



# MidCoast Council

Housing Barriers Review

Findings Report

October 2023



An initiative funded by the NSW  
Government through the NSW Regional  
Housing Strategic Planning Fund

## Acknowledgment of Country

In preparing this document, Locale Consulting acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional custodians of the land to which this project relates, the Gathang-speaking people and pays our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the MidCoast Council area. We extend our respect to elders past and present and to all future cultural knowledge holders.



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### Document Control

Job Number: 2023/778  
Job Name: Housing Barriers Review  
Client: MidCoast Council  
Job Contact: Paul De Szell – Director Liveable Communities  
Document Name: Findings Report

Version	Date	Author	Reviewer	Approved
1	30.05.23	Steve Thompson / Cinnamon Dunsford	Cinnamon Dunsford	Steve Thompson
2	01.09.23	Steve Thompson	Steve Thompson	Steve Thompson
3	09.10.23	Steve Thompson	Steve Thompson	Steve Thompson

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# 1. Project overview

## 1.1 Project overview

The Housing Barriers Review (**project**) seeks to understand what barriers unnecessarily complicate the development assessment process and/or impede the delivery of good housing outcomes within the MidCoast Council local government area (**LGA**). By understanding these barriers, Council can work towards internal process improvements, industry engagement and the ongoing development of its planning controls to best meet the challenges the current housing market raises. Ultimately, the project aims to improve the MidCoast community's housing outcomes now and in the future.

To best understand perspectives on barriers and potential solutions, direct engagement with Council staff and industry participants was combined with the identification of issues and opportunities to develop the findings that are the subject of this report. By providing an open and balanced approach, the outcomes intend to be both well-informed and tangible.



The project is also informed by the existing improvement projects being pursued by Council, including customer journey mapping, process improvements, templates and standardisation processes recommended by the Audit, Risk and Improvement Committee and Business Transformation projects. Council has also been undertaking numerous programs and activities to increase the attraction and retention of staff in what are known industry wide shortages within many professional fields, and a tight labour market more generally.



**It is important that the recommendations and outcomes of this report be recognised within the broader context of professional staffing shortages across the industry, and financial resource constraints of local government.**

## 1.2 Housing market realities

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a rapid and substantial increase in regional migration, placing demand pressures on housing in areas where development has typically been moderated by more gradual population growth and limitations on project feasibility. The imbalance between supply and demand has increased median house prices by more than 50% in most areas since early 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Complicating the significant increase in demand is a planning system that requires multiple levels of approvals and assessment processes (within both the State and Local Government contexts) to enable the release of land and the delivery of built housing. These processes, including establishing long-term plans (e.g. Local Strategic Planning Statement and Housing Strategy), rezonings, subdivisions, dwelling construction and occupation, can all be lengthy.

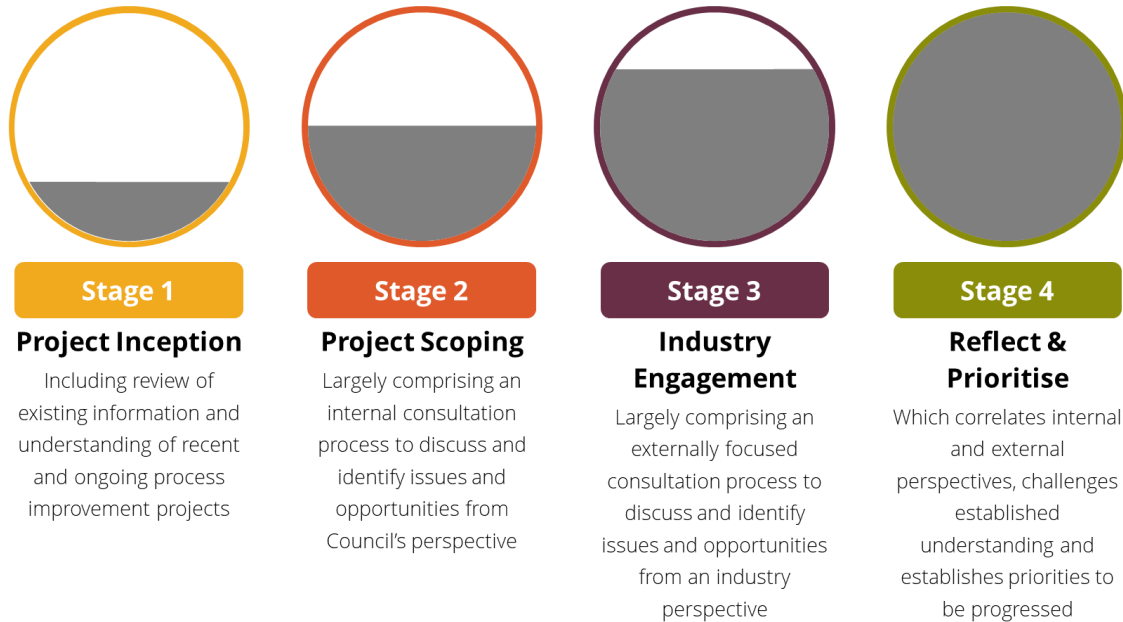


For some, these processes are also seen to result in poor urban form, a lack of environmental sustainability and widening the gap between housing cost and affordability - particularly for new entrants to the housing market. Within this context, the project is conscious of establishing short and long-term directions to assist in delivering effective housing outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Refer data for various postcodes at <https://heatmaps.com.au/> accessed 03.02.2023

### 1.3 Project process

To ensure broad, informed and direct discussions, the project has been delivered across four stages as follows:



This Findings Report is based on the outcomes of these stages, reflecting the need to balance internal and external perspectives whilst remaining within a context of pragmatic and tangible outcomes.

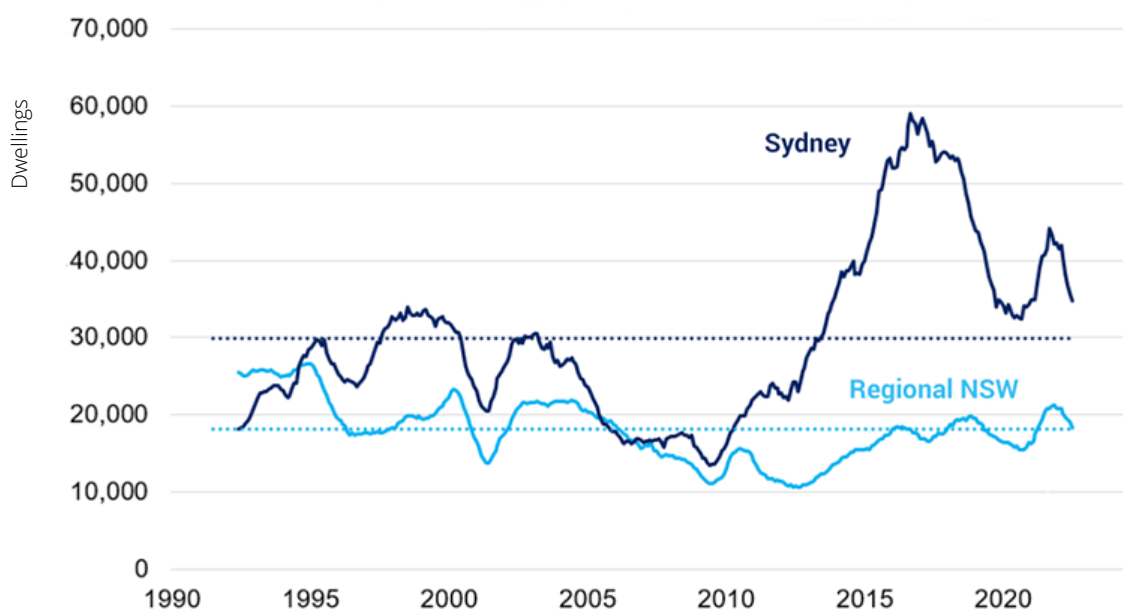
## 2. Existing situation

This section provides an overview of the current situation with respect to the delivery and cost of housing, how planning and development is viewed in the MidCoast area, how Council is tracking in terms of assessment data and housing delivery. It also provides a summary of the more recent improvements and changes that have been made to development assessment processes as part of Council's continuing operations.

