*Voices of the Upper Hunter: Community Insights on Regional Priorities and Challenges*

**Summary Report: Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue 2024 Community Forum**

February 2025

## Document preparation

This report was prepared on Awabakal and Worimi Land by the Institute for Regional Futures for the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue.

*The University of Newcastle acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands within our footprint areas: Awabakal, Darkinjung, Biripai, Worimi, Wonnarua, and Eora Nations.*

*We also pay respect to the wisdom of our Elders past, present and emerging.*

# Contents

# 1  Executive summary

The Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue (UHMD) serves as a vital and unique forum within the Upper Hunter region, bringing together a broad spectrum of stakeholders—including representatives from the mining industry, local government, businesses, and the community. This inclusive platform fosters open discussions and facilitates feedback on the impacts of mining, creating a collaborative space to address key concerns and priorities raised by the community.The 2024 Community Forum, held in Singleton, provided a platform for over 120 stakeholders to discuss regional challenges and priorities, with a strong focus on economic transition, environmental sustainability, and social resilience.

**Key Findings and Priorities**

**Economic Diversification & Workforce Transition:** The Upper Hunter remains highly dependent on mining, with some 28% of jobs linked to the sector. The community supports the need for economic diversification, with opportunities for the region identified in renewable energy, agribusiness, and advanced manufacturing. Workforce reskilling is a priority—74% of workers are willing to retrain, yet access to local education and training remains limited. There is significant support for investment in a regional education hub and in expanded vocational training pathways.

**Environmental Stewardship & Post-Mining Land Use:** Stakeholders voiced concerns over mine rehabilitation, with calls for adaptive land use policies to repurpose sites for renewables, agriculture, and biodiversity corridors. There is strong support from diverse sectors for regulatory reform to streamline post-mining land use approvals and support sustainable transitions. Water security, air quality, and emissions reduction remain key community concerns, and the programs developed by the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue to address these issues are well supported.

**Community Well-being & Infrastructure Needs:** Healthcare access is a growing issue, with residents frequently traveling to Newcastle for specialist care. Mental health support, particularly for youth and transitioning workers, is a critical need. Housing affordability is less of a concern than in other regions, but new housing and infrastructure are required to support economic diversification, and to attract and retain the essential workers to support community resilience.

**Governance & Stakeholder Engagement:** Community fatigue from repeated consultations without clear outcomes is a major challenge. Stakeholders renewed the call for a central transition authority to coordinate planning, investment, and industry engagement. Trust and transparency in governance and decision-making processes are essential for sustainable progress, and the bridging role of the UHMD was emphasised in this regard.

**Recommendations & Next Steps**

This report proposes a strategic roadmap for the UHMD and regional stakeholders, focusing on two core workstreams:

1.  A Joint Fact-Finding (JFF) initiative, to address knowledge gaps on post-mining land use, workforce skills, infrastructure, and environmental impacts, to facilitate evidence-based decision-making.
2.  A program of projects and advocacy for regional stakeholders, to pilot projects on post-mining land rehabilitation, community energy initiatives, and vocational training, to build regional education and skills to support industry transition, and to advocate for policy and regulatory reforms to enable flexible land use and improved governance coordination.

# 2  Background

## 2.1  ABOUT US

The Institute for Regional Futures at the University of Newcastle and the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue are both deeply rooted in the regional development and governance of the Hunter Valley.

The Institute for Regional Futures at the University of Newcastle was formed in 2022 and incorporates the longstanding Hunter Research Foundation Centre. It functions as an interdisciplinary research and consultancy centre within the University of Newcastle. The Institute aims to deliver high-value consultancy advice, research, analysis and innovation to support the socio-economic development of the Hunter region, regions and local governments in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. It focuses on fostering sustainable regional growth through collaborative research and innovation. It acts as a bridge between academia, government, and industry, aiming to address key socio-economic and environmental challenges in regional areas. Through partnerships and practical research initiatives, the Institute tackles issues like resource allocation, sustainable community planning, and the economic diversification of regional economies.

The Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue emerged as a response to community concerns regarding the impact of mining on local communities and the environment. It represents a multi-stakeholder initiative involving the mining industry, local government, and the communities affected by mining in the Upper Hunter region. The Dialogue aims to create a platform where diverse voices can discuss the social, environmental, and economic challenges of mining. It seeks to foster transparency, mitigate adverse effects, and develop strategies for sustainable mining practices that balance economic benefits with community welfare.

Through ongoing consultation, the Dialogue works to understand the Upper Hunter community's most pressing issues and uses this insight to guide its initiatives. Its efforts are structured around three dedicated working groups—Environment, Social and Economic Development, and Communications—which collaborate under the guidance of a Joint Advisory Steering Committee. Together, they identify challenges, propose actionable strategies, and implement practical solutions to address environmental, social, and economic challenges within the region.

A cornerstone of the Dialogue's mission is its commitment to transparency and its role as a trusted provider of factual, accurate information. By ensuring all stakeholders have access to reliable data and updates, the Dialogue builds trust and accountability, empowering the community to participate meaningfully in shaping the region's future.

## 2.2  ABOUT THE 2024 COMMUNITY FORUM

The Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue held its 2024 Community Forum in Singleton on 29 October 2024. The Forum brought together over 120 stakeholders to assist in guiding key Dialogue projects and have their say on issues impacting the Upper Hunter region. The 2024 program included an overview of the regional economic outlook and future of coal, an update from the NSW Government on the Future Jobs and Investment Authorities and Post Mining Land Use Enquiry and the EPA's Climate Change Policy and Action Plan.  Alongside these, the Dialogue provided updates on its environmental projects focused on water stewardship, air quality, and mine rehabilitation.

The afternoon workshop session, led by Professor Roberta Ryan, centred on identifying and prioritising issues that can be strategically addressed by the mining sector in collaboration with community and government stakeholders over the next 1-2 years. The goal of that workshop was to identify impactful interventions that the Dialogue can undertake to potentially support economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion.

This report summarises the community contribution and findings from the workshop session.

## 2.3   PRIOR COMMUNITY FORUMS

### Summary of 2022 Forum findings:

The discussions raised at the 2024 Forum were directly tied to the issues and key themes raised at the 2022 Forum in Muswellbrook, which focused on 'Planning for the Future'. Feedback from that forum indicated a high priority on economic diversification, skills development, and community engagement as key pillars for addressing the socio-economic impacts of the economic change in the Upper Hunter, and included proposals for actions:

- Developing infrastructure and housing solutions to support new industries and incoming residents.
- Conducting a regional skills audit to align workforce capabilities with emerging sectors.
- Resourcing an independent agency to streamline collaboration between stakeholders.

### Key environmental issues

- Air quality: significant community issue with health impacts, particularly around dust and chemical pollutants, highly valued air quality monitoring and analysis. Industry can drive early adoption of technology to reduce diesel emissions.
- Mine voids and post-mining land use: future compatible land uses, including using voids for flood mitigation, pumped hydro, or industrial freshwater storage, noting environmental and economic challenges.
- Rehabilitation of mine sites: requires innovation and joined up governance, opportunities for utilising tailings as topsoil and addressing organic material shortages for revegetation, interest in creating biodiversity corridors to connect ecosystems using post-mining lands and areas offset by mining.
- Water security and drought proofing: demonstrating leading edge water stewardship, including low use and reuse best practices of industry.
- Other issues: examples included concerns around noise, spontaneous combustion, odour, chemical contamination, ongoing concerns about mining operations affecting quality of life for residents.

### Key socio-economic issues

- Economic diversification and new industries: strategic planning on land availability for future industries, roadmap/timeline for post-mining land use, investment and industry  attraction (renewable energy, agribusiness, and critical minerals processing), multi-purpose land use, unlocking mining lease land for affordable housing and training.

- Technological innovation: high potential for the Upper Hunter to showcase transition technologies globally, mining companies can leverage their global resources to support innovation and demonstrate new, sustainable business models.

