but some industries are fragile.
- Our flagship cultural facilities are nationally significant, but we need more spaces for cultural production.
- Community centres and halls are vital but underpowered: too small, under-used, or not in the right location.
- Housing affordability is a real issue. CN will keep doing what it can to unlock new, affordable homes in good locations.
- Renewal, staffing, and smarter distribution of existing spaces is essential to maintaining growth.



Horizons by Sophi Odling, The Big Picture Fest 2024, photographer Lee Illfield

Creative Precincts

Newcastle's cultural life is shaped by a diverse network of precincts where creativity is produced, shared and experienced.

Each precinct has its own identity and strengths – some long established, others emerging – and together they provide the spaces, connections and opportunities that allow Newcastle's creative sector to thrive.

Civic Cultural Precinct

Our Cultural Precinct is anchored by landmark venues including the Civic Theatre (and Playhouse), City Hall, the Newcastle Library (and Lovett Gallery), the expanded Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle Museum, and the University of Newcastle's city campus.

Callaghan

The Wollotuka Institute at Callaghan is a nationally recognised centre for First Nations learning, leadership and cultural engagement, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices into the heart of the university. Alongside it, the University Gallery showcases contemporary art, student exhibitions and visiting practitioners.

Lambton

The long-running Newcastle Theatre Company anchors the Lambton precinct with high-quality live performance, while Flamingos (formerly Lizotte's) continues its legacy as one of Newcastle's most beloved live music stages. Across the road, Lambton Library supports lifelong learning, reading and cultural programming.

Midtown

Midtown is rapidly establishing itself as one of Newcastle's most dynamic creative and cultural quarters. Home to a TAFE NSW campus (including Newcastle Art School and Newcastle Film School), the precinct also includes a range of live music venues and performance spaces.

Clyde Street

The tenants of Clyde Street Arts, a 25,000 sqm collaborative makerspace, make up Newcastle's largest collective of artists, producers, creative manufacturers, and social innovators.

Mayfield

The Stag and Hunter Hotel has built a national reputation as one of the Hunter's most authentic live music venues, regularly hosting touring acts alongside local performers and sustaining a strong grassroots scene. It is flanked by the Mayfield Library and the Mayfield Mosque.

The Soap Factory

The Soap Factory in Mayfield East houses local artists working across sculpture, wood, ceramics, jewellery, photography and lighting. Its shared studios and collaborative ethos nurture both established and emerging talent.

Hamilton

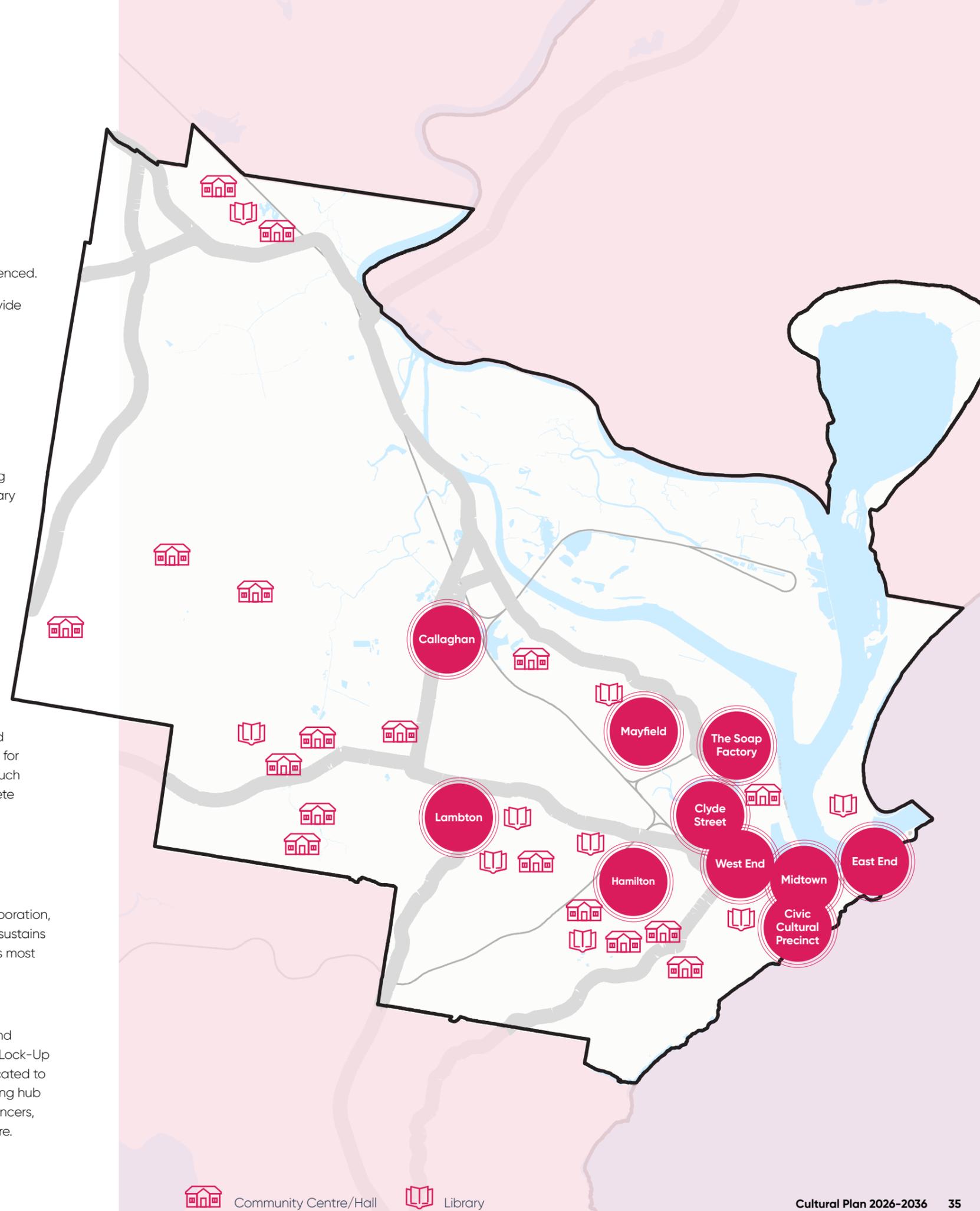
The much-loved Young People's Theatre continues to nurture local talent while the refurbished James Street Plaza offers a flexible outdoor stage for live music and performance. Community spaces such as Hamilton Library and the Scots Kirk Hall complete the picture.

