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# **CITY OF NEWCASTLE**

Covid-19 Taskforce Evaluation

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# City of Newcastle Covid-19 Taskforce Evaluation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City Taskforce was established to provide local leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. It is led by City of Newcastle, and acts as a local coordinating authority to oversee the second and recovery phases of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. It is made up of 17 key city leaders across manufacturing, small business, financial services, tourism, transport and logistics, arts and culture, workers, education, business, community sectors and state government representatives. Members of the Taskforce include senior representatives from Newcastle Airport, Hunternet, Samaritans, Independent Creative Alliance Newcastle, Newcastle Permanent, Greater Bank, Hunter Workers, Wests Group, Colliers International, NSW Government (Regional NSW), University of Newcastle, Port of Newcastle and Hunter New England Health.

The first meeting was in mid-April and Taskforce concluded at the end of the 2020.

The COVID-19 City Taskforce (City Taskforce) aimed to be a collaborative forum to identify non-health impacts for City of Newcastle business and community from the COVID-19 pandemic and generate local solutions. In-kind contribution of staff / human resources of Taskforce members supported a series of work streams. This support was facilitated through an Action Team (25 members) and smaller working groups. The City Taskforce established five clear work streams including advocacy, direct industry support, local evidence base, youth employment, and a collaboration forum for new ideas.

This evaluation uses Taskforce documents, such as minutes and communiqués, along with a series of semi-structured interviews with Taskforce members to explore: the appropriateness of original Taskforce aims, its operation, key activities and outputs and concludes by looking at perceived value, impact and achievement as well as its ongoing legacy.

Overall evaluation findings reveal that it has shown early success as a mechanism for collaboration, advocacy, in developing better channels for city intelligence and in designing ground-up solutions for the city's most impacted communities and sectors.

### **Key findings of the Taskforce evaluation in relation to appropriateness and effectiveness:**

**A City Taskforce was necessary:** a Taskforce is distinguished by having relatively less intensive collaboration and being focused on *“specific, highly important, time-critical and often complex issues”* (Nous, 2013). Applying this definition would support decision by the City of Newcastle to lead the City Taskforce in the face of important, time critical and complex issue posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Taskforce members interviewed were uniformly in agreement that having a Taskforce was necessary. They were also generally in agreement that the aims of the Taskforce as stated in the Terms of Reference were necessary and appropriate, particularly at the point when the Taskforce was established in early April. **Despite the fact the city did not end up in a health crisis, having the Taskforce was seen to be a significant achievement to address the ongoing non-health impacts. To**

this end the overarching aims as expressed in the Terms of Reference were supported by mutual goals of Taskforce members, such that there was a common purpose and a perceived shared benefit among Taskforce members.

**The Taskforce provided united and deliberate leadership for the COVID-19 pandemic.**

There was a strongly expressed consensus among interviewees that a Taskforce which facilitated united and deliberate City leadership was needed during the COVID pandemic, and it was important for City leaders to be aligned. This **collegiality** was felt to be a new way of working for the City by a number of interviewees and City of Newcastle staff.

**Membership was representative and facilitated cross-sector collaboration:** A key objective of the Taskforce was to bring together interdisciplinary expertise and cross-sectoral perspectives, to fill information gaps and assist in rapid city response. The cross-sector representation of the 17 Leadership Team members of the Taskforce was widely acknowledged as an enabler of the Taskforce's operation. Interviewees consistently highlighted that there was a diversity of representation across government, business, industry, and community and arts sectors within the city. An interviewee highlighted that the sport and leisure sector was not well represented. Several interviewees identified a need for better representation of indigenous groups and culturally and linguistically diverse communities on the Taskforce.

**The Taskforce was well governed and facilitated, with a clear organisational structure:**

most interviewees commented that the governance and management of the Taskforce was efficient, well organised and well-coordinated. Several interviewees felt the City Taskforce secretariat and Chair were able to effectively facilitate ownership and enable members to share information on their own sectors, and to contribute and shape outcomes for the crisis response. Others commented that genuine collaborative problem-solving may have been assisted by facilitation of a more direct communication and less council direction of content for discussion.

**Participation and commitment:** a number of agencies represented (for example in real-estate and hospitality) in the early stages of the Taskforce withdrew as the focus of the Taskforce evolved. There was a tendency to delegate attendance from CEOs to senior management as the Taskforce progressed. Delegation and the involvement of less senior staff was however noted by a number of interviewees to have "*fostered officer to officer level interactions*" which may have been more beneficial in progressing the outputs of the Taskforce and in building new relationships able to pursued offline.

**The Taskforce strengthened and/or built new relationships amongst member**

**organisations:** the Taskforce was perceived to have provided a significant opportunity to form new, and strengthen existing relationships with other sectors and leaders in Newcastle. It also enabled the identification of partnership opportunities and areas of alignment across different sectors. Some interviewees however identified differences in operating language and culture as a barrier to the building of successful relationships.

In relation to Taskforce achievements against aims as stated in the Terms of Reference, interviewees highlighted that the key value generated from the Taskforce related to its **timeliness** in being brought into operation just as COVID-19 pandemic was breaking, many interviewees praised the City of Newcastle in being first movers, proactive in showing City leadership within the region.

There was a general consensus as has already been discussed that the Taskforce acted as a successful and coordinated vehicle for **advocacy** to other levels of government as to the most innovative and targeted support to assist heavily impacted local industries. Several interviewees felt that the advocacy was well timed because policy-makers at the state and federal level were open to local advocacy and evidence, because policy and program responses were evolving more fluidly. In summary, key responses from state and federal government to advocacy to date have commended the City of Newcastle on the formation of the City Taskforce and highlighted the Taskforce's novel and constructive nature. It has also thanked the Taskforce for the quality of its local evidence base which has included valuable data and case studies, along with the clarity of the suggested policy responses.

The Taskforce aimed to be a mechanism for **collaboration and sharing local insight** in order to improve local responses to COVID impacts. Interviewees were almost uniformly in agreement that the Taskforce had been effective in **sharing real-time knowledge and local insights**. This supported a view by City leadership that there was a particular role for local government in **social cohesion and communication** during the pandemic. In this way the Taskforce also generated value for members individually and organizationally through knowledge building and the production of new and timely information important for decision-making within members own sectors.

Mixed views were expressed with regard to the City Taskforce's success in **designing local solutions. The Industry Response Program was seen to be a well targeted and significant tangible outcome of the Taskforce.** In addition to funding five successful projects, a perhaps greater measure of the success of the **Industry Response Program** in designing local solutions - was its ability via the visibility of the EOI process to generate high quality local ground-up collaborations, which resulted in a large number of eligible and innovative funding applications across the city. Five of these applications were successfully funded through other City of Newcastle funding sources. A minority of interviewees questioned whether the Taskforce had met what they believed to be its ultimate aims **in terms of local problem solving, providing immediate crisis responses and delivering local solutions**, but acknowledged that in this the Taskforce was constrained by finance, and by its degree of power, delegation and control in the broader political hierarchy. Several interviewees recognized and supported the City Taskforce's intent to produce both immediate, mid-term and longer-term deliverables, believing the benefits of this approach became more apparent as the crisis rolled on. Others offered that it was not reasonable to expect advocacy to produce an immediate outcome and proof of value would lie in using these documents and frameworks for ongoing city advocacy.

**Resourcing and value for money for the City of Newcastle:** City of Newcastle leadership expressed the view that the outcomes for resources committed were excellent – both in terms of headline outputs and advocacy, getting sign-off and alignment across infrastructure priorities from City leaders and laying the foundation for ongoing collaborative work to address systemic issues in the City through the Youth Employment Charter and the city evidence base and analytics work. The model itself anticipated that much of the problem-solving and the substantive work of the Taskforce would happen out of session. City of Newcastle staff reflected mid-year that this was hampered both in and out of session in practice by a number of member organisations being unable to meet the initial undertaking to provide a resource equivalent to half full-time equivalent per week to the Action Team, and by the inability to meet face-to-face. This was partly due to the delegation challenge with the breadth of the five work streams.

**Legacy and ongoing work:** it was expressed that the legacy of the City Taskforce would be its place in Newcastle’s history as an example of “*appropriate collaboration and response to crisis*”. The City Taskforce was seen by many as a good starting point for future collaboration and partnerships. Other interviewees felt the Taskforce’s legacy would be the tangible documents that provide a reference point to show that agreement can be met, and collaborations can be positive and fruitful. Whilst this Taskforce is dissolving at the end of 2020, a number of interviewees were of the view that it would be beneficial for Taskforce members to continue to be involved in different events, discussions, and opportunities on an ongoing basis. Senior leadership in the City of Newcastle have indicated that the Taskforce work, or at least several components of it such as the local evidence and data analytics stream will be ongoing. The work of the Taskforce provides proof-of-concept regarding the value of cross-sector collaboration in solving City problems, and has been identified by interviewees as a model which can be rolled out in the future. In 2021 its ongoing work will be absorbed in the work of the City of Newcastle Strategy and Innovation Committee of Council.

## TASKFORCE THEORY

Cross-sector collaboration provides a means to pool the capacities and resources of actors across different sectors to deliver better solutions for complex social, economic and environmental problems (Van Tulder *et al.*, 2016:2; Brinkerhoff, 2002a, 2002b). As such, Taskforces' have an "imperative to realise benefits for the wider community rather than special interests" (Skelcher and Sullivan, 2001:752 cited in Van Tulder *et al.*, 2016:1).

At the same time models of collaboration have grown in popularity within government, having the potential to pool resources and ideas and so increase innovation and provide a cost-effective solution to organisational problems and/or broader public issues. They aim to deliver innovative solutions for 'big picture' or complex social problems and have an imperative to generate benefits for the wider community.

In theory, partnerships generate value as partnership processes and interaction transform information into capability (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a: 940). Trust facilitates the work of the collaboration (Nous Group, 2013a:17) and is built by sharing information and knowledge and demonstrating competency, good intentions and follow-through. There are also barriers that need to be addressed in collaborative arrangements. These include power imbalances such that costs and benefits are not evenly distributed amongst partners.

There are several collaborative models for coordinating collective interests. The common principle of these models is coordination of collective interests/actions that does not necessarily involve direct financial transactions between participating members.

Nous Group (2013a) have ranked these models below (Table 1) based on the increasing intensity and complexity of collaboration, they range from a coordinating forum to dedicated outsourced broker.

A Taskforce is distinguished by having relatively less intensive collaboration and being focused on "specific, highly important, time-critical and often complex issues."

**Table 1 Collaborative Models Based Primarily on Coordination of Collective Interests.**

Model	Purpose
Coordinating Forum	Provides a forum for formal consultation to coordinate the delivery of different programs and services. Often place-based.
<b>Taskforce</b>	<b>Used to pool knowledge and coordinate specific actions to address specific, highly important, time-critical and often complex issues.</b>
Joint Team	Used to address policy or service design issues that cut across multiple departments/sector and benefit from shared accountability structures
Frontier/Joined-Up Entity	Used to deliver a new service with a whole-of-government approach
Outsourced Coordinator/Broker	Used to outsource to a private not for profit organisation who may be better placed to coordinate parties to work together to deliver a desired outcome. Often place-based

Increasing intensity of collaboration



Source: Nous Group (2013b). Collaboration Blueprint. Prepared for the NSW Public Service Commission.

The following were identified as key features of collaboration (Nous Group, 2013b:4):

- Commonality of mission/purpose
- Compatible authority and control mechanisms
- Formality of relationship
- Trust between collaborators
- Investment in collaboration
- Risk, benefit and resource sharing
- Communication and information sharing.

The literature also identifies a number of key enablers and barriers to successful collaboration:

<p><b>Enablers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mutual goals, purpose and a shared benefit.</li><li>• The existence or possibility of trust in the relationship, and early proof of the effectiveness of the relationship.</li><li>• Strong effective leadership.</li><li>• Influential individuals and the ability to effect 'informal' collaboration</li><li>• Appropriate governance.</li></ul> <p><b>Barriers/Inhibitors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Power asymmetries and the presence of alternative mechanisms to achieve outcomes/objectives</li><li>• Inadequate accountability and responsibility arrangements</li><li>• Insufficient investment (in terms of effort, time, resources and cost)</li><li>• Differences in operating language and culture.</li></ul>
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Source: (Nous Group, 2013b: 7).