- Skills and workforce development: a regional skills audit to identify existing talents that can be transitioned into new industries, align educational programs with future industry needs, retraining programs for workers in traditional sectors to industries like renewable energy and advanced manufacturing.

- Youth and education: creating opportunities for the region's youth to remain or return after education, more apprenticeships and educational pathways within the region.

- Housing and infrastructure: affordable housing emerged as a high-priority concern, particularly as economic transitions could drive up housing costs, access to services and infrastructure and aligning infrastructure projects with the region's evolving needs. This includes ensuring access to healthcare (especially for an aging population) and improving tourism infrastructure to attract new residents and visitors.

- Community and social well-being: including addressing negative perceptions of the region that could hinder diversification and growth, marketing and advocacy strategies were suggested to combat this image and highlight the region's long-term potential.

- Community engagement: Participants emphasised the importance of involving the broader community in decision-making processes. This includes ensuring affordable housing options and educational opportunities are available and accessible.

- Industrial capacity and skills shortages: looming shortages of critical minerals and skilled labour, both of which are essential for transitioning into new industries, collaboration between stakeholders to address these shortages was recommended.

- Economic and social costs: potential short-term economic and social costs of the transition, such as job displacement and loss of philanthropic support from mining companies.

# 3  Regional Context

The Upper Hunter comprises the Dungog, Singleton, Muswellbrook and Upper Hunter Local Government Areas (LGAs). The Upper Hunter had a population of 64,704 residents at the time of the 2021 *Australian Census of Population and Housing*.[1] By 2041, the region is forecast to have a residential population approaching 68,000, with modest population growth expected in Dungog and Muswellbrook and small declines forecast for Singleton and the Upper Hunter Shire.[2]

The median age of the Upper Hunter's residents is 39, consistent with the New South Wales median. However, this masks sub-regional differences. With median ages of 37, the populations of both the Singleton and Muswellbrook LGAs are actually younger than the state's population as a whole. On the other hand, both Dungog and the Upper Hunter Shires are considerably older, with median ages of 42 and 46 respectively.[3]

The mining industry accounts for the largest share of jobs in the Upper Hunter, with 28% of all jobs being directly linked to the sector. The agriculture, forestry and fishing (8%), and health care and social assistance (7%) sectors are the next biggest employers. While over a quarter of local jobs are within the mining industry, only 17% of the Upper Hunter's workforce are employed in the sector. This is because just two-fifths of the region's mining workforce choose to live in the Singleton and Muswellbrook LGAs where they are employed. Instead, 17% of mining industry employees working in the Upper Hunter choose to live in Maitland, a further 17% in Cessnock, and a total of 12% across the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie LGAs.[4]

In the five years prior to the 2021 *Australian Census of Population and Housing*, 11,748 new residents moved to the Upper Hunter. They predominately migrated from Maitland (1,120), overseas (1,052), Cessnock (1,038), Lake Macquarie (737), Newcastle (690), the Central Coast (674), Port Stephens (509), and the Mid-Coast (364). Over the same period, 11,128 people moved away from the Upper Hunter, predominantly to Maitland (1,359), Newcastle (1,057), Cessnock (1,044), Lake Macquarie (806), Port Stephens (578), the Mid-Coast (468), Tamworth (341), and the Central Coast (338). This leaves the Upper Hunter with a relatively neutral net-migration figure of +462 over the five years, indicating that the majority of local population growth is driven by natural increase (births minus deaths).[5]

## 3.1  EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING MARKET

The Institute for Regional Futures maintains an ongoing assessment of the region's economic performance which is updated quarterly as the Hunter Insight Dashboard.[6] The Dashboard offers a comprehensive analysis of the Hunter region's socio-economic conditions, drawing upon over 60 years of data from the Hunter Research Foundation Centre alongside current ABS and labour force statistics. The Dashboard serves as a vital resource for policymakers, industry leaders, and community members, providing timely and detailed insights into the region's economic performance and facilitating informed decision-making.

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[1] ABS. 2021. *Search Census data*. Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area

[2] NSW Government. 2022. *NSW Population Projections*. Available at: https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/populations

[3] ABS. 2021. *Search Census data*. Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area

[4] ABS. 2021. *TableBuilder*. Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area

[5] Ibid

[6] https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/regional-futures/hunter-insight-dashboard

According to most recent data (October 2024), recent trends in the Hunter region's labour market have revealed a shift in employment patterns, marked by a notable decline in overall employment. Following a period of growth earlier in 2024, the region experienced a contraction in the last quarter, with a reduction of 11,800 full-time jobs. This downturn has primarily impacted key sectors, including mining, manufacturing, public administration, administrative services, and education. Despite this contraction, there has been positive growth in employment within the health services and construction sectors, indicating areas of resilience and opportunity amidst broader market challenges.

The region's unemployment rate remains comparatively low, recorded at 3.7% in August 2024. This figure is below the New South Wales state average, highlighting the Hunter's relative stability in the broader economic landscape. The persistently low unemployment rate underscores the region's capacity to maintain workforce participation even during sectoral adjustments. As the Hunter region navigates these labour market changes, strategic focus on leveraging growth sectors and addressing vulnerabilities in declining industries will be crucial for sustaining economic resilience.

Recent data indicates stable or increasing median house prices across the region, which has retained significantly higher values than pre-COVID levels, though they remain below the NSW state average. Price fluctuations are notable in Upper Hunter Shire, Dungog and Muswellbrook. The graph below summarises the percent change in median house prices by the region's LGA over the past six months, modelled against the cost of a three-bedroom or equivalent house.
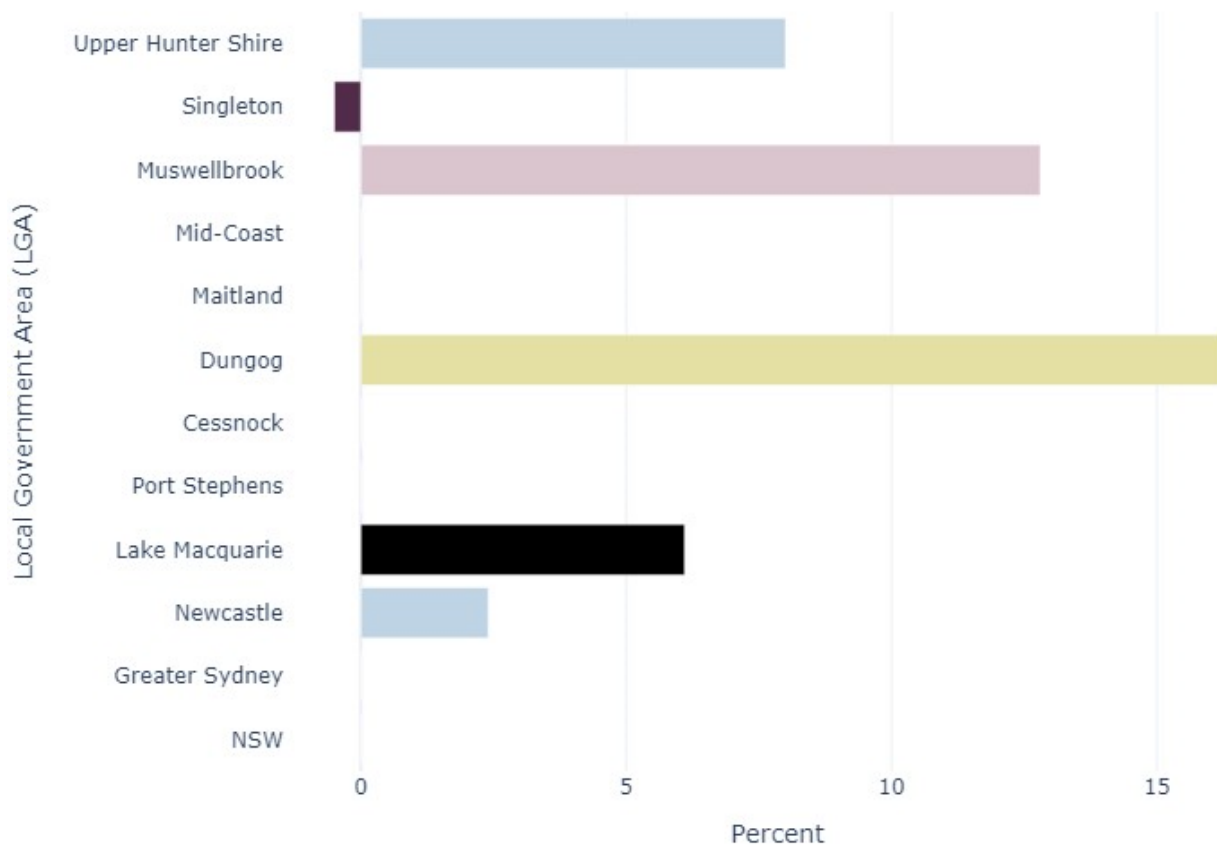


