Introduction

This report provides an overview of the arts and cultural sector in the Lower Hunter region of NSW. It outlines some of the key issues and trends impacting the region and provides a summary of the structure and business models it operates within. The report is based on consultation with key sector representatives. It has been developed to provide Arts NSW Arts Funding Program (AFP) assessment panels with an up to date overview of the region. Arts NSW acknowledges the invaluable contribution of all involved in the preparation of this report.

Overview – Lower Hunter Region in NSW

The Lower Hunter covers an area of 4,300 square kilometres with a total population of approximately 520,666. It is the sixth largest urban area in Australia and one of the State’s major centres of economic activity. The region is expected to continue to grow as people are attracted by its lifestyle and opportunities. The region includes the following Local Government Authorities (LGAs):

Cessnock City Council – 50,840 pop. (major towns Cessnock, Kurri Kurri)

Lake Macquarie City Council – 189,006 pop. (main centres Toronto, Warners Bay, Belmont, Charlestown, Morisset)

Maitland Council City – 67,478 pop. (major town Maitland) – Maitland is the fastest growing LGA in NSW outside Sydney

Newcastle City Council – 148,535 pop.

Port Stephens Council – 64,807 pop. (major town Raymond Terrace).

The lines between the Upper Hunter and Lower Hunter are blurred. The significant tourist destination of Pokolbin, for example, lies mostly in the Cessnock LGA but usually describes itself as Upper Hunter for brand purposes. Main industries and employers include:

- coal mining
- agriculture
- viticulture and wine making
- tourism and hospitality industries
- horse breeding
- electricity production
- local councils
- State and Federal government service centres

The region has a diverse arts and cultural sector with a number of activities and events occur across art forms. The region does not have a Regional Arts Board (RAB).
Festivals, performance, exhibitions, markets and studios contribute to the arts and cultural environment, particularly in Newcastle. Arts and culture also play a central role in developing active spaces, in place making and engaging communities.

**Performing Arts**

Based in Newcastle, Tantrum Theatre provides innovative arts programs with and for the young people of Newcastle and the surrounding areas. Other theatre activity includes Black Box Theatre which is run through the Newcastle Community Arts Centre.

Music is strongly represented in the region, particularly in Newcastle which is home to numerous organisations and groups including the Newcastle Conservatorium of Music, Newcastle Festival Opera Co-Operative, Newcastle Improvised Music Association, Christ Church Camerata (orchestra) and the Newcastle Youth Orchestra. The Loft Youth Arts and Cultural Centre (established by Newcastle City Council) manage a music incubator program.

There is limited dance activity happening in the Lower Hunter.

Key performing arts venues in the area include:

- Cessnock Performing Arts Centre
- Civic Theatre, Newcastle
- Lake Macquarie Performing Arts Centre
- Playhouse, Newcastle

**Visual Arts**

Regional galleries in the area include Cessnock Regional Art Gallery, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, Maitland Regional Art Gallery and the Newcastle Art Gallery. The Newcastle Art Gallery holds the second largest collection of art in NSW, featuring significant Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal works of art. Significant renovations to the Newcastle Art Gallery building have been planned for a decade and were set to proceed in 2013 but have recently been put on hold by the Council due to financial pressures within the Council’s budget.

In Newcastle, The Loft Youth Arts and Cultural Centre offers classes in art, craft and design, and has two exhibition spaces. The Lock-up Cultural Centre also runs an exhibition program. Newcastle has three artist run initiatives – PODspace Gallery (Octapod Association), Newcastle Art Space (Newcastle Community Arts Centre) and Watt Space (UON). Port Stephens Council manages the Mezzanine Community Exhibition Space for local artists and cultural and community groups, and the Newcastle City Council also offers the Nobbys exhibition space for community groups.

**Festivals**

The Octapod Association was conceived as an incubator and a common infrastructure for a variety of independent projects. Octapod’s main project, the This Is Not Art Festival (TINA) began in 1998 and is dedicated to the exploration of experimental and emerging arts media and concepts. Held annually in Newcastle, the Festival presents a diverse program of over 250 events. across four days. The 2012 Festival included The Crack Theatre Festival, Critical Animals (creative research symposium) and The National Young Writers’ Festival. In 2013 the Festival will also include Electrofringe (experimental electronic arts and culture festival).

Smaller festivals include: Newcastle Writers’ Festival, Newcastle Jazz Festival, Karuah Blue Grass Festival in Port Stephens, the Blue Water Country Music Festival in Nelson Bay, the Nelson Bay Blue Water Sculpture Festival, and the Real Film Festival in Newcastle. The popular music festival Groovin’ the Moo, which travels to regional centres across Australia, has previously been held in Maitland.
Literature

A key organisation in the region is the Hunter Writers’ Centre which supports literary culture in the region by assisting emerging and professional writers through professional development activities, resources and strategic partnerships with other groups and organisations. The Centre also administers the Newcastle Poetry Prize. In 2013 the inaugural Newcastle Writers’ Festival took place in a number of inner-city venues.

The National Young Writers’ Festival is the country’s largest gathering of young writers working in both new and traditional forms including zines, comics, blogging, screenwriting, poetry, spoken word, hip hop music, journalism, autobiography, comedy, song writing and prose.