West End

At its heart, the Catapult Dance Choreographic Hub provides a nationally recognised platform for contemporary dance and cross-disciplinary collaboration, while just down the road the Lass O'Gowrie Hotel sustains its long-standing reputation as one of Newcastle's most authentic live music institutions.

East End

The East End is home to a rich cluster of venues and heritage spaces. This includes institutions like The Lock-Up and Timeless Textiles, Australia's only gallery dedicated to fibre art. Nearby is The Roost Creative, a co-working hub that supports designers, media makers and freelancers, as well as the state heritage-listed Victoria Theatre.



CN as Enabler: Special Business Rates – Investing in Precincts and Creativity

In Newcastle, culture and commerce move together. Through the **Special Business Rates (SBR) program**, CN invests directly in both by funding projects that generate income for businesses and the cultural workers who deliver them. This is on top of the almost \$500,000 that CN also distributes through annual Community Support Grants.

Since 2019, **\$6.5 million in investment has flowed through the SBR program**, backing countless initiatives that benefit both trading areas and the creative sector. More than half of this amount has gone to 78 place activation and/or event projects that showcased local creativity.

For cultural workers, this annual investment often means **income, visibility, and freedom to experiment** in ways that drive foot traffic and visitation to trading areas. It supports creativity and collaboration at the street level – where culture meets public life and local business.

Some of the more recent standout projects enabled by SBR funding include:

- **Acquist by Flipside Dance** (\$100,000) brought free outdoor dance performances to Civic Park, blending First Nations storytelling, contemporary movement and live music.
- **The Big Picture Fest 2024** (\$160,000) turned Newcastle's walls into open-air galleries through large-scale murals and live painting sessions that drew thousands into the East End.
- **Whale Chorus – Twelfth Night** (\$80,000) transformed Pacific Park into a theatre under the stars, attracting 3,600 people across twelve evenings.
- **West Best Bloc Fest** (\$45,000) showcased more than 100 local musicians across eight venues in the Midtown precinct.
- **'Stories in Light'** (\$25,000) celebrated women's voices through photography, writing and public art in partnership with local creative collectives and institutions.
- **Chalk the Walk Newcastle** (\$50,000) invited artists and families to co-create a 3D art trail through the CBD, blending spectacle with participation.
- **Little Festival New Lambton** (\$25,000) filled suburban streets with installations and street art, creating paid work for ten artists and activating local business.
- **Wallsend Frights: Dance of the Dead** (\$26,250) reimagined Halloween as a creative, family-friendly celebration linking artists, schools and traders.

By funding creativity at street level, CN is showing how cultural support can also be sound economic strategy – one that sustains local business, empowers cultural workers and keeps the city's energy visible, welcoming and alive.



What You Told Us

Newcastle's cultural sector has spoken loud and clear. Through interviews and two co-design workshops, almost 70 unique voices from the sector described both the enormous potential and the real barriers they encounter living and creating in our city. Their voices highlight a city full of creativity and resilience, but also a sector that is too often hamstrung by red tape, affordability challenges, and a lack of fit-for-purpose spaces.

How we engaged



10 hours of stakeholder interviews



2 community engagement workshops
40 total participants



20 additional inputs
Includes inputs from members of the Community and Culture Strategic Advisory Committee.

June 2025

1. ENGAGEMENT PLANNING

Insights from the Community and Culture Advisory Committee shaped the engagement process. This included identifying voices who should be in the room, locations for co-design workshops, and early conversations about the kind of place Newcastle could be by 2036. This independent engagement was led by ThinkPlace X, external to CN.

July 2025

2. 1 ON 1 INTERVIEWS

As identified by the City of Newcastle and the Community and Culture Strategic Advisory Committee, 1 on 1 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, identifying areas of improvement and key themes to be explored in co-design sessions with the wider community.

July/August 2025

3. CO-DESIGN WORKSHOPS

Co-Design workshops were held in Ward 1 and Ward 3 to shape the 2036 vision and the plan that will support it. Stakeholders from across Newcastle's arts and culture ecosystem came together to prioritise challenges, brainstorm ideas and create a vision for the future. Participants highlighted opportunities not only for CN but for State and Federal Government, individuals and strategic partnerships.



An identity people can get behind

We heard that people want Newcastle to have the confidence to tell its own story. The city's grit, history, and coastal energy are seen as distinctive assets – qualities that set Newcastle apart from larger metropolitan centres. Participants were consistent: Newcastle should lean into its identity as a **city of storytellers**, where everyone has the freedom to bend and shape our shared narrative.

- *"We're a city of storytellers. Our identity should focus on that."*

A confident cultural identity would not only build local pride but also guide investment, partnerships, and marketing. Stakeholders called for a unifying story that CN, industry, and the community can all use to pull in the same direction.

Spaces to Create and Share

The strongest message was about space. We heard it directly: it's too hard to find affordable, suitable places to make and present work. Production spaces – like messy, flexible, creative studios – are scarce, and access to major venues can be limited or confusing. We also heard that many privately owned, underused spaces such as empty shops, car parks, and warehouses are wrapped in red tape, making activation costly and exhausting.

- *"Venues would be the number one challenge in town."*
- *"We need messy spaces. Spaces that allow us to produce work."*

Ideas from the sector included:

- Mapping and promoting available spaces with clear information on functionality and costs.
- Incentivising businesses and developers to open vacant spaces to creatives.
- A purpose-built multi-arts venue for both production and presentation.
- Dedicated youth cultural venues that can host rehearsal, performance, and experimentation.

The message is simple: without more accessible spaces, creativity risks being stifled.



