



CESSNOCK CITY COUNCIL

HUNTER VALLEY VISITOR CENTRE

STRATEGY 2013 – 2017

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Jenny Rand & Associates
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Executive Summary

Since opening in 2001, visitor services at the Centre, (now known as the Hunter Valley Visitor Centre) have been provided by Hunter Valley Wine Country Tourism (HVVCT) supported by annual grants from Council. With the amalgamation of HVVCT and Hunter Valley Wine Industry Association (HVVIA) to the Hunter Valley Wine & Tourism Association (HVWTA), CCC, concerned with several governance issues, the focus of the new entity and the absence of formal arrangements, redirected its annual grant for FY2013/14. As a result HVWTA relinquished their tenancy at the Centre, vacating 23 August 2013. Cessnock City Council (CCC) took over the operation of the Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre (Centre) on 24 August 2013.

In July 2013, the CCC established a Visitor Centre Strategy Committee (VCSC) to facilitate the development of a Strategy and Action Plans for the Centre. In addition, the VCSC was to also prepare a Business Case around the future sustainability of the Centre and provide a report to Council on 20 November 2013 with its recommendations for the future ongoing operations and sustainability of the Centre. As a sunset committee the VCSC was to be disbanded upon the report being presented to Council.

The purpose of the Strategy is to provide clear direction for the Centre that would support and promote the Visitor Economy to and within the Cessnock LGA. Further, the Strategy includes actions that will enhance economic growth by providing relevant information and support to all businesses in the LGA and boost business profiles.

The Centre currently enjoys visitation of around 120,000 per annum, providing visitor services and information. The Centre also leases 2 areas, one to the Wine Country Café and the other to Wine Selectors promoting Hunter Valley wines. With Level 1 accreditation, the Centre is open 7 days per week 363 days per year.

In defining its focus for the next three years, the VCSC has drawn information from researching other visitor centre operations, the location of the centre, the facility itself and the experiences and contributions of the VCSC members at meetings. It was clearly recognised by the VCSC how critical the role of strategic partnerships and alliances will be for the long term success of the Centre as well as the need for transparency and best practice governance.

In this context, the VCSC has determined that its focus for the three year period 2013 to 2016 to achieve its Vision will be to:

1. Attract visitors;
2. Provide a superior level of customer service with highly trained staff;
3. Implement best business practices in all activities and operations; and
4. Create a Centre highly conducive to business support, investment, growth and retention with strong cooperation and collaboration of businesses, government and institutions.

To continually improve the operation of the Centre, meet or exceed visitor expectations, economic growth for the LGA, sustainability and transparency, the Economic Development Unit overseen by a Visitor Centre Governance Committee will implement the following strategies:

1. Ensure visitor services are continually provided at the Centre at world's best practice standards;
2. Attract visitors – promoting and marketing the Centre and the LGA as a key visitor destination;
3. Develop and maintain critical strategic alliances
4. Utilise the Centre as a business support and investment hub for economic development growth; and
5. Clearly demonstrate and communicate our performance.

Introduction

The Hunter Valley Visitor Centre (Centre) was built with the assistance of various grant funds to be "*A visitor and industry facility providing encyclopaedic information on wine and the industry through easily accessed and entertaining creative media commensurate with visitation itineraries*".

Funding of the Centre was sourced as follows:

- Establishment Grant of \$100,000 under Regional Business Development.
- Commonwealth Department of Industry, Science, and Tourism \$350,000.
- Cessnock City Council contributed approximately \$1.2 million.
- Hunter Valley Vineyard Association contributed \$50,000 in 2002.
- Council provided \$20,000 to finance exhibits of an educational/cultural nature.

The Centre is promoted in the media as a wine industry headquarters, with extensive exhibition space, where visitors to the district have a facility that can answer questions about the area, its attractions and the processing of wine.