## 3.2 COMMUNITY VALUES AND WELLBEING

As part of the most recent iteration of the Regions Matter survey, the Institute for Regional Futures surveyed Upper Hunter residents about current and future issues relating to workforce transition, future

skills and the experience of changes in the cost of living. Regions Matter is the flagship research program of the IRF that examines the values, perspectives and experiences of people who live and work in regional Australia. The research spans regional areas across the country, representing a diverse mix of population sizes, proximity to and remoteness from capital cities, and core industries. This data is from the most recent Regions Matter survey, which was conducted in December 2023 and January 2024, and included more than 800 participants from the Hunter Region.

Key findings from that survey for the Upper Hunter indicated that:

- As few as 1 in 5 residents in the Upper Hunter are confident that the government has good plans in place for the future of the region.
- Only 35% of Upper Hunter residents believe their local community is prepared for changes in the economy.
- Almost a third of residents in the Upper Hunter reported that they can't find a local tradie when they need one. Less than half of Upper Hunter residents can easily access a doctor who does bulk billing.
- People who move to the Upper Hunter are less likely to stay long term, compared with other regional areas nationwide. The Upper Hunter reflects a significantly lower workforce retention rate than the Lower Hunter.
- 74% of workers and those seeking work in the Upper Hunter are prepared to undertake reskilling or retraining to meet future job needs, including 74% of young people (aged 18-34).
- The Upper Hunter is already proactively meeting skill gaps – 68% of the Upper Hunter's working population undertook education or training programs in the last 12 months.
- Upper Hunter residents are less concerned about housing affordability as a major issue, but are more likely to be concerned about future job growth and access to training and education than other parts of the country.

## Prepared for the future

We asked people to consider whether they thought their local community was prepared for changes in the economy. Only 35% of Upper Hunter residents agree that their local community is prepared for changes in the economy. This is significantly lower than the national average (43%) and the result in major cities where 46% of residents believe their community is ready for economic change. Confidence is lower again for residents on the Mid Coast – only 22% agreed that their community is ready.

Less than half of Upper Hunter residents (49%) agree with the statement that there are lots of opportunities for people who live in the local area, while 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In contrast, 69% of residents in our major cities are positive about the range of local opportunities, and so too 57% of regional Australia. The Upper Hunter compares unfavourably with the Lower Hunter in this regard – 64% of residents in the Lower Hunter are positive about the availability of local opportunities.

Similarly, 50% of Upper Hunter residents agree with the statement 'there are job prospects for young people in my area' – this number soars to 62% for residents in the Lower Hunter who are significantly more positive about the job prospects for young people.

We asked whether people were confident that the government has good plans for the future of their region. Regional areas generally have lower confidence in future plans, but there is significantly lower confidence in our region. In the Lower Hunter, only 28% agreed that good plans were in place, but this number drops as low as one in five (20.8%) for the Upper Hunter. Across the country, 38% of residents agree that governments have good regional plans in place, and in the cities 42% of residents agree.

## Cost of Living Impacts

The Upper Hunter appears to be less significantly impacted by cost of living compared to other regions.

Currently, 42% of Upper Hunter residents describe themselves as living comfortably, 34% say that they can meet expenses with a little left over for extras, while 22% are just meeting their weekly expenses. 3% of Upper Hunter residents described themselves as not having enough to meet their basic expenses. Across the country, 30% of people describe themselves as living comfortably, and for regional areas outside of the Hunter, this drops to 25%.

Around the country, some 34% of people are struggling to make ends meet, whereas 25% are in this situation in the Hunter.

Optimism and outlook for the Upper Hunter is high (64% are either very or somewhat optimistic about the future of the region), and generally consistent with the rest of the country (66% general optimism, fractionally higher in metro areas than regional areas). In the short term, 40% of Upper Hunter residents expect their standard of living to improve in the next two years (the average for non-Hunter regional Australia is 32%).

## Regional Skill shortages

There is a well-documented regional skill shortage around the country. The difficulty in filling job vacancies in the Upper Hunter is generally consistent with the experience of other regional areas nationally, and significantly less than the challenges faced by the Mid Coast, for example, and some of the emerging renewable energy zones (REZs) in western NSW. Residents felt that unemployment in the Upper Hunter was significantly lower than for regional Australia outside the Hunter.

However, the regional skill shortage is experienced in other ways. In the Upper Hunter, 32% of residents found it difficult to access a local tradie when they needed one. Only 15% of residents in the Lower Hunter had the same experience, and in the cities only 10% found it difficult. Similarly, in capital cities, 61% of people reported easy access to a doctor who does bulk billing; but only 47% of residents of the Upper Hunter have the same level of access to healthcare.

Another aspect of skill shortage is regional retention – do skilled workers in critical industries tend to stay? In the Upper Hunter, 48% of respondents agreed that people who move to the region for work tend to stay, which indicates a tendency toward short term retention of skilled workers. It compares unfavourably to the Lower Hunter, for example, where 64% agree that skilled workers tend to stay, 60% rate of agreement in major cities, and 57% retention in regional areas nationwide.

## Willingness to retrain

74% of the working population of the Upper Hunter are prepared to retrain for the work opportunities of the future, which is marginally higher than regional Australia generally.  This is consistent across age groups – 74% for 18-34 year olds, 75% for 35-54 year olds, and 71% for 55 years and older.

The Upper Hunter is a standout region for vocational training – 68% of Upper Hunter's working population undertook education and training in the last 12 months - significantly more than the regional average of 41% and the metropolitan average of 43%.

### Relocation intentions

Only 43% of Upper Hunter residents consider themselves likely to relocate from the region in the next five years, and 34% of those consider themselves highly unlikely to move. However, for young people aged 18-35, 67% see themselves as either very likely (38%) or somewhat likely (29%) to relocate to in the next five years.

Of those planning to relocate away from the Hunter, very few are planning to leave regional Australia. 37% see themselves moving to a similar sized region area, 25% see themselves in a larger sized region, and 22% see themselves moving to a less populated region. Less than 10% are intending to move to a capital or major city.

### Issues affecting the region

Residents in the Upper Hunter are significantly more likely to see growing local jobs and access to education and training as the main issues affecting the region than other parts of the country. 42% of Upper Hunter residents rated growing local jobs as one of the three most important issues, compared to 27% nationally and 22% of capital city residents seeing that as a priority. Similarly, access to suitable education and training was a major issue for 39% of Upper Hunter residents, but only 27% of those in major cities and 26% in regional Australia. The major concern for Upper Hunter residents is access to adequate healthcare facilities. For most of the rest of the country, housing affordability is regarded as the most important issue, but it is second to healthcare in the Upper Hunter.

## 3.3  SUMMARY

The Upper Hunter region is entering a challenging transformative period, characterised by modest population growth, a continuing high dependence on the mining industry and mixed optimism about the region's preparedness for the future. The mining sector dominates employment in the region, accounting for 28% of jobs, but only 17% of the workforce resides locally, highlighting out-commuting trends. Other key sectors include agriculture, forestry, and health care. While employment has declined recently, growth in health services and construction reflects emerging resilience. Housing markets remain stable, with prices above pre-pandemic levels yet below state averages.