Supporting Homegrown Talent

Newcastle's cultural vibrancy depends on its people – yet many feel undervalued, underpaid, and unsupported. Participants described a precarious existence: juggling day jobs to subsidise creative practice, relying on volunteer labour, and struggling to see long-term career pathways.

The sector suggested:

- New or improved grants to support emerging talent.
- Mentorship and professional development programs.
- Residencies within other sectors – embedding artists in corporate, sporting, or health settings.
- Commissioning funds for “works of scale” that showcase Newcastle's talent.

The goal is clear: make Newcastle a place where creatives can build sustainable, recognised careers rather than treating art as a side pursuit.

Diversity and Inclusion

Stakeholders emphasised that Newcastle's cultural identity must reflect its full diversity. First Nations stories are foundational, and their leadership must be visible in governance, programming, and public life. Likewise, multicultural communities, LGBTIQ+ people, younger people, and people with disability all need meaningful pathways to not only participate in culture but actively shape it. Ensuring accessibility in all its forms – physical, cultural, social, and economic – is essential to a city identity that is genuinely open, inclusive, and reflective of everyone who calls it home.

- *“Our First Nations people are our original storytellers and creators.”*
- *“We still have work to do to engage multicultural, queer, and diverse communities.”*

This is about more than representation on stage – it means embedding diversity in decision-making, funding, and space allocation.



Embedding Arts in Civic Life

The community called for culture to be woven into Newcastle's everyday life – into industry, tourism, education, and civic spaces. Many participants saw opportunities to partner with developers, health services, and universities to create new pathways and audiences. CN has a critical role here as connector and broker, making those partnerships possible.

CN as Enabler, Advocate and Champion

One of the clearest insights: the community wants to better understand CN's role in the sector. While financial and venue support is vital, creatives also want advocacy and local champions. They asked for support from dedicated cultural workers within CN, long-term partnerships, and clearer, more transparent models of support.

"It is worth dedicating funding, resources and internal expertise for arts and culture, with an understanding that it cuts across vibrancy, economy and community engagement."

In Summary:

- Newcastle needs a **shared cultural identity** rooted in grit, creativity, and storytelling.
- **Spaces are the number one challenge** – they need to be affordable, fit-for-purpose, and accessible.
- Homegrown talent is the heartbeat of culture but risks being squeezed out without support.
- Diversity must be **central**, not an afterthought.
- Culture should be embedded in everyday life through partnerships and cross-sector collaboration.
- CN is expected to be **enabler, advocate, and champion**.



Our Cultural Landscape 2036



Our Vision

Grounded in Country, powered by imagination, and open to the world, by 2036 Newcastle's cultural future will be fearless, funded, celebrated and sustainable. CN will lead with conviction - as an enabler, advocate, and champion.



Our Mission

CN will lead a city where creativity shapes decision about planning, investment and growth. Guided by First Nations leadership, we will ensure Newcastle's cultural life reflects the full diversity of our community and is accessible to all. Our role is to create the conditions where culture and creativity thrive - driving innovation, local jobs and civic pride across a vibrant, confident and connected city.



6,531 jobs
(4,709 direct and
1,822 indirect)



What Success Looks Like in 2036

A city of inclusion and diversity

- CN leadership ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their stories and enduring custodianship of the lands and waters remains the foundation of culture in this city.
- Multicultural, LGBTQ+, youth, people with disability, and other under-represented communities are visible and active in shaping the city's cultural life.

A city with a confident cultural identity

- Known nationally as a **city of storytellers and creators**.
- Newcastle's Aboriginal heritage, coastal lifestyle and creative grit form the backbone of its identity.

A city of spaces

- Flagship venues (Civic Theatre, Newcastle Museum, Newcastle Art Gallery) are complemented by new and refurbished rehearsal, production, and presentation spaces across the city that are affordable and accessible to all.
- There has been a significant, measurable increase in accessible and affordable community and cultural floorspace across the LGA.

A city of sustainable creative careers

- Creative jobs continue to outpace other industries, with 6% of the total workforce employed in the creative sector (up from 4.1% today).
- New affordable housing options make it easier to live and create in Newcastle. Many of these have been supported by CN's Affordable Housing Contribution Scheme.

A city where CN is recognised as a cultural leader

- CN is respected as an advocate and connector, not just a funder.
- Our 60+ cultural workers are empowered to connect with their communities, the sector, industry, and beyond. These enduring relationships keep CN connected to its communities.

A city of thriving audiences and participants

- Repeat visitation at CN and independently run venues remains strong, while broader participation grows - especially among younger audiences.
- Cultural participation contributes directly to wellbeing, social cohesion, and Newcastle's visitor economy.

How we'll get there

The following 4 Strategic pillars hold up our 2036 vision:



Pillar 1 – CN as Enabler, Advocate & Champion

This pillar is about CN supporting creativity as an enabler, advocate and champion. These clear roles give guidance to a range of roles we play. These include embedding arts and culture across strategies and projects, championing diverse creative voices, and unlocking new spaces and investment with state and federal partners.

The sector has been clear: people want clearer, easier pathways into CN – including how to work with and benefit from the expertise of CN's more than 60 dedicated, full-time cultural workers. These directors, curators, producers, programmers and designers hold deep knowledge, creative networks and the ability to accelerate ideas. Cultural practitioners are looking to CN to act as an enabler, advocate and champion who sustains momentum, builds confidence, and strengthens the city's creative ecosystem.

