



HAWKESBURY CITY COUNCIL

BUSINESS RECOVERY PLAN



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Hawkesbury City Council acknowledges the Darug and Darkinjung people as the Traditional custodians of the land of the Hawkesbury. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present and emerging and acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of this Country.

WPS
Alice-S
Sorry
Mariah
Martin
Hawkesbury
D. Heath
Suzie-V
Faith
Nalek
MAY
LUSTY
WESTERN
COMMUNITY
CENTRE
COMMUNITY

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PART 1

RATIONALE FOR THE PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The Business Recovery Plan (BRP) has been prepared in the context of the 2019/2020 bushfires, floods, and COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these events has had a compounding effect on the local business community.

The plan is framed around the following themes:

- Regroup
- Reactivate
- Rediscover

The BRP is intended to be highly practical and only in operation for a two-year period. This is reflected in the number and type of actions chosen. It is envisaged that a more long-term and comprehensive economic development plan will be prepared after the BRP.



REGROUP

REACTIVATE

REDISCOVER

ABOUT HAWKESBURY

The Hawkesbury LGA is located on the outer north west of the Sydney Metropolitan area approximately 50 kilometres and one hour's drive from the CBD. The area takes its name from the Hawkesbury River that flows through it.

Originally inhabited by the Darug and Darkinjung people for over 40,000 years there were up to 3,000 Aboriginal people living in the Hawkesbury area in 1788. The Darug called the river Deerubbin. It provided them with rich soil to grow yams, their staple food. This rich soil would also lure the first Europeans, desperate to feed the new colony in Sydney.

The Hawkesbury was first settled by Europeans in 1794, making it the third oldest European Settlement in Australia. The area was founded on agriculture and plays a vital role in our local economy and defining the character of the area. The rural setting and scenic landscapes are one of the main attractions for people to live in and visit the area.

The Hawkesbury has many towns and villages, each with very distinctive identities, communities and stories, and includes 4 out of 5 Macquarie Towns that were laid out by Governor Macquarie in 1820. Hawkesbury City Council is the largest local government area (LGA) by landmass in metropolitan Sydney covering an area of 2,793km².

THE CONTEXT

Since late 2019 and throughout most of 2020, Hawkesbury business owners faced a series of significant setbacks in the form of bushfires, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Each external threat has placed business owners under increasing pressure for a sustained period.

BUSHFIRES

On 26 October 2019, a lightning bolt struck Gaspers Mountain in the Wollemi National Park and began a fire that would burn for 79 days. It would grow to become the biggest forest fire that Australia has ever known, and among the world's 10 largest bushfires on record.

Dubbed "the mega fire", "the mega blaze" and "the monster", the blaze destroyed more than a million hectares and from the western border of the Blue Mountains to the Central Coast hinterland, north to the Hunter Valley and south to the Hawkesbury and past the Bells Line of Road.

The fire was declared contained on 12 January 2020 and eventually extinguished on 10 February due to intense rainfall. This in turn created another extreme weather event for Hawkesbury businesses to deal with in the form of a localised flood.

FLOODS

On the 9 February 2020 Hawkesbury LGA experienced the worst flood in decades. Over the coming days the Hawkesbury River at North Richmond would peak at 11.4 metres and 9.2 metres at Windsor.

Both the Richmond and Windsor bridges were closed for the first time in 28 years.

The Hawkesbury again faced a flood in March 2021 with water reaching levels not seen since 1990. On 24 March 2021 the Hawkesbury River at North Richmond peaked at 12.71 metres and 12.85 metres at Windsor. Both bridges were again closed forcing many flood rescues to be performed for Hawkesbury residents as the SES responded to calls for help.

Major flood warnings remained in place for the Hawkesbury, Nepean and Colo rivers for over a week. At least 4,000 properties in the



Hawkesbury were flood affected, with the impact of this natural disaster being felt across the entire Local Government Area.

COVID-19

On 25 January 2020, Australia recorded its first case of COVID-19. The Federal Government focussed on containing the external threat presented by the virus by restricted access from people travelling from China.

By 2 March, Australia recorded its first case of community transmission and the community had become increasingly concerned as evidenced by panic buying. Cases began to rise exponentially, and the country quickly transitioned into a full shutdown.

The Federal Government delivered an economic support package worth \$176 billion including the JobSeeker and JobKeeper programs. The NSW Government imposed social distancing measures and had to get used to the 'new normal' of stay-at-home life. Local councils pursued a range of measures such as rate relief, information sharing and business webinars.

It was estimated the lockdown was costing Australia's economy about \$4 billion each week. On 8 May the National Cabinet agreed to a progressive plan to bring Australia out of lockdown over the next few months. This allowed cafes and restaurants to open as well as some recreational activities.



DEFINING THE PROBLEM

INFRASTRUCTURE DAMAGE

The bushfires and floods have had a direct impact on infrastructure and the business environment more generally in Hawkesbury LGA. This has stretched resources because even prior to these events the Hawkesbury was in urgent need of increased infrastructure investment. One year on, residents are still involved in the recovery effort. Which has been further impacted by the flood of March 2021.

Examples of infrastructure that still needs to be addressed due to fire and flood damage include:

- Tree removal
- Signage replaced
- Repairs to buildings
- Replacing fencing
- Replacing bins in town centres
- Internet 'black spots' due to bushfire damage
- Infrastructure repair and clean-up

PERSONAL IMPACT

Business owners in the Hawkesbury have been under sustained pressure for over a year. The fires and floods both presented a more short-term and direct impact on business. COVID-19 has occurred over a longer period and in a variety of direct and indirect ways, such as lockdowns, visitation numbers, interruptions to supplies, implementing COVID Safe practices and general cashflow challenges.

Likewise, many people have lost their jobs or had their hours cut back. This has an impact on individuals' self-esteem and motivation. Many people will need to find new jobs or seek further training.

Supporting people's mental health, connectedness and resilience has been and continues to be an important part of a holistic view of recovery.

QUANTITATIVE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has clearly had a substantial negative impact on economic activity causing Australia's first recession in 26 years. In the September Quarter of 2020 Hawkesbury's Gross Regional Product had declined by 2.8% and local jobs by 2.9%.

Remarkably, the overall performance of the local economy was largely offset by the strong performance of the Agricultural sector which added 401 jobs over the same period. Had Hawkesbury not had a such a strong Agricultural sector the impact to the local economy would have been much worse.

