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Newcastle Now

Cafe culture Newcastle, Newcastle 2018. (Source: City of Newcastle)

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Café culture, Newcastle, 2018. (Source: City of Newcastle)

Newcastle's transformation following the closure of BHP has seen a shift in the city's economy and the shape of its urban fabric. Fundamental to the changes are investment in new infrastructure, housing and adaptive re-use of heritage assets. Newcastle's culturally and linguistically diverse communities, though small in number, have also contributed to the economic labour history and the social infrastructure of the city.

Renewing Newcastle

People who ought to know better still think of this city as it was thought of years ago. They read of new enterprises and new ventures and also of visions of a many-sided industrial future, but are not moved away from the past: they still think the city's development is limited by the coal trade.³²³

The shutdown of Newcastle's coalmines, its factories and its dockyards in the 1990s was a blow to the city. The closure came hot on the heels of two decades of decline, the Newcastle Earthquake, population decline and rising unemployment. The city's built and social fabric decayed as people and jobs moved to the suburbs or left Newcastle altogether. Many heritage buildings fell into disrepair while other industrial buildings emptied.

The blow was softened somewhat by the city's transition from the secondary to tertiary sector and initiatives developed by BHP in conjunction with the unions, community and government to transition Newcastle to a post-BHP landscape.³²⁴ BHP invested \$7 million into Personal Pathways (1.5 % of the payroll at the steelworks), an extensive program of assistance, retraining and job placement for employees facing retrenchment. A raft of initiatives was also implemented at all levels of government to transition Newcastle to new industries and future economic development beyond the steel, coal and shipbuilding industries.



Queens Wharf, February 1989, photographed by Percival William Sternbeck. (Source: Coalfields Local History Association, UON Hunter Living Histories, Sternbeck_Bk23_0289_B_000)

Foreshore Park was formerly the site of the Newcastle East Marshalling Yard (largely disused State Rail Authority land), the Zaara Street Power Station (demolished in 1975) and two bond stores. The park's layout was the result of a design competition in the 1980s to convert the area into an open space parkland. Work began on the redevelopment of the site in 1985 and it was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1988 to mark Australia's Bicentenary.

Another major development was the revitalisation of Honeysuckle following the establishment of the Honeysuckle Development Corporation in 1992 to redevelop surplus government railway and port-related land along 4 kilometres of harbourfront adjacent to Newcastle's central business district.³²⁵

The high-profile campaign Renew Newcastle was initiated by Marcus Westbury in 2008, as a DIY urban renewal scheme to take over 30 empty buildings in the city for creative outlets such as galleries, start-ups and bespoke boutiques. Westbury founded Renew Australia in 2013 following the success of Renew Newcastle, becoming a 'national social enterprise designed to catalyse community renewal, economic development, the arts and creative industries across Australia'.³²⁶



Honeysuckle before redevelopment. (Source: Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation, *Honeysuckle Celebrating 20 years*)

Momentum was regained later in the decade with the Revitalise Newcastle program by Transport for NSW, Roads and Maritime Services, the NSW Department of Planning and Environment, NSW Treasury, the Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation and Infrastructure NSW. The resulting \$650 million investment into the revitalisation of the city centre has included transport infrastructure, commercial development, homes and public spaces. The program has



Honeysuckle before redevelopment. (Source: Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation, *Honeysuckle Celebrating 20 years*)

not been without controversy in the community including the truncation of the heavy rail line at Wickham. The NSW Government's objective was to connect the city to the waterfront, and provide new public space along with commercial, retail and residential development. Although there were critics of this project who saw the redevelopment as funded by public money but operated by private interests, with the touted benefits of public space increasingly infringed upon by commercial and private residential development,³²⁷ the passage of time has proven those critics wrong.

The urban renewal of the Honeysuckle precinct has successfully integrated employment, residential, tourism, recreation and public domain. It includes a revitalised Newcastle Station precinct, providing direct, unbroken connection between Hunter Street and the waterfront, a well-used and loved foreshore park and an extensive promenade along the foreshore from Nobbys Head to Newcastle West. As recently as April 2024 the Cottage Creek southeast section of the public domain was completed. The Honeysuckle Redevelopment is substantially complete.