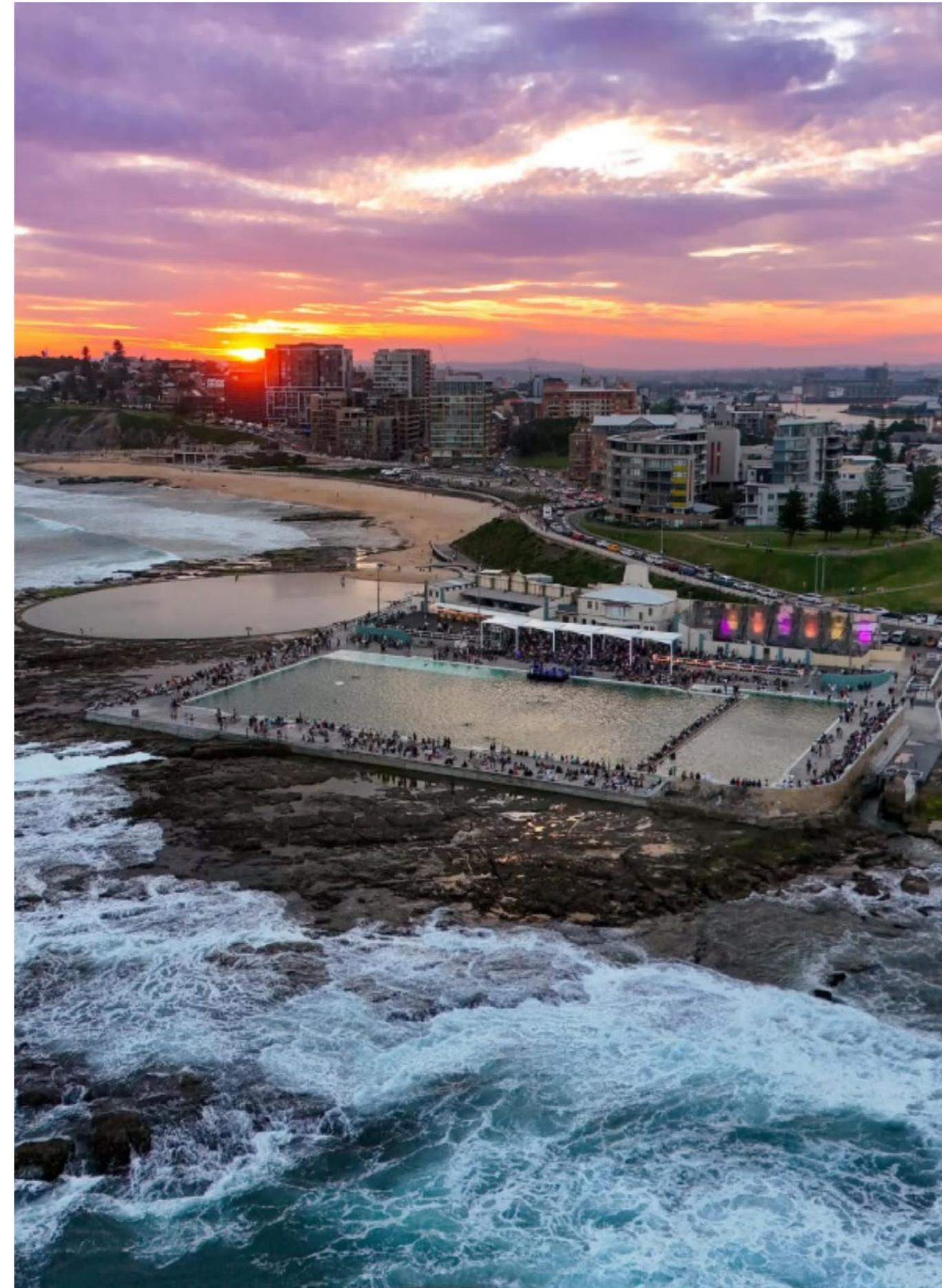
Engagement also reinforced that Newcastle thrives when CN is an active connector – building strong links with government, philanthropy, education, tourism and industry. Participants emphasised the value of CN opening doors, amplifying local voices, and brokering relationships that help ideas take flight. Over the decade, CN will simplify and strengthen pathways for cultural practitioners to engage with Council, ensuring they can access guidance, partnerships, facilities and opportunities when they need them.

Vision 2036

CN is recognised as an enabler, advocate and champion for the city's creative future. With the guidance of First Nations leaders, including the Guraki Aboriginal Standing Committee, and a deep respect for Country, CN partners with its communities to open doors, strengthen creative expression and ensure diverse stories and talents are supported to thrive.

We'll get there by:

- ✔ Investing in CN's cultural workforce by recruiting new roles to support the implementation of this plan, and by giving our 60 full-time directors, curators, digital leads, producers, and designers the tools to act as creative connectors and champions for local talent.
- ✔ Enabling clear access to CN support by creating a simple "front door" for guidance, partnerships, facilities, and funding information – and advocating internally across Council to embed culture in decision-making.
- ✔ Championing fair and transparent opportunity through clear partnership and commissioning pathways – using open calls, published criteria and proactive outreach to emerging and under-represented creatives.
- ✔ Enabling sector capability and resilience through professional development – including grant-writing support, philanthropy and fundraising workshops, digital skills training and forums linking creatives with producers, funders and industry partners.
- ✔ Championing First Nations leadership by expanding traineeships, mentoring and employment pathways across CN venues – and advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visibility across the city's cultural life.
- ✔ Enabling and championing First Nations creative practice across CN venues, festivals, and civic events.
- ✔ Championing diverse creative voices by developing targeted partnerships and pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people and other under-represented groups and advocating for equity in cultural participation and leadership.
- ✔ Advocating for cultural infrastructure by working with state and federal government to match housing targets with new cultural and community floorspace.
- ✔ Championing an open, listening culture through the Community & Culture Strategic Advisory Committee to ensure CN's role evolves with the needs of the sector.



CN as Champion: Grounding Newcastle Art Gallery in First Nations culture and Country

A culturally confident Newcastle begins by recognising that First Nations culture is foundational to this place – its past, present and future. As the city grows and evolves, amplifying First Nations creative excellence in our major cultural institutions is essential to ensuring our cultural identity remains authentic, connected to Country and reflective of who we are.

The expansion of Newcastle Art Gallery marks a generational cultural step forward. With more than 1,600m² of new public space and expanded capacity for major commissions and exhibitions, NAG is moving from respected regional institution to nationally significant cultural destination. Central to this evolution is a commitment to First Nations cultural centrality – a principle already evident through new commissions and site-specific works, including Renae Lamb's immersive installation, and a defined emphasis on connection to Country and community in the reimagined NAG experience.

