



Draft Destination Management Plan

City of Newcastle

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Introduction

The Hunter Business Chamber (the Chamber) appreciates this opportunity to provide feedback on the City of Newcastle (CN) Draft Destination Management Plan (DMP).

The Chamber is the Hunter Region's peak business and industry group, representing more than 2,500 member businesses across all sectors, ranging from SMEs to large corporations and organisations. We are connected to the business community statewide and nationally through affiliations with Business NSW and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and we advocate to government at all levels for policies that promote investment, growth and regional prosperity.

Our membership includes many businesses and organisations with an interest in the Newcastle visitor economy, from large stakeholders such as Newcastle Airport, Port of Newcastle and the University of Newcastle to hotels, hospitality venues, retailers and other small businesses that are part of the broader tourism industry. We also have a close association with the Newcastle Tourism Industry Group, to which we provide administrative, marketing and advisory services.

The Hunter Business Chamber was involved in consultation for the draft DMP, contributing feedback through both workshops and an individual interview. We congratulate City of Newcastle on producing a comprehensive and far-reaching plan, and are pleased to offer comment in the following areas .

Regional Coordination

The plan demonstrates a strong emphasis on facilitating greater regional tourism collaboration and an ambition to make Newcastle the 'hub of the Hunter' from a tourist attraction perspective. We agree that regional collaboration has the potential to provide benefits for all local LGAs by packaging a more diverse tourist offering under a regional banner. The vineyards of the Hunter, the blue-water experiences of Port Stephens and wilderness of the Barringtons are all within daytrip distance of Newcastle and should be part of the tourist city's offering. Similarly, those neighbouring areas should be able to take advantage of promoting the proximity of the unique coastal city attractions Newcastle has to offer.

We acknowledge that achieving this collaborative approach is not an easy task, as the remit of individual LGAs does not ordinarily extend to cross-promotion of neighbouring areas. However, we have detected through our recent dealings with council tourism and economic development managers across the region an appetite for greater cooperation and recognition of the increased power of a combined tourism product. We are pleased to see that City of Newcastle is considering taking a leadership role in pursuing this objective.

Events

Events are a significant contributor to the visitor economy and there is great potential to grow this sector in Newcastle. Signature events such as Supercars are important for training the gaze of national and international travellers on the city, establishing the city's reputation as an event destination and bringing in tourist dollars, but there are lessons to be learned from the experiences to date about ensuring that the benefits of hero events flow through to businesses. Negotiations with promoters of signature events should focus on minimising disruption to local traders and ensuring that local providers of food, beverages and other services are preferred where possible. This will not only enhance the economic benefit to the city but project a positive, harmonious image of Newcastle as an event city to promoters and visitors.

We also acknowledge the value of 'next rung' sporting and cultural events to local visitor economies, particularly those such as national sporting championships that run over several days and attract large entourages of spectators and supporters as well as participants. These events bring significant additional spend into the visitor economy for the event duration but also have potential to generate positive widespread word-of-mouth promotion. Pursuing more events of this nature should be an equal priority for city.

We agree there is good scope to grow the city's business events program, and acknowledge the need for a showcase convention centre to attract large and prestigious business events. Given the scarcity of suitable sites remaining for a facility of this nature, CN should ideally be liaising with relevant authorities, such as the Department of Regional NSW and Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation, to ensure a prospective site is identified, preserved and earmarked for this future use.

Newcastle Tourism Industry Group

The DMP acknowledges the importance of the Newcastle Tourism Industry Group (NTIG) in implementing many of the initiatives outlined, however it does not propose any funding avenue or resources to assist the organisation in delivering the anticipated support. NTIG is a not-for-profit group resourced by a small board and supported by the Chamber. It has taken great strides over the past 18 months in unifying local visitor economy businesses and strengthening the industry's relationship with City of Newcastle, but as a voluntary organisation with no paid staff is limited in the contribution it can make.

There are various models used elsewhere which show how council funding and support is provided to an independent industry-driven body to deliver tourism initiatives – Destination Port Stephens and Destination Wollongong, for example. While these specific models may not necessarily be the best for Newcastle, the Chamber believes consideration should be

given to potential funding avenues that would allow NTIG to take a more active role in coordinating industry activities that support the implementation of the DMP.

Market Awareness

The plan makes an important acknowledgment of the relatively low awareness of the tourist offering in potential key markets in Australian capital cities and Auckland and recommends marketing solutions to enhance recognition of Newcastle as a tourist destination. We support this approach, along with additional awareness initiatives locally that will help businesses in areas such as food, beverage and retail understand that they are part of the city's visitor economy and can play a role in enhancing the visitor experience.