The Broadmeadow Regionally Significant Growth Area is the latest locality set for significant development and revitalisation. The 'Broadmeadow Place Strategy' was prepared by CN in partnership with the NSW Government and adopted by Council in March 2025. This document will guide redevelopment of 313ha of land in Broadmeadow and Hamilton North over the next 30 years, anticipating creation of up to 15,000 jobs and 20,000 new homes for an estimated 40,000 residents. One of the first actions under this plan was initiated

by the NSW Government rezoning of four government-owned sites in Broadmeadow's growth area.

The transformation of iconic industrial and heritage buildings has played a key part in the revitalisation of the city. The state heritage listed Newcastle Post Office, which had fallen into disrepair, was bought in 2017 for \$3.3 million by hotel magnate Jerry Schwartz. He proposed to turn the property into a conference centre and bar. Successful arts initiatives have revitalised other heritage places such as the adaptive re-use of the Newcastle Police Station. In 1988 it became the Hunter Heritage Centre and is now the Lock-Up, a multidisciplinary experimental arts space.

The urban structure of Newcastle was formerly dictated by the industrial and mining economy and characterised by a pedestrian oriented series of suburbs based around workplaces and retail high streets. New settlements developed further out as the railway network expanded. Then by the 1970s, mirroring increased car dependency, urban sprawl had become the byproduct of low-density suburban expansion. In 2003, suburbs like Maryland had an average of 26.4 people per hectare, around half the density of Cooks Hill.³²⁸ By 1989 the destruction caused by the earthquake had led to infill and new development in the Newcastle CBD and surrounding suburbs.

Today urban renewal corridors, housing release areas and catalyst areas are identified within CN and NSW Government strategies as a means of targeting areas for housing provision. Areas targeted for urban renewal in the *Newcastle Local Environmental Plan 2012* and *Newcastle Development Control Plan 2023* include



The Signal Box after 2019 after heritage restoration. (Source: Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation)

Islington, Mayfield-Tighes Hill, Hamilton, Broadmeadow and Adamstown.

On 7 December 2023, the NSW Government announced the proposed Transport Oriented Development (TOD) Program as well as Low and Mid-Rise Housing Policy planning reforms. The changes aim to increase housing capacity close to transport, jobs and existing infrastructure to address the state's housing crisis. The TOD program, which proposes new planning controls, will allow more homes within 400m of metro and suburban railway stations including the Newcastle Interchange.

Increased pressure from housing shortages and programs such as the TOD prompted a review in 2024 of Newcastle's heritage conservation areas (HCAs) including Newcastle City Centre, Newcastle East, The Hill and Cooks Hill. The buildings, streets and precincts of these four Newcastle HCAs have undergone significant change as part of economic revitalisation. Streetscapes have come under pressure as older buildings have been replaced and vacant sites infilled with new higher-density, mixed use development. The review found residents within the HCAs generally want to maintain the special character of these areas. The community identified several distinct character areas, particularly in the Newcastle City Centre HCA, for protection and conservation.

In June 2024, a planning proposal was made to create a ninth HCA: that of Cameron's Hill, a 13.73-hectare parcel of land known for its Victorian and Federation-era homes that takes in areas of Hamilton and Broadmeadow. The proposal was received by the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure in August 2024 with public exhibition in September 2024. Council adopted the planning proposal in February 2025, a decision by the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces to gazette amendments to create the new HCA is expected by mid-2025.

The changing faces of Newcastle

Compared to the rest of New South Wales's population, the cultural make-up of Newcastle is less diverse. Residents are more likely to have been born in Australia (86.1% for Newcastle vs 72.4% for New South Wales overall) and the majority speak only English at home (90% vs 74.9%).³²⁹ Nonetheless migrant communities have made their mark on Newcastle.