Benefits likely to be delivered by collaborative models include:

- Improved knowledge and ideas to access specific knowledge or approaches, as well as to broaden input regarding a problem and therefore increase the quantity and quality of possible solutions;
- Improved skills or competencies – technical or experience based;
- New or improved relationships, and
- New or improved assets – including access to physical assets and intangible assets such as knowledge (intellectual property) or expertise, including how to best undertake an aspect of the planned investment.

Indirect benefits achieved through the experience of collaboration are often under-recognised. This is in part because collaborative relationships often operate outside the boundaries of hierarchical relationships, and are fostered by voluntary cooperation. These benefits may include (Nous Group, 2013a: 13):

- Personal and organisational relationships – working together can build a foundation for future collaborations;
- Increased societal trust – agencies have an opportunity to demonstrate openness to learn and work collaboratively with others and the broader community, and
- Increased societal engagement – through working with others, this may also build acceptance or support for the policy and program that is the focus of the collaboration.

On the flip-side *Nous Group (2013a:14)* identified that cost savings and value added by efforts from collaborative models are contested. Participants in collaborative models are usually required to

invest significant time and effort in the venture itself and also extra time to develop and maintain the collaboration. The difficulty in developing and maintaining collaborative relationships, as well as promoting enablers and overcoming barriers may compound the 'investment' required.

## TASKFORCE EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The project methodology was designed to answer the overarching research questions:

1. How appropriate were Taskforce aims?
2. How well did the Taskforce operate?
3. What were its key activities and outputs?
4. What were the Taskforce achievements? What contribution has the Taskforce made to address the non-health impacts of COVID for the City of Newcastle's businesses and broader community?

The elements of the methodology for evaluating the Taskforce included:

- A literature review of existing frameworks and tools developed in other settings to assess the functioning and impact of partnerships and networks, in order to identify those that may be appropriately and readily adapted to assessing the value delivered by the Taskforce.
- Review of available Taskforce minutes and reports to Government to assist in analysing the nature of the developing relationships between Taskforce members and Taskforce processes.
- Short online survey of Taskforce Action Group members regarding the operation, value and achievements of the Taskforce Action Group.
- In-depth interviews with 14 members of the Taskforce Leadership Team and Action Group who were available within the prescribed timeframe and budget for the project, to assess their perceptions of the Taskforce's aims, operation and impact. A list of stakeholders interviewed is provided in Appendix 1.
- Interviews were conducted via online platform, with an average duration of approximately 30-40 minutes. The research team developed a question path for these interviews, based on the outcomes of the literature review in conjunction with the objectives and requirements of the project, provided in Appendix 2. The question path was approved by the client and used to guide the interviews. The question path examined the views of Taskforce members on:
  - Aspects of the Taskforce's work/relationships that have been useful to them;
  - The extent to which participation in the Taskforce has influenced or supported decision-making within the member's stakeholder group;
  - The processes and influences on the focus of the Taskforce;
  - The way(s) in which the current structure of the Taskforce has supported or hindered the developing relationships;
  - The legacy/contribution of the Taskforce to date and how it could best inform decision-making and policy development within Newcastle into the future.

## TASKFORCE STRUCTURE, IMPLEMENTATION AND PROCESS

Senior City of Newcastle leadership “*could see the pandemic coming*” and felt the COVID-19 pandemic had distinct implications for cities in NSW that were not a capital city, in that for these cities there was a “*higher level of response that’s required from the local government level and a higher level of community expectation.*”

Under the *City of Newcastle Pandemic Plan NSW Health* is designated as the lead agency to determine the response, but there was felt to be a particular role for local government in social cohesion and communication during the pandemic. There was also a recognised opportunity to look at other international models. While the City of Newcastle had a particular industrial response and a need to look to operation of front facing community services with the breaking of the pandemic, another role for the City of Newcastle was supporting Newcastle to “*come together as a community to assist the community around the communications and the fear that circulated around the community at the time*”. There was a recognised:

*“Need to address mixed-messages, bringing very large employers together, sharing that knowledge and looking to the future. This included making sure that there was clear cohesion amongst leaders, political leaders but more around industry and organisational leaders.”*

The Taskforce was deliberately established with a sunset clause for the end of the year with the intent to run a duration of 17 April 2020 to 31 December 2020.

Regular briefings at each Taskforce meeting were to be provided by:

- Mr Michael DiRienzo, CEO Hunter New England Health on local public health impacts and considerations
- Dr Anthea Bill, Lead Economist Hunter Research Foundation Centre on local Newcastle economic impacts and considerations.

Leadership Team aims, as expressed in the Terms of Reference (TOR) are broader and longer-term:

- To provide local leadership to local issues
- To act as the local coordinating advisory committee to oversee the second and recovery phases of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.
- To make recommendations to Council and Industry Organisations as to the most innovative and targeted support to assist heavily impacted local industries.
- To liaise with the State Government, under the delegation of the Council, via regular updates from Regional NSW (Department of Premier & Cabinet).
- To make recommendations regarding outbound communications capacity by coordinating major media outlets across television, print and social and procuring a creative agency
- To make recommendations to Council and Stakeholder organisations regarding community well-being and social cohesion through this difficult time.

As already mentioned in the context of the Resilience Package, within which the Taskforce sits as success factor for the City of Newcastle’s Taskforce was that it was very timely and one of the first established across Australian LGAs. The Taskforce terms of reference were scoped on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, with all invitees accepting invitations for the first meeting on the 17<sup>th</sup> April and the first meeting was held on the 24<sup>th</sup> April. The first Action Team workshop was held and 24<sup>th</sup> April.

## Structure

The City Taskforce consisted of two teams: a Leadership Team, comprised of civic and industry leaders, and an Action Team. The Terms of Reference stated that the Action Team was to work alongside the Leadership Team and implement proposed actions. The structure of the Taskforce distinguished between the Leadership Team, with CEO representation operating as a forum for information-sharing, and the Action Team with senior manager/officer level representation was to drive joint problem solving (including via break-out task groups).

The intent of the design was such that the Action Team was to be an ideas generator and implementation group, while endorsement was to be provided by the Taskforce Leadership team. Recommendations for actions were to originate from the Action Team to Leadership Team and endorsements and/or suggestions for course corrections fed back from Leadership Team to the Action Team. The City of Newcastle has provided comment that it expected members to not just come and provide updates, instead both of meetings attempted to create value. For example through the economic and health update in the Leadership Team and via the City of Newcastle bringing a problem that could be collectively solved, such as youth unemployment in the Action Team. While the Action Team was to contribute in session to the co-design a solution, a lot of the real work and value happened outside of the meeting. Communication between the Leadership Team and the Action Team was largely expected to occur offline given representatives were from the same organisation, however CN staff also provided regular updates on Action Team activities in Leadership Team meetings.

## City Taskforce Leadership Team

Under the Terms of Reference (ToR) Leadership Team members were asked to commit to:

- a) Represent their sector by seeking innovative ideas and proposing new programs of work to support Newcastle's recovery from COVID-19
- b) Make recommendations to Council in relation to the types of support to be provided to economic stimulus programs
- c) Facilitate the delivery of these programs through in-kind support of 0.5+ FTE to join the City Taskforce Action Team. **Additional financial support would be welcomed**, and
- d) Attend all leadership meetings (2hrs every fortnight) or nominate a delegated representative.

Action Team members were expected to commit to:

- a) Scoping, refining and implementing a proposed program of work from the City Taskforce.
- b) Providing detailed updates on program implementation to the Leadership Team, and
- c) Rolling evaluation of programs to ensure agility and responsiveness of programs to City needs.

## Membership

The Leadership Team was to meet via digital platform initially on a fortnightly basis and from June this changed to monthly. The City Taskforce Action Team, was convened fortnightly and shifted to once a month.

Each organisation was to be represented by their CEO or nominated delegate, and each organisation was to provide 0.5+ FTE to work for the City Taskforce Action Team, while City of Newcastle was to provide up to 6 FTE to implement initiatives of the Taskforce. City of Newcastle support was provided by Mr Simon Massey (Economic Strategy and Government Relations Manager, City of Newcastle) and Dr Nathaniel Bavinton (Smart City Coordinator) – as well as Mr Brett Smith (CN Director Strategy & Engagement) and Ms Ashlee Abbott (CN Manager Community, Strategy & Innovation). Secretariat support was provided by Ms Natalie Peattie (CN Executive Assistant). Further CN resources were committed in terms of CN providing a note-taker and Chair for both Leadership and Action Group meetings.

**Table 2 List of Taskforce Members**

#	Sector	Title / Organisation	Name
1	City	Lord Mayor City of Newcastle	Cr Nuatali Nelmes (Chair)
2	Business	CEO Hunter Business Chamber	Mr Bob Hawes
3	Industry	CEO Hunternet	Mr Tony Cade
4	Industry	CEO Port of Newcastle	Mr Craig Carmody
5	Industry	CEO Newcastle Airport	Mr Peter Cock
6	Education	Vice Chancellor University of Newcastle	Professor Alex Zelinsky AO
7	Community	CEO Samaritans, Chair of Third Sector Group	Mr Brad Webb
8	Tourism	CEO Alloggio	Mr Will Creedon
9	Arts	Independent Creative Alliance	Ms Justine Coggan
10	Finance	CEO Newcastle Permanent	Ms Bernadette Inglis
11	Finance	CEO Greater Bank	Mr Scott Morgan
12	Insurance	CEO NIB	Mr Mark Fitzgibbon
13	Unions	Secretary Hunter Workers	Mr Daniel Wallace
14	Sport & Hospitality	CEO Wests Group	Mr Philip Gardner
15	Development & Property	Director, Newcastle, Colliers International	Mr Peter McAdam
16	Health	CEO Hunter New England Health	Mr Michael DiRienzo
17	State Government Coordination	Director Regional NSW	Ms Alison McGaffin

Additional Members:

Additional city collaborations may also be invited to contribute at various stages, including, but not limited to:

- Newcastle Tourism Industry Group
- Live Music Taskforce
- Australian Hotels Association
- Makers & Traders
- Business Improvement Association
- Hunter Joint Organisation
- Shop, Distributive, and Allied Employees' Association.

#### Action Team Members:

- Economic Development Facilitator, City of Newcastle, Simon Massey (co-lead)
- Smart City Coordinator, City of Newcastle, Nathaniel Bavinton (co-lead)
- All stakeholder organisations to nominate an appropriate staff member(s)
- Additional members invited as the need arises

The Terms of Reference expected the Leadership Team would commit 1.5-hour of time commitment per fortnight and from 5 June, meetings were to be held monthly. The Action Team was to provide a 2 hour commitment of time per fortnight and break-out groups were to be established to work on specific tasks as required.

Participation in the Action Group ask for contribution of skills from members, included:

- Policy / advocacy skills for writing and pulling together of The Newcastle Response
- Research / data analysis skills for development of The Newcastle Response
- Communication skills for promotion of The Newcastle Response and Industry-Response Program
- Media partners
- Data science skills for Local Evidence Base Work Stream, and

Further collaboration of the Action Team, included representatives from:

- Retail/Hospitality
- Hotels Industry
- Live Music
- Tourism Industry
- Arts/Cultural Sector
- Business Improvement Associations

# Evaluation Feedback

## APPROPRIATENESS

Taskforce members interviewed were generally in agreement that having a Taskforce *per se* and the aims of the Taskforce as stated in the Terms of Reference (ToR) were necessary and appropriate, particularly at the point in the COVID-19 pandemic when the Taskforce was established in early April. **Despite the fact the City did not end up in a health crisis, having the Taskforce was still seen to be a significant achievement to address the significant an ongoing non-health impacts for the City.**

**There was a strongly expressed consensus among interviewees that a Taskforce which facilitated united and deliberate City leadership was needed during the COVID pandemic, and it was important for City leaders to be aligned during the pandemic.** To this end the overarching aims as expressed in the ToR were supported by mutual goals, purpose and a perceived shared benefit among Taskforce members:

*“People had to stand up, and it gave a forum to people, that could be recognised, to stand up to give confidence to everyone else, it was leadership in chaos and leaders supporting leaders. This was one of the strengths the Taskforce brought, it zoned in pretty quickly in particular areas that were suffering more than others.”*

*“Yes, if you go back to those times, keeping in mind collaboration is generated by success or disaster...yes you should have had a Taskforce, that leadership thing has to come through when you get a disaster (and I say disaster to distinguish from a success), people hanker for it and somebody needs to do it.”*

*“At that time we had the opportunity to have people think differently because we all knew tomorrow was going to exist differently.”*

*“It was well-conceived at a principle level; is there a role for local government in helping their community through these issues? I would say yes. Obviously plenty of gaps in the Commonwealth and state services that are available, particularly a larger entity like the City of Newcastle knows its patch and has some capacity and good relationships.”*

*“Having leaders come together to be deliberate and aligned about what the priorities are and how we should respond, was solid gold.”*

*“I applaud them for the leadership because that was necessary.”*

Interviewees conceptualised the Taskforce aims differently; some felt that that Taskforce had a clear mission to generate concrete local solutions while others felt that it was about demonstrating collaboration and leadership at a time of crisis. It was commonly expressed that a key aim of the Taskforce was to bring together different sectors and levels of government to converse on a City-wide basis.

