

Chapter 1



1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report is an interdisciplinary examination of issues in the lower Hunter region in the context of the latest round of population growth and urbanisation. The report is based on research conducted by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies for the McCloy's Group in a project aimed to provide the data foundation to support strong and successful urban developments in the lower Hunter. The research project responds to a broad need for information and insights about economic, demographic, socio-cultural and community trends and possibilities for the lower Hunter region.

The report focuses on the key issues of urban change in the lower Hunter through a lens based on connections and flows. This introductory chapter sets the context for the report. It develops the idea of an urban area as a set of connections and flows. It then positions the lower Hunter in its urban and regional setting, and identifies the links and flows that frame the lower Hunter and connect it to the wider world.

Chapter 2 describes and analyses trends in the demography of the lower Hunter in a range of contexts, including as a set of distinct communities centred on the local government areas (LGAs) of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock shire; as a district closely connected to coastal New South Wales; and, critically, as an urbanising region increasingly subject to changes arising from the burgeoning growth of the global city region of Sydney – the GMR – extending from the Illawarra region in the south to the lower Hunter in the north.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of links and flows that derive in the main from the scale of the household. The chapter commences with descriptions and commentaries on the retailing, leisure, recreation and education sectors. It then reveals the flows generated by households in the lower Hunter including flows of money and people. People flows are analysed according to age and occupation background.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus of analysis to the business sector. The chapter commences with details of occupations and industry patterns and trends for the lower

Hunter. This is followed by comprehensive analysis of the region's business connections and flows, internal and external to the Hunter.

Chapter 5 presents three case studies of residential development away from the lower Hunter. The case studies demonstrate what happens in new neighbourhoods as they grow and mature. The three case studies areas are located in Liverpool in Sydney, Warnervale on the Central Coast and Maleny in Queensland. The chapter concludes with observations about residential planning processes, the coordinating role of government, the historically important contributions of the private sector, the crucial role of transport systems, issues relating to the natural environment and to community formation and cohesiveness.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the report with an overview of key findings of the analysis and extended commentary on the implications for future urban development in the lower Hunter, particularly in the context of the recently produced Lower Hunter Regional Strategy which provides the strategic policy context to guide that development.

The report features a comprehensive set of support material including maps, diagrams and data tables. Two comprehensive appendices provide details of the Hunter's social infrastructure and services and physical infrastructure (Appendix A) and the region's transport services (Appendix B). A third appendix outlines potential statistical methodologies used to summarise the high volume of flows discussed in this report.

Our approach

In Australia we think of urban areas like the lower Hunter as successions of suburbs around an inner core. In our mental image the business district occupies the inner core surrounded by a mixture of old housing and tight-packed industrial and commercial zones. The suburbs come next and these are filled by detached cottages that get newer as you go outwards. The suburbs are serviced by schools, hospitals, playing fields, shopping malls, main roads and the occasional railway line. Finally, the

suburbs get thinner, a rural-urban fringe appears, farms start to dominate and the urban area fades away. Overall, then, we think of an urban area as belts or concentric zones of occupied land.

This report encourages a different view of urban areas. Here we tell a story of the lower Hunter as a place where people move about, where they go and do things, where they journey daily to work, school, shopping centres, the homes of friends and relatives, parks, beaches, hospitals and so on. In other words, we see an urban area as a place built up by connections and flows, a place made up by workers, students, shoppers, footballers and walkers. Houses, offices, shops, schools and playgrounds are there, sure; but in this report we see them as origins and destinations and sites of activity. This makes them important parts of the city not just because of their presence but because they mobilise a city's residents, businesses and organisations into daily activity; and it is activity that is the essence of urban life.

Thinking about urban areas as connections, flows and activities helps us understand how urban areas build distinctive characters. Thinking this way also enables us to assess how well an urban area is providing for the needs of its residents and its businesses. Importantly, when it comes to planning for new urban settlements, knowing the connections and flows that are already in place and how these need to be enhanced provides the opportunity for planners and developers to anticipate the needs of new communities well in advance and provide for their needs and aspirations. At the same time, identifying areas that have problems in their connections and flows to facilities, activities and other places – perhaps there are deficiencies, perhaps separation distances are too lengthy – can enable the targeting of interventions to produce more efficient and fairer urban areas.

Importantly, the specific analysis of the lower Hunter region deployed for the report is designed to intersect with key theoretical developments in understanding the contemporary western city. Here we seek to flesh out the pioneering views of the city as a site of networks and flows proposed in Ash Amin's and Nigel Thrift's exciting *Cities: Re-imagining the Urban* (2002). Rather than depict the city as a set of

characteristics (or stocks) attached to particular places or territories (e.g. that Carrington has a certain level of unemployment, or that Hamilton has a particular ethnic mix), Thrift and Amin argue that it is in the circulations of the city that urban life is formed and performed. Besides focussing on movement and connection, the novel thing in the Thrift-Amin approach is the assertion that just because urban life has become busier does not mean it has become more chaotic. Rather, say Thrift and Amin, urban life is increasingly an assemblage of sequenced and synchronised activities with connections across home life, recreation, social activity and work life.