Currently, the Centre has two (2) tenants:

1. Wine Country Café - (76m²);
2. Wine Selectors – (46 m²);

The HVWCT, in addition to its association operations, was also providing the visitor services on behalf of Council, without formal or contractual arrangements in place. However, the Council has been providing funding through donations each year of amounts ranging between \$266,000 to \$470,000.

In late 2012, the Council received a request from the HVWCTA for funding of \$395,000 with a CPI increase each year for the four years to June 2017. Additional funding was also requested for 50% shared costs to run the Tourism Monitor Research Program and for the implementation of the Destination Management Plan.

In May 2013 the HVWCT and HVWI voted to merge the two associations under the banner of Hunter Valley Wine & Tourism Association (HVWTA). At that time, concern was raised by Council as to the draft Constitution of the new body and what form the relationship would be between Council and the new entity once incorporated. Further concern was also raised over the continuing funding to the HVWCT, the purpose and expenditure of the funds and the delivery of visitor services within the Centre. This included costs associated with the delivery of visitor services, the operations of the Centre and Council's role moving forward.

As a result, on 17 July 2013 Council resolved to establish a Sunset Committee to develop a strategy for the Centre with short, medium and long term actions to ensure best practice visitor services and provide a clear pathway for the ongoing sustainability of the Centre. The Visitor Centre Strategy Committee held its first meeting on 25 July 2013. A full background of the Centre is attached as Appendix A.

Local Area Profile for the Cessnock Economy

Cessnock's diverse towns and villages emerged from a prominent coal mining history and are now sustained by a diverse business environment with a backdrop of wine and tourism. Cessnock has unique and distinctive experiences ranging from food and wine gastronomy through to heritage and nature based activities. Cessnock LGA has a diversity of attractions, activities and events. The Wine Country area is the focus for visitor attractions, events and activities with a secondary node centred on Wollombi. Events held in the vineyard areas are major generators of visitors. Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Branxton and Greta are primarily services for passing traffic, with small visitor markets attracted by events and activities held in these centres. The Watagan Ranges are popular with visitors looking for a nature based / soft adventure activities, with most visitors accessing the Ranges via Lake Macquarie LGA rather than via Cessnock LGA. Mining and rail heritage can be explored alongside a number of cultural attractions supporting growing numbers of arts and craftspeople.

There are many niche markets emerging with synergies to traditional experiences. Environmental, Aviation and Adventure tourism, Golf tourism, and World Heritage assets are amongst our broad range of attractions. Cessnock is also a popular wedding, major event and concert destination. We boast the largest mural town in mainland Australia – Kurri Kurri. Large expanses of open space, and forested lands are undercapitalised in terms of recreation/tourism product development.

Cessnock LGA is currently marketed in conjunction with Singleton LGA as Hunter Wine Country. While the vineyard area is the main destination within Cessnock LGA, the LGA has a range of attractions and activities that bring non-wine visitors into the LGA. Tourism Research Council estimated that in Year End September 2011:

- Cessnock LGA attracted 286,000 domestic overnight visitors, 458,000 domestic day trippers and 11,000 international overnight visitors.
- The total value of direct visitor expenditure in Cessnock LGA was \$157 million, with a further \$79 million spent across the border in Singleton LGA.

In 2011, the Hunter Valley Research Foundation estimated that wine tourists in Hunter Wine Country (parts of both Cessnock and Singleton LGAs) had a direct expenditure of \$285.71million with a flow on impact (indirect expenditure) of a further \$222.1million (total contribution of \$520.6million) and that the wine tourism sector has direct employment of 1,862 people and supported a further 949 jobs (total direct and indirect employment of 2,811 people).

In 2010-11 the 'Accommodation and Food' services section of the tourism industry in Cessnock City was estimated to have a gross value of product of \$148m and account for 7.6% of GVP in Cessnock City. The City has 241 accommodation and food businesses accounting for 9.1% of businesses within the LGA. At the 2011 Census 2,013 people worked within the accommodation and food services sector with this sector accounting for 9.6% of employment.