City of Newcastle is championing this direction by:

- Supporting First Nations-led commissions and creative sovereignty as defining features of the expanded NAG.
- Ensuring interpretation, programming and civic storytelling reflect deep connection to Country, history and continuing culture.
- Integrating the NAG re-opening and precinct activation with cultural pathways and community engagement grounded in First Nations knowledge.

By foregrounding First Nations cultural centrality in NAG's transformation, CN is helping shape a cultural future where First Nations creative excellence, story and connection to Country sit at the heart of Newcastle's identity and invitation to the world.

A guided tour in the Valerie and John Ryan Gallery, Featuring (left to right): Destiny Deacon, G'ua G'ua and Erub/Mer peoples, Scared, Sad, Slow, and Travelling, 1998 – 2003, Newcastle Art Gallery, Australia, purchased 2006 © the estate of the artist.



Pillar 2 – Spaces & Places

This pillar is about fixing the basics while planning the future: aligning future growth with provision of cultural and community floorspace, investing in suburban facilities, unlocking more existing spaces, and laying the groundwork for new infrastructure that can serve the next generation.

Newcastle has nationally significant cultural venues, but many of our community halls and local centres are ageing, under-used, or too small. Suburban access is uneven, and many people struggle to find affordable space for cultural production.

The community have told us they want dedicated, fit-for-purpose cultural infrastructure. As one participant said: *“We need spaces where artists can create, perform and experiment – not just hire a hall for the night.”*

By 2036, the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure estimates Newcastle’s population will reach more than 198,000—around 20,000 new residents. But if the city meets its NSW Government target of 11,100 new homes by 2029, we will surpass that growth forecast seven years early. It is clear our city is growing faster than official forecasts. This scale of change will require substantial new cultural and community floorspace.

Vision 2036:

Cultural life has room to grow – anchored by nationally significant cultural venues, strengthened by vibrant fit-for-purpose suburban facilities, and sustained by affordable, flexible spaces for cultural production and community use.

We’ll get there by:

- ✓ Developing a clearer evidence base on the needs and types of space our communities require across our network of community halls and facilities.
- ✓ Enabling delivery of cultural and community infrastructure as part of urban renewal at Broadmeadow. Preliminary sites already identified include within Hamilton North, Broadmeadow Town Centre, and the Locomotive Heritage Precinct. This approach ensures new spaces are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted later.
- ✓ Continuing to collaborate with the NSW Government on the creation of a Creative Land Trust that can secure and expand affordable cultural floorspace in Newcastle.
- ✓ Continuing to make it easier and more cost-effective for cultural workers to deliver free-entry, street-based community events by building on resources such as off-the-shelf traffic management plans and the CN street-events guide.⁵
- ✓ Completing an LGA-wide floor space and employment survey. This will allow CN to measure how much floorspace creative industries have gained or lost during the life of this plan and beyond.

5. Plug and Play media release CN



New Move, Victoria Theatre

CN as Advocate: Exploring a Creative Land Trust

Access to secure, affordable space is one of the greatest challenges facing Newcastle's cultural sector. Rising land values and short-term leasing mean that individuals and organisations alike often operate with little stability. Without new approaches, our city risks losing vital creative activity to displacement and precarity.

Around the world, Creative Land Trusts (CLTs) have emerged as a tool to safeguard cultural floor space. A CLT model typically acquires, holds and manages land and buildings in perpetuity for creative use, providing long-term stability for cultural production. International examples exist in London and San Francisco, and closer to home the City of Sydney has commenced work on a CLT with the Committee for Sydney and the NSW Government.

As the NSW Government explores policy options to support CLTs, CN has taken a proactive approach by initiating discussions early and promoting Newcastle as a site for future CLT.

CN will:

- **Continue to monitor state policy development** and advocate for Newcastle's inclusion in future CLT activities.
- **Audit CN-owned and under-utilised property** to identify potential sites for transfer or long-term lease into a future CLT model.

By preparing now, Newcastle can position itself to take advantage of this model once enabling frameworks are confirmed. A Creative Land Trust, if implemented, would provide a powerful mechanism to expand affordable, long-term cultural space as the city grows.

Pillar 3 – Creative Workforce & Industry

This pillar is about making creative careers viable and sustainable. It means embedding affordability into every aspect of CN policy: advocating for more affordable housing, lowering cost barriers where we can, and continuing to ensure audiences can participate despite cost-of-living pressure.

Newcastle's creative workforce is growing faster than the rest of the economy. Digital and design jobs are thriving; however, some musicians, performers and artists survive on insecure contracts and part-time work.

Engagement with the sector continues to reinforce that affordability is a systemic barrier. Rising housing costs, venue hire fees, and the broader cost-of-living crisis are driving people in the creative industries out of the city or forcing them to leave the sector. As one participant put it: *"It's not the lack of talent or ideas that holds us back - it's the cost of simply staying here and making work."*

Vision 2036:

People in the creative industries can build lasting careers in Newcastle, underpinned by financial security and exciting professional opportunities.

Creativity is also a major competitive advantage for our city. Newcastle continues to be one of the best places outside a capital city to pursue a job in the creative industries.

We'll get there by:

- ✓ Providing ongoing funding for the delivery and growth of the New Annual festival over the life of this plan.
- ✓ Actively supporting the development of affordable housing within Newcastle through CN's Affordable Housing Contributions Scheme and by furthering efforts to reach CN's 15% affordable housing target across the LGA.
- ✓ Supporting the creation of more than 1,200 new jobs in the broader creative sector by embedding the creative economy as a core driver of Newcastle's economic diversification, local talent retention, and city vibrancy. In addition to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, CN will work with strategic partners to better understand industry needs and necessary support. This looks like CN collaborating with organisations such as Business Hunter, the University of Newcastle and the Hunter Creative Alliance to monitor trends and emerging opportunities.
- ✓ Facilitating a nationally significant industry forum that supports local cultural workers grow their professional networks and showcase their work.
- ✓ Reviewing our grants programs for culture and creativity, with a focus on supporting the sector at all stages of career development and embedding local talent and content into all major CN events, festivals and venues.