### 2.1 Housing delivery and cost generally

The NSW Department of Planning and Environment identify a historic lag of around 2 years between the approval and the completion of housing projects, with about 97% of projects with construction approval being completed. However, with a push to deliver more housing in recent years there has been a vast difference between the delivery of housing in Sydney and regional areas.

In Greater Sydney, the historic average of 30,000 dwelling approvals each year has increased by close to 50% over the past decade, with 42,600 dwellings being approved per year in the last 10 years. In regional areas, the longer-term average of around 18,000 dwellings per year is relatively consistent with more recent trends. This comparison is highlighted below.<sup>2</sup>



*Number of dwelling approvals over the longer-term*

<sup>2</sup> Refer <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Housing/Housing-Supply-Insights/Quarterly-Insights-Monitor-Q1/Trends-in-housing-supply> for details. Accessed 29.08.2023

Conversely, the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a substantial increase in regional migration, placing greater pressure on areas in regional NSW where housing development has not substantially increased compared with Sydney where successive State and Federal governments have placed great effort and resources to increase dwelling delivery. The consequence is the earlier stated situation where median house prices have increased by more than 50% in most areas since the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, while housing sales have reduced dramatically over the same period.<sup>3</sup>



More substantive resourcing to address barriers to housing delivery by State and Federal Governments can significantly improve output, as demonstrated by the increases in housing numbers in the Sydney area over the last 10+ years.

## 2.2 Customer satisfaction surveys

While customer satisfaction surveys were undertaken in 2016, 2017 and 2020, only the 2020 version asked questions regarding planning and housing matters. A 2023 survey is currently in progress, but results are not available at the time of writing.

The 2020 survey, undertaken by Micromex and utilising benchmarks between Council scores and averages for others across NSW, identifies two areas of particular relevance to this Housing Barriers Review project:

- 'Residential development' - Has relatively low importance compared to many areas, with the MidCoast community ranking this 10% lower in importance than the benchmark score. This suggests that at that time (2020), there was relatively low concern about housing within the community.
- Correspondingly, community response to the question of whether 'you feel able to afford a reasonable standard of housing in this area', most people (68%) agree or strongly agree, 15% above the benchmark average.

Other areas of note from the 2020 survey include the community's dissatisfaction with 'opportunities to participate in Council decision making' and 'engaging the community in planning'. These measures are considered to be of higher importance to the MidCoast community compared to the benchmark averages, suggesting the potential for the community to have a heightened interest in how development and housing is assessed and approved.



Decisions on planning have long been important to the community, but the importance and relevance of housing is likely to be far more important than pre-Covid surveys suggest.

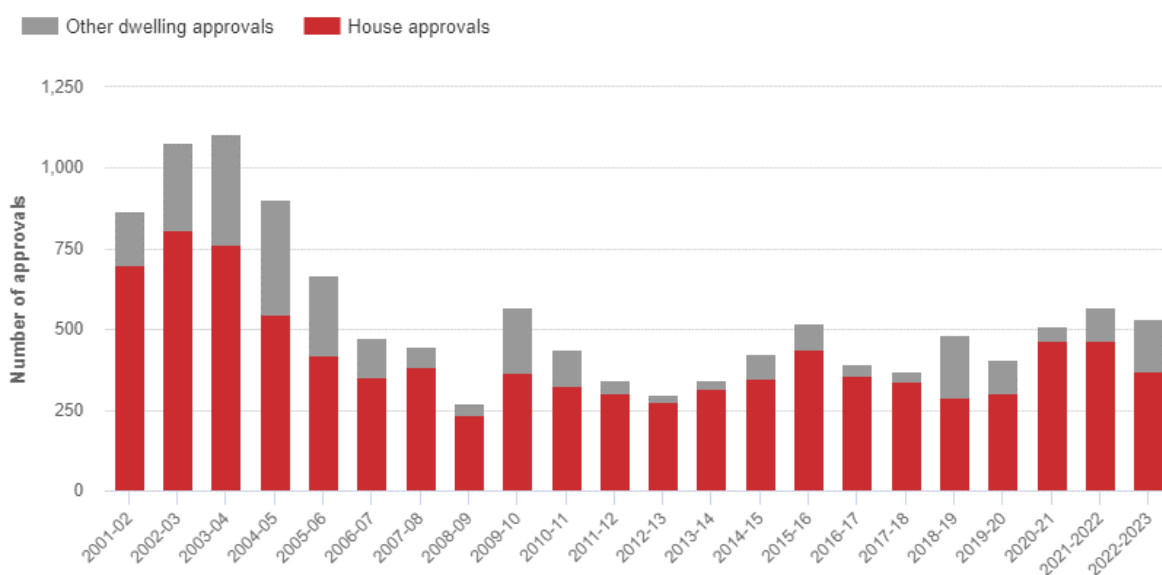
It is noted that the survey was undertaken just prior to the first Covid-19 lockdowns and therefore prior to the increased property prices and housing shortages that have been experienced since. Comparison to future surveys would be of particular interest in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Refer data for various postcodes at <https://heatmaps.com.au/> accessed 29.08.2023



## 2.3 Development assessment data

According to ID community profile<sup>4</sup>, in the MidCoast Council area there were almost 570 housing and other dwelling approvals in the 2021/2022 financial year, the highest level of approvals since 2005/2006, and followed up by more than 530 in 2022/2023. According to ID, building approvals are a leading indicator of the general level of residential development, economic activity, employment and investment. While the number of building approvals can fluctuate substantially from year to year as a result of the short-term nature of construction projects, there has been a progressive increase over the last three years.