The Australian goldrushes brought increased Greek migration to New South Wales during the 1850s. The presence of Greek people in Newcastle can be dated from the 1880s. Greek run oyster saloons and fruit shops clustered around Queens Wharf, the former Newcastle Railway Station, and along Hunter and Blane streets. Chain migration from Ithaca saw many families congregate in Newcastle. By the early twentieth century there were at least 30 Greek owned and operated businesses in Newcastle associated with the food industry.³³⁰

During World War I, fears that Greece would side with Germany triggered anti-Greek rioting and attacks on three businesses including John Zervos' shop in Hunter Street. However, this did not deter the community nor prevent a rising number of Greek milk bars from opening. The Art Deco interiors and 'exotic' American style meals came into their own during World War II when American servicemen were assigned leave in Newcastle.

The draw to Newcastle was also based on further chain migration from Macedonia. Many Macedonian families were sponsored by relatives in the late 1920s and early 1930s, with the population reaching 600 in Newcastle during the 1940s.³³¹ Suburbs such as Mayfield, Tighes Hill, Islington and Hamilton became home to Macedonian families working at BHP, Rylands Bros, and Stewarts & Lloyds. Most of these jobs were unskilled and many people worked with the intention of saving money for their own home, sponsor family members to Australia or to return home.. Kiril Murgev was born in Macedonia and remembers his father's experience of working at BHP:

I can remember we lived in Mayfield East, most of the time he walked to BHP to work, and then he would come home very tired. In the evening after day shift, working in the open hearth, swinging a sledgehammer ... 14kg ... and he would come home and show me, he couldn't even close his fist...³³²

Between 1947 and 1961, many migrants from Eastern Europe including Croatia and Macedonia settled in Australia's industrial areas including Newcastle. One of the largest postwar immigrant camps in Australia was established at Greta, 40km northwest of Newcastle. The first cohort of displaced persons to be settled in Australia outside of a capital city arrived at Newcastle Harbour on 19 August 1949 aboard the *Fairsea*, and 1,096 migrants were transported to the Greta Migrant Camp via train. Just under a month later, 100 migrants from the camp were recruited to work at BHP. This was not without complaint from locals who feared that migrant employment was 'to the detriment of Australian workers.'³³³

Italian families such as the De Martins were influential in Newcastle's construction economy, establishing one of the area's longest-running concreting companies (in Mayfield). During the 1950s and '60s, the De Martin Brothers business employed hundreds of Italian migrants on construction projects, including suburban petrol stations for BHP.³³⁴ The brothers created a decorative terrazzo for the Royal Newcastle Hospital and the State Library of NSW, before starting their own company in Mayfield making granite benchtops.

Migrant communities influenced the built form of Newcastle and shaped cultural, sporting and religious facilities. In 1969, Newcastle's first Greek Orthodox church, St Demetrios, was founded in Hamilton East, followed by the Holy Apostles Church in Hamilton. The Croatian Wickham Sports Club supported the establishment of the Newcastle Croatia Football Club in 1984.



John Black Oyster Saloon, 56 Hunter Street, Newcastle, NSW, 1891. (Source: Ralph Snowball Photographic Archive, UON Hunter Living Histories, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/uon/3964533511/>)



California Café, c1940s–1950s. (Source: Sikiotis, reproduced by Spero Davias on <https://www.soundworld.com.au/cafe/>)



Ithacan picnic, Newcastle, 1940s. (Source: J Comino, from 'In Their Own Image: Greek Australians' National Project Archives)

In the early twenty-first century, refugee communities have become part of the life of Newcastle. The Hunter African Communities Council had helped resettle people from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Rwanda. Short-term accommodation has become a feature of several Newcastle suburbs such as North Lambton. Other refugees have secured long-term accommodation in Broadmeadow, Carrington, Islington, Jesmond, Mayfield, Shortland and Wallsend.³³⁵