Community sentiment reveals concerns around skill shortages, access to social services and tradespeople, and concerns about job prospects and training access, especially for young people. However, the region continues to provide atypical participation in vocational education, with 68% of the workforce engaged in training over the past year. The cost of living impacts are less pronounced compared to other regions, with many residents reporting financial stability. Healthcare access and job creation are key concerns, with 42% of residents identifying local job growth as a critical priority. Regional retention of skilled workers remains a challenge, though 74% of the workforce expresses readiness for reskilling to meet future opportunities.

This summary underscores the Upper Hunter's economic and social dynamics, emphasising the need for strategic interventions in healthcare, job creation, and training to foster long-term regional resilience.

# 4 Discovery Review: National and International Experience

Global and national examples demonstrate the need for economic diversification to broaden the economic base and reduce vulnerabilities to external shocks. For regions like the Upper Hunter, resilience-building and economic restructuring would typically require a shift away from single-industry dependency. Case studies highlight the impacts of structural changes, including job displacement, income stability challenges, and shifts in community cohesion and growth patterns. For sustainable transitions, a strategic blend of public and private investment, proactive policies, and industry-led initiatives is essential to drive innovation and leverage local strengths. Understanding these impacts is key to supporting sustainable, inclusive transitions.

Socio-economic impacts of economic change can be severe, but strategic planning and proactive policy responses can mitigate negative effects. Regions must invest in education, infrastructure, and social support systems to facilitate smoother transitions. Risks include:

- Job Displacement and Workforce Shifts: Transition away from traditional sectors like mining or manufacturing can lead to job losses, particularly in regions heavily reliant on these industries.
- Income Instability: Fluctuations in employment and industry restructuring can create income gaps and increase inequality, with flow-on economic impacts
- Community Displacement and Cultural Shifts: Loss of industries integral to regional identity can lead to social dislocation and loss of cultural capital.

## 4.1 SHARED ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The Upper Hunter's reliance on mining mirrors the experiences of regions globally facing industrial decline, such as deindustrialising areas in the United States and parts of Europe transitioning from manufacturing. Similar to these regions, the Upper Hunter grapples with labour market disruptions, skill mismatches, and social infrastructure and service access issues in key areas such as healthcare, alongside challenges unique to Australia's economic geography and regulatory environment.

### Economic Diversification and Employment Transition

In line with restructuring efforts seen globally, the Upper Hunter is exploring diversification into renewable energy, technology, and sustainable agriculture. Like coal-dependent regions in Appalachia (U.S.) and Ruhr Valley (Germany), the area faces hurdles in providing training and incentives for alternative industries. A centralised transition authority, as suggested in the community Forum, reflects successful models like Germany's "Coal Commission," which coordinates industry transitions and labour market realignments at a national level.

### Community Fatigue and Inclusive Governance

Community consultation fatigue is a common issue in regions undergoing economic restructuring, where frequent engagement processes sometimes yield slow results. This concern is echoed in similar Australian regions, where communities report disillusionment with prolonged consultation without tangible outcomes. The Upper Hunter could benefit from streamlined governance approaches observed internationally, such as Norway's inclusive stakeholder-driven model for resource transitions, which emphasises community-led investments and local governance empowerment.

### Healthcare and Social Resilience

Compared to international counterparts, the Upper Hunter faces acute healthcare challenges given its reliance on urban centres like Newcastle for specialist care. While rural healthcare shortages are common in restructuring regions, international models, such as the establishment of regional health hubs in the U.S., could offer guidance. Regional hubs can centralise services and improve access, a strategy that could enhance social resilience in the Upper Hunter by making healthcare more accessible locally.

### Environmental Restoration and Land Repurposing

The environmental challenges of post-mining land use in the Upper Hunter align with those faced by other post-industrial regions. For instance, U.S. and European coal regions have successfully implemented land repurposing for renewable energy or conservation projects. To adopt similar strategies, the Upper Hunter may benefit from adaptive land use policies, like Germany's brownfield-to-renewables transitions, which prioritise former industrial sites for new energy projects while mitigating land use conflicts.

## 4.2  KEY LESSONS FOR MANAGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

As regions transition economically, it is crucial to address socio-economic impacts thoughtfully, ensuring community support and involvement, particularly in areas experiencing shifts due to industrial decline or restructuring. The following insights underscore the importance of targeted, inclusive approaches that foster new sector growth and ensure equitable benefit distribution.

### Community Engagement as a Foundation

Engaging the community is essential in addressing the socio-economic impacts of economic transition. This approach not only fosters local support but also enhances transparency and inclusion. Community engagement is vital to understanding and addressing concerns, gathering input for solutions, and creating a shared vision for the future.

### Infrastructure, Education, and Skills Development

Investments in infrastructure, education, and skills development are critical to fostering new sectors. These foundational elements provide the backbone for supporting emerging industries, especially in sectors like renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and technology. Enhancing education and skill-building initiatives prepares the workforce for new job opportunities and supports long-term economic sustainability.

### Tailored Regional Approaches

A one-size-fits-all strategy is ineffective for regional socio-economic transitions. Each region has unique strengths, challenges, and community dynamics; hence, a tailored approach is required. Customised strategies should consider local needs, available resources, and specific socio-economic contexts to yield optimal outcomes.

### Aligning with Emerging Sectors

Industrial attraction efforts should align with the development of emerging sectors, including renewable energy, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, and technology. Targeting these sectors ensures sustainable growth by creating high-quality jobs and diversifying the economic base, reducing dependence on traditional industries.

### Skills Development and Community-Driven Initiatives

Programs focused on skills development and community betterment are essential for resilient socio-economic transitions. Workforce retraining and community-driven projects empower local residents to

actively participate in and benefit from economic changes. Such programs also build capacity within communities to adapt and thrive.

### Equitable Benefit Distribution

It is crucial to ensure that the benefits of economic transition are shared across the community. This equitable distribution helps build local support for change, particularly amid uncertainties. Programs should be designed to benefit a broad cross-section of the community, reducing socio-economic disparities and fostering inclusiveness.

### Partnership Building

Strong partnerships between local governments, industries, and community organisations are essential for a holistic approach to economic transition. Collaborative efforts promote a unified strategy, combining resources and expertise across sectors to address complex challenges and facilitate smooth transitions.

## 4.3   THE CONTEXT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### Emerging Industry and Energy Perspectives

The introduction of new industries and energy sources brings both opportunities and uncertainties for communities. From a community perspective, there remains a lack of familiarity with what these new sectors might look like or how they will operate. Addressing these uncertainties is critical for building trust and fostering acceptance of change.

### Broad-Based Acceptance with Key Concerns

Research shows that there is a general acceptance of economic change, yet concerns persist, particularly around youth opportunities, fairness, and the need for re-skilling or up-skilling. These areas require focused efforts to ensure that the transition meets community expectations and provides equitable opportunities.

### Beneficiaries vs. Impacted Communities

Communities experiencing significant economic shifts are not always the primary beneficiaries of these changes. To mitigate this, policy and program efforts should prioritise local impact, ensuring that those most affected by economic changes directly benefit from new industry developments.

### Recognising Local Influencers

Local "influencers"— community leaders, advocates, and trusted figures — play a critical role in shaping community sentiment. Governments and industries often underestimate their impact; however, recognising and engaging these influencers can improve the effectiveness of communication and program implementation.

### Addressing Cumulative Impacts

Effective management of cumulative impacts is necessary, particularly when multiple projects are underway. Clear responsibility for overseeing cumulative socio-economic and environmental effects is essential to avoid fragmented approaches and ensure that all aspects of the community's well-being are considered.

### Avoiding "Siloed" Thinking

The community does not view issues within professional or administrative siloes. Statements like "that's not in my remit" or "you'll need to speak to a different agency" can frustrate and alienate community

members. A more integrated, interdisciplinary approach is necessary to respond to community concerns holistically.