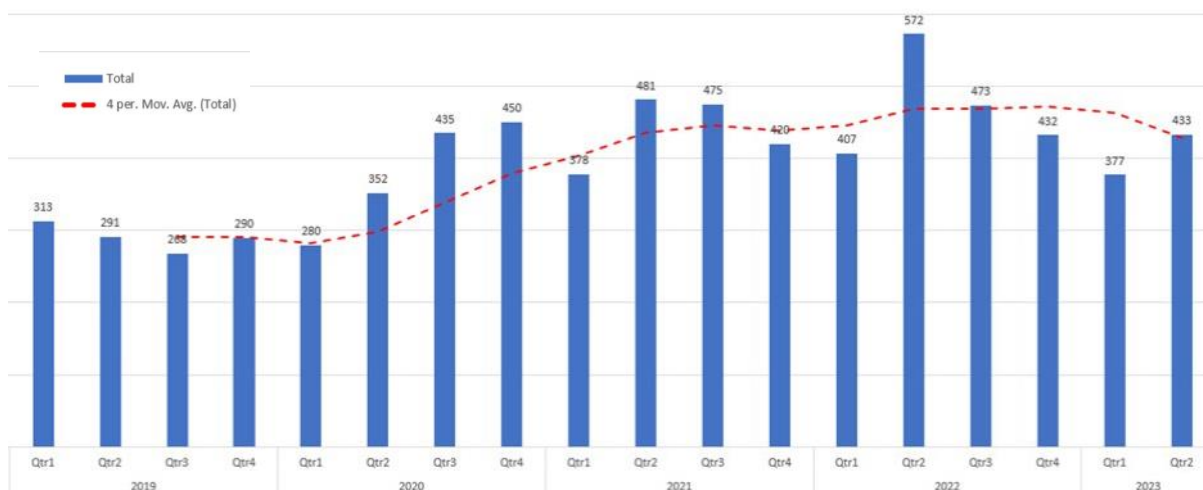
### *Housing and other dwelling approvals per annum (financial year)*

Council staff also provide quarterly update reports to Council meetings to monitor activity in this area. These reports highlight key indicators across an extended period such as:

- Number of applications lodged and determined
- Average and median assessment timeframes
- Comparison to broader NSW and Regional City Councils based on Planning Portal data
- Other statistics including types of applications, development type and their value

Of note in the most recent report (at the time of writing and being for the March - June 2023 period), there is a slowing average trend in applications being lodged, as shown in the reported graph below.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://profile.id.com.au/midcoast/building-approvals> for details. Accessed August 2023



### Applications lodged to MidCoast Council per quarter

The reports also indicate relatively favourable results compared to overall and the “Regional City Councils” group (this is further explored below). Average internal referral times have become longer in recent times, albeit the median times remain relatively consistent at around 7 days. The most recent report also provides an overview of external referrals, of which there were 50 returned, where average times were 45 assessment days, with RFS (60) and Department of Planning - Water (70) being particularly slow in responding (noting that these figures can be easily swayed by small numbers of referrals to some organisations).

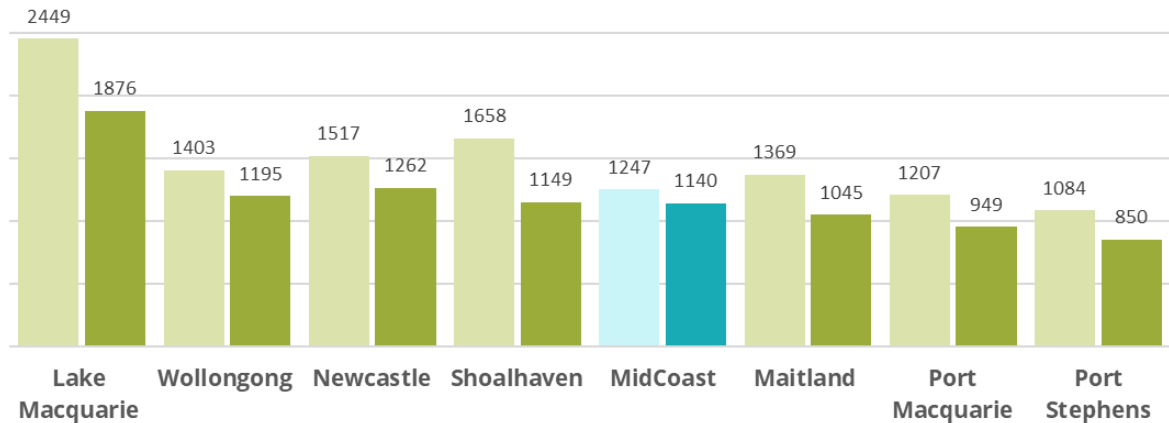


Council has received unusually large numbers of applications, and approved large numbers of dwellings, since the 2020/2021 period - coinciding with Covid-19 restrictions and tightening staff availability.

### Planning portal statistics

Based on a review of Planning Portal statistics for Regional City Councils<sup>5</sup>, MidCoast ranks fifth in terms of DAs lodged in 2022/2023 (behind Lake Macquarie, Newcastle, Wollongong and Shoalhaven respectively). Between the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 financial years, the MidCoast has maintained a high proportion of applications experienced during the end of the pandemic period - with only a 9% reduction in volume compared to an average reduction of 22% amongst comparable councils. These figures are highlighted below.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/eplanningreport> - Many comparable and surrounding councils fall within the Regional City Council category as defined by the Office of Local Government



*DAs lodged in 2022/2023 (bold colour), and previous financial year 2021/2022 (light shade)*

In terms of total development value, DAs in the MidCoast are typically of a lower value than others, with MidCoast ranking only above Maitland Council out of this group for the 2022/2023 financial year.

DA processing times of councils varies widely within the group, from 49 to 131 days for the 2022/2023 financial year. MidCoast ranks fifth in the group at 88 days (gross). Compared to the previous financial year, all councils have seen an increase in processing times. However, MidCoast is performing comparatively well despite the ongoing pressure of high applications, with only a 6% increase in gross processing time (ranking first in this group).

As a proportion of total applications (modifications compared to DAs), MidCoast has the fifth lowest number of modifications of the group, suggesting that there is not an excessive number being lodged in a comparative sense. Processing times of modifications is however high compared to others, being the worst performing of the group last financial year (66 days). This could reflect difficulties of amalgamation, including issues associated with access to historic files / records required to assess modifications.

In terms of complying development certificates (CDCs), MidCoast has the second lowest number of determinations (270), with only Port Stephens lower of the group (180). Comparatively, Lake Macquarie, Shoalhaven and Wollongong all have at least double, potentially reflecting a deliberate strategy to be more involved and competitive in certification. MidCoast is however strong in this area in terms of determination times, ranking second at just 20 days.



Whilst there is always room for improvement, Council's development assessment processing times are generally comparable or favourable with others Council's within the 'Regional City Council' cohort.

### 3. Summary of consultation outcomes

To ensure that project outcomes were informed and practical, those with close involvement in delivering housing outcomes were consulted through a detailed engagement process across internal and external stakeholders. An outline of the engagement activities undertaken is provided below, with subsequent sub-sections giving further details of the consultation outcomes from both perspectives.



### 3.1 Internal perspectives

A total of two online and 10 face to face sessions were held with Council staff typically involved in the development assessment and approvals processes. This initial consultation process provided an overarching opportunity for internal staff to raise known issues and identify opportunities across the typical development stages.

It also provided the opportunity for the Locale Consulting team to better understand current processes and the improvements already being pursued by Council. The sessions were undertaken in a non-confrontational way, encouraging self-reflection of activities within each area's control and highlighting issues and opportunities that may be apparent across other areas or externally.