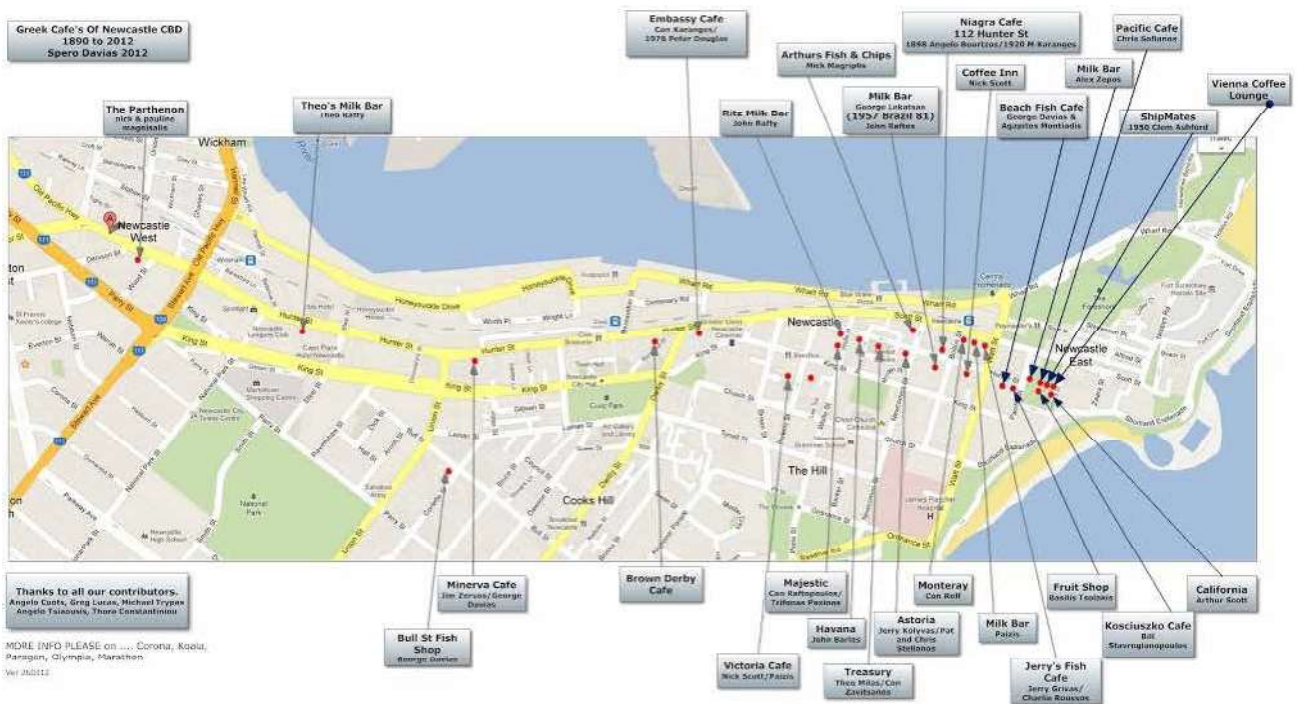
Internal migration within New South Wales to Newcastle remains the main source of population growth. Since COVID-19, Newcastle has experienced another shift in population as people are increasingly leaving Sydney to find affordable housing, in turn driving up house prices in Newcastle and elsewhere. Most migration comes from the Central Coast, Mid North Coast, Singleton, Port



John Zervos, Dionisios Trohliis (Trouliias) and Peter Zervos, Newcastle, NSW, late 1910s. (Source: Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, *Novocastrian Hellenes: an insight into Newcastle's Greek settlement*)

Macquarie-Hastings and Sydney's Northern Beaches. The younger population moves in a push and pull pattern. The age group moving into Newcastle most frequently is that of 18–24 year olds as they arrive from regional areas seeking tertiary education and employment opportunities. But the most common age group leaving Newcastle is the next bracket up, between 25 and 34, who tend to move back to neighbouring Lake Macquarie, Maitland and Cessnock LGAs seeking affordable housing and employment.³³⁶