Night economy

The Chamber supports the relaxation of city-specific liquor regulations implemented from 2011. The city needs to enhance the night economy and the Chamber offers its continued support in advocating for this outcome. There may be an increased need as residential development in the city continues for council to address the conflict between night economy activities and a growing inner-city population. However, it is also understandable that the same population as well as the community in the wider region recognise the regional capital should offer a range of recreational and night life opportunities.

Bookable experiences and packaging

The plan notes the lack of both bookable experiences and effective packaging and promotion of existing attractions to create linked experiences. In this context, consideration could be given to the development of a 'Newcastle Card' or 'Hunter Card' that would allow visitors to sample a range of experiences from participating operators for a one-off fee.

Hunter Street Mall Enhancement and Placemaking

The plan recognises the importance of the Hunter Street Mall to the Newcastle visitor experience, the need to improve the amenity of the area and its potential to become a dining and entertainment drawcard. With the first stage of the Iris Capital development nearing completion, we agree that the development of a placemaking and activation plan is timely and suggest this might include consideration of incentives to encourage local traders in the precinct to participate and upgrade their spaces. It could also be a catalyst for further renewal in a space that seen by many as iconic to Newcastle, yet currently below its best. Many of the current traders have continued to carry the mall through a sustained period of

downturn, all the while contributing additionally to the BIA funding through a special rate levied on small businesses. Consequently, it would be good to see them rewarded for their loyalty and perseverance by identifying and actioning improvements and having the businesses be part of any future enhancement initiatives.

Infrastructure and enabling

We support the enabling infrastructure priorities outlined in the plan and we offer our continued support in advocating for their delivery. Many of these projects have also been identified as regional priorities by the Chamber, including the Newcastle Airport upgrade, Hunter Park and a cruise terminal solution that is acceptable to and workable for all stakeholders.

Skills shortages

Skills and career pathways should be a priority to support the delivery of the DMP initiatives and could be incorporated into the themes of product development and industry collaboration. Council could consider what role it can play, in collaboration with training organisations, to facilitate career pathways and skills development, both to address current workforce shortages in encourage a higher level of professionalism in the sector, which in turn improves the visitor experience. It is interesting to note the TAFE facilities in the Hunter have a reputation for a strong program in courses and training that feed into the hospitality and tourism sectors. It would make sense that TAFE along with businesses and council work to coordinate a strategy and action plan that sees Newcastle and the region benefit fully from this endowment.

Signature attraction

The plan notes in the introduction the lack of a major hero attraction in Newcastle. Given the focus of this DMP is on leveraging the unique attractions across the existing experience pillars, we acknowledge that this may be a topic of consideration for a future time. However, it is worth noting that adopting a proactive approach to identifying and targeting hero attractions has been successful in comparable cities. While Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art is the often-quoted example of a transformational tourist attraction of this nature, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is perhaps a more pertinent example of what is possible for a regional city when city leaders get behind a project and actively pursue a signature attraction.

Alignment with other regional initiatives

Some of the key initiatives in the DMP have synergies with regional initiatives currently under way and may benefit from alignment with those.

- Work is under way on the Hunter Identity and Positioning Strategy, which seeks to establish the identity and brand of Greater Newcastle as an internationally recognised metropolitan city and promote the competitive advantages of Greater Newcastle to domestic and international markets. While this initiative is not specifically concerned with tourism – rather business, lifestyle and investment attraction more broadly – the visitor economy is likely to feature as a significant sector and the project should be complementary to Newcastle’s destination positioning development.
- The Hunter Joint Organisation has identified the development of a Regional Events Strategy as a strategic priority and is in the process of submitting a grant application for a project to accelerate the event economy through better regional coordination. As the application is being made through the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund, it is initially focused on the seven eligible LGAs within the region, which does not include Newcastle, but the Chamber’s understanding is that the project would have capacity to scale to encompass the three remaining Hunter LGAs.

Alignment with NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2030

The Chamber notes the recent release of the NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2030 and its focus on COVID recovery, which is the first of its five strategic pillars. We also note the outlook for continued restrictions on trading and travel for the foreseeable future and the possibility of internal border restrictions being reinforced in the event of breakouts. In view of these factors, and notwithstanding the inclusion of a COVID 19 industry recovery plan as a priority initiative in the DMP, we question whether there should be stronger emphasis on COVID recovery planning, including identification of target markets least likely to be affected by future border closures and restrictions.

The Chamber appreciates the opportunity to contribute feedback on the City of Newcastle DMP and is happy to be involved in further discussion.

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