Other interviewees felt that the aim of the Taskforce was to provide clarity and authoritative information to address mixed-messages from conflicting information during the COVID crisis. To this end interviewees commented that an aim was to have consistent and clear health updates from Hunter New England Health (HNE) as well as the Hunter Research Foundation (HRF) on the economic impacts of the pandemic.

*“Make sure the response to the pandemic was coordinated and there was broader information sharing about what was occurring and what initiatives were being developed.”*

At least one interviewee felt a key aim of the City Taskforce was to be “a nerve centre for City leaders during the pandemic response”. Senior leadership from within the City of Newcastle commented:

*“There was a rolling response from Premiers but that doesn’t necessarily assist with areas outside of the capital city..need a way to communicate locally...it allowed a regular point of contact from leaders in each industry to share that knowledge and health as the lead agency.”*

Several interviewees questioned whether having a broader regional focus, given that LGA boundaries are somewhat arbitrary and many of the problems being addressed were relevant to the Hunter overall and operated across boundaries, would have been beneficial.

One interviewee questioned whether the aims of the Taskforce may have been subject to “over-reach” and questioned whether it was a credible to expect Taskforce members to devise effective local solutions given many of these were operationally out of the remit of the Taskforce or local government:

*“Can’t criticize any of the aims – when someone reads those to me, initially very much think if using the word ‘local’ then its generating local activity over which they have control...but when you see the backend of those measures raised, they are out of our control although they may be locally generated ideas.”*

*“It’s an unprecedented event and everyone initially is going to throw the kitchen sink at it – probably in retrospect a more refined set of priorities, and a smaller canvas might have been a good idea, but I don’t think that’s a valid criticism. What can you expect in a situation that is unprecedented? You just try to plug a lot of gaps.”*

Others supported the breadth and ambition of the original aims:

*“It was important that those aims were pretty broad, some of them were very needed and some of them weren’t as needed.”*

## HOW WELL DID THE TASKFORCE OPERATE?

### Membership and participation

The cross-sector representation of the 17 Leadership Group members of the Taskforce was widely acknowledged as an enabler of the Taskforce’s operation. Interviewees consistently highlighted that there was a diversity of representation across government, business, industry, and community and arts sectors within the city:

*“Making sure every facet of the community had a seat at the table.”*

*“The team at Council did a very good job making sure all the key players came together, and expanded beyond employers to workers and industries and large employers represented, but also social services sectors..making sure the unions are involved.”*

CN staff reflected that while government and business collaboration around local responses might occur more commonly, cross-sector representation within the Taskforce raised the prominence of sectors like the community sector and the arts in local decision-making. CN staff reflected that this was “a positive change for Newcastle, and one that can be replicated moving forward.”

An interviewee highlighted that the sport and leisure sector was not well represented. Several interviewees identified a need for better representation of indigenous groups and culturally and linguistically diverse communities on the Taskforce.

*“We can’t not have indigenous representation at a leadership level anymore – if we don’t know the right people, we need to have a dialogue with the community to access the right people.”*

One interviewee suggested that the Taskforce did not have a gender balance, but an examination of Taskforce Leadership and Action Team minutes suggests that a greater gender balance was achieved as Taskforce members began to delegate attendance. One interviewee also felt people with disabilities could have been better represented and that there could have been greater acknowledgement of issues associated with inclusion in all discussions. Alternatively, another interviewee commended the Taskforce and Taskforce Action Team on having a good demographic mix in terms of age groups. Another commented that young people and the issues impacting young people could have been better represented.

A review of Taskforce minutes and analysis of in-depth interviews found that member composition, in terms both of individuals and member groups, had changed over the course of the Taskforce operations. A number of agencies represented (for example in real-estate and hospitality) in the early stages withdrew as the focus of the Taskforce evolved. This lack of perceived investment in the work of the Taskforce may in part reflect and/or be reflected in a view that Taskforce membership was of less relevance or benefit to them than to other organisations who remained active participants.

There was a tendency to delegate attendance from CEOs to senior management as the Taskforce progressed. The delegation by original Taskforce members to senior managers was not necessarily perceived as a negative by all interviewees however, with senior management in the City of Newcastle seeing this as a natural progression:

*“CEOs made the effort to come to the first couple of meetings I don’t have an issue when they start delegating to senior managers, either they check-in or make sure teams are sharing .the agenda was split up in such a way that some members had a lot of expertise in certain areas and were able to provide greater contribution.”*

Delegation and the involvement of less senior staff in the Action Team meetings was noted by a number of interviewees to have “fostered officer to officer level interactions” which may have been more beneficial in progressing the outputs of the Taskforce and in building new relationships able to pursued offline.

On balance, the analysis of in-depth interviews indicates that the enabling effects of membership and participation have outweighed the inhibiting impacts on the effectiveness of the Taskforce in achieving its objectives, particularly that of providing a forum for information exchange and communication between member organisations.

### Investment – Time and Resourcing

A recognized inhibitor to taskforce operation in theory is insufficient investment of members, in terms of effort, time, resources and/or cost. City of Newcastle staff indicated that by design a key aspect of the membership was the ability to provide a resource to support the work:

*“We wanted that to be a real key difference between how this group worked and how other collaborative forums across the city look like, rather than the ask being attend the meeting once a fortnight – provide us with a human resources to support the community.”*

Most member organisations have not been able to consistently provide half a Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff member a week to the Taskforce.

Owing COVID-19 restrictions Taskforce Action Team also couldn't bring people together face to face to workshop *in-situ* around a table. City of Newcastle staff believe had they been able to, this may have created greater resourcing power and fostered more energetic engagement and collaboration:

*"I feel like the collaboration is genuine but we still structure everything up before the meetings...because we've only got a certain amount of time with people via zoom to work through this, if we asked a broad question of 'what does this look like?' we won't get anywhere in 2 hours."*

It was felt by one interviewee, who was a Taskforce member, that the time commitment was potentially too demanding. Others disagreed feeling that their expected contribution was reasonable and an extension of their City leadership roles, with one interviewee saying:

*"If we are in leadership roles, the participation in the Taskforce is not on top of our jobs - it is part of our jobs to pull together a pandemic response, and I loved that we proved we could do it."*

### Facilitation, governance and operation

A number of interviewees complemented the City of Newcastle on the facilitation and running of the Taskforce, feeling that City Taskforce Zoom meetings ran well and provided flexibility and accessibility for all members.

A recognized Taskforce enabler is making sure the administrative, communication and decision-making structure of the Taskforce is as simple as possible. Most interviewees commented that the governance and management of the Taskforce by the CN was seen to be efficient, well organised and well-coordinated. The meetings were seen to be very well executed, including good preparation, being well chaired and conducted with support from a strong secretariat and governance structure provided by the City of Newcastle. The preparation and circulation of detailed business papers ahead of Taskforce meetings was seen as supporting member preparedness to discuss key issues and arrive at consensus-based decisions in Taskforce meetings.

Several interviewees were of the view that the operation of the Taskforce was very transparent, professional, focused and clear. Meetings were of the right length and frequency and attendance was consistently strong:

*"I thought the Taskforce was very well managed – the meetings were often enough, but not too often, the meetings were well organised, well signaled in advance, good papers and well-chaired by the Lord Mayor... I thought the process was very transparent."*

*"I thought it was pretty good and focused. I sit on a lot of these and I feel like I am wasting my time, but I didn't feel like that with the Taskforce. I think it is really challenging to try and create a structured conversation and then take it somewhere particularly when you are covering a lot of territory, but I thought there were some good ways of going about it."*

*"Very professionally done and managed and you knew what was happening, and the format and facilitation of that...organised to feel like it's a valuable use of your time and something will come out of it."*

Whilst the City of Newcastle were the galvanizers of the City Taskforce, the interviewee felt they were able to effectively facilitate equal ownership and gave members opportunity to contribute and shape outcomes for the crisis response.

*“It was felt the meetings were well-structured and everyone had an opportunity to participate and ‘have a voice.’”*

*“There was an action-oriented feel to the Taskforce, which I thought was very good – the CN were committed to pushing stuff out and getting things done which was great for us.”*

Several interviewees reported that the facilitation provided a significant opportunity to share information on the key issues. One interviewee particularly appreciated the opportunity to share information facing the member’s heavily impacted arts and cultural sector. This included the opportunity to share stories of firsthand experiences through her dialogue with arts and cultural sector individuals, organisations and collectives in Newcastle.

By contrast several interviewees felt that the Taskforce aligned too closely with internal aims of Newcastle Council, and that as a result was *“overly bureaucratic and constructed”*. It was felt this had an impact on members voicing and sharing their opinions within sessions and to some extent on collaborative, joint-problem solving which was central to the Taskforce aims:

*“The cultural thing is deeper than that – the staff were trying to use the ebb and flow of the group to their advantage, they are KPI’d on that and it’s all good, but there were opportunities missed.”*

*“Good that they sought to bring in diverse opinions in terms of the updates but many of the solutions were ready-made produced by the council – the team potentially hadn’t parsed any options, or scratched heads. In part that was a timeliness issue we didn’t know how long COVID was going to go for.”*

The same interviewee acknowledge however that working from an entirely blank-sheet of paper would have been impractical and would have compromised quality and timely outcomes:

*“Rarely a fan of putting down a blank sheet of paper – there is an art to getting the pre-perscribing right...throwing it back to the group to problem solve – third of the way completed but not 100% completed.”*

In a similar vein at least one other interviewee felt that the partnership and collaborative components of the Taskforce could have been more effective and identified a need to foster greater cross-sector collaboration by making this a clear imperative of any similar Taskforce. A number of interviewees framed this feedback positively and felt that this was a learning which could have been taken forward:

*“I don’t think the opportunity is lost by the way ...to say ‘How can you two work together so we use products or use IP to build opportunities in the Hunter?’”*

There was a general consensus that the facilitation by the Chairperson had been a strength, with many interviewees complementing the facilitation, and one interviewee commenting that the Lord Mayor chaired the group *“beautifully, respectfully and kindly.”*

However several interviewees expressed the view that the Taskforce may have benefited at times from independent chairing or the introduction of a facilitator(s) with specific skills in managing group-dynamics among leaders. *Taskforce* theory highlights the role of the independent Chair can be critical to the development of relationships between Taskforce members. In particular, the Chair’s policy and practice of inclusiveness and encouragement of all members to participate and express their views can assist in mitigating the inhibiting effects of differences in perspective and organisational culture between members.

