

23 June 2026

Few Hunter highlights in household-focused NSW Budget

Business Hunter has welcomed the allocation of \$14 million to begin planning and development of a new Newcastle Entertainment Centre in a NSW budget that was otherwise modest in terms of new handouts for the Hunter.

CEO Bob Hawes said Treasurer Daniel Moohkey's budget was focused on cost-of-living relief measures rather than big new projects.

"We are happy to see funding dedicated to progressing the new Newcastle Entertainment Centre, although the budget does not provide detail on how the money will be spent," Mr Hawes said.

"Our submission sought funding for both the Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation to undertake planning for the first stage of the precinct and for Venues NSW to initiate detailed planning, costing and scoping of a new entertainment centre.

"Our understanding is that the money in the budget is going to Venues NSW, which is a good start, but we will be continuing our advocacy for resourcing to ensure continued progress on both the precinct and a new entertainment centre."

The biggest new spends for the region were in education, with funding announced for a new primary school at Chisholm and the relocation of Cooranbong primary and Maitland Grossman high schools. The Net Zero Manufacturing Centre of Excellence at Tighes Hill TAFE will also share in additional new funding.

Importantly for the economic future of the region, the budget contains a provision for NSW to contribute to a federal support package to secure the future of Tomago Aluminium, but does not specify how much money will be committed.

The budget confirms continued funding for major road and infrastructure projects in the Hunter, including the John Hunter, Cessnock and Muswellbrook hospital redevelopments and the M1 Raymond Terrace extension, Singleton and Muswellbrook bypasses and Nelson Bay Road upgrade. While there was no substantial funding for John Hunter Hospital Stage 2 projects, the Budget allocates \$1 million to plan for new paediatric oncology services.

"We welcome the additional \$55 million to complete the John Hunter Hospital Acute Services Building and the government's recognition of the increasing cost pressures on major building projects over recent years," Mr Hawes said.

"We will be maintaining pressure for Stage 2 funding to flow in future budgets to ensure the new building is resourced to operate at optimal level, delivering all the services our community expects and needs."

Also encouraging was the government's continued investment in renewable energy infrastructure, which included an additional \$39 million over four years for an acceleration fund to fast-track projects, including the Hunter Transmission Project.

"We need to improve the pace of delivery of renewable projects to stay on track to meet our Net Zero targets, and having transmission infrastructure and transport connections in place is a critical step," Mr Hawes said.

While the budget delivered cost-of-living concessions for households, it offered little to help businesses weather increased cost pressures.

"The budget foreshadows future reform of the Emergency Services Levy but does not offer any immediate relief, and it missed the opportunity to reduce the tax burden on small businesses by restructuring payroll tax," Mr Hawes said.

The budget commits \$10 million for the development of a new business advisory service to replace Business Connect. Business Hunter and its state affiliate Business NSW advocated for the reinstatement of the service after it was axed last year.

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