### Government Coordination and Transparency

Government agencies sometimes lack coordination, leading to confusion and apprehension within the community. Clear and consistent communication regarding agency roles, project timelines, and progress updates can reduce misunderstandings and foster a more cooperative environment.

### Capacity Building for Community Understanding

There is a need to build community capacity for understanding the transition process. Educating the community on how decisions are made, who makes them, and the channels available for influencing change can empower residents to actively participate in the transition and make informed contributions.

### Considering Impacts on Landowners

The lack of comprehensive planning for both positive and negative impacts on landowners across scenarios has been a recurring issue. For example, when land is required for public purposes, transparent discussions and considerations of compensation, alternatives, and long-term impacts on landholders are necessary.

# 5 2024 Community Forum - Priority Regional Issues

The workshop session facilitated by the Institute for Regional Futures as part of the 2024 Community Forum enabled group discussions amongst diverse stakeholder groups, based on a summary of the national and international experience of economic change During these sessions, priority issues and shared concerns were identified, as well as opportunities for targeted interventions to address key issues.

| Discussion questions | Additional facilitator prompts |
| --- | --- |
| **What are the most pressing challenges faced by the Upper Hunter region that could benefit from targeted intervention from the Mining industry and sector?** | Which issues have the most significant impact on the community (e.g., employment, housing, skills development)?<br>Which are most time-sensitive?<br>How can we sequence interventions to maximise impact?<br>What are the strengths of the industry that can be harnessed? |
| **How can we leverage existing strengths and resources to create impactful pilot programs or projects that address this issue?** | For instance, are there local programs that the mining industry supports that we can leverage from?<br>What role should local governments, other industries, and communities play in driving these initiatives?<br>What are the other examples that we can learn from? |
| **What barriers (e.g., policy, financial, regulatory, infrastructure) might hinder the successful implementation of new projects, and what strategies can we adopt to overcome them in the short-to-medium term?** | How can advocacy and collaboration with state and federal governments be used to address barriers?<br>What role should innovation, education, and public-private partnerships play in mitigating these challenges? |

Voices of the Upper Hunter: Community Insights on Regional Priorities and Challenges
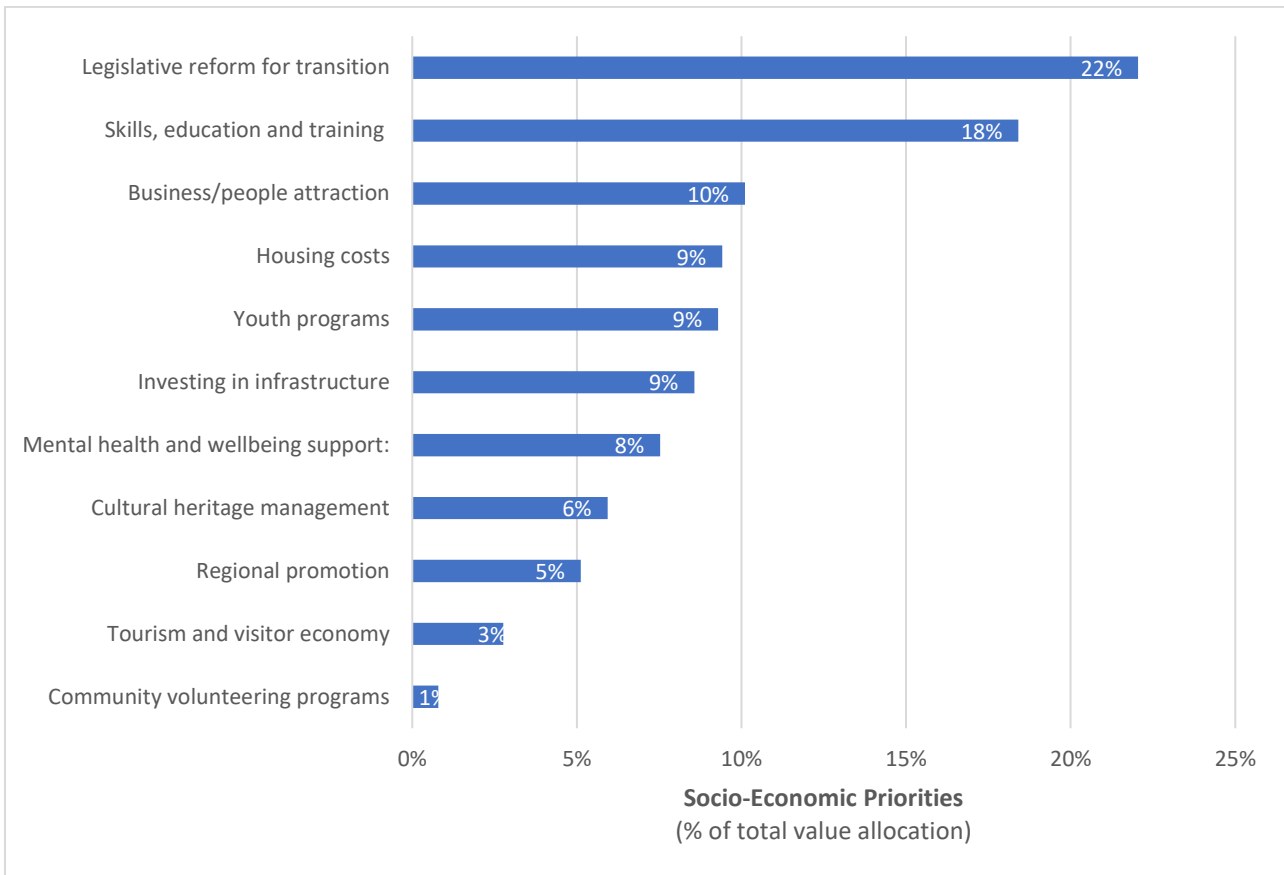
## 5.1  PRIORITY ISSUES: SOCIO-ECONOMIC

The participants identified a range of socio-economic issues central to the region's future, especially as it transitions from a mining-dominated economy.

The issue which was considered the highest priority amongst participants was the urgent need for legislative reform to enable economic development and use of post-mining land. This issue has significant cross-over with the environmental theme, and is related primarily to streamlining land-use change processes and resolving conflicts between renewables, biodiversity conservation, and agriculture. Further, it included the need for legislative reform of buffer lands management for biodiversity and regenerative agriculture, and the need for comprehensive planning for post-mining land use at a whole of region scale to ensure sustainability and economic utility.

Other identified issues include:

- **Employment and skills development**: There is a pronounced need for programs that transition mining workers to other sectors, supported by skills development outside of mining. Indigenous training pathways and skills development were highlighted as critical areas of focus.

- **Education and training access**: Insufficient local education facilities, including the lack of university and TAFE support, are barriers to retaining young people and attracting skilled professionals. Suggestions included using mining funds to establish a regional education hub in Muswellbrook.

- **Economic Diversification**: The imminent closure of major mines has heightened the need for alternative industries. Participants stressed diversifying into sectors like renewable energy, data and technology, and potentially establishing community energy cooperatives.

- **Housing and infrastructure**: Participants pointed out a shortage of affordable housing and insufficient health infrastructure, with many residents needing to travel to Newcastle for specialised health services.