Ultimately City of Newcastle leadership of the Taskforce was seen to have pros and cons:

*“It immediately brands or badges how people perceive it and what they bring to the table and how they might think about it.”*

*“I thought the City of Newcastle officer did a great job to be honest – always happy to take things on board...the Taskforce used problem solving.”*

Interviewees also acknowledged the difficulties of managing the representative model:

*“At the very beginning you can limit the number of people you have in the room but make sure they are representative, have some strong figureheads in there to give it some auspice, but that likely means you’re doubling up as well – that whole representative model, managing that, is a task in itself.”*

One interviewee felt Council’s guidance in directing collaboration was skillful and appropriate. This interviewee commented, in the context of varying attendance over the year, that it was natural that as the Taskforce’s focus sharpen it would lean towards members with the relevant skills and experience:

*“The first thing is to have the right collaboration format...of course when it comes to doing, it does tend to go into people who know more about a certain area or had an interest, but you know what that means you are leveraging the experience of people for the common good beyond the organisation. Council had a nice touch role of facilitating that and providing a platform.”*

Several interviewees who participated in the Action Team felt that there was opportunity for discussion and joint-problem solving as had been intended by design of the Action Team:

*“We certainly felt more comfortable in the B-team sessions than the A-team sessions. I think the breakout sessions were valuable.”*

*“Definitely strengthened and built new relationships – bit less formal than the Leadership group, convivial and really interactive - safe environment to meet people, float ideas and talk about things.”*

One interviewee felt that the use of the ‘mentimetre’ in the Action Teams was a little technocratic and may have stifled opportunities for a more organic discussion and problem solving. However another interviewee was supportive:

*“The Action Team was run very professionally, it had use of the mentimetre.”*

Another interviewee commented that there may have been some conflict around communication styles within the Taskforce with private industry representatives favouring more direct communication styles, while government members and representatives of peak bodies had an operating language and culture that was felt to be more bureaucratic. The interviewee expressed the view that had the Taskforce better facilitated direct communication in the Leadership Team meetings it would have led to more active problem solving - the legacy of which would have been more actionable items for the Action Team to progress, and in turn less need to direct content by Council:

*“If you went through the Leadership Team and counted the people in private industry and not in associations, I found that make up interesting...if you had more people in private industry you would have got a deeper straight down the line communication...you cannot underestimate the strength of being direct as you can understand what makes your position and others can choose to work alongside your position.”*

The model itself anticipated that much of the problem-solving and the substantive work of the Taskforce would happen out of session. City of Newcastle staff reflected mid-year that this was hampered both in and out of session in practice by a number of member organisations being unable to meet the initial undertaking to provide a resource equivalent to half a full-time equivalent per week to the Action Team. Action Team representation may also have been more senior than intended, inhibiting the more time-intensive hands-on working that had been anticipated in the design:

*“People keep turning up but getting people to contribute outside of the session is challenging.”*

### Relationship building

The building of relationships within the Taskforce is a key part of Taskforce theory and why a Taskforce may achieve success. Recognised enablers to Taskforce success include the existence or possibility of trust in the working relationships, along with early proof of the effectiveness of the relationship. Taskforce relationships are also assisted by influential individuals or champions, and the ability to effect ‘informal’ collaboration.

The City Taskforce clearly had a number of relationship building successes, including the bringing-in of larger financial organisations not previously aligned with council organisations into the group and this has provided support for the city analytics and local evidence base program:

*“The larger financial organisations not engaged in the city before and the datasets that they hold - huge financial dataset of national companies like NIB and the two banks - sometimes civic and council organisations do not align.”*

A commonly identified enabler was a history of good-relationships between Taskforce members. Interviewees expressed that the Taskforce structure allowed them to build relationships with new sectors and organisations (arts and cultural sector and Hunter Workers), below the CEO level, and a number of interviewees commented that relationships were successfully built at officer to officer level outside the Taskforce.

*“Because you were on the Taskforce you cut through a lot of red tape to get to that person...I have been able to connect people from the Taskforce to a whole lot of people outside the Taskforce and outside the region, and I’ve been told they would never have been able to get that otherwise.”*

*“The Taskforce was a good opportunity to touch base with people you hadn’t seen in a while and provided good social cohesion and connection... as leaders in business it is good to have those interrelationships.”*

*“I feel I can pick up the phone and have some quite frank conversations – the relationship Newcastle council and the other stakeholders was strengthened as a result – any relationship building across sectors helps...where it is done constructively.”*

A question can be asked as to whether relationship building was purely centrally facilitated (by the chair and secretariat) referred to in Taskforce literature as a ‘hub and spoke model’ or whether relationship building occurred more organically member to member. From examination of the minutes and qualitative research conducted here, there appears to be a reliance on the Secretariat and supporting council staff to drive communication and coordination of the Taskforce, particularly

in the early stages. There is some evidence however that increased communication and networking between members occurred over time, for example in the establishment of sub-groups to focus on specific aspects of the Taskforce activities. This may also have been assisted by the presence of pre-existing relationships between members, which many interviewees noted. A number of members saw further scope for the development of such relationships, although it is recognised that the Taskforce is reaching its formal end date, and that consistent issues of competing demands on member time may be inhibiting factors in continuing relationships.

Evidence of the development of relationships can be seen in the introduction of new members where appropriate, for example Awabakal Land Council, Hunter Young Professionals, AiGroup, Hunter Multicultural Communities, Hunter Region Employment Facilitator, Hunter Innovation Festival, Youth Council and the Business Centre. There is evidence of spin-off collaboration between group members, such as work with Newcastle Industry Tourism Group and in the collaboration between members which led to formation of 'JobHelper':

*"The Taskforce sparked some things that definitely wouldn't have happened otherwise and some of that was formal and some of that was informal – the conversation...rolled on to some other pretty well conceived projects."*

*"With regard to the industry roundtable - it broke down the barriers to coming together and the Taskforce created that opportunity."*

Several interviewee commented with regard to still evolving relationships, which had their origin in the Taskforce:

*"I noticed the other day there was a story about an alliance they were forming – I feel like I might be able to say 'I'd like to hear a little bit more about this', and that's between two organisations that might feel like they are from a different philosophical perspective."*

CN staff involved in the Taskforce have indicated that the Taskforce has been invaluable in terms of making new contacts and forming new relationships, particularly in terms of other economic development officers (people and resources that support that role). CN staff have delivered presentations on the Community and Economic Resilience Package presentations:

- Local Government Professionals NSW
- Economic Development Network
- Newcastle Business Club
- Business Improvement Association / Hunter Business Chamber briefing
- Strategy & Innovation Committee of Council
- City of Newcastle Ordinary Council March Meeting

They have subsequently been able to form relationships with the above groups and organisations. An outcome of this relationship building is that Mr Simon Massey has been invited to attend the Federal Government's *Local Jobs Taskforce*.

## ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Key outputs of the Taskforce are usefully summarized in four key City Action streams:

1. *Industry-specific response program*

2. *The Newcastle Response*
3. *Local evidence - city data and analytics program*
4. *Youth Employment Charter*

### Industry-specific response program

The City Taskforce *Industry Response Program*, was co-designed by City Taskforce members to assist the most affected local industries and population groups within the region. The total value of funds was \$500,000 opening on 5 June and expressions of interest were sought from industry groups, businesses, community organisations and collaboratives, for funding that aimed to enable city-shaping outcomes targeting the hardest hit industries and population groups.

The City called on nominees to “*think big, think innovation, think collaboration*” and the process emphasised the importance of collaborations that extend beyond sectors and age cohorts. The program gave priority to large grants \$150,000 or more, opportunities for matched funding, and importance of knowledge-building capacity in submissions.

**Specific assessment criteria** included, whether the application:

1. **Addressed priority industries / populations:** the extent to which the proposed activity targets the hardest hit industries and population groups due to the COVID-19 pandemic\*
2. **Collaboration and partnership:** the extent to which the proposed project demonstrates constructive and cooperative relationships between City Taskforce, funding recipients and other relevant stakeholders to achieve positive outcomes for the City.
3. **Delivery:** ability to demonstrate the delivery of project outcomes can occur on time and within budget.
4. **Innovation:** the extent to which the proposed project incorporates new methods, ideas or products to support long term benefits for their industry, population groups and/or the City
5. **Value with public money:** demonstrating value for money through careful consideration of costs, benefits, options and risk. Funding co-contributions from applicant and partner organisations are encouraged, and
6. **Knowledge building capacity:** the ability of the project to capture data and information to tell local Newcastle stories. This may involve, but is not limited to, partnering with a research organisation.

The Taskforce was also able to use its networks to increase visibility and activate interest in the EOI process for the grants, including raising awareness of the funding round through its June ‘*Affected Industries Roundtable*’. An assessment panel incorporating the Lord Mayor, City of Newcastle Staff, Hunter Business Chamber and the University of Newcastle, was convened that ultimately endorsed the part / full funding of five applications totalling \$502,400. The City of Newcastle received 29 applications for the Industry Grants program totalling \$4.2 million in applications for its \$500,000 pool of funds. Program staff provided advice that they were worried grant applicants wouldn’t be able to “*think big, innovative programs*” but were proven wrong by the very high quality applications.

Projects in the tourism, arts, live music and small business space have been funded. Funding agreements were signed by Thursday 30 July. All successful applicants were required to present the outcomes of their project to both the City Of Newcastle Taskforce *Leadership Team* and *City Taskforce Action Team*.

The successful projects included:

- **The Business Centre - Small Business Recovery Centre** – coordinated by the Newcastle Business Centre this project will bring together government and non-government agencies, banks and financial services providers, mental health and well-being providers, to offer support and provide information, and services for participating small businesses during and after COVID-19.
- **University of Newcastle – Hometown Holiday** – to incentivise Newcastle residents to have a ‘hometown holiday’ inclusive of overnight accommodation and curated experience itineraries. Encourage locals to visit Newcastle as tourists and engage with the City as a tourism destination, providing economic benefits to local tourism businesses.
- **Field Frequency - Smart City LIVE Music TV Show** - live-stream music series, using live-stream broadcast collaborations to maximise the recovery of the local arts and entertainment industry. The show aims to showcase a diverse range of established musicians and new talent growing the City’s identity as a collaborative and inclusive community.
- **Hunter Writers Centre including Multi-Arts Activation** - multi-arts activation led by the Hunter Writers Festival to benefit local arts, cultural, and tourism businesses. The project will include exhibition studio spaces for Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, musicians, visual and digital artists, to develop work for exhibitions of cultural and maritime history and stories of local sites.
- **The Olive Tree Market - The Olive Tree Virtual Online Platform** – online platform to develop new income generating opportunities, capacity building and educational workshops for local creatives. Existing customers, supporters, and new online audiences will be targeted to buy local online, to re-connect and forge ongoing connections with creatives.

Amongst several Taskforce members interviewed the *Industry Response Grant* program was seen to be one of the most tangible and important outputs from the Taskforce. Interviewees also highlighted that Industry Response Grants program was appropriately targeted at the hardest hit sectors, which included tourism, hospitality and the arts, and believed it to be effective in providing immediate and direct support to these impacted industries:

*“The Industry Response most important, \$500,000, a very clear signal to those in industry that have been impacted, that there are dollars to support them.”*

*“With the Industry Response which is the most tangible outcome [of the Taskforce] that’s playing out now and it will be interesting to see whether they have been able to stimulate activity...I know some are up and running.”*

*“The Industry Response grants targeted the hard hit sectors...the data HRF Centre were putting out verified that.”*

One interviewee who had been involved in the selection process felt that it could have been better structured:

*“The process was a little rushed, there was one session which was overly long – eighteen applications to go through. The project’s we came up with were very good but a bit difficult to consider them all in that space...could have whittled down the shortlist a bit, to consider the applications in more depth.”*

CN staff also communicated that in addition to conducting the EOI process, significant City of Newcastle resources have been allocated to provide ongoing support to the successful applicants – this included support from the City of Newcastle’s tourism and economic development team, strategy and engagement directorate and communication and engagement team, as well as via facilitating access to City of Newcastle venues where necessary:

*“The Industry Response Program on the surface is half a million dollars, but when you start to look at the actual delivery of the program, yes there is cash on the table but the layering of support through council...is still currently ongoing and spread through a number of different areas of council.”*

One notable success of the *Industry Response Program* was its ability through the EOI process to generate high quality local solutions and ground-up collaborations, which resulted in a large number of eligible and innovative applications across the city. While the number of eligible grants significantly exceeded the \$500,000 allocated, unsuccessful applications were able to be circulated through other city grant schemes. For example the Port of Newcastle had another initiative, for which some of the unsuccessful applications were reportedly able to apply, and the Newcastle Permanent provided a similar opening for funding via its charitable arm. A number of unsuccessful applications from Industry Response Program were also able to be cycled back through City of Newcastle grant schemes including events sponsorship, special business rate program and arts grant which went out in July - these forums used a very similar application template, and this was a time-saving approach for those applicants. Reportedly five of these original Industry Response Grants were successful through these other City of Newcastle funding rounds. These five projects included a project funding a series of events over three weeks in November and December to “wake Newcastle from its COVID slumber” run by Newcastle Art Space; *Created in Newcastle* a film project to deliver new ways of reconnecting film, arts and culture across the city precinct, a Hunterhunter campaign to promote Newcastle Food Month via digital and traditional media, a newly created Makers and Traders ‘Project 360’ digital interface using virtual tours and podcasts to enable visitors and encourage booking, sales and connection, and a project to build permanent lighting/lightscape infrastructure for Civic Park.