Figure 3 Proportion of Arts, Culture and Creative Sector Employment (Industry Definition) – City of Newcastle and Benchmarked Regions, 2011, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS Census Population and Housing (2011, 2016 and 2021)



Tim Winton and Rosemarie Milsom at Newcastle Writers Festival, photographer Liam Driver

CN as Champion: UpStage – Building Creative Careers Close to Home

Newcastle has no shortage of creative talent but turning into a sustainable career takes opportunity, space and support. The **UpStage program** at the Civic Theatre delivers exactly that, helping local performers and producers take the next step without leaving the city. This is in addition to other support offered to local organisations by the Civic Theatre.

Launched in 2024, UpStage was created to **remove cost barriers and professionalise pathways** for local cultural workers. Through a competitive EOI process, the program offers in-kind venue hire, marketing support and mentorship from Civic Theatre staff – giving creatives the chance to test new ideas, stage original work, and build professional experience in one of the nation's most respected venues.

To date, the program supported 8 local productions. Participants received access to the Playhouse, lighting and sound support, ticketing infrastructure, and marketing promotion through the Civic's networks – resources typically out of reach for small-scale artists.

The impact has been immediate: local practitioners report stronger audience development, new collaborations, and the confidence to scale their work. Some have gone on to tour regionally or attract external investment, while others have formed collectives that continue to employ local technicians, designers and performers.

By opening the Civic's doors to local talent, CN is **helping artists build sustainable careers without leaving the city** – turning one of our flagship venues into both a stage and a stepping stone for the region's creative workforce.

By the Numbers – UpStage



8 local productions supported
(4 in 2024 and 4 in 2025)

3,000 tickets sold (2024)

9 City of Newcastle Dramatic Association Award nominations (2024)



Pillar 4 – City Life & Vibrancy

This pillar is about supporting the cultural life that brings Newcastle's streets, venues and public spaces to life – day and night. It focuses on strengthening the ecosystems that sustain cultural workers, festivals and small venues, while making it easier for cultural experiences to happen spontaneously and safely in the public realm.

Culture is at the heart of Newcastle's night-time economy. As CN's *After Dark Strategy* recognises, the city's evenings are shaped by live music, events, live performances and spontaneous creative encounters that draw people out and bring streets to life. This pillar strengthens that vision by supporting both cultural creation and participation after dark.

This pillar also recognises that some barriers remain: complex regulations, rising costs, and limited late-night transport options restrict the diversity and reach of cultural life after hours. The NSW Government's *Vibrancy Reforms* recognise these challenges statewide, calling for simpler rules, flexible licensing, and shared responsibility for creating safe, welcoming places to gather.

Vision 2036:

Newcastle's cultural life thrives day and night. We are a city known for its creative energy and welcoming atmosphere, where culture animates venues and public spaces, and where people feel safe and connected across generations and neighbourhoods.

We'll get there by:

- ✓ Processing more DAs, more quickly through our innovative Accelerated Development Application pathway. Already one of the fastest in the state, CN will increase awareness of the scheme to get the doors open at more galleries, live performance spaces, and small venues.
- ✓ Considering the feasibility of one or more Special Entertainment Precincts to encourage live music and performance while balancing amenity, safety and land-use priorities through data-led community consultation.
- ✓ Partnering with the NSW Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner to pilot Vibrancy Reforms that support after-dark activation across key precincts.
- ✓ Expanding late-night cultural and creative programming to extend city life beyond traditional trading hours, diversify the nighttime offer, and improve perceptions around safety and amenity.
- ✓ Embedding safety, inclusion and accessibility in nighttime design by improving lighting, transport options and public-space management so Newcastle's after-dark cultural life and economy remains vibrant, diverse and welcoming for all.



CN as Enabler: Newcastle's Fast-Track DA for a Vibrant Cultural City

For cultural workers and small venues, even the best ideas can stall in paperwork. Recognising this, City of Newcastle introduced an **Accelerated Development Application (DA) pathway** – a faster route for low-risk projects such as fit-outs, signage and small refurbishments.

The impact has been remarkable. Newcastle is now one of the **fastest councils in NSW** for assessing DAs. In 2024–25 it ranked **#5 in the state** for total DAs determined – and was the **fastest of the top ten councils**. In 2025, the average DA was processed in just **54 days**, helping projects get off the ground sooner and bringing investment, housing and cultural activity to life more quickly.

The results are evident across the city: faster approvals mean more galleries, live-performance venues and creative pop-ups coming to life. This momentum is translating into real outcomes – Newcastle's night-time economy, within which many cultural workers play a significant role, now supports **more than 14,000 jobs** and contributes over **\$2.1 billion** in annual turnover, a **17 percent rise in employment since 2018** that shows how cutting red tape directly fuels creativity, participation and growth.

By reducing barriers and backing cultural life, City of Newcastle is proving that good governance can be a creative act – freeing space, energy and opportunity for a city alive with culture.

By the Numbers



54 days – average DA processing time in 2025

#5 in NSW – for total DAs determined (and fastest of the top 10 councils)

+17% – rise in cultural employment since 2018

\$2.1 billion – annual turnover in Newcastle's cultural and night-time economy

(Sources: City of Newcastle, Accelerated Development Applications Program (2025); NSW Productivity Commission, Review of Regulatory Barriers Impeding a Vibrant 24-Hour Economy (2025); Property Council of Australia, Newcastle's Night-Time Economy in the Productivity Spotlight (2025).)



Action Plan

Explanation of Council Function:

- **Enabler:** Council's role in providing the resources, tools, and structures to facilitate actions and initiatives.
- **Advocate:** Council's role in advocating for funding from other levels of government and supporting the integration of cultural priorities within the broader policy and decision-making framework.
- **Champion:** Council's role in leading initiatives, building visibility, and driving cultural change.