Newcastle's population is projected to grow by 41,000 between 2016 and 2041 (from 160,900 to 202,050 people). New households are expected to increase by 18,250 in the same period. This is partly due to population increase but also due to changing household formation rates that are made up of more retirees, young people living alone or two-person households.³³⁷ The outskirts of Newcastle around Fletcher, Minmi and Maryland draw young families who tend to leave the inner-city areas dominated by younger adults. These fringe suburbs have been identified as significant greenfield opportunities



Map of some of the cafes in Newcastle's inner city, updated March 2010. (Source: Spero Davias on <https://www.soundworld.com.au/cafe/>)

alongside Elmore Vale and Wallsend. Inner-city areas such as Newcastle, Newcastle West, Mayfield, Adamstown, New Lambton, Broadmeadow, Maryville, Wickham and Islington are also expected to provide new dwelling opportunities.

Newcastle 2040, endorsed by Council in April 2025, sets out a 10-year roadmap to deliver and finance Council's vision of Newcastle as a liveable, sustainable, inclusive global city. The ongoing opportunities and challenges which the City of Newcastle faces in the next decade includes climate change, long term impacts of COVID-19, affordable housing and housing provision shortfalls, industry transition and low education coupled with moderate population growth, lack of diversity and local brain drain.



Martin Bros concrete contractors at 80a Maitland Road, Mayfield. (Source: De Martin Family)



Concreters including Giusepp Suprano finish a slab at King Street car park, 1961. (Source: De Martin family)



The Holy Apostle Church, 11-17 Steel Street, Hamilton, June 2025. (Source: CN)



NUspace is a \$95 million landmark education precinct under development by the UON in the heart of Newcastle's CBD. (Source: University of Newcastle History Collection, UON Hunter Living Histories)

From Steel City to Smart City

Since 1999, employment in the healthcare and social assistance sector has grown, making this the largest industry in the Newcastle and the Hunter region. It employed over 23,000 residents in 2021, the largest occupation segment as measured by the last census.

The John Hunter Health and Innovation Precinct provides healthcare services for Newcastle, the greater Hunter region and northern NSW communities. John Hunter Hospital was established in 1991, integrating four separate hospitals (Royal Newcastle Hospital, Calvary Mater Hospital, the Western Suburbs Hospital, and the Wallsend District Hospital) on a new campus at Rankin Park, Lambton Heights. Since that time it has become the major trauma and teaching hospital outside the Sydney metropolitan area and one of the busiest hospitals in the state.

Education/training has also expanded, becoming the second major employment sector in Newcastle. The University of Newcastle was established as an independent institution in 1965 and was relocated to the campus at Shortland soon after (now the Callaghan campus). The university has grown rapidly since that

time. New courses such as law and medicine have been introduced, and several new campuses established including at Ourimbah and Gosford on the Central Coast, in the Newcastle and Sydney CBDs, and in Singapore.



Plan for the University of Newcastle campus, Shortland, 1964. (Source: UON Hunter Living Histories, P3023-119)

Newcastle remains one of the largest coal export ports in the world. The amount of coal shipped through the Port of Newcastle was recorded as 144.5 million tonnes (valued at \$38,693 million to the economy) in 2023.³³⁸ Yet this volume of exports does not correlate to a significant workforce. Only 5% of the Hunter region's workforce (which includes Newcastle) is in mining; the sector ranks behind health care and social assistance education and training, retail trade, accommodation and food services, construction and manufacturing. During the 1990s, CN adopted the slogan 'A clean green city' and introduced a range of sustainability measures. One initiative, the world's first greenhouse gas speedometer, sought to draw attention to the city's emissions from carbon dioxide, electricity, gas, waste and water.³³⁹ However, as environmental historian Nancy Cushing argued, 'as climate change makes carbon pollution a global rather than a local issue, ongoing coal exports challenge Newcastle's claims to have escaped its smoky past and to be clean, green, post-industrial.'³⁴⁰ CN has forged ahead with its own initiatives including achievement of its goal to generate 30% of its electricity from low-carbon sources by 2020, and securing a \$6.5 million loan from Australia's Clean Energy Finance Corporation to build the region's biggest solar farm.