City of Newcastle program staff have provided reflections that the *Industry Response Program* would perhaps have worked better if originally co-designed with Taskforce partners to deliver a larger funding pool – particularly where similar funding initiatives were duplicated across the city, for example in the case of the Port of Newcastle and the Newcastle Permanent grant schemes.

### Affected Industry Roundtable

An *Affected Industries Roundtable* was held on 3 June 2020. Attendees were from COVID affected industries retail/hospitality sector, hotel industry, live music, tourism sector, arts sector, business improvement associations. The Roundtable had two tasks:

- Tailoring Taskforce activities to support our heavily-affected industries
- Identifying opportunities for cross-sector collaboration

It was also an opportunity to share business / industry / customers / personal experience of COVID-19, around impacts, what the easing of restrictions would look like and how can the City Taskforce support impacted sector's recovery over the coming weeks / months / years.

### Advocacy/Newcastle Response

On 15 May Taskforce Members endorsed a proposal by the City Taskforce Action Team to develop a monthly '**The Newcastle Response**'. This is a regular letter on behalf of City Taskforce members to key state and federal government decision-makers, which outlines the local community and business impacts of COVID-19 pandemic for various sectors/groups.

The 3-4 page memo or letter is co-signed by each organisation on the Taskforce, and aims to provide key local insights, data and intelligence that might not otherwise be readily accessible by state and federal government decision-makers. It was initially funded by \$500,000 from the City of Newcastle, Infrastructure Advocacy program.

The memos typically contained:

- A set of specific policy asks - usually from government (state or federal)
- Local insights – local data, local commentary on impacted sectors and local human stories
- Documentation of local responses – an overview of how the impacted sector is responding to local need and any innovation in service delivery
- Recommendations in terms of policy delivery – all decision makers at state/federal policy measures that support the financial sustainability of the community sector and dedicated engagement First Nation/disability organisation.

The content of the Newcastle Response typically included a deep dive into a particular topic, including human stories and shared experiences, along with data and intelligence framed through these stories. The first issue of the '*Newcastle Response*' focused on the *Community Sector* was signed on 4th June, the second issue on the *Tourism Sector* was signed on 2nd July and the third issue on *Youth Employment* was signed on 7th August 2020. From the Taskforce inception to completion of the Taskforce five *Newcastle Responses* were produced:

- Community Sector
- Tourism Sector
- Youth Employment
- Arts Sector
- Innovation Economy

Key policy asks throughout the Newcastle Response have included the extension of existing subsidies and introduction of new schemes for COVID impacted sectors and groups, along with targeted infrastructure funding and changes to caps and eligibility for existing concessions:

Each *Newcastle Response* has been widely circulated to state and federal members (sent to 85 politicians and different secretary of departments) as part of broad program of Taskforce advocacy. Advocacy to state and federal members using the Newcastle Response has included:

- Sonia Hornery MP, made representations to the Hon Stuart Ayres MP, Minister for Jobs, Investment and Tourism, regarding the impact to the visitor economy in Newcastle and the importance of supporting the industry over the coming months.

- Taskforce member Mr Will Creedon met with Prime-Ministers' Office following the release of the *Newcastle Response – Tourism Sector* in July, and has indicated that the Newcastle Response provided policy direction and local evidence, which assisted the conversation.
- Sharon Claydon MP, Federal Member for Newcastle, presented the second edition of the Newcastle Response to Hon Simon Birmingham, Minister for Trade Tourism and Investment, Australian Government.
- Sharon Calydon MP, Federal Member for Newcastle, presented the third edition of the Newcastle Response to the Minister for Youth, the Honourable Senator Richard Colbeck.
- Tim Crankanthorp MP, made representations on behalf of the City Taskforce to the NSW Minister for Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney, the Hon. Stuart Ayres MP.
- Tim Crakanthorp MP, made representations on the 25 August to the Hon Gladys Berejiklian MP, Premier on behalf of Mr Brett Smith regarding the Newcastle Council's City Taskforce Newcastle Response on the impact of COVID-19 on the City's youth. The correspondence was referred to Dr Geoff Lee MP, NSW Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education.

Appendix 3 – contains a tabled list of responses to this advocacy. In summary, key responses from state and federal government to advocacy to date have commended the City of Newcastle on the formation of the City Taskforce and highlighted the Taskforce's novel and constructive nature. It has also thanked the Taskforce for the quality of its local evidence base which has included valuable data and case studies, along with the clarity of the suggested policy responses:

- The Hon. Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government conveyed thanks on behalf of himself and the Deputy Prime Minister for "your efforts to protect our citizens and the economy from the effects of COVID-19". They also commend your novel and constructive initiative in establishing the City Taskforce and *'The Newcastle Response'*.
- Hon. Dr Geoff Lee MP, NSW Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education, Acting Minister for Sport, Multiculturalism, Seniors and Veterans wrote to City of Newcastle: "I commend you on the formation of the City Taskforce to assist with recovery post the COVID-19 pandemic" and highlighted that *"The NSW Government is aware of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on young people and is committed to supporting them into skilling and employment opportunities"*.
- Hon. Richard Colbeck, Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians, Minister for Youth and Sport, wrote to City of Newcastle *"I was greatly encouraged to learn of the extensive work your community leaders are undertaking to provide guidance for young people facing the significant challenges presented by the COPVID-19 pandemic."*
- The *Deputy-Secretary of Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet*, thanked the Taskforce for sharing the second edition of the Newcastle Response and noted *"this issue provides a valuable insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Newcastle's tourism sector, including valuable data and case studies...This type of resource is always appreciated, as it helps us to build a more nuanced understanding of the issue facing different industries and regions."* The Assistant Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet wrote further *"that this type of resource continues to be appreciated."*
- Sharon Claydon MP, Federal Member for Newcastle wrote on two separate occasions:

*"I am pleased that the Taskforce was chosen to highlight the plight of young Novocastrians in this edition...I appreciate the clear and succinct actions identified by the Taskforce that the Federal Government can take to increase employment opportunities for young Australians."*

*"Thank you again for the Taskforce's advocacy and its contribution to our community."*

- Hon. Don Harwin MLC, NSW Minister for the Public Service and Employee Relations, Aboriginal Affairs and the Arts wrote regarding the Newcastle City Taskforce Response to COVID-19 and the Arts Sector *"I appreciate that the Newcastle City Taskforce has undertaken very proactive work around community driven ideas for policy responses to COVID-19 and note the recommendations covered in the Response for the Arts Sector."*

Almost uniformly Taskforce members spoke favourably of the City of Newcastle's advocacy program commending the quality, detail and scope of the documents produced, as well as the clarity of the policy asks they contained. Taskforce members were strongly supportive of the intent to have local data and as many insights as possible, local human stories and the ability to collaborate around the policy asks. Most interviewees saw these as tangible and useful outputs in raising the profile of impacted sectors within the City, and some believed they represented a new way of working for the City:

*"I think what went up was really top notch and much more sophisticated...and it was really high quality. What's your snapshot and what's your local evidence? and then augmenting that telling the stories of the people. Also the element of saying we have skin in the game, now you come and partner...showing that established base of organisation and action; this gives credibility."*

*"In highlighting the significance of visitor economy tourism the Newcastle Response was really important. From the lense of local industry it was really important because it gave strength and confidence and it gave belief. From a mental health point of view they weren't alone...all the tourism groups saw it and the industry generally saw it...it created a Roundtable for that industry and its still alive today."*

*"It was a new way of working – Newcastle Response, gets down to the new economic development team – has set a benchmark for the type of quality in the economic development response and tourism development response."*

*"The Newcastle Response – Community Sector usefully linked local, state and federal responses to the pandemic, allowing for strategic alignment both locally and regionally."*

Interviewees also expressed satisfaction in being able to contribute specific evidence and data to *Newcastle Responses* and advocate for policy solutions which aligned with their organisation's aims:

*"I had quite a lot of interaction with Simon and some of others...quite a lot of input into the Youth Employment Charter/Youth Employment Response...pushing for extending the apprenticeship subsidy to include new placements, as we had identified in the data there would be a huge drop off in new signups, 2,500 less in this area from Business NSW had done the Skilling Australia report."*

Taskforce members were strongly supportive of the *Newcastle Response* being sector specific. For example an interviewee expressed that *Newcastle Response - Tourism Sector*, pertaining to their own sector, provided a good summary and was in a practical format. It was felt that these provided a significant opportunity to raise the profile of key infrastructure needs, keeping it on the state and

federal governments' agenda and posed a number of policy asks to the state and federal Governments, such as the establishment of a cultural infrastructure fund that *Gateway Cities* like Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong can access, and government partnership on local arts and culture infrastructure projects like the Newcastle Art Gallery expansion.

Another interviewee felt there is a need to ensure these resources continue to be used into the future. The interviewee was also of the view that the *Newcastle Response* gave a good blueprint for advocacy and funding for all sectors that could be used by other key regional bodies and stakeholders, for example the Committee for the Hunter and the Chambers of Commerce to draw on the responses.

A minority of interviewees expressed some criticisms about whether the *Newcastle Response* constituted effective advocacy, questioning whether policy asks were sufficiently practical and whether they reflected a considered understanding of the role Newcastle plays within the political hierarchy. Another interviewee felt that the *Newcastle Response* needed to be followed up with a face to face meeting to deliver messages more directly to decision-makers:

*“Combination of things that were occupying people’s minds as opposed to pragmatic measures that were relevant to what we were talking about. Advocacy is about trying to make sure you understand that you have a role to play in the solution...really a platform rather than an advocacy.”*

*“We need to take up the challenge to work together...we have the 15 second or one-liner and we need to be able to carry the message. They were fantastic documents for the local environment but had less influence at the state and federal level.”*

City of Newcastle staff expressed that the biggest challenge with regard to the *Newcastle Response* had been the writing itself which was resource intensive. Staff expressed that more assistance and collaboration from Taskforce members would have been beneficial. This again partly reflected the delegation challenge for Taskforce member's given the breadth of the five work streams.

### Local Evidence Base/City Analytics

The Local Evidence Base and City Analytics workstream was established within the Taskforce Action Team with an immediate goal to bring together data from member organisations, and a long-term goal to create a culture and process of data sharing across the city that provides an ongoing resource and legacy. In early Taskforce Action Team meetings the discussion focused on sharing aggregate data from each of the 17 organisations to paint a clearer picture of COVID-19's impacts on Newcastle and the Hunter Region, as well as refining work streams to inform faster policy decisions.

The CN Team in particular felt there was a need for locally-specific data and insight to compare with general trends and to understand local impacts. A local evidence base was also felt to be important to underpin both the infrastructure advocacy and industry response within the workstreams.

The Action Team identified a range of priorities to define the workstreams:

- Telling the local stories that communicate human impacts
- Advocate for Newcastle as a research site (including positioning a policy lab/sandpit)
- Leveraging open data to generate shared value for the city
- Data analysis features including modelling and visualisation
- Developing a robust research program to translate data to insight
- Providing a collaboration forum for new ideas.

The Local Evidence Base/City Analytics working group included representatives from NIB, University of Newcastle, Hunter New England Health, Regional NSW, and City of Newcastle. Activities conducted including collecting and compiling data from across the city, generating stories to assist advocacy, identification of datasets to fill evidence gaps, the establishment of a data sharing framework for the city, creation of a data portal as a shared resource along with a data analytics platform and establishment of a research program.

Actions to date include:

- Demonstrations of existing University of Newcastle and CN platforms for data sharing and analysis;
- Discussion of key characteristics of data to be requested from Taskforce members; and
- Agreement on need to establish framework of principles for city data sharing.

CN program staff reported mid-year that engagement in the city analytics/local insights stream had been excellent. The workstream established a group of local analysts looking to 'play' with shared data in a secure site to support the building of an evidence base for the 'Newcastle Responses'.