Six theme areas emerged from these consultations, as summarised below.

- 1. IT systems and portal integration**, including improvement to the overarching MC1 IT platform for application management, combined with the need to integrate with the Planning Portal and ensure accessibility of historical records.
- 2. Access to lodgement information and submission quality**, including the availability of quality lodgement information and submission requirements to ensure accurate and informed applications that enable efficient assessment and effective outcomes.
- 3. Council staffing and structure**, including continued efforts to address staffing shortages, exacerbated by high application volumes, whilst having documented processes / programs to assist professional staff and ensure that team skills are readily available.
- 4. Application management and input**, including encouraging high-quality applications to enable a more outcome-focused approach, including greater team focus on large projects, skills / training improvement and focus on accuracy and time management.
- 5. Post-determination processes**, including addressing field inspection staff shortages, appropriate use of conditions that require further approvals, co-ordinating post-determination operations and associated advice.
- 6. Completing the overarching framework**, including removing conflicts / inconsistencies through adopted strategies (e.g. Housing / Rural, Open Space, Development Servicing Plans) and preparing the MidCoast LEP, DCP, contributions plan/s.

Internal consultation also highlighted that there were various perspectives between teams and individuals - as may be expected to some degree in any large organisation. However, whatever policy position, submission requirement or assessment process is implemented, ensuring consistency in the application of these policies and processes by internal staff is critical to external perceptions and overall housing outcomes.

## 3.2 External perspectives

Ten online and three group face-to-face sessions were held with industry participants typically involved in the development assessment and approvals process and those with a broader interest in housing delivery. An online project survey, with 48 responses being received, supported this industry-based consultation to ensure a wide spread of opportunities for feedback.

Industry consultation activities also allowed the Locale Consulting team to test issues raised through internal consultation and to correlate these with external perspectives. The sessions were undertaken in a non-confrontational way, encouraging reflection on both the issues and opportunities associated with Council's activities, as well as broader industry perspectives.

Six theme areas emerged from these consultations, as summarised below.

- 1. Communication**, including changing internal processes to be more communicative generally, including updating applicants on assessment processes, but also being more open to discussing issues with applicants and being available to explain requirements before making written requests.
- 2. Staffing resources and consistency**, including making continued efforts to recruit key staff positions, improve staff skills through training and mentoring, empowering staff to make quality decisions and escalating issues where they are not being resolved in a timely manner.
- 3. Enabling process touch points**, including well-communicated and more effective (and for larger projects, more regular) meetings such as pre-lodgement, post-lodgement and meetings to resolve key issues. Faster lodgement processes and opportunities for feedback to enable continuous improvement were also identified.
- 4. Specific referral area improvements**, including addressing issues associated with specific referral areas to ensure timeliness, consistency and reasonableness, particularly in the engineering, water quality, ecological and environmental health assessment teams.
- 5. Enabling innovation and forward planning**, including at the broad scale, immediately focusing on increasing land release opportunities to stimulate supply, and at the finer scale, providing planning control clarity and flexibility to ensure appropriate application at a site, locality or application level. This may necessitate addressing infrastructure gaps and establishing policies for alternative housing models and innovation to address affordability and availability.
- 6. Advocacy for broader outcomes**, including advocating for improvements to overarching planning legislation, identifying funding opportunities to rectify infrastructure gaps, and establishing an Upper Hunter Urban Development Program as identified through the Hunter Regional Plan.

A key issue that largely overarches these themes, which was consistently raised during consultation activities, related to delays in the processing of applications across the development spectrum. Many conversations, and therefore the themes identified above,

subsequently related to mechanisms that could be employed to ensure more timely and accurate outcomes.

### 3.3 Achieving lasting outcomes

In developing the proposed direction areas outlined in Section 4 of this document, and in the interest of achieving lasting outcomes, the following principles are relevant:

- **Directions will need focused resourcing** - Whilst we have identified that existing staff can be used to resource many identified directions, this assumes that staff vacancies are filled, and staffing allocations are best utilised for maximum effect. Without focused resourcing, achieving substantive change is unlikely to be successful (refer to further discussion on resourcing in Section 4).
- **There's no silver bullet** - The NSW planning system, and other processes associated with the delivery of housing, are complex. The delivery of housing requires many inputs and industry participants. This means that improvements can similarly be made from many directions. Implementation of directions across various areas of Council (including advocacy where required) is preferable to identifying a single 'silver bullet' solution.

These principles appear to be generally well understood across both internal and external perspectives. Issues associated with staff resources is particularly difficult for Council, and the industry more broadly. Council have identified that they undertake regular benchmarking with respect to remuneration and working conditions and that there are notable complexities with both existing and future staff recruitment when stepping outside industry benchmarking.

Council have also identified numerous initiatives / programs that are currently undertaken with respect to staff retention and training. These include:

- Lead program, a comprehensive leadership program aimed at future leaders within the organisation
- Women Rising Program, an internationally recognised program delivered through an online learning platform
- Rural Management Challenge, a professional development opportunity for all up and coming staff within council
- Wellbeing – Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provided to all staff
- Culture surveys, including the recently completed 2023 survey where staff are working with the organisation to improve outcomes
- Yearly individual work and development plans undertaken for all staff
- Graduate and traineeship programs
- Reward and recognition programs
- Succession planning

Achieving effective staff resourcing needs to be set within this broader staffing context, and in recognition of the high volumes of work that have been experienced in recent years.

## 4. Three core directions

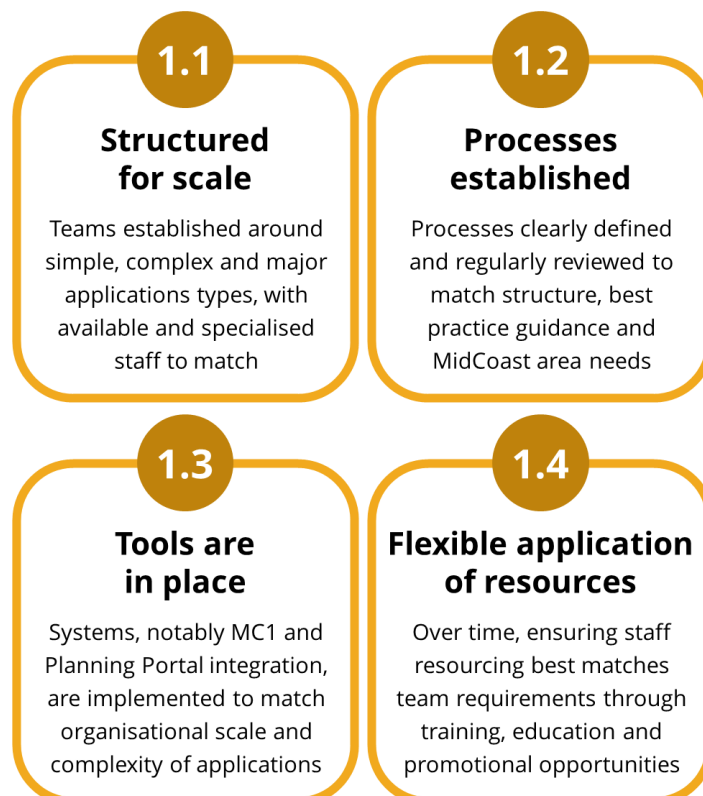
To assist in defining the outcomes of the project, three direction streams are identified. Each of these streams has definable outcomes on its own, but with concurrent implementation, there is the potential to magnify the benefits of each stream.