The Loft writing program assists young people to write, design, publish and distribute zines. There are also 27 libraries throughout the Lower Hunter area.

Museums and History

The Lower Hunter is home to the Newcastle Museum which is situated in a new facility at the Honeysuckle site in the civic and cultural precinct. The Newcastle Maritime Centre, located in a restored wharf building, houses a collection focusing on local maritime activity in Newcastle and the Hunter River. The Morpeth Museum in the Maitland LGA focuses on local history and is housed in the historic court house.

Historical societies exist in Cessnock, Maitland, Lake Macquarie, Newcastle and Port Stephens.

Aboriginal Arts and Culture

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery takes an active role in engaging with the Aboriginal community in terms of exhibition content, community workshops, education programs and collections. The Gallery formed an Aboriginal Reference Group in 2000 and since then has worked in partnership on more than 19 projects. At least 75% of the Gallery’s exhibitions include Aboriginal content.

The Loft’s Aboriginal youth arts program services Newcastle and the surrounding areas. The program includes education, cultural re-engagement processes, mentoring and skills development for participants across a variety of areas of practice including traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Place making / Urban renewal

Newcastle has a particular emphasis on place making and the role of art and culture in helping to identify and create active spaces. Renew Newcastle was established in 2008 to activate on a short or medium term otherwise empty buildings in the Newcastle CBD as incubation spaces for arts projects, creative enterprises, cultural activities and community groups. It was the first creative enterprise hub to be developed in Australia.

L!vesites, an initiative of Newcastle City Council and the Hunter Development Corporation, undertakes place making activities and business activation with the aim to develop a sustainable creative industry in Newcastle. The program delivers events and activities which draw together artists and organisations to the Newcastle’s public spaces. L!vesites is part of Newcastle Now, a not-for-profit association representing property owners, businesses and residents of the inner city of Newcastle.

In May 2013 Newcastle City Council released a discussion paper on Newcastle’s night time economy, which includes arts and cultural activities. The purpose of the paper is to determine how Council can support the night time economy through planning controls.
Training and education

The Hunter Institute of TAFE has nine campuses throughout the Lower Hunter region, with the Newcastle campus offering arts courses though the Newcastle Art School, Newcastle Media and Film School, Newcastle School of Music, and the Regional Institute of Performing Arts. UON also runs courses in fine arts, music (Newcastle Conservatorium of Music) and the performing arts.

Key Issues

Space

- The high costs of space and accommodation, and ageing infrastructure have been highlighted as areas of concern for the region.

Career pathways and training

- Like other regional areas, the movement of artists, particularly emerging, away from the area to pursue careers elsewhere is an issue.
- Artists require support to move beyond the emerging stage of the career and this could be achieved through opportunities such as mentoring.
- Funding changes to TAFE have created reported gaps in training within the Lower Hunter arts sector.

Collaboration and Information Sharing

- Organisations in the area have identified that a collegiate attitude towards funding is important as limited resources can threaten partnerships between organisations.
- The fragmentation of the arts sector and the difficulty this poses for information sharing between organisations is seen as an issue. There is a need for a single information hub which could include up to date resources, case studies and current opportunities available.

Organisational Capacity

- The limiting nature of volunteerism, the need for expertise in governance, and staffing levels have been identified as areas of concern for arts organisations within the Lower Hunter.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Concentration of practitioners and creative industries with strong skill base.
- Active participation by residents in arts and cultural activities.
- Institutions – four regional galleries, Newcastle Museum, libraries, TAFE, University of Newcastle (UON) and its Conservatorium of Music.
- Significant events such as TINA (This Is Not Art Festival).
- Strong partnerships.
- Increasing younger population and families.
- Public spaces.
- Close connection between city and country.
- Attractive built and natural environment.
- Strong digital connectivity and use of technology.
- Diversity of practice.
Weaknesses

- Transport and the geographic spread of the region.
- Competing pressures on local government.
- Expertise in governance.
- Staffing levels.
- Limiting nature of volunteerism.
- Fragmentation of the arts sector and the difficulty this poses for sharing information between organizations.
- Movement of artists away from the area – perception that artists aren’t well regarded unless they have gained experience outside the region.
- No clear career progression for artists.

Opportunities

- Strong support for cultural activity from local population.
- Young population.
- Young artists and new forms being explored – an opportunity for the region specifically Newcastle, to become an incubator for emerging artists and the creative industries.
- Rich local history including Aboriginal heritage.
- Leverage tourism interest in the region.
- Strong links across the arts spectrum.
- New people relocating from capital cities.
- Affordability of region.
- Developing a local culture of corporate support and philanthropy.
- National Broadband and digital economy.
- Develop new models to support artists with disability and arts and cultural programs involving people with disability. From 2013 to 2015 Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Maitland are the initial LGAs in NSW for the rollout of the new National Disability Insurance Scheme (now called DisabilityCare Australia).
- Creative use of spaces.
- Redevelopment in Newcastle.
- Mentoring.
- Review of the Newcastle City Council’s Community Strategic Plan.
- Encouraging the sharing of information between organisations e.g. through creation of an information hub.

Threats

- Financial constraints.
- Ageing infrastructure.
- Competition for funding rather than being collegiate.
- Cost of space and accommodation.
- Limited resources can threaten partnerships.