Interviewees who commented on the city analytics and local evidence base workstream were favourable, with one interviewee commenting that the *"data and analytics are great – they [the City of Newcastle] have control over that and they can do something about that."*

The work stream was identified by a number of interviewees as having a longer-term aim, one interviewee identified that the tangible benefits were difficult to pin-point:

*"On principle yes, I support evidenced based decision making...understand in the context of councils' having information and datasets as a competitive advantage...but not quite tangible. Can't tell you what an output or an outcome of that thing was...probably needs further thought and work to get the most out of that...not necessarily getting a big data set. It's having a chat to businesses and seeing how they are coping and asking what would help you right now."*

City of Newcastle personnel however commented that the workstream was particularly productive with a lot of the work happening outside the substantive meeting as per the intent. The larger financial organisations not engaged in the city before, and who house very large financial datasets were able to build strong officer to officer level relationships.

## Youth Employment/Youth Charter

Youth unemployment arose as a prominent issue for the Taskforce to address, motivated by evidence from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that the youth unemployment rate hovered around 27 per cent in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie LGAs as a result of COVID-19, and underemployment was even higher. There was strong support within Taskforce discussions that youth unemployment is one of the biggest issues facing the region as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, and there was an imperative to act.

To address the issue of 'youth employment' a working group (*City Taskforce, Young People / NewSkills Workshop* in early July) was convened including representatives from Hunter Young Professionals, Youth Council, Hunter Regional Employment Facilitator, Community Disability Alliance Hunter, Hunternet, University of Newcastle, TAFE NSW, Committee for the Hunter, Hunter Business Chamber, Arts / Tourism Sector representatives and most importantly, young people.

Three projects have eventuated:

- Community Program – Youth Employment Wrap Around Service – ‘JobHelper’. A collaboration between Warrick Jordan Hunter Valley Employment Facilitator, the Business Centre, Committee for the Hunter and City of Newcastle.
- Greater Newcastle Youth Employment Charter
- The Newcastle Response – Youth Employment.

*The Youth Charter*<sup>1</sup> model is borrowed from the UK where governments have pledged to work with a range of leading national youth organisations to set out a vision for young people over the next generation and beyond.

All Greater Newcastle organisations (government /businesses /not-for-profits) were encouraged to sign the Greater Newcastle Youth Employment Charter as an affirmation of their commitment to maintain and expand opportunities for young people in the region:

- Youth Employment** – our organisation will prioritise the maintenance of trainee/apprenticeship/graduate positions to ensure quality early career opportunities for young people in the Greater Newcastle area.
- Youth Training** – our organisation will prioritise professional development opportunities for young people to ensure they have appropriate skills to create new and expanded opportunities for the region into the future.
- Youth Voice** – our organisation will actively engage with and listen to young people to better understand their perspectives, barriers and challenges in the COVID-19 era and beyond. Our organisation will ensure that young people are represented in the decision-making processes that directly/indirectly impact their employment opportunities.
- Youth Support** – our organisation will establish a structured mentoring program to ensure young people are provided with effective mentoring and/or peer support within the workplace.
- Youth Celebration** – our organisation will celebrate the important role that young people play in our local economy.

Collectively, the City Taskforce represents the largest employers in Newcastle – to date all Taskforce members bar one are signatories to the Youth Charter. Newcastle based businesses ‘Top Blokes’, ‘ASR Recruitment’ and also the newly formed ‘Committee for the Hunter’ are also signatories.

Taskforce members interviewed identified a number of benefits from the *Youth Employment Charter*, such as the Charter providing the impetus for the examination and communication of own organisational policies and procedures relating to young people and the capacity to contribute unique data and evidence:

*“For example, the development of the Youth Employment Charter provided an opportunity for the health sector representative to describe some of the Hunter New England Local Health Districts policies/ strategies around youth employment and demonstrate their ongoing commitment to be an employer of choice for young people in the region.”*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-youth-charter-to-support-young-people-across-the-country>

## Spin-off Collaborations/Collaboration Forum

In a number of instances the Taskforce also helped reinforce existing relationships and was the catalyst for discussions and further work outside of the meetings. For example the Taskforce was the catalyst for further work with Alloggio including how their service offering could fit with community sector needs for emergency accommodation for young people. Mr Will Creedon and Ms Justine Cogan also began a development of collaboration in tourism and arts for Industry-specific response grants provided by City of Newcastle. Mr Peter Cock worked with Mr Will Creedon (Alloggio) and other stakeholders on items from Newcastle Airport Special Activation Precinct.

The Taskforce Leadership and Action Team also provided opportunity for all city leaders to pitch new ideas and program of works at each City Taskforce meeting.

- *Soft international diplomacy*: in early May city leaders unanimously agreed to show diplomacy to strengthen international trade and manufacturing relations where there was a mutual benefit to Newcastle, including to key sectors such as the international student market and visitor economy.
- *A new version of Renew Newcastle*: the Taskforce heard how commercial rental vacancies across Newcastle had significantly increased from February to June, changing the city's streetscape and eroding business confidence. City leaders raised the concept of applying the Renew Newcastle model more broadly to redevelop and revitalise commercial precincts and the city's overall amenity in parallel with discussions with the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment around zoning and the night-time economy. Leaders agreed to workshop this further with City Taskforce members, including the Hunter Business Chamber, Colliers International, Alloggio and Independent Creative Alliance Newcastle. The Newcastle Response – Tourism Sector also advocates for the extension of the Retail and Other Commercial Leases (COVID-19) Regulation 2020.
- *Business to Business initiative* with discussion led by the Hunter Business Chamber.
- *Revising the visitor economy* - City leaders resolved to identify gaps and opportunities in Newcastle's visitor economy, recognising that it was among the hardest hit sectors, to increase brand awareness and capitalise on the city's proximity to Australia's second-largest domestic market, Sydney, as travel restrictions around COVID-19 ease. Opportunities explored included: industry collaboration to develop new products and experience, skills and training packages, marketing campaigns which define Newcastle as a leisure destination etc. These discussions have led to the formation of Visitor Economy Roundtable.
- *JobHelper* - City of Newcastle and Career Links are in the process of establishing a Service level Agreement to enable coordination of a youth employment program to respond to high rates of youth unemployment across the region. The Youth Employment Coordinator (YEC) position is scheduled to commence in March 2020 for a 12 month pilot phase and will develop, activate, coordinate and promote a range of programs that will provide mentoring, transition support and information-sharing interventions to help build employability skills of vulnerable young people aged 15 to 30 years in the Newcastle Local Government Area (LGA). The YEC position will focus on delivering the objectives of the Greater Newcastle Youth Employment Charter.

Updates were also provided from key city leaders including:

- University of Newcastle – advocacy on behalf of international students, updates on the new Innovation Hub and STEMM building;
- Newcastle Airport – Special Activation Precinct and possible expansions into New Zealand;
- Port of Newcastle –the future uncontained; and
- Hunternet – job exchange / redeployment service.

### Alignment across Infrastructure Priorities

Taskforce advocacy and collaboration has extended to support infrastructure priorities in the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Area*, such as the diversification of the *Port of Newcastle* and the *Newcastle Airport Expansion*, which were existing priorities within the City of Newcastle. City of Newcastle have commented that getting consensus sign-off on these infrastructure priorities for the region from Taskforce members who are city leaders across a number of sectors, was a key achievement.

*“First time that organisations aligned on those projects...it was really important and done in a collaborative fashion, we did it in one meeting, people have been talking about doing that for years.”*

### Real-Time Health and Economic Updates

Another activity within the Taskforce were regular briefings at each Taskforce meeting were to be provided by:

- Mr Michael DiRienzo/Ms Jane Gray, Hunter New England Health on local public health impacts and considerations; and
- Dr Anthea Bill, Lead Economist Hunter Research Foundation Centre on local Newcastle economic impacts and considerations.

Feedback from Taskforce members was positive regarding the value of real-time health and economic data. More than one interviewee saw the health and economic snapshots and analyses presented at the start of meetings as one of the key strengths of the Taskforce process. These summaries were used by the interviewee to prompt discussions with their organization’s board and to conduct business planning meetings and discussions outside of the Taskforce:

*“Updates were there as a standing briefing HNE/HRF to provide value add, this information spread back through the boardrooms of Newcastle.”*

*“The best update was the real-time economic data to understand the different datasets, and some of the conflicting numbers. The format of the Bloomberg and Harvard updates is a similar format to one we were using....if I was a financial institution, that’s really important information to predict consumer behavior. Very clear and important to the process.”*

*“I found the numbers and trends that were being talked about extremely valuable and insightful and I put my own colour on it.”*

## OUTCOMES

Outcomes for the City of Newcastle can be considered from the perspective of value gained individually or organizationally by Taskforce members as well as the inroads made in addressing the non-health impacts of COVID for the Newcastle LGA, as stated in the original Taskforce aims.

Interviewees spoke about the value generated by virtue of the alignment of the Taskforce aims with their own leadership roles within the City, stating that participation in the Taskforce was a means to **strengthen their core leadership responsibilities**. Several interviewees commented on value derived from the ability to utilise particular skills and knowledge constructively. This is supported by taskforce theory which highlights that the co-creation or collaboration process not only requires the partners to have linked interests but also to be well-connected with local communities and their stakeholders. This allows members to think more broadly and see longer-term value or benefit beyond the immediate collaboration (Austin *et al.*, 2012a:936).

*“We all had an opportunity to tap into our own areas of specialty...having a group of that size gave us an opportunity to tap in where we could provide most benefit.”*

As has already been highlighted the Taskforce generated value for members organizationally through knowledge building and the production of new and timely information important for decision-making within members own sectors. It also delivered new knowledge on a sectors outside members’ direct experience, and brought new knowledge of the impacts of COVID for these other sectors, and in so doing expanded interviewees’ knowledge of the City itself.

One interviewee was of the view that the City Taskforce provided a good opportunity to keep abreast of health, economic and social trends occurring regionally, which have implications for their sector. It also provided a better understanding of the Arts and Cultural sector and its interconnectedness with the visitor economy. Others commented:

*“Because didn’t know at that time in March what type of spread/community transmission (we have been fortunate in Newcastle) you are going to have...it was important to be talking to those people and organisations gave me personally, including in conversations offline, much larger insights some industries not impacted at all.”*

*“For our sector it was useful to hear about the impact and downturn of the hospitality industry because that was insightful to get a sense of the vulnerability and disadvantage being felt by employees in that sector.”*

Several interviewees identified that the Taskforce provided an opportunity to voice concerns and issues of own sector to other City leaders, and an opportunity to gather intelligence on sector impacts locally:

*“A key outcome of the Taskforce for the community sector was the ability to be a voice for people in the community who would otherwise not be heard, and to collaborate in a constructive conversation about meeting their diverse needs during the crisis.”*

*“Being able to get ‘intel’ and sit on leadership group meetings and listen to what was happening in real time from the heads of industry was really valuable.”*

While a general consensus emerged around the value generated in terms of knowledge building and in seeing advocacy in action, several interviewees suggested the individual business value for a number of participating members might have been lacking, and this was reflected in their diminished attendance at later meetings:

*“From our perspective, we are a bit different to others - value in terms of knowledge building, which equips us for next time, in how we might advocate and do things in those circles.”*

*Individual businesses measuring value in terms of direct benefit may have been disappointed.”*

In relation to Taskforce achievements against aims as stated in the Terms of Reference, interviewees highlighted value generated from the Taskforce related to its timeliness in being brought into operation just as COVID-19 pandemic was breaking, many interviewees praised the City of Newcastle in being first movers, proactive in showing City leadership within the region. The City Taskforce was seen by one interviewee as *“an incredible achievement”*. The interviewee was of the view that it was established very quickly and all members demonstrated strong commitment right from the beginning. Others likewise commented:

*“Newcastle were very proactive, they were very much the model of what could be done at the local level. The first time I met Simon in mid-March he was already on the front foot – he was talking about what the City’s response was going to be. From that point of view it was worthwhile being involved.”*

*“One of the questions we got back for NSW Government through their state government Taskforce was: which local government is doing this stuff well? And we were able to say Newcastle is - they are out of the starting blocks, they are interested, they are talking to everybody.”*

Several interviewees were able to point to tangible outcomes for the City in terms of the Industry Response Grants and Youth Employment Charter, and that these provide material assistance to impacted sectors and groups and a clear signal that their concerns had been voiced and City leadership supported them.