Central to the success of the city, then, is in the way it deals with time. A city marshals time in four different ways. First it fixes *moments* of times for daily and weekly events to start and cease. Second it devises *periods* of time for the undertaking of tasks especially work, schooling, shopping, leisure and so on. Third it *sequences* time such that work periods, home periods, entertainment periods, schooling periods, shopping periods and so on proceed with order. Fourth, and critically, it *synchronises* these three types of time – moments of time, periods of time and sequences of time – so that the rhythms of the city are accessible to a large number of people. Synchronisations of time enable ships, trains and buses, for instance, to provide transportation services, they enable schools to open and shut at times that suit the work hours and rosters of parents and they determine when shops and entertainment facilities will offer their services. The operation of each and every activity of the city thus depends on the synchronisation of time.

Thinking about sequencing and synchronisation of urban life helps us understand the rhythmic flows of a city. On any weekday morning we can observe the remarkable order enabled by a city as people of all ages move and connect with the activity they have assigned themselves to, or been assigned: work, education, shopping, fitness activity, child care, whatever. That these connections have grown in complexity and intensity is a reflection of the city's (and its residents') capacity to intensify activity and adjust to new demands. The noise and throng of a city, then is a mark of its evolution, if you like, rather than of its deterioration.

Thrift and Amin's approach – and our extension of it – have important implications for the management of urban areas. One challenge is in matching a city's infrastructure and management with an urban area's enhanced operation. Here Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin in *Splintered Urbanism* (2001) argue that that economic and social infrastructure underpin contemporary urban life more than at any time in human history. Access to urban infrastructures then becomes critical to economic and social success. In this way, say Graham and Marvin, the connections and flows that are enabled or enhanced by urban infrastructure become a city's power geometries providing some groups with social and economic advantages while denying the full benefits of urban life to others.

The rhythms of the lower Hunter

The key question we seek to answer in this report is what does an urbanising region look like when we think about it as a set of connections and flows rather than as a container of attributes. As stated, our focus is the lower Hunter. The lower Hunter is not yet a single city. Perhaps it never will be. Yet it is already a single urban region with its five local government areas maintaining distinctiveness with strong local loyalties from their residential, their business and even their visitor communities.

As chapter 3 reveals, a feature of the lower Hunter is its remarkably local labour market behaviours. In Cessnock LGA, for instance, 51 per cent of residents in 2001 worked within the LGA, the equivalent Maitland figure is 44 per cent, with Newcastle a very high 66 per cent, Port Stephens 57 per cent and Lake Macquarie 45 per cent, although an additional 33 per cent of Lake Macquarie residents worked nearby in Newcastle. Likewise local residents tend to fill their local jobs. In Cessnock, for instance, 68 per cent of the LGA's jobs in 2001 were held by locals, For Maitland (15 353) the figure is similarly high at 63 per cent, for Newcastle (73 500) it is 50 per cent, 68 per cent in Port Stephens (17 778) and Lake Macquarie the highest at 71 per cent.

The lower Hunter has a history of place loyalty. Residents know their patch intimately and proclaim its desirability willingly, products of strong intergenerational attachment

to the region as a place to live and work. This means that there are distinct spatial patterns in the lower Hunter's urban rhythms. It also means that the region has distinctive connections and flows to other regions especially to Sydney's Greater Metropolitan Region (GMR). This report examines these internal and external flows and discusses how they might be changing.

In the report, we show how the basic rhythms of the lower Hunter are revealed in travel patterns: travelling to work, travelling to school and travelling to the shops. We discover that we do these in remarkably ordered ways. Once there were piercing whistles of pits, smelters and mills to start the day in the lower Hunter with the regularity of a steam plume or smoke stack as a compass. Now there are familiar radio sounds or jingles that send us rushing for the door and buckling up. Then we drive along, mostly mindlessly for we know where we are heading and our timetable for getting there. Our journeys to work have an amazing synchronicity. We spot the same cars at just about the same intersections, most of us moving east and squinting into the sun. We know where the traffic snarls will be as we criss-cross to an increasingly dispersed set of employment sites.

When some leave for work other rhythms are commencing. Kids brush and rush for the school bus, washing lines get a visit, dogs get walked, retirees stroll down for the paper or a coffee. All across the lower Hunter our journeys take place without a central decision-making power or grand plan. Then by night and at weekends the rhythms of new circulations take hold. Familiar weekday roads and rhythms are disturbed by householders off to sport, the shops and the beach, Sydney day trippers unfamiliar with lower Hunter habits and tolerances, and young adults in cars with impossibly-shiny body kits joining choreographed drive-bys and parking area show-and-tells. Seasonally, there are different patterns. Warm summer sunshine and cooling summer nor'easterlies, for instance, fill streetside cafes with the idle while winter westerlies send them packing, perhaps to the footy or the mall.

Of course, the lower Hunter's rhythms did not just appear, nor will they remain just as they are now forever. They have a history. Each new circulation must have some

sequence and synchronisation with the flows that are already there. As houses, mines, factories, warehouses, schools and shops were built, so too networks of roads, bus routes, rail lines, electricity grids, water mains and gas pipes were expanded, one overlaying the other, conscious of forgoing an ideal, separate form in order to blend with what is already there and so avoid chaos or isolated irrelevance.

Pressures from the growth of the GMR, however, will force the lower Hunter to participate in larger and more powerful urban rhythms associated with Australia's largest urban region. The tight localised communities of the lower Hunter will be forced to adjust and familiar rhythms will be threatened or disappear. Business networks and flows will alter both in size and nature. The lower Hunter will be re-shaped, re-scaled and re-synchronised to new flows and connections. The issue of the lower Hunter's geographic position within an expanding GMR as well as the demographic changes that are imminent for the region are explored in the next chapter.