The Hunter Valley is Australia's oldest surviving commercial wine region and one of the highest profile wine areas in Australia. In 2011-12, a total of 10,554 tonnes of wine grapes were harvested in the Hunter Valley, with 79.8% being white wine grapes. Four varieties of grapes accounted for 88% of production - Semillon (34.3%), Chardonnay (26.8%), Verdelho (15.5%) and Shiraz (11.3%). From 2008-9 (first published Wine District statistics) to 2011-12, the number of wine grape growers in the Hunter Valley has declined by 25.7% from 277 growers to 207 growers, while the area under cultivation has fallen by 40.7%, with grape production falling by 60%.

Vision

The Hunter Valley Visitor Centre is recognised nationally and internationally as a centre of excellence for:

1. Visitor services;
2. Governance and long term sustainability;
3. It's role as a vibrant LGA business support hub; and
4. Facilitating cooperative and collaborative activity among the region's businesses and institutions that achieves positive economic development outcomes in business investment, business growth and business retention.

Mission

To achieve our Vision we will:

1. Attract visitors;
2. Provide a superior level of customer service with highly trained staff;
3. Implement best business practices in all activities and operations; and
4. Create a Centre highly conducive to business support, investment, growth and retention with strong cooperation and collaboration of businesses, government and institutions.

Strategic Priorities:

The strategic imperatives are designed to achieve its vision

1	Ensure visitor services are continually provided at the Centre at world's best practice standards
1.1	Ensure the continuity of the visitor services within the Centre is maintained during the development of the Strategy and its adoption by Council
1.2	Ensure management of the Centre is undertaken with the highest levels of corporate governance
1.3	Accreditation as an A1 Visitor Centre is maintained
1.4	Visitor services are delivered with customer service standards of excellence
1.5	Visitor information provided is comprehensive and relevant and available through appropriate and optimal channels

2	Attract Visitors - Promoting the Centre and the LGA as a key visitor destination
2.1	Undertake a campaign to attract local people and Visitors/Friends/Relatives (VFR) – special weekend or week where locals can receive discounts – Centre is the pick-up point
2.2	Harness the Asian market, contact tour operators in targeted markets and invite them to the Centre for support of tours
2.3	Support joint marketing campaigns to attract visitors
2.4	Implement Hunter Valley Visitor Centre website marketing plan
2.5	Ensure marketing is undertaken in other VIC's of the LGA
2.6	Marketing of the Centre is tailored to ensure the needs of all identified target markets are met and/or exceeded (in line with the Destination Management Plan and the Council's Economic Development Strategy)

3	Develop and maintain critical strategic alliances
3.1	Identify key stakeholders across the LGA
3.2	Prepare and implement a communication plan to link with key stakeholders for joint projects, programs, campaigns, funding and support
3.3	Work with key resorts/experiences and seek opportunities for alliances with key media such as Destination TV shows and magazines

4	Utilise the Centre as a business support and investment hub for economic development growth
4.1	Promote the existence and capabilities of the Centre as a business hub
4.2	Promote the business strengths and capabilities of the region in its role as a business Centre and in support of the Council's Economic Development Unit and implementation of Council's Economic Development Strategy
4.3	Promote the business strengths and capabilities of the region in its role as a business centre.
4.4	Facilitate, promote and support an interactive business environment that is conducive to business growth at the Centre with networking functions, workshops and government departments, including innovation advisory services
4.5	Pro-actively market the benefits of exporting and provide and facilitate good advice on all aspects of international trade at the Centre
4.6	Support and promote local businesses by retailing local merchandise in the Centre
4.7	Consider how the Centre can become a training hub
4.8	Investigate integration of existing LGA infrastructure and businesses for long term economic growth outcomes

5	Clearly demonstrate and communicate our performance
5.1	Quarterly update report to Council against objectives and KPI's including financial reports
5.2	Monthly update reports provided to Governance Committee to regularly assess progress
5.3	Media releases on activities and successes
5.4	Speaking engagements at Chamber of Commerce meetings and other functions of key stakeholders