As has already been discussed in this report the City Taskforce provided a significant opportunity to form new, and strengthen existing relationships with other sectors and leaders in Newcastle. It also enabled the identification of partnership opportunities and areas of alignment across different sectors, and this was seen. This collegiality was felt to be a new way of working for the City by a number of interviewees and City of Newcastle staff:

*“Organisations change their modus operandi to become potentially more collegial in a crisis – there was more Newcastle engagement...you get a chance to work directly and it strengthens your relationship.”*

*“With regard to the industry roundtable, it broke down the barriers to coming together, and the Taskforce created that opportunity.”*

*“The flexibility of local government to be able to have a crack at things that are too hard for state and federal government to do because of the way programs are put things together, that was really valuable.”*

Other Taskforce members saw the Taskforce’s greatest achievement in terms of advocacy, and there was a general consensus as has already been discussed that the Taskforce acted as a successful and coordinated vehicle for advocacy to other levels of government as to the most innovative and targeted support to assist heavily impacted local industries. Several interviewees felt that the advocacy was well timed because policy-makers at the State and federal level were open to local advocacy and local evidence, because policy and program responses were evolving more fluidly during the pandemic:

*“Some of the responses we have had from very senior members of state and federal government to that advocacy – suggest it has 100% shaped some of the government responses.”*

*“If I have had meeting with ministers or cabinet members, I always make sure Newcastle Response is visible.”*

*“It’s been an opportunity to sharpen the advocacy...if four or five or ten are singing in chorus it has an impact on decision making...We saw the policy could change because it’s being made so quickly – almost immediate impacts of this because policy was being made on the run and it was imperfect – and there was an opportunity to provide that feedback, and contribute to things being tweaked or making them better. So in terms of the collective voice there was real opportunity for it to be an effective vehicle.”*

*“Having the group come together and produce credible, aligned responses to government and strategies for the community was the biggest achievement.”*

A consensus emerged that the Taskforce presented a demonstration of leadership and a united response for the City. It was recognized that leadership was necessary because at the start of the pandemic it was a time of great uncertainty and fear in the community.

*“Having the formal and united response – tourism, community, arts, innovation, youth unemployment.”*

*“The Taskforce was seen to be a strong demonstration of leadership and cohesion across Newcastle, providing a coordinated approach in a time of crisis.”*

Some interviewees expressed a degree of cynicism as to whether the Taskforce had met its ultimate aims in terms of local problem solving and delivering local solutions, saying instead that the Taskforce:

*“Almost became a point through that group for Council to express themselves...good end when you get that concurrence, and it’s an effective communication piece by the way people know what you stand for and what you are about.”*

*“Council is another advocacy voice rather than being an effective voice to facilitate and make change – it’s all very well to say A, B,C, D but if that’s controlled by state government and you’re just saying it...and they are things over which you have no control.”*

but also recognised:

*“Council’s ability in that arena was constrained by finance and their level of delegation/control over factors over which we are all suffering.”*

The question of whether the Taskforce had produced substantive outcomes was explored with interviewees. For the arts and cultural sector, an interviewee felt that there is a need to move beyond a grant funding model to encourage and facilitate philanthropy, sponsorship and social investment in the arts, potentially through partnerships with large businesses and organisations.

One interviewee expressed a view that the Taskforce may initially have needed a stronger focus on immediate crisis responses, but felt that aims targeted at the medium and longer-term became more appropriate as the immediate crisis dissipated and it became clear that New South Wales was not facing the same issues of large scale community-transmission as other countries overseas:

*“There was a sense in some of the break-out group that we need more immediate responses but as the crisis rolled out we could see the benefits of having some responses which were short-term, some which were more immediate term, and some of which were longer-term outcomes – initially there was a little bit of frustration from people who were dealing with immediate needs in their businesses, and here we were talking about nebulous and longer-term impacts.”*

Similarly, senior City of Newcastle leadership were able to reflect on a range of outcomes from the Taskforce starting with the Newcastle Response considered to be a headline outcome from the meetings themselves, mid-term concrete deliverables in terms of *Industry Response Grants* and longer-term ongoing policy and program responses which aim to address systemic issues and underpin the future success and cohesion of the City:

*“I think having the formal, united response that we had with the Newcastle Response for community, youth unemployment, tourism, arts, innovation – is very, very important. That’s a headline output from a meeting; while the Industry Response Grants were the rubber hitting the road – like a concrete, tangible deliver that is happening right now. While the Youth Employment Charter and the collaboration around local evidence workstream will hopefully knit together a broader more ongoing response to issues like youth unemployment that are very systemic to this region.”*

Others commented that many of the Taskforce’s key outputs would need time to see achieve their ultimate outcomes:

*“I don’t think that it was reasonable to expect that everything that was identified in the response documents was going to produce an outcome immediately – the proof of its value will be in whether we undertake those stories and requests further and continue to press the case for investment from other levels of government.”*

Several interviewees recognised that some of the Taskforce original aims may have been less needed than initially anticipated given fortunate lack of large-scale community transmission across the City. However others recognized that adverse business impacts from mandated social distancing were significant and still prominent, and believed the Taskforce made positive contributions to addressing these impacts with the right degree of urgency:

*“Wasn’t overkill from a business perspective – very important.”*

*“I think the Taskforce had the right amount of urgency, the reason is that the lands were shifting underneath our feet so much and so quickly we had to be careful we didn’t commit to something and it was wrong the day after.”*

Asking City of Newcastle leadership to reflect on the proportionately large resourcing from City of Newcastle itself, and whether it represented value for money, this leadership confirmed that it was perceived as valuable:

*“Fantastic, it has been a wonderful outcome for the City – it helps not having any large clusters or outbreaks of COVID for the City. There has been some really important advocacy beyond COVID come out of the Taskforce and those signed off documents from heads of*

*industry, arts alliance, health sector and tourism sector on infrastructure that's across the board, that's needed in the City."*

An emerging finding is that the Taskforce may have benefited from clearer direction around collaboration and more facilitation of direct communication particularly in the Leadership Team meetings, to draw members out and give them more direction in terms of how best to contribute:

*"There was a strong willingness to participate and collaborate but in some cases there was uncertainty around what the City Taskforce Action Group was trying to achieve and how to best contribute."*

Final positive outcome lay in the Taskforce operating as an exemplar of how to do cross-sector collaboration within the city and region:

*"This issue is a disrupter in our longer-term economic diversification and it does require an integrated collaborative approach, and it's hard. So having vehicle to demonstrate and test and learn how to work together and start to see the dividends, and the value of that, was really important and a tangible contribution to our region and collaboration going forward."*

*"Obviously there is a standing analysis about generally the fact that people in the city and the region aren't really that good about getting on the same page about things, and I think that is perfectly accurate...it [the Taskforce] was a really good example of when there is a really concrete, specific focus and no time or space to worry about the usual reasons people have issues working together...people can really get on with it and work in a collective interest."*

## LEGACY

One interviewee expressed the view that the Taskforce had achieved what it needed to in its allocated timeframe, and that dissolving it was timely and sensible:

*"The Taskforce came together swiftly because it was needed, and it did what it needed to do. The fact that it is dissolving and not trying to outstay its timeframe I think is very smart... if there is a situation that warrants it we can come together again and we have showed we can do it."*

The interviewee felt the legacy of the City Taskforce would be its place in Newcastle's history as an example of *"appropriate collaboration and response to crisis"*. The City Taskforce was seen by many as a good starting point for future collaboration and partnerships:

*"I love the way our community comes together around issues, and we have done it again for this pandemic... the symbolism of having civic leaders come together and staying aligned is another proud moment in Newcastle's history."*

*"Laid the groundwork for future collaboration or response to the crisis – in terms of a local government response, useful for the Council if they need to quickly bring a group together."*

Several interviewees felt the Taskforce's legacy would be the tangible documents that provide a reference point to show that agreement can be met, and collaborations can be positive and fruitful. One interviewee expressed the view that the Taskforce will provide a blueprint for how leaders can respond to future crises and unexpected events:

*“The Taskforce provided a template or proforma for how we can rapidly pull a leadership group together for the City... we have some tangible documents that show what our agreements, commitments and strategies are – maybe we can come back to these when we are fracturing and say remember how good it was when we got into a room and agreed on this.”*

*“Perhaps it is up to the participants to breathe life into the strategies that they think are worthwhile in the position papers.”*

One interviewee commented that a good legacy for the Taskforce would be in using the Taskforce as a regional model of how to prosecute advocacy and extending learnings to other LGA’s within the Region:

*“Reaching out to the region to collaborate with other Council’s – I think how to prosecute advocacy – much more sensible and mature debate about complex issues.”*

Senior leadership in the City of Newcastle have indicated that the Taskforce work, or at least several components of it, will be ongoing:

*“I see the end of the Taskforce as the conclusion of formal meeting process, but all the work will be continuing...any of the streams that are continuing, such as the Youth Employment Charter, will continue on through current formal committee structure in council.”*

Whilst this Taskforce is dissolving at the end of 2020, of a number interviewees were of the view that it would be beneficial for Taskforce members to continue to be involved in different events, discussions, and opportunities on an ongoing basis. Other expressed similarly that there was a need to continue new ways of working including having strategic discussions amongst key leaders and stakeholders. There was enthusiasm for carrying on the whole of city/ region approach to working together, and preserving the collegiality and leadership demonstrated throughout the pandemic.

*“That collaboration and advocacy won’t stop when the formal meetings stop, it will just morph into another phase.”*

*“I think the group, the Taskforce members need to come together once every 3-4 months for years to come...and they should bring in a successor, to champion the succession of their sector and it will live through the generations.”*

*“A legacy of the Taskforce is definitely in terms of the City’s role in terms of leading economic development policy and discussion and initiatives, will probably have been lifted to a new level...sometimes local government has a lot of policy and plans but if you are talking about real economic development, jobs, you want those heads of industry and workers having buy in to tangible results, that is a really important component. “*

*“I thank the City for taking the leadership and the risk that comes with that too...it’s built our capital within the region to do collaborative exercises on really important issues...taken big first steps that made this a safer place to play in and special congratulations to the work that is sitting behind it...its left a very good impression of the work in Council.”*

The data analytics stream was seen by a number of participants as an important long-term piece of work and tangible legacy of the endeavor.

However in order to continue this interviewee felt it was important for the Taskforce to have a defined focus both at a high level and within the defined priority areas.

*“I liked the fact that whilst it was a City of Newcastle Taskforce it did have broader consideration for the fact that we operate in a regional context. I think that was very useful and instructive for other groups like the Committee for the Hunter to see alignment for what we need in the City, and that was useful for coming into discussions around stimulus packages and budgets... this sort of model will be a strong platform for the City and region going forward.”*

Internal reflections on ongoing pieces of work stemming from the Taskforce include a renewed focus on a strategic and collaborative approach to advocacy within the City of Newcastle. For example, versions of the Newcastle Response may be presented to City of Newcastle’s Strategy and Innovation Committee of Council moving forward. Secondly, with regard to the Youth Employment Charter – a toolkit is being developed by the City of Newcastle for engagement of external organisations and will continue to be a key focus for CN’s Community Development team. With regard to the Local Evidence Base, CN has stated that there is ambition that new approaches to data sharing between local organisations will continue to be explored. Other ongoing work of Taskforce is to be absorbed in the City of Newcastle Strategy and Innovation Committee, chaired by Deputy Lord Mayor Cr Declan Clausen.

## Conclusion

This evaluation explores the appropriateness and effectiveness of the City of Newcastle COVID-19 Taskforce or *City Taskforce*, over its 8 months of operation from April to December 2020.