- **Mental health and community well-being**: Ongoing mental health support, including expanding programs to counteract community burnout, was seen as necessary for the social stability of the Upper Hunter.

| Socio-Economic Priority | % |
|---|---|
| Legislative reform for transition | 22% |
| Skills, education and training | 18% |
| Business/people attraction | 10% |
| Housing costs | 9% |
| Youth programs | 9% |
| Investing in infrastructure | 9% |
| Mental health and wellbeing support: | 8% |
| Cultural heritage management | 6% |
| Regional promotion | 5% |
| Tourism and visitor economy | 3% |
| Community volunteering programs | 1% |

**Socio-Economic Priorities**
(% of total value allocation)

Participants were invited to contribute additional issues that had not been raised in previous community forums or during the course of the 2024 Community Forum. These are captured and summarised below:
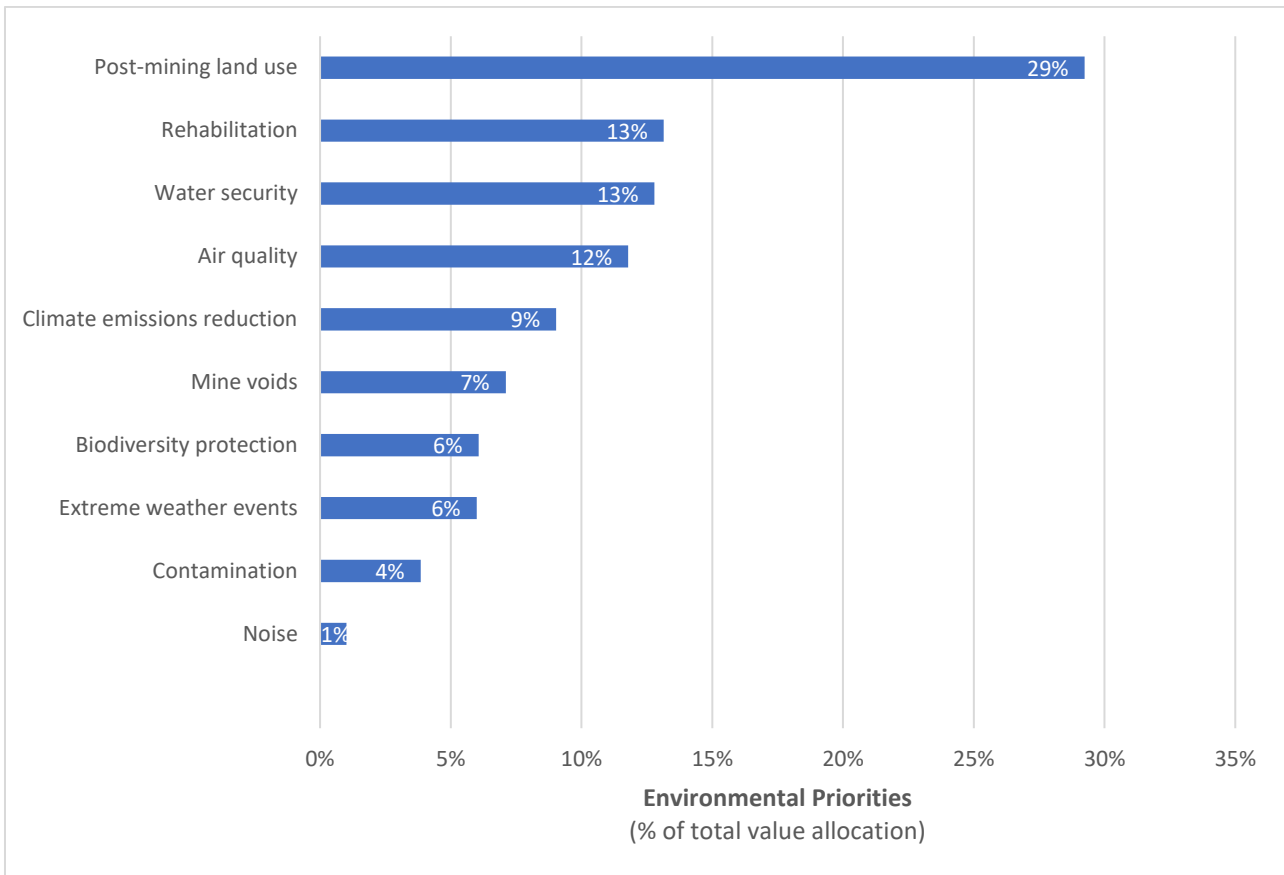
| | |
|---|---|
| *Healthcare and social services* | • Youth mental health / mental health of mining families<br>• More localised health services based on needs of catchment<br>• Specialist medical services and attracting qualified professionals to the Upper Hunter<br>• Domestic violence programs and regional services (including men's outreach) |
| *Economic transition and employment* | • Resilience building and support for the network of SMEs in the region<br>• Accommodation for new industries<br>• Local shortages of trainers/assessors held in mining roles; could mining companies reskill workers for transition?<br>• How will the region fill the developed skills created through education? What industries are coming to the region?<br>• Acute community and business impact of 2030 closures of MAC and Mangoola mines |
| *Planning and governance* | • Need for a clear regional plan to set direction, investment signals, and create certainty for transition<br>• Centralised transition authority  and holistic approach to avoid duplication and delays<br>• Changing goalposts from multiple layers of government<br>• Community codesign<br>• Financial inclusion |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Social cohesion and community engagement* | • Combined community consultation, noting community burnout from over-consultation<br>• General decline of regional towns<br>• Community knowledge and awareness of what is happening<br>• More local First Nation engagement, consent, and involvement<br>• Opportunities for people within the mining industry to connect and share knowledge |
| *Infrastructure and public services* | • Public transport and general transport improvement in the region<br>• Medical facilities based on current catchment<br>• Knowledge sharing<br>• Accurate and accessible data<br>• Shifting infrastructure needs based on shifting demographics - schools, hospitals, aged care |

## 5.2   PRIORITY ISSUES: ENVIRONMENTAL

The environmental issues highlighted by participants reflected the existing projects of the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue, in terms of ongoing concerns around rehabilitation of landscapes, water security and air quality impacts. Similarly to the socio-economic issues, however, there was an overwhelming concern in relation to the environmental management of lands post-mining. Environmental concerns are significant due to the historical environmental impact of mining operations. Key areas for attention include:

- **Post-Mining Land Use**: Future uses of mine voids could include flood mitigation, hydroelectric storage, and biodiversity corridors, requiring careful planning and regulatory support.

- **Water Security**: Leading-edge water management practices are essential for regional drought resilience, underscoring the need for low-use and reuse-focused approaches in industry.

- **Air Quality**: Dust and other airborne contaminants are critical health issues, necessitating advanced air quality monitoring and emission reduction technologies.

| Environmental Priority | % |
| --- | --- |
| Post-mining land use | 29% |
| Rehabilitation | 13% |
| Water security | 13% |
| Air quality | 12% |
| Climate emissions reduction | 9% |
| Mine voids | 7% |
| Biodiversity protection | 6% |
| Extreme weather events | 6% |
| Contamination | 4% |
| Noise | 1% |

**Environmental Priorities**
(% of total value allocation)

Additional issues identified by participants that had not been raised previously included:

| *Environmental Sustainability and energy* | <ul><li>Low-cost and secure energy provision for industry attraction</li><li>Regional scale greenhouse gas emissions, including Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions</li><li>Regional reporting of greenhouse gas emissions</li><li>Offsetting emissions with a land register in the Hunter</li><li>Buffer lands potential, including biodiversity</li><li>Regenerative agricultural methods for post-land use where applicable</li><li>Risk management plan for extreme weather</li><li>Drinking water quality</li></ul> |
| --- | --- |
| *Land use and zoning* | <ul><li>Land zoning restrictions impacting economic diversity</li><li>Lengthy approval processes and streamlining opportunities for land use post-mining</li><li>Land use conflicts from renewables</li><li>Inclusion of Traditional Owners in land reuse decisions, including artefact restoration</li></ul> |

## 5.3 PROGRAMS, PILOTS, AND ADVOCACY OPPORTUNITIES

To address the identified issues, participants proposed several programmatic and advocacy approaches:

- **Education and training hubs**: Establishing an education hub, in Muswellbrook for example, for technology and other sectors was suggested. This hub could attract educators and trainers, facilitate skills diversification, and foster a regional narrative to retain and attract residents. A new hub would work in alignment with existing facilities including the WesTrac Institute, TAFE programs in the Upper Hunter and emerging regional innovation precincts.