These direction streams are outlined in further detail below, with the Implementation Plan (Section 6) providing additional detail and context for each stream.

### **Direction 1: Internal processes and structure**

This inwardly focused direction responds to both internal and external feedback. This direction intends to acknowledge and work towards a structure and systems that reflect the size and complexity of applications being received and assessed by MidCoast Council. Given the changes in demand that can occur depending on the point of the development cycle, this direction also provides a structure that can be flexibly applied. This direction includes four parts:





## Direction 1.1 - Structured for scale

Establish a structure that is more reactive to development types or complexity, with relevant and specialised staff being answerable to development and planning management. This includes a renewed focus on larger application outcomes whilst maintaining the fast-track process for smaller applications and merit planning assessments for small, but complex applications.



More specifically, the structure would benefit from:

- Building Services and Major Assessment teams being brought under a single co-ordinator / manager, meaning that the above split can be effectively established, and
- Remaining areas of Environmental Health Services and Regulatory Services being brought under a single co-ordinator / manager with a more regulatory and enforcement focus.

The structure would also benefit from internalising key professional resources under development and planning management with a view to having greater accountability for delivering development assessment activities. As a priority this would apply to development engineering, ecology and water quality teams. In light of the above changes, a review of referral processes and structures will also be required.

## Direction 1.2 - Processes established

Based on team structures, best practice guidance and testing for MidCoast needs, processes and procedures need to be clearly established, documented and consistently applied in advance of updated IT software/modules. Continual review of procedures should be undertaken to identify failures, integrate updates to accommodate changing IT systems, and to reflect management priorities and desired development assessment outcomes .

These processes should also examine referral activities to create consistent approaches and to identify steps to be taken where conflicting or excessive requests are identified (e.g. escalation of referral requests to directions meetings held by development and planning management).

## Direction 1.3 - Tools are in place

Working systems are implemented to match the scale of the organisation and complexity of applications, particularly with respect to MC1 development and integration with the Planning

Portal. Once established, the use of these tools is clearly defined and consistently utilised in accordance with process manuals (Direction 1.2).

To assist in the efficient operation of the above recommendation, opportunities also exist to ensure that historical site information is more readily available, in order to assist in future development enquiries, connections to neighbouring land and to address site history needs.

### **Direction 1.4 - Flexible application of resources**

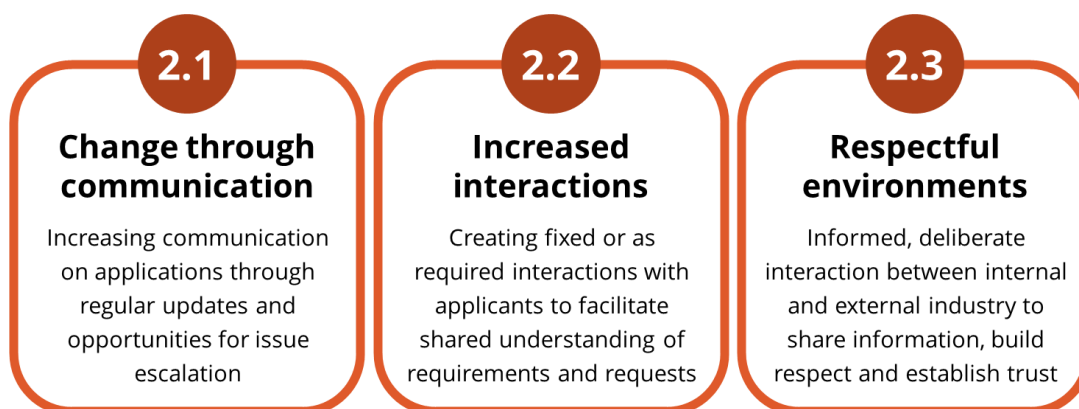
Recognising the ebbs and flows of the development industry generally, and the resource-intensive nature of major assessment in particular, the proposed structure of teams needs to provide greater flexibility to share resources between teams to establish more level work-loads over time, including between the more traditional 'building surveyor' and 'planner' roles.

Alongside these structure changes is the need to continue to provide for increased internal (e.g. mentoring) or external (e.g. formal study) training and education opportunities that enable succession planning for staff to increase their roles and responsibilities over time. This includes both "para-professionals" in lodgement and business support teams, as well as professionals within assessment teams.

## **Direction 2: Cultural change and understanding**

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This direction seeks to create improved working relationships through a greater appreciation of issues and opportunities from both an internal and external perspective. The direction has an initial focus on communication, with a growing opportunity to increase respectful understanding of perspectives through information sharing and collaboration. The direction includes:



### **Direction 2.1 - Change through communication**

Reviewing and being more open to genuinely informing and discussing opportunities associated with development assessment and approvals processes. This includes establishing regular communication processes and protocols through Direction 1.2, as well as establishing systems for management to ensure that such processes are being completed (e.g. automated alerts, feedback loops, training etc).

## **Direction 2.2 - Increasing interactions**

Matching the regular written and / or verbal communication on specific applications, there are also opportunities to ensure that assessment and/or referral staff are positioned to engage more directly with applicants to discuss and resolve issues and to escalate issues where required. This can provide efficiencies for both internal and external participants by avoiding uncertainty around information requests and ensuring that assessment times are focused on key issues and the application of clear policy objectives.

For larger applications, this may also include fixed point process interactions (such as a post-lodgement review meeting) that aim to ensure a consistent understanding of the project, the need for additional information and options for maintaining application progress.

## **Direction 2.3 - Respectful environments**

Over and above application specific interactions, providing increased opportunities for informed and deliberative engagement between internal and external stakeholders can be used to encourage information sharing and continual improvement. Opportunities include:

- a range of potential industry-based groups, for example an expanded Development Industry Group (DIG) or other similar groups based on industry types that meet at regular intervals
- establishing broad-based regular "Development Forums", with opportunities for presentations and information sharing through two-way discussions by Council and industry participants, and
- education-based talks and seminars where challenges and opportunities can be discussed and understanding of specific issues/responses can be explained.

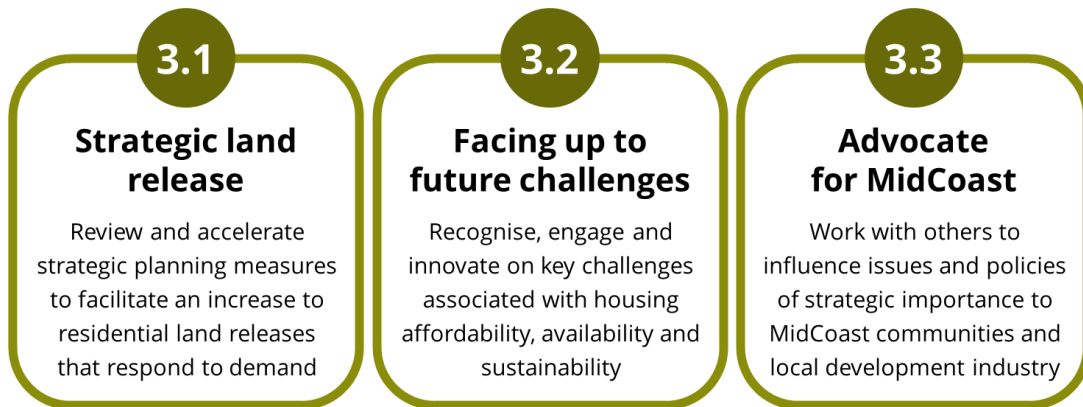
This process is aimed at establishing trust and understanding between internal and external participants to increase respect and establish fair, collaborative and informed working environments.