In 2023, the Hunter offshore wind zone was declared. Stretching from Norah Head on the Central Coast up to Newcastle, it occupies 2,000 square kilometres of ocean space.³⁴¹ The plans have divided the community, like in other parts of Australia, with concerns over environmental impacts and whether the project would deliver long-term employment. Nonetheless the shift away from coal is inevitable and has driven the growth of the Newcastle

container port and proposal for a deepwater container terminal. In 2021, the Port of Newcastle challenged the restrictions placed on container movement by NSW Ports. The Federal Court ruled in favour of NSW Ports, which prioritises Port Botany and Port Kembla as the key trade gateways. This ruling has not deterred Port of Newcastle's policy, which has flagged 80 hectares of vacant port land for development, representing 25% of total landholdings at the Port of Newcastle. In the face of climate change and the Hunter's population increase, the Port of Newcastle sees the potential for diversifying port freight as a key pillar economic growth for the region.³⁴² The diversified port included a proposal for a passenger cruise terminal, but funding was withdrawn from Infrastructure NSW in 2019.

Despite the absence of a cruise terminal, tourism has become a key pillar of Newcastle's diversified economy. In 2019, it was estimated that tourism contributed \$945 million to the local economy and sustained 4,950 or nearly 5% of total jobs.³⁴³ With its combination of cultural heritage, natural environment, and nighttime economy, the City of Newcastle continues to draw significant visitation. The opening of the extension of the Newcastle Art Gallery, providing an additional 1,600sqm of exhibition space, by the end of 2025 is set to boost cultural tourism to the city.

The 29 July 2025 opening of the international terminal at the Newcastle International Airport is also expected to drive increased visitation to the city with planned flights to destinations such as Bali firmly putting it on the map as the state's second international airport.

Our population

Newcastle population 2023 **174,294**

Population by 2046 **205,445**

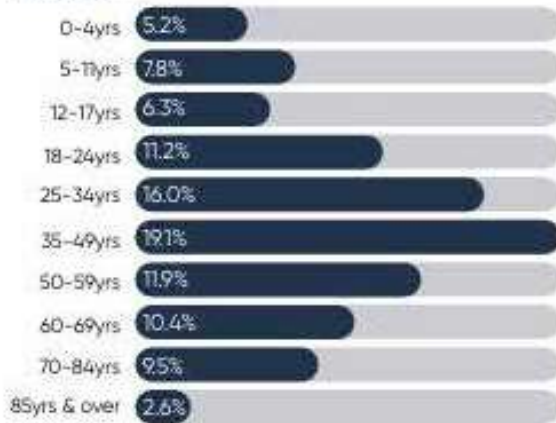
Greater Newcastle population 2021 **604,115**

Population by 2041 **773,825**

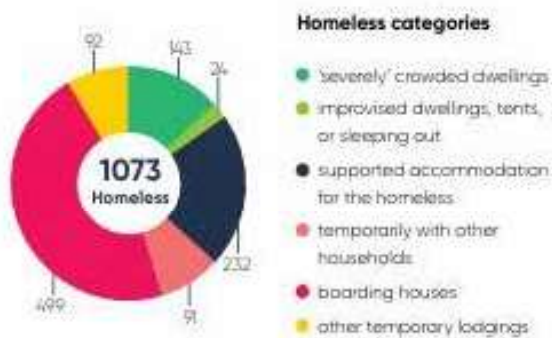
Estimated annual population growth rate **0.77%**



People



134 different languages spoken at home – most widely spoken includes Mandarin, Macedonian, Italian, Greek and Arabic. Languages spoken with greatest need for translation included Arabic, Mandarin, Swahili, Persian/Dari and Tibetan.



Housing stress

Of the 20,700 households in private rentals in Newcastle 4,935 (23.8%) were in rental stress in 2021 compared to 28.1% for Regional NSW. Of the 20,894 households with a mortgage in Newcastle 1,303 (6.2%) were in mortgage stress in 2021 (Regional NSW average 8.4%).

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