- **Special Economic Zone (SEZ)**: Creating an SEZ could offer investment incentives, streamlined planning approvals, and dedicated infrastructure, encouraging new businesses and industries to establish a presence in the region.

- **Community energy and sustainability programs**: Participants saw potential in community energy initiatives, including local energy hubs and community batteries, to enable a sustainable energy transition.

- **Post-Mining land use strategies**: Participants advocated for collaborative strategies involving government and industry to repurpose post-mining lands, possibly for renewable energy projects, community cooperatives, or cultural heritage tourism. This could include a staged release of mined lands to enable their gradual re-integration for community and economic uses.

- **Housing initiatives and marketing campaigns**: Building upon "The Welcome Experience" service in Muswellbrook Shire, concierge-style support could be extended region-wide to attract new residents, coupled with housing incentives or subsidies for teachers and essential workers to address housing shortages.

- **Health and social services expansion**: Funding mental health prevention programs and improving healthcare availability across the region.

- **Pilot programs**: Participants recommended several proposals for pilot programs that could be trialled and evaluated across the region, including:

  o Feasibility assessments for innovative post-mining land uses, including industrial, recreational, hydroelectric storage, residential or agricultural uses.

  o Circular economy initiatives, including ash recycling and biodiesel production.

  o Demonstrations of diverse and transitional housing projects using modular or subsidised housing models to meet essential and future workforce needs.

## 5.4 BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

### Barriers

Several structural and operational barriers could hinder the implementation of regional programs such as those identified above (section 5.3) to address community needs, including:

- **Legislative and regulatory rigidity**: Planning laws, land zoning restrictions, and waste regulations were frequently cited as impediments to adaptive, post-mining land use and effective community planning.

- **Silos in governance**: Fragmented decision-making across government agencies and industries has led to a lack of alignment in policies and program goals. This siloed approach also stifles cohesive regional planning and resource sharing, diminishing the effectiveness of cross-sector initiatives.

- **Community fatigue and cynicism**: Participants noted a history of unresolved issues from past meetings, leading to cynicism and disengagement. Community burnout was also prevalent, exacerbated by unmet expectations and communication gaps regarding renewable energy initiatives.

- **Inconsistent support from key agencies**: The absence of key State and Commonwealth agencies, like DPHI and the Resource Regulator, in discussions and planning processes was highlighted as a gap that hampers alignment across local, state, and federal levels.

## Enablers

Participants also identified enabling factors that could help drive program success:

- **Mining infrastructure re-utilisation**: Existing infrastructure from mining operations, such as transport networks and facilities, could be repurposed to support other industries, like health and education, enhancing regional resilience.

- **Collaborative governance**: Local government's role as a stable, central stakeholder allows it to act as a facilitator, maintaining continuity across changing political and economic conditions. Strengthening local government partnerships with industry and community stakeholders was seen as an effective approach for sustainable development.

- **Community governance models**: Proposals included a community-led social investment fund supported by mining revenue, which would allow local residents to influence funding allocation, encouraging community ownership and participation in socio-economic projects.

# 6  Implications for the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue

Managing socio-economic change effectively requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises community engagement, infrastructure and skills investments, and tailored regional strategies. This report on the full range of issues identified by the community underscores the need for equitable benefit distribution, strategic partnerships, and capacity building as foundational elements for successful economic diversification.

The workshop component of the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue 2024 Community Forum illuminated a clear vision for a diversified and resilient Upper Hunter region. The workshop identified critical issues around sustainable energy, healthcare access, economic transition, land use flexibility, and community engagement. By addressing key barriers and leveraging enablers, the Upper Hunter can capitalise on opportunities for projects that promote sustainable economic growth, improve quality of life, and foster an inclusive approach to the region's future.

Key recommendations include:

- The continuation of the UHMD environmental programs that address ongoing impacts of mining, including landscape rehabilitation, and water and air quality monitoring.

- Support and engage in the design of community-driven programs focused on skills and workforce development.

- Support a revised governance framework to manage consultation fatigue within the community.

- Advocacy to promote reforms to streamline land-use processes and enable diverse post-mining economic activities, and to improve First Nations engagement and incorporating cultural heritage into land rehabilitation plans.

- Open, transparent communication to address community concerns, cumulative impacts, and landowner rights.

- Building local capacity to support informed, engaged communities ready to navigate socio-economic transitions.

By focusing on these strategic areas, the Upper Hunter regions can foster resilient, inclusive, and sustainable growth aligned with emerging economic opportunities. It is noted that there is a wide array of public, private and community stakeholders with varied responsibilities for future economic development. Amongst these, the Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue is an organisation with a clear mandate to foster collaboration between community and the mining industry to address concerns and issues within the community and deliver tangible outcomes. Not all of the issues identified by the Forum are within the ambit or scope of the UHMD's work program, and additional clarifications for the specific role of the UHMD is required.

Based on the priority issues identified, the following recommendations for an ongoing work program aligns with the Dialogue's role as a community-driven initiative with specific strengths and limitations. These recommendations are based on two distinct but complementary work streams. The first is a proposal to address identified knowledge gaps through the application of a "joint fact finding (JFF)" initiative. The second is to propose a series of projects, partnerships and policy initiatives, with a focus on pilot cases, community engagement, and collaboration with industry partners.

## 6.1  ADDRESSING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

The priorities identified by the community have surfaced a series of knowledge gaps that need to be addressed as a part of the broader project of building socio-economic resilience. It is proposed to address these gaps through a Joint Fact Finding (JFF) initiative.

JFF is a collaborative process where diverse stakeholders come together to collectively identify, gather, and analyse data relevant to a shared issue or decision-making process. It is designed to build mutual understanding, transparency, and trust among participants by ensuring that all perspectives are considered in defining the scope of inquiry and interpreting the findings. JFF emphasises a shared commitment to creating a credible and impartial knowledge base that can be used to address complex problems, especially those involving scientific, technical, or socio-political uncertainties. This approach is particularly valuable in situations where conflicting views or mistrust might otherwise undermine productive dialogue and decision-making.

JFF is recommended when addressing knowledge gaps that are central to contentious or multi-faceted issues, particularly in cases involving diverse or opposing stakeholders. The process typically begins with the identification of specific questions or gaps that need resolution, followed by collaborative agreement on the methods, data sources, and experts to be involved in the investigation. For example, in the context of the Upper Hunter, JFF could be applied to explore sensitive topics such as post-mining land use, environmental restoration, or regional economic diversification. Stakeholders — including community members, mining companies, local governments, and Traditional Owners — would work together to co-design studies, review findings, and develop evidence-based solutions. By fostering shared ownership of both the process and outcomes, JFF can help build consensus, reduce polarisation, and ensure that the resulting actions or policies are informed by a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The following table outlines the knowledge and data gaps identified, key research or investigative questions to be addressed, and potential actions or outputs based on the JFF activity.