## **Direction 3: Innovation and strategy**

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This direction steps outside of the development application process to a more strategic level. It recognises and engages with a range of core issues that require informed policy responses, collaboration or advocacy with others, and which recognise the need for accelerated forward planning following demographic changes related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

At a practical level, many of these challenges can be addressed in some form through consolidated planning controls. However, many issues are challenging within the land use planning system, have costs and implications for typical markets, and will require careful policy development and clear communication to enable meaningful change. The direction includes:



### **Direction 3.1 - Strategic land release**

Recognising population increase and accelerated land take-up resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic demographic shifts, there is a need to accelerate the 3-5 year timeframe that is typically required from land assessment/rezoning through to approvals, construction and certification. Increased demand for regional housing from pandemic demographic change is likely to have exhausted large areas of previously available land placing an emphasis on increased delivery of new land releases or infill opportunities.

To facilitate land releases, a review of the *Urban Release Areas* report and acceleration of identified planning proposals should be combined with a broader review of potentially available and developable land through engagement with industry and State Government. Facilitation of increased infill opportunities may also be considered through planning incentives, target site identification, site-specific planning controls and a balance between greenfield and brownfield development.

### **Direction 3.2 - Facing up to future challenges**

A number of key issues and opportunities are associated with housing availability, affordability and sustainability. Whilst housing supply can be partially addressed through Direction 3.1, there are numerous other factors that may require close review, innovative solutions and, potentially, advocacy, as discussed in Direction 3.3. Examples include (applying to some areas, but not necessarily all):

- High vacancy rates / holiday homes and short-term holiday letting that reduces the pool of available housing, including rental markets
- Meeting affordable and social housing needs to enable safe, available accommodation options that can be accessed by workers and other community members
- Planning for older age population segments that potentially reinforces the skewed demographic to older people through housing types and social infrastructure, and
- Increasing long-term housing sustainability through design, materials and changing social norms around housing size.

The difficult balance through this process will be providing for leadership on challenging issues whilst working within a system that is not conducive to change. Challenging the system is often also seen as a challenge to the broader industry, which can be met with resistance (such is likely to be the case with water quality assessment requirements). Careful policy settings

combined with high levels of evidence-based communication and education are required. This could include examples of where such approaches to development have been successful (economically, socially and environmentally) in other regional areas.

### **Direction 3.3 - Advocate for MidCoast**

This direction recognises that resolving all housing barriers is beyond Council's direct control, and there is a key role for advocacy to State Government agencies, as well as other industry participants. Examples of areas of advocacy that are directly related to housing delivery at the current time include:

- Identification of and sourcing funding for key infrastructure gaps which create feasibility barriers to housing supply
- Establishing substantive infrastructure planning assistance through the Upper Hunter and MidCoast Urban Development Program identified within the Hunter Regional Plan 2041
- Continuing to work with relevant groups on key issues such as broader-scale housing affordability, social housing, housing sustainability and worker accommodation
- Liaising with State Government agencies to address barriers and explore additional opportunities for rezoning land

## 5. Resourcing change

The key to delivering the directions identified in this report is providing focused resourcing to match requirements. Identified resourcing needs, and the potential opportunities to support implementation, are identified by organisation below.

### **Council:**

*Note: A key aspect of these directions is to ensure focused staff effort rather than assumed need for the introduction of new positions, particularly given the likely reduction of application volumes in the foreseeable future. Where short to medium term effort is required, opportunities for grant funded positions or temporary positions may also be relevant.*

- Undertake a benchmarking review of staffing needs within assessment teams, based on the new structures identified, with a view to ensuring that appropriate resource levels are available to enable the undertaking of identified directions generally.
- Continue to identify opportunities for staff attraction for professional positions, noting the industry wide constraints identified in many of these areas. This would particularly target mid to senior-level planners and engineers, whilst promoting 'family friendliness' of vacancies to make jobs more attractive to the 'whole family'.
- Noting the range of activities and programs already undertaken (refer to Section 3.3), continue to facilitate staff retention through leadership that creates a desirable work environment for both mental and physical wellbeing, as well as recognised pathways for career progression, mentoring programs, recognition and reward process / schemes, regular staff check-ins (e.g. staff surveys) and the like, and particularly within the assessment team environment.
- Provision of resources (outside direct assessment staff as identified above) relating to the following:
  - Major project co-ordination and procedures staff: Includes DAP and post lodgement co-ordination, major project working group meetings and major project business support roles, as well as establishing and maintaining process procedures for all assessment tasks - potential business support role.
  - Education and engagement co-ordination staff: Includes a range of internal and external education, training and information-sharing processes and opportunities to improve public, industry and staff knowledge and understanding. A new focus for the communications teams that seeks to explore a range of issues and opportunities across the planning and development spectrum (e.g. issues and opportunities identified under Direction 3.2 - Facing up to future challenges).
  - Certification and sign-off staff: Includes the filling of staff vacancies, or additional focus of existing staff, on certification and subdivision sign-off to expedite releases of land and the completion of construction projects.
  - Instructure gap identification, grant funding and delivery staff: Includes resourcing of processes to identify, obtain funding for, and deliver infrastructure projects that are a catalyst for development opportunities. Potential grant funded position to

assist to drive the unlocking of housing development opportunities in the short-medium term.

- Funding for external assistance to accelerate specific project outcomes, including assistance to develop overarching planning frameworks, development specifications / guidance, and investigations to key planning and housing issues. Potential to be sourced from State and/or Federal housing acceleration or related programs.

**Department of Planning & Environment:**

- Continued delivery of Regional Plan outcomes, including the Upper Hunter Urban Development Program and acceleration of the Place Strategy actions required for significant growth in the 'Strategic Centres' of Taree and Forster-Tuncurry.
- Seeking to obtain funding for, or have delivered through State agencies, Planning Portal integration costs.

**Department of Planning & Environment - Planning Delivery Unit:**

- Continue and expand working opportunities with the Department's Planning Delivery Unit to identify potential assistance measures (physical or monetary) that could include:
  - Regional Housing Flying Squad Program
  - Regional Planner Incubator
  - Strong Start Cadetship program
  - Concurrences and Referrals Project

*Note: A number of the above resourcing opportunities could be presented to the Planning Delivery Unit or Department of Planning & Environment more broadly to seek guidance on available assistance measures.*

## 6. Implementation Plan

This section provides an "Implementation Plan" to guide resource allocation and the timing of directions identified by this Findings Report.