Explanation of Timeframe:

- **Short:** 2026-2028
- **Medium:** 2026-2031
- **Long:** 2026-2036

Pillar 1: CN as Enabler, Advocate, & Champion

ACTION	TIMEFRAME	COUNCIL FUNCTION
Investing in CN's cultural workforce by recruiting new roles to support the implementation of this plan, and by giving our 60 full-time directors, curators, digital leads, producers, and designers the tools to act as creative connectors and champions for local talent.	Short	Enabler
Enabling clear access to CN support by creating a simple "front door" for guidance, partnerships, facilities, and funding information - and advocating internally across Council to embed culture in decision-making.	Medium	Enabler/ Advocate
Championing fair and transparent opportunity through clear partnership and commissioning pathways - using open calls, published criteria and proactive outreach to emerging and under-represented creatives.	Medium	Champion
Enabling sector capability and resilience through professional development - including grant-writing support, philanthropy and fundraising workshops, digital skills training and forums linking creatives with producers, funders and industry partners.	Long	Enabler
Championing First Nations leadership by expanding traineeships, mentoring and employment pathways across CN venues - and advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visibility across the city's cultural life.	Medium	Champion/ Advocate
Enabling and championing First Nations creative practice across CN venues, festivals, and civic events.	Medium	Enabler/Champion
Championing diverse creative voices by developing targeted partnerships and pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people and other under-represented groups and advocating for equity in cultural participation and leadership.	Medium	Champion/ Advocate
Advocating for cultural infrastructure by working with state and federal government to match housing targets with new cultural and community floorspace.	Long	Advocate
Championing an open, listening culture through the Community & Culture Strategic Advisory Committee to ensure CN's role evolves with the needs of the sector.	Short	Champion

Pillar 2: Spaces & Places

ACTION	TIMEFRAME	COUNCIL FUNCTION
Developing a clearer evidence base on the needs and types of space our communities require across our network of community halls and facilities.	Medium	Enabler
Enabling delivery of cultural and community infrastructure as part of urban renewal at Broadmeadow. Preliminary sites already identified include within Hamilton North, Broadmeadow Town Centre, and the Locomotive Heritage Precinct. This approach ensures new spaces are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted later.	Long	Enabler
Continuing to collaborate with the NSW Government on the creation of a Creative Land Trust that can secure and expand affordable cultural floorspace in Newcastle.	Long	Advocate
Continuing to make it easier and more cost-effective for cultural workers to deliver free-entry, street-based community events by building on resources such as off-the-shelf traffic management plans and the CN street-events guide.	Short	Enabler
Completing an LGA-wide floor space and employment survey. This will allow CN to measure how much floorspace creative industries have gained or lost during the life of this plan and beyond.	Medium	Enabler



West End Bloc Fest 2025



Pillar 3: Creative Workforce & Industry

ACTION	TIMEFRAME	COUNCIL FUNCTION
Providing ongoing funding for the delivery and growth of the New Annual festival over the life of this plan.	Short	Enabler/Advocate
Actively supporting the development of affordable housing within Newcastle through CN's Affordable Housing Contributions Scheme and by furthering efforts to reach CN's 15% affordable housing target across the LGA.	Medium	Enabler/Advocate
Supporting the creation of more than 1,200 new jobs in the broader creative sector by embedding the creative economy as a core driver of Newcastle's economic diversification, local talent retention, and city vibrancy. In addition to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, CN will work with strategic partners to better understand industry needs and necessary support. This looks like CN collaborating with organisations such as Business Hunter, the University of Newcastle and the Hunter Creative Alliance to monitor trends and emerging opportunities.	Long	Enabler/Advocate/Champion
Facilitating a nationally significant industry forum that supports local cultural workers grow their professional networks and showcase their work.	Medium	Enabler/Advocate
Reviewing our grants programs for culture and creativity, with a focus on supporting the sector at all stages of career development and embedding local talent and content into all major CN events, festivals and venues.	Medium	Enabler/Advocate

Pillar 4: City Life & Vibrancy

ACTION	TIMEFRAME	COUNCIL FUNCTION
Processing more DAs, more quickly through our innovative Accelerated Development Application pathway. Already one of the fastest in the state, CN will increase awareness of the scheme to get the doors opens at more galleries, live performance spaces, and small venues.	Short	Enabler
Considering the feasibility of Special Entertainment Precincts to encourage live music and performance while balancing amenity, safety and land-use priorities through data-led community consultation.	Medium	Enabler/Advocate/Champion
Partnering with the NSW Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner to pilot Vibrancy Reforms that support after-dark activation across key precincts.	Medium	Enabler/ Advocate/Champion
Expanding late-night cultural and creative programming to extend city life beyond traditional trading hours, diversify the nighttime offer, and improve perceptions around safety and amenity.	Long	Enabler/ Advocate/Champion
Embedding safety, inclusion and accessibility in nighttime design by improving lighting, transport options and public-space management so Newcastle's after-dark cultural life and economy remains vibrant, diverse and welcoming for all.	Long	Enabler/Champion

Appendix

Size of Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector, City of Newcastle and Newcastle Metro Region, 2011, 2016 and 2021