Based on a literature and document review, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 Taskforce and Action Team members, the evaluation has ascertained that Taskforce interviewees almost unanimously agreed that there was a role for united local leadership in the face of important, time critical and complex issue posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The work of the Taskforce produced a number tangible outputs, which provided material assistance to impacted sectors and groups and a clear signal that their concerns had been voiced and City leadership supported them:

- An industry response Program funding \$500,000 to assist most affected industries. Five projects in tourism, the arts, live music and small business space were funded. In addition to funding five local projects, via the visibility of the EOI process, the grant funding round generated more than two dozen high quality, ground-up collaborations, and some of these have been successfully funded through other City of Newcastle and other sources.
- A regular newsletter on behalf of Taskforce members to key state and federal decision makers, providing local evidence, stories, local responses and a series of policy asks for five sectors: community sector, tourism sector, youth employment, arts sector and the innovation economy.
- A workstream was established within the Taskforce action Team to bring together data from member organisations, with a long-term goal to create a culture and process of sharing data across the city.
- Establishment of the 'Greater Newcastle Youth Employment Charter' to expand opportunities for young people within the region. Collectively, the City Taskforce represents the largest employers in Newcastle – to date all taskforce members bar one are signatories to the Youth Charter. Newcastle based businesses 'Top Blokes', 'ASR Recruitment' and also the newly formed 'Committee for the Hunter' are also signatories.

There was a strongly expressed consensus among interviewees that the Taskforce was necessary and that its facilitation of united and deliberate City leadership was needed during the COVID pandemic. Value generated from the Taskforce also related to its timeliness in being brought into operation just as COVID-19 pandemic was breaking, many interviewees praised the City of Newcastle in being first movers, proactive in showing leadership within the region.

Many Taskforce members saw the Taskforce's greatest achievement in terms of advocacy, and there was a general consensus that the Taskforce was successful in its advocacy to other levels of government as to the assistance required for heavily impacted local industries. Several interviewees felt that the advocacy was well timed because policy-makers at the state and federal level were open to local advocacy and local evidence, as policy and program responses were evolving more fluidly during the pandemic.

The Taskforce conformed with many of the key elements of successful taskforce structure and operation as identified in the literature. For example membership was broadly representative and facilitated cross-sector collaboration. The Taskforce also successfully strengthened and/or built new relationships amongst member organisations. This has led to a number of spin-off

collaborations including a *'JobHelper'* youth employment coordinator position which is entering service level agreement, work by Taskforce members on soft international diplomacy, a new version of Renew Newcastle, a Business to Business initiative and collaboration focused on revising the visitor economy, including a Visitor Economy Roundtable hosted by the Newcastle Industry Tourism Group, now ongoing. The Visitor Economy Roundtable aims to provide a single voice for the sector, facilitate collaboration across multiple industry groups and levels of government, and to generate advocacy and action<sup>2</sup>. However the Taskforce also faced a number of known challenges, including difficulties relating to the pro bono investment of members time and differences in operating language and culture.

The Taskforce generated value for members organizationally through knowledge building and the production of new and timely information important for decision-making within members own sectors. Interviewees spoke about the value generated by virtue of the alignment of the Taskforce aims with their own leadership roles within the City, stating that participation in the Taskforce was a means to strengthen their core leadership responsibilities. Several interviewees commented on value derived from the ability to utilise particular skills and knowledge constructively. This is supported by Taskforce theory which highlights that the co-creation or collaboration process not only requires the partners to have linked interests but also to be well-connected with local communities and their stakeholders.

The Taskforce's legacy was felt to lie in it providing a blueprint for how leaders can respond to future crises or unexpected events within the city and region. It was expressed that the Taskforce had built 'regional capital' to do collaborative exercises well on important issues. Whilst the Taskforce is dissolving at the end of 2020, of a number interviewees were of the view that it would be beneficial for Taskforce members to continue to be involved in different events, discussions, and opportunities on an ongoing basis. The work of Taskforce is to be absorbed in the work of the *City of Newcastle Strategy and Innovation Committee*, chaired by Deputy Lord Mayor Cr Declan Clausen in 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> It has a number of key aims related to increasing local visitation, reducing the number of commercial properties available for lease and increasing the vibrancy of the night-time economy. It also aims to focus on the sector's key drivers of demand, improve sector member's wellbeing and support, better leverage innovation and entrepreneurship and improving the sustainability over the longer term.

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## APPENDIX 1      TASKFORCE MEMBERS INTERVIEWED

Interviewee	Organisation
Cr Nuatali Nelmes (Chair)	Lord Mayor City of Newcastle
Mr Simon Massey	City of Newcastle
Mr Bob Hawes	CEO Hunter Business Chamber
Ms Amy De Lore	Hunter Business Chamber
Mr Will Creedon	CEO Alloggio
Mr Peter Cock	CEO Newcastle Airport
Mr Brad Webb	CEO Samaritans, Chair of Third Sector Group
Ms Jane Gray	Hunter New England Health
Ms Justine Coggan	Independent Creative Alliance
Ms Alice Thompson	CEO Committee for the Hunter
Ms Emma Grangier	Samaritans
Mr Warrick Jordan	Hunter Valley Employment Facilitator, Department of Education Skills and Employment
Ms Anne Long	Greater Charitable Foundation, Greater Bank
Ms Samantha Marsh	Economic Development Project Officer, Regional NSW

# APPENDIX 2 QUESTIONNAIRE

## COVID 19 Resilience Package Evaluation – City Taskforce and Industry Responses

### Taskforce Members

*The Hunter Research Foundation Centre is conducting an evaluation of the City of Newcastle’s COVID-19 Economic and Community Resilience Package. There are nine programs being evaluated, the City Taskforce is one of these. This evaluation will provide important feedback about the effectiveness of the City Taskforce. Your feedback will enable the HRF Centre’s research team to make recommendations to the City of Newcastle to enhance and extend the reach of their COVID-19 response initiatives.*

*Participation in this research is entirely your choice and the information that you provide will be treated confidentially. Your responses will be de-identified at the time of reporting – so no individual names will be included; so your feedback will not be linked to you.*

*Do you have any questions before we begin?*

#### **Introduction to the Taskforce**

1. Firstly, what is your role in your organisation and how does membership with the Taskforce fit with that?
  - o What particular knowledge and skills do you contribute to the work of the Taskforce?

#### **Participation in the Taskforce**

2. Can you describe some of the key ways you / your organisation have been involved with the Taskforce?

#### **Aims of the Taskforce**

3. In your view, what is the objective of the Taskforce (reason for being / mission)?

*Prompt, stated aims of the Taskforce are to:*

- i. Provide local leadership to local issues;*
- ii. Act as the local coordinating advisory committee to oversee the second and recovery phases of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis;*
- iii. Make recommendations to Council and Industry Organisations as to the most innovative and targeted support to assist heavily impacted local industries;*
- iv. Liaise with the State Government, under the delegation of the Council, via regular updates from Regional NSW (Department of Premier & Cabinet);*
- v. Make recommendations regarding outbound communications capacity by coordinating major media outlets across television, print and social and procuring a creative agency; and*
- vi. Make recommendations to Council and Stakeholder organisations regarding community well-being and social cohesion through this difficult time.*

4. Do you agree with these stated aims? Were these aims appropriate in your view? Are there any others you can think of?

#### **Processes within the Taskforce – how well has it operated?**

5. Did the meeting format of the Taskforce work well? E.g. number and duration of meetings, meeting agenda and facilitation, etc.
6. How do you communicate and exchange information with other Taskforce members?
7. Did you develop any new relationships or strengthen any existing ones through your membership? Probe fully: Who, what happened?
  - o Has this led to any developments of projects or relationships outside of the Taskforce?
8. Were there organisations or individuals that you felt were missing from the Taskforce? If yes, who?

#### **Outputs of the Taskforce**

9. What have been the key outputs of the Taskforce? i.e. what work has it been doing/what has it produced?

*{Prompts: Advocacy, The Newcastle Response, Youth Employment Charter, Data and Analytics Portal, Industry Roundtable and/or Industry Response Grants, Boost Our City Grants and industry funding}.*

#### **Outcomes**

10. In your opinion what have been the key outcomes or achievements of the Taskforce, for a) you personally b) your organisation and c) the broader Newcastle community and business sector?

*Prompt, aspects to consider are:*

- What aspects of the Taskforce have been most useful to you / your organisation?
  - *Has the Taskforce been effective in supporting decision-making and advocacy within Newcastle LGA and beyond, in relation to key (non-public health) COVID impacts for community and business?*
  - *Effective for exchanging information and communicating between members?*
  - *Effective in influencing or supporting decision-making within the stakeholder group?*
  - *Effective in prompting greater collaboration between Taskforce members (either inside or outside of the Taskforce)?*
11. Are there any specific examples or outcomes from collaboration which you can point to, not already mentioned?
12. In your opinion has the Taskforce been able to identify gaps and develop an evidence base on key issues? Has it been able to provide unifying intelligence to other levels of Government?
13. Is the Taskforce helping to contribute to City decision-making and policy development for the future?

#### **Key learnings moving forward**

14. What aspects of the Taskforce have worked well?
15. Anything that could be improved? If so, can you suggest what is needed to make the Taskforce more effective?
16. Are there things you would have liked to have done / been involved with that didn't eventuate?

#### **Legacy**

17. What do you think is likely to be the legacy (i.e. things that will now continue regardless of the ongoing work of the Taskforce) of the Taskforce?
- Have you seen any early evidence of this?
18. Do you have any further comments about the Taskforce or this evaluation?

## APPENDIX 3 – CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED NEWCASTLE RESONSE

Date	From	Subject
10 July 2020	Mr Tim Crakanthrop MP State Member for Newcastle	Expression of appreciation – The Newcastle Response – Tourism Sector - and further representation to NSW Cabinet Ministers on behalf of City of Newcastle.
28 July 2020	Andrew Wallace Chief of Staff, Office of the Hon Mark Coulton MP	Work of City Taskforce in responding to COVID-19 pandemic
7 August 2020	Ray Williams MP Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier and Western Sydney	Correspondence regarding Newcastle’s Tourism Sector
11 August	Anthea Fell A/g Assistant Secretary Industry, Science and Communications Branch Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	Expression of appreciation - <i>The Newcastle Response</i> publication
21 August 2020	Sharon Claydon MP Federal Member for Newcastle	Expression of appreciation and correspondence on behalf of Newcastle City Taskforce & <i>The Newcastle Response</i> publication
28 August 2020	Office of Mark Butler MP Labor Member for Hindmarsh	Expression of appreciation - <i>The Newcastle Response – Youth Employment Charter</i> publication
9 September 2020	Marcus Ray Group Deputy Secretary Planning and Assessment	Expression of appreciation and correspondence regarding <i>The Newcastle Response</i> publication

15 September 2020	Hon. Dr Geoff Lee MP Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education Acting Minister for Sport, Multiculturalism, Seniors and Veterans	Expression of appreciation and correspondence on behalf of Newcastle City Taskforce - <i>The Newcastle Response</i> - Youth Employment Charter – August 2020 publication
21 September 2020	Senator The Hon. Richard Colbeck Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians Minister for youth and Sport Senator for Tasmania	Expression of appreciation and correspondence regarding <i>The Newcastle Response – Youth Employment Charter</i> publication
24 September 2020	James O’Toole Assistant Secretary Taxation, Financial Sector and Employment Branch	Expression of appreciation - <i>The Newcastle Response</i> publication
25 September 2020	Ms Sharon Claydon MP Federal Member for Newcastle	Expression of appreciation – <i>The Newcastle Response – Arts Sector</i> publication
1 October 2020	Mark Butler MP Labor Member for Hindmarsh	Expression of appreciation - <i>The Newcastle Response – Arts Sector</i>
7 October	Paul Vevers Deputy Secretary Housing, Disability and District Services Communities and Justice, NSW Government	Expression of appreciation and correspondence on behalf of Newcastle City Taskforce - <i>The Newcastle Response</i> - Youth Employment Charter – August 2020 publication
21 October 2020	Arts COVID Recovery and Response Office for the Arts Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	Expression of appreciation and correspondence regarding <i>The Newcastle Response – Arts Sector</i> publication

11 November 2020	Don Harwin MLC <sup>3</sup> Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council Special Minister of State Minister for the Public Service and Employee Relations, Aboriginal Affairs, and the Arts Minister for the Public Service and Employee Relations, Aboriginal Affairs and the Arts	Expression of appreciation and correspondence regarding <i>The Newcastle Response – Arts Sector</i> publication
11 December 2020	Ms Sharon Claydon MP Federal Member for Newcastle	Expression of appreciation and correspondence regarding the Newcastle Response – Innovation Economy publication.

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<sup>3</sup> Letter received by Mr Tim Crakanthorp MP, Member for Newcastle.