Each direction within the Implementation Plan is provided with:

**Timeframe** allocation is as follows:

- Immediate - to be completed by March 2024
- Short-term - to be completed by September 2024
- Medium-term - to be completed by July 2025
- Long-term - completion is currently undefined, but unlikely by July 2025
- On-going - no set commencement or completion date
- As required - where subject to other influences

**Resources** allocation is as follows:

- Existing staff resources - utilising existing staffing to complete directions
- Focused staff resources - requires focused staff resourcing to enable implementation, including redeployed, new or temporary opportunities
- Existing funding allocation - Previously identified or anticipated external cost
- External assistance (low) - potentially requires external support for delivery at a relatively low cost (under \$10,000)
- External assistance (medium) - potentially requires external support for delivery at a relatively low cost (\$10,000 - \$50,000)
- External assistance (high) - potentially requires external support for delivery at a relatively low cost (\$50,000+)

**Responsibility** allocation is based on the current (as of October 2023) MidCoast Council organisational chart. The lowest direct report is identified where possible.



## MidCoast Housing Barriers - Findings Implementation Plan

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
<b>1</b>	<b>INTERNAL PROCESSES AND STAFFING</b>			
<b>1.1</b>	<b>Structured for scale</b>			
	<p>1.1.1 - Review the structure of the Liveability &amp; Sustainable Development section as outlined in Direction 1.1, to internalise key professional resources under development and planning management with a view to having greater accountability for delivering development assessment activities. As part of this review three groups could be established based on the following (or a similar) scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Building applications</li> <li>○ Planning assessments</li> <li>○ Major projects</li> </ul>	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Director Liveable Communities
	1.1.2 - Identify opportunities for the integration of specialisation areas, particularly development engineering, water quality and ecology, into planning and building assessment teams where FTE roles are identified	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Focused staff resources	Director Liveable Communities
	1.1.3 - Ensure there are suitably trained staff in specialised areas to reduce reliance on external consultant assistance and to maintain in-house expertise in specialist areas such as water quality (MUSIC) and ecology (BAM)	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources + training and/or IT costs	Innovation & Sustainable Futures
	1.1.4 - Increase resource focus on engineering certification and sign-off to increase the frequency of physical inspections (e.g. subdivision certificates, driveways etc.) to accelerate occupation	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Focused staff resources	Transport & Engineering
	1.1.5 - Retain / establish and promote career progression pathways within para-professional and professional service areas	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Strategy & Performance + Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.1.6 - Pending the outcome of changes to the Liveability & Sustainable Development section, review referral processes and staff training to assist in identifying necessary, efficient and consistent referrals	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
<b>1.2</b>	<b>Processes established</b>			
	<p>1.2.1 - Document, provide staff training on, and maintain standard operating procedures via a dedicated manual or similar, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lodgement and clearinghouse processes and timing</li> <li>○ Assessment processes, timing and consistency of approach</li> <li>○ Referral processes, timing and consistency of approach (internal and external), including establishing the reason for additional information requests</li> <li>○ External communication protocols and timing</li> <li>○ Provision of 'directions meetings' or similar between junior and senior staff</li> <li>○ Escalation of issues to managerial staff outside the above mechanisms</li> <li>○ Requirements for non-standard conditions (including senior staff agreement)</li> <li>○ Co-ordination and ownership of post-determination processes via Business Support teams and/or direct ownership of those areas requesting the conditions</li> </ul>	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Focused staff resources - Potential administrative resource to review and maintain procedures	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.2.2 - Within the major projects assessment team, establish a more collaborative, case management style processes to better integrate assessment disciplines into the ongoing assessment process (e.g. regular case management meetings)	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.2.3 - Modify current processes to move clearinghouse activities to be after lodgement is accepted, consistent with the Best Practice Guidelines and reducing the time taken for formal lodgement	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.2.4 - Increase training of lodgement team staff on minimum requirements for application acceptance to accelerate lodgement times and to ensure incremental improvement of applications over time by reducing the incidence of inappropriate requests and reducing the onus on professional staff reviews	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.2.5 - Ensure mechanisms are in place to enable the efficient escalation of key issues, referral requests or the like to 'directions meetings' with managerial staff	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Director Liveable Communities

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
	1.2.6 - Review and agree on processes with external referral agencies (Essential Energy and RFS in particular) to improve combined understanding of the need for referrals (or where referrals are not required), as well as post-determination processes	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Transport & Engineering
	1.2.7 - Establish and promote an integrated approval process (e.g. avoiding the use of separate section 68 approvals) where desired by applicants	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
<b>1.3</b>	<b>Tools are in place</b>			
	1.3.1 - Review existing systems in conjunction with Technology One as part of the Business Transformation program and seek to establish parameters for and accelerate the implementation of new and / or improved use of development assessment and related modules	Commence - August 2024) Complete - Nov 2025	Existing funding allocation - Business Transformation	Business Transformation + Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.3.2 - Work with Technology One and State Government to accelerate Planning Portal integration for local government (including MidCoast) to ensure that activities are as seamless as possible	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / Externally funded - State	Business Transformation + Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.3.3 - Implement a standardised condition approach to reduce inconsistencies and increase the accuracy of consents (Note: State-led approach also being pursued within the context of the Planning Portal)	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources / Funded project	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.3.4 - Develop options for staff training to ensure efficient, effective and consistent use of IT systems across all teams	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing funding allocation - IT	IT + Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.3.5 - Review current access arrangements and establish any viable alternatives to assist in creating more timely access to required historical information	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Records + Liveability & Sustainable Development

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
	1.3.6 - In the development of LEP / DCP provisions, or through a separate Local Approvals Policy, consider options to increase exempt or codified applications, e.g. wood heaters, driveways and temporary dwellings	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Innovation & Sustainable Futures + Liveability & Sustainable Development
<b>1.4 Flexible application of resources</b>				
	1.4.1 - As part of structural reviews, instil a culture of teamwork across work streams or teams to facilitate balanced work-loads, flexible application of staffing resources, and opportunities for training and promotion between teams	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Director Liveable Communities
	1.4.2 - Establish more deliberate and structured mentoring opportunities, particularly between senior and junior staff (external if required) with a view to increasing knowledge and confidence across teams	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	1.4.3 - In conjunction with procedural reviews, continue to identify additional responsibilities (and training as required) to facilitate 'para-professionals' and 'business support' to flexibly supplement teams in recognition of likely staff shortages in professional areas across the longer-term	Ongoing	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Liveability & Sustainable Development
<b>2 CULTURAL CHANGE AND UNDERSTANDING</b>				
<b>2.1 Change through communication</b>				
	2.1.1 - Establish and monitor internal levels of service with respect to communicating progress on applications, with a view to updating applicants on a fortnightly basis	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	2.1.2 - Increase communication between lodgement staff and applicants to advise of potential future requests (e.g. accepting an application but advising of minor issues to be rectified prior to release or for future applications)	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Customer Experience