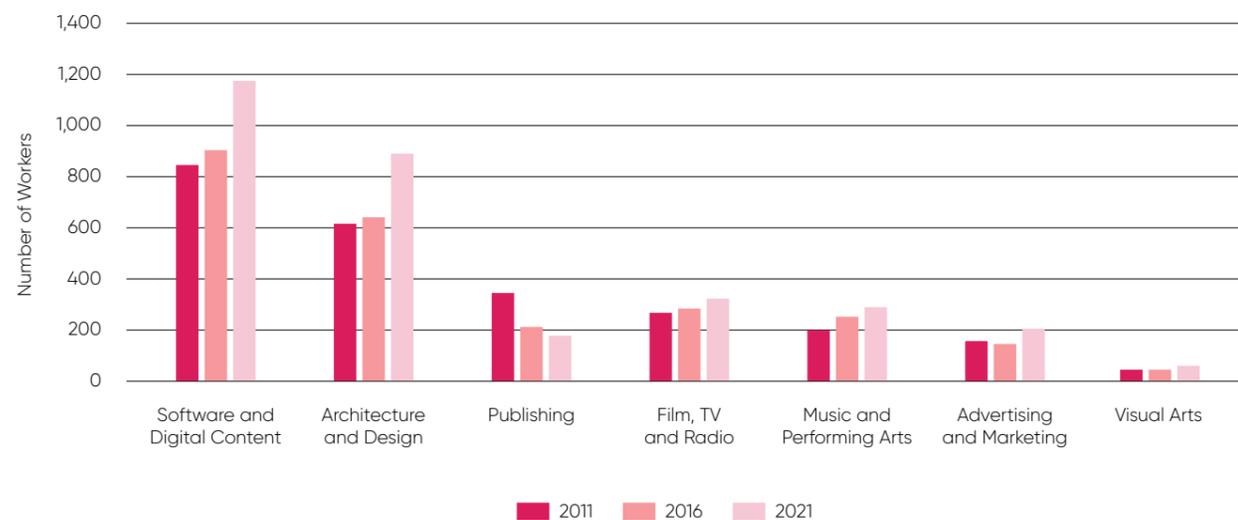
Industry Definition	CITY OF NEWCASTLE			NEWCASTLE METRO REGION			% OF WORKERS IN CITY OF NEWCASTLE		
	2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021	2011	2016	2021
Advertising and Marketing	158	144	205	238	273	347	66.4%	52.7%	59.1%
Architecture and Design	615	644	892	1,096	1,210	1,620	56.1%	53.2%	55.1%
Software and Digital Content	847	909	1,179	1,380	1,645	2,351	61.4%	55.3%	50.1%
Film, TV and Radio	271	286	327	373	387	419	72.7%	73.9%	78.0%
Music and Performing Arts	201	257	292	405	459	559	49.6%	56.0%	52.2%
Publishing	346	216	179	547	365	303	63.3%	59.2%	59.1%
Visual Arts	46	45	60	103	104	115	44.7%	43.3%	52.2%
Creative Services	1,620	1,697	2,276	2,714	3,128	4,318	59.7%	54.3%	52.7%
Cultural Production	864	804	858	1,428	1,315	1,396	60.5%	61.1%	61.5%
Total Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector	2,484	2,501	3,134	4,142	4,443	5,714	60.0%	56.3%	54.8%

Average Hours Worked Per Week by Creative Sector of Employment - City of Newcastle, 2011, 2016 and 2021

Industry Definition	2011	2016	2021
Advertising and Marketing	37.5	37.5	34.3
Architecture and Design	34.9	35.2	33.8
Software and Digital Content	39.5	38.7	36.7
Film, TV and Radio	37.5	36.4	34.0
Music and Performing Arts	24.5	27.4	25.6
Publishing	33.5	36.3	33.1
Visual Arts	40.7	15.9	33.1
Creative Services	37.6	37.3	35.4
Cultural Production	32.8	32.9	30.7
Total Arts, Culture and Creative Sectors	36.2	36.1	34.3
Total Non-Arts, Culture and Creative Sectors	34.2	33.4	32.0
Total Employment	34.3	33.4	32.1

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing (2011, 2016 and 2021)

Number of Workers in Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector (Industry Definition) - City of Newcastle, 2011, 2016 and 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing (2011, 2016 and 2021)



Winterheat 2025

Estimated Economic Contribution of Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector

This section estimates the contribution of employment in the arts, culture and creative industry sector to the City of Newcastle economy. This analysis uses value added by industry data published by Informed Decisions at the two-digit ANZSIC level to illustrate how the economic contribution of the arts, culture and creative industry sector has shifted over the past twenty years.

The table below details the concordance of the relevant two-digit ANZSIC to each creative sector.

Creative Sector to Two Digit ANZSIC Concordance

CREATIVE SECTOR	RELEVANT ANZSIC TWO DIGIT SECTORS
Advertising and Marketing	Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (Except Computer System Design and Related Services)
Architecture and Design	Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (Except Computer System Design and Related Services)
Software and Digital Content	Publishing (Except Internet and Music Publishing) Internet Publishing and Broadcasting Internet Service Providers, Web Search Portals and Data Processing Services Computer System Design and Related Services
Film, TV and Radio	Motion Picture and Sound Recording Activities Broadcasting (except Internet)
Music and Performing Arts	Motion Picture and Sound Recording Activities Creative and Performing Arts Activities
Publishing	Printing (including the Reproduction of Recorded Mail) Publishing (Except Internet and Music Publishing) Library and Other Information Services
Visual Arts	Furniture and Other Manufacturing Heritage Activities

Value Added by Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector (\$m) – City of Newcastle, 2003–04 to 2023–24



Source: Informed Decisions (2025) and Bull & Bear Economics (2025)

Economic Contribution Growth Scenario – City of Newcastle Arts, Culture and Creative Industry Sector, 2024 to 2036

	2024	2026	2031	2036
Output (\$m)				
Direct	\$1,166.10	\$1,214.25	\$1,352.84	\$1,513.50
Indirect	\$458.69	\$476.97	\$529.94	\$591.81
Total	\$1,624.79	\$1,691.23	\$1,882.78	\$2,105.31
Household Income (\$m)				
Direct	\$398.43	\$417.30	\$469.77	\$530.18
Indirect	\$144.35	\$150.13	\$166.86	\$186.43
Total	\$542.78	\$567.43	\$636.63	\$716.61
Employment (FTEs)				
Direct	3,472	3,653	4,150	4,709
Indirect	1,412	1,469	1,632	1,822
Total	4,884	5,122	5,782	6,531
Value Added (\$m)				
Direct	\$564.76	\$591.14	\$664.79	\$749.17
Indirect	\$216.32	\$225.07	\$250.29	\$279.79
Total	\$781.08	\$816.21	\$915.09	\$1,028.96

Source: Bull & Bear Economics (2025)

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