| Focus areas | Knowledge and data gaps |
| --- | --- |
| **Post-Mining land use** | ● **Key Questions:**<br><br>    ○ What are the current and planned post-mining land use strategies?<br><br>    ○ What are the legislative and regulatory barriers to adaptive land use?<br><br>    ○ What are the community and stakeholder priorities for post-mining land use (e.g., renewable energy, agriculture, tourism)?<br><br>● **Actions and outputs:**<br><br>Mapping and sequencing current and future status of mine voids and buffer lands<br><br>Documented Traditional Owner priorities and perspectives on land reuse and cultural heritage integration in post-mining.<br><br>Feasibility assessment framework of proposed uses, including recreational, industrial, commercial and residential future uses, alongside renewable energy hubs, biodiversity corridors, and agricultural projects |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Education and skills development** | ● **Key Questions:** |
| | ○ What skills are currently available in the Upper Hunter workforce, and what skills are needed for emerging industries? |
| | ○ What training programs exist, and where are the gaps? |
| | ○ What is the interest level in retraining among mining workers and youth? |
| | ● **Actions and outputs:** |
| | Detailed skills audit for the Upper Hunter workforce, identifying current capabilities and gaps, including availability of local training facilities, courses, and trainers, particularly for energy and technology sectors. |
| | Improved understanding of barriers to participation in retraining or upskilling programs among mining workers and youth. |
| | Industry-specific requirements for workforce skills in renewable energy, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and agribusiness |
| **Local infrastructure** | ● **Key Questions:** |
| | ○ What is the current housing stock and demand for affordable housing in the region? |
| | ○ What infrastructure improvements are needed to support economic diversification and community well-being? |
| | ● **Actions and outputs:** |
| | Detailed data on current housing stock, demand, and affordability in the Upper Hunter region |
| | Identify infrastructure gaps related to healthcare, transport, and utilities to support economic diversification |
| | Support the development of government strategies relating to affordable housing solutions for essential workers |
| **Economic diversification** | ● **Key Questions:** |
| | ○ What industries are viable for economic diversification in the Upper Hunter (e.g., renewable energy, agribusiness, technology)? |
| | ○ How can existing skills and capacity in the region attract or enable these opportunities? |
| | ○ What infrastructure and investment are needed to attract these industries? |
| | ● **Actions and outputs:** |
| | Viability and investment potential of alternative industries (e.g., renewable energy, agribusiness, critical minerals processing). |
| | Existing mining infrastructure that can be repurposed for other industries. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Comparative analysis of successful economic transitions in similar mining-dependent regions. |
| | Specific incentives needed to attract investment and businesses to the Upper Hunter |
| **Community engagement and social cohesion** | <ul><li>**Key Questions:**</li></ul><ul><li>What are the primary concerns and priorities of local communities regarding the transition?</li><li>How can the Dialogue continue to build trust and engagement among stakeholders?</li></ul><ul><li>**Actions and outputs:**</li></ul>Communicate the Upper Hunter community's priorities and concerns regarding the economic and social transition to key decision-makers, including the region's future opportunities and challenges<br><br>Support effective communication approaches for engaging underrepresented groups, including youth and Indigenous communities |
| **Community well-being, including mental health** | <ul><li>**Key Questions:**</li></ul><ul><li>What health and wellbeing services are currently available, which are in decline and where are the gaps?</li><li>What are the specific mental health challenges faced by mining families and transitioning workers?</li></ul><ul><li>**Actions and outputs:**</li></ul>Availability and accessibility of existing mental health services in the Upper Hunter region<br><br>Feasibility of expanding regional mental health services, including funding sources and partnerships |
| **Environmental stewardship** | <ul><li>**Key Questions:**</li></ul><ul><li>What are the current environmental impacts of mining, and what progress has been made in rehabilitation?</li><li>What innovations in rehabilitation, conservation and environmental impact reduction have been implemented or could be piloted in the Upper Hunter?</li></ul><ul><li>**Actions and outputs:**</li></ul>Baseline data on air quality, water use, and rehabilitation progress in the region<br><br>Documentation/showcase of current post-mining lands for innovative projects (e.g., biodiversity corridors, renewable energy) |
| **Cross-cutting regional co-ordination** | <ul><li>**Key Questions:**</li></ul><ul><li>How can governance processes be streamlined to support transition efforts?</li></ul> |

o    What role should a central transition authority play in the region?

● **Actions and outputs:**

General desktop review of strategies to improve inter-agency collaboration and reduce "siloed" decision-making

Success factors relating to current level of regional coordination between mining companies, local governments, and community organisations

Detailed audit of funding availability for pilot projects and initiatives from private and public sources

## 6.2  POTENTIAL UPPER HUNTER PROGRAMS

In addition to a coordinated JFF program, the following actions are proposed as part of a strategic program of works for the Upper Hunter. These actions were developed to address community priorities and aim to enhance socio-economic development and community well-being in the Upper Hunter region. Some of this work is within the scope of the UHMD itself, and other work can be delivered by other stakeholders and in collaborations between the business community, government agencies and the mining sector, fostering a coordinated approach to addressing relevant economic and social challenges.

Based on the issues and priorities identified in this report, the following table presents the key themes and classifies them into three action pathways: Project, Partnership, and Policy/Advocacy.

- **Project:** Actions which can be delivered by a single or lead organisation.
- **Partnership:** Actions which require collaboration across organisations and agencies
- **Policy/Advocacy:** Actions that require legislative or regulatory authority, but where Upper Hunter stakeholders can play a supportive role in advocacy or policy development.

| Focus areas | Key objectives | Suggested UHMD initiatives | Potential other initiatives |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Post-Mining land use** | Sustainable repurposing of post-mining lands (e.g., renewable energy, agriculture, cultural heritage tourism)<br><br>Legislative reform for streamlining land-use planning and approvals<br><br>Inclusion of Traditional Owners in land reuse decisions | Develop case-studies for post-mining land use, such as biodiversity corridors, renewable energy sites, or agroforestry initiatives<br><br>Advocate to government the importance of community involvement and engagement in developing post mining land use strategies and policies | Produce a feasibility assessment framework for innovative post-mining land uses, such as hydroelectric storage, agriculture, or tourism<br><br>Collaboration with local councils, Traditional Owners, and environmental organisations to initiate the development of a regional post-mining land-use framework |
| **Education and skills development** | Regional education and training hub for workforce transition<br><br>Retraining programs for workers in sectors like renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and healthcare<br><br>Apprenticeship and vocational training for youth | Engage with TAFE, universities, training agencies, and local employers to promote training opportunities with emerging industry needs<br><br>Advocate for future skills needs to be considered as part of the future plans for the region, such as a potential skills development hub focused on reskilling programs | Establish a skills development hub (for example, in Muswellbrook) offering tailored reskilling programs |
| **Local infrastructure** | Affordable housing for essential workers and transitioning populations<br><br>Infrastructure planning for new industries and demographic shifts | | Develop a diverse (e.g. modular or subsidised) housing pilot for essential workers<br><br>Engage with local councils and housing providers to co-ordinate community engagement and feedback on housing solutions |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Economic diversification** | Supporting emerging sectors like renewable energy, agribusiness, and technology<br><br>Leveraging mining infrastructure for new industries | Document and showcase existing local initiatives or circular economy projects (e.g. environmental rehabilitation, ash recycling, community batteries, reuse of mining infrastructure) | Work with industry groups to attract investment for innovations in renewable energy and advanced manufacturing<br><br>Support regional economic incentives, such as creating a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to attract investment |
| **Community awareness, engagement and social cohesion** | Transparent communication and reducing consultation fatigue<br><br>Promoting regional pride and combating negative perceptions<br><br>Engaging youth and First Nations communities in regional planning | Launch online community forums and online tools for project updates and engagement<br><br>Collaborate with community groups and advocacy networks to amplify local voices | Advocate for a community-led social investment fund |
| **Community well-being, including mental health** | Addressing mental health challenges, particularly for mining families and workers<br><br>Expanding youth mental health services and domestic violence outreach | | Pilot targeted community mental health awareness campaigns and localised support services<br><br>Partner with healthcare providers and non-profits to improve service delivery<br><br>Advocate for additional regional funding for mental health and social services |
| **Environmental stewardship** | Rehabilitation of mine sites and creating biodiversity corridors<br><br>Water security and advanced water reuse technologies | Continue environmental programs focused on water stewardship, rehabilitation and air quality | Advocate for regulatory support for greater flexibility and responsiveness in mine rehabilitation and leading-edge environmental practices |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Air quality monitoring and emission reduction | Collaborate with environmental NGOs and research institutions to showcase innovative practices in conservation, rehabilitation and environmental impact reduction. | Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to implement innovative practices in conservation, practice conservation, rehabilitation and environmental impact reduction |
| **Cross-cutting regional co-ordination** | Representative transition authority to coordinate regional planning<br><br>Addressing "siloed" governance and ensuring community-led approaches | Work to inform and direct state-supported regional transition authority to oversee economic diversification | Engage with government agencies to streamline regional planning processes<br><br>Facilitate regional planning workshops to align stakeholders on transition priorities |