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
	2.1.3 - Establish protocols to encourage more open communications between lead assessors and applicants to assist in resolving barriers and discussing issues in advance of information requests	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	2.1.4 - Establish a process of escalation, automated if possible, of assessment reviews where levels of service are not being met (including the communication of such escalation to applicants)	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	2.1.5 - As a process of continual review, improve access to planning-related information on Council's new website	Ongoing	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Engagement, Communication & Education
	2.1.6 - Improve guidance and templates for submission requirements, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In conjunction with LEP / DCP, develop new template/s for Statement of Environmental Effects (SEE) that can be used for smaller scale and more simple applications</li> </ul>	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Land Use Planning + Liveability & Sustainable Development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Review and clarify (recognising some will be encapsulated in the DCP work): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Procedures for how DCP variations are considered</li> <li>- Specifications for water/sewer infrastructure</li> <li>- Specifications for water quality and quantity</li> <li>- Specifications for open space dedications</li> <li>- Specifications for ecological assessments</li> <li>- Requirements for environmental health assessments (e.g. noise and odour reports), and</li> <li>- Provision of flood certificate information.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Land Use Planning + Liveability & Sustainable Development

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
	2.1.7 - Provide standardised advice with basic information on 'next steps' once a determination is made	Medium-term (by Sept 2025)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Liveability & Sustainable Development
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Increasing interactions</b>			
	2.2.1 - Improve pre-lodgement meetings for major projects, including an increased focus on relevant staff attendance, completeness of minute taking and turnaround of minutes / associated information.	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	2.2.2 - Consider the establishment of post-submission meetings for major projects to establish reviews, early applicant interaction and clarification and to avoid unnecessary requests for information	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development
	2.2.3 - Consider the establishment of automated "post-determination surveys" for applicants to seek ongoing feedback and opportunities for process improvement over time	Medium-term (by Sept 2025)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Customer Experience
	2.2.4 - Open or establish opportunities for greater access to DA tracking through Council's website to enable self-check-in opportunities for applicants and thereby reduce requests for assessment updates	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Engagement, Communication & Education

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
<b>2.3</b>	<b>Respectful environments</b>			
	2.3.1 - Hold and participate in "development forums" or similar processes where internal and external industry participants can directly communicate on key policies, issues and opportunities	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Engagement, Communication & Education
	2.3.2 - Consider the establishment of educational style seminars targeted at industry participants on key policies and issues - e.g. balancing ecological impacts and bushfire requirements, avoidance of ecological impacts, the importance of water quality requirements	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Director Liveable Communities + Engagement, Communication & Education
	2.3.3 - Consider the establishment of education-style seminars targeted at internal staff/groups to get consistency of approach, such as lunchtime seminars or other forms of staff interaction opportunities (e.g. presentations from referral groups, updates on process improvements etc.)	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Liveability & Sustainable Development + Engagement Communication & Education
	2.3.4 - Consider the establishment of professionally managed forum or panel-style seminars that include both industry and staff participants to increase internal and external understanding of the balance between real-life consequences and policy objectives.	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (low)	Director Liveable Communities + Engagement Communication & Education
	2.3.5 - Pending the outcome of the above actions, consider the need for a professionally designed and implemented cultural change program to facilitate a greater outcome-focused approach for Council staff	As required	External assistance (high)	Director Liveable Communities

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
<b>3</b>	<b>INNOVATION AND STRATEGY</b>			
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Strategic land release</b>			
	3.1.1 - Accelerate a review of Council's Local Strategic Planning Statement (LSPS) to act as a lead document that integrates land use planning, economic development and sustainability needs	Long-term	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Director Liveable Communities
	3.1.2 - Accelerate delivery of LEP, DCP and contributions plans to establish a consistent land use planning basis across the LGA	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Innovation & Sustainable Futures
	3.1.3 - Accelerate delivery of opportunities that are consistent with existing adopted strategies and directions, even where the timing of these may not align with other more detailed studies (e.g. Hallidays Point Place Strategy)	Immediate (by Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	Innovation & Sustainable Futures
	3.1.4 - In conjunction with the Department of Planning & Environment, review opportunities to increase land release options (inconsistent with adopted strategies) to stimulate the next wave of post-pandemic housing, with a focus on where land is most able and ready to be developed	Immediate (By Mar 2024)	Existing staff resources	DPE + Innovation & Sustainable Futures
	3.1.5 - Accelerate a review of Council's water/sewer Development Servicing Plans (DSPs) to assist in identifying and establishing processes to overcome blockages to land development sequencing	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Water Planning & Assets
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Facing up to future challenges</b>			
	3.2.1 - Consider the establishment of education processes to increase community/industry understanding of the planning system, existing strategic documents, and the subsequent decision-making process	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Director Liveable Communities + Engagement, Communication & Education



#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
	3.2.2 - In the development of LEP / DCP provisions, or as an amendment thereof, consider options to differentiate between greenfield and brownfield development to encourage infill redevelopment opportunities	Medium-term (by Sept 2025)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Innovation & Sustainable Futures
	3.2.3 - In development of LEP / DCP provisions, or as an amendment thereof pending timing of supporting studies/information, review responses to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Short-term rental accommodation and impacts on housing availability in key areas</li> <li>o Incentivising reduced environmental impacts (e.g. through carbon calculators) within new development</li> <li>o Increasing focus on / availability of social housing and worker accommodation</li> <li>o Reducing the focus on accommodation targeted at specific segments (e.g. over 55's style developments)</li> <li>o Identification and mapping of, and establishing setbacks to, potential impact areas (e.g. poultry farms / EPA licenced sites) and mapped waterways</li> <li>o The extent of information required to assess and achieve water quality objectives by locality</li> </ul>	Medium-long term	Existing staff resources / External assistance (high)	Innovation & Sustainable Futures + relevant internal groups as required
	3.2.4 - Undertake education and training for the general public, industry and staff on the benefits of reduced housing size, options for sustainability inclusions and new forms of housing/housing typologies	Medium-term (by Sept 2025)	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Director Liveable Communities + Engagement Communication & Education
	3.2.5 - Review Council's role as a principal certification authority and develop a business plan or similar to establish core competencies within broader industry change/context	Short-term (by Sept 2024)	Existing staff resources / External assistance (medium)	Liveability & Sustainable Development

#	Actions	Timeframe	Resources	Responsibility
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Advocate for MidCoast</b>			
	3.3.1 - In conjunction with the Department of Planning & Environment, continue to work as part of the MidCoast - Upper Hunter Urban Development Program Committee and establish supply pipeline benchmarks for housing	Ongoing	Existing staff resources	DPE + Director Liveable Communities
	3.3.2 - Identify and make submissions for grant or other funding opportunities for identified infrastructure gaps to unlock housing potential - e.g. Growing Regional Economies Fund, Housing Acceleration Fund and NSW Regional Housing Fund	Ongoing	Existing staff resources / Focused staff resources	Land Use Planning + Water Planning & Assets
	3.3.3 - Advocate for social housing, alternative housing models and housing innovation to address affordability and availability at a regional and/or broader level	Ongoing	Existing staff resources	Innovation & Sustainable Futures + Community / non-profit organisations
	3.3.4 - Advocate for improvements to overarching planning legislation, including renewal of the <i>Environmental Planning &amp; Assessment Act 1979</i>	Ongoing	Existing staff resources	Mayor, General Manager & Director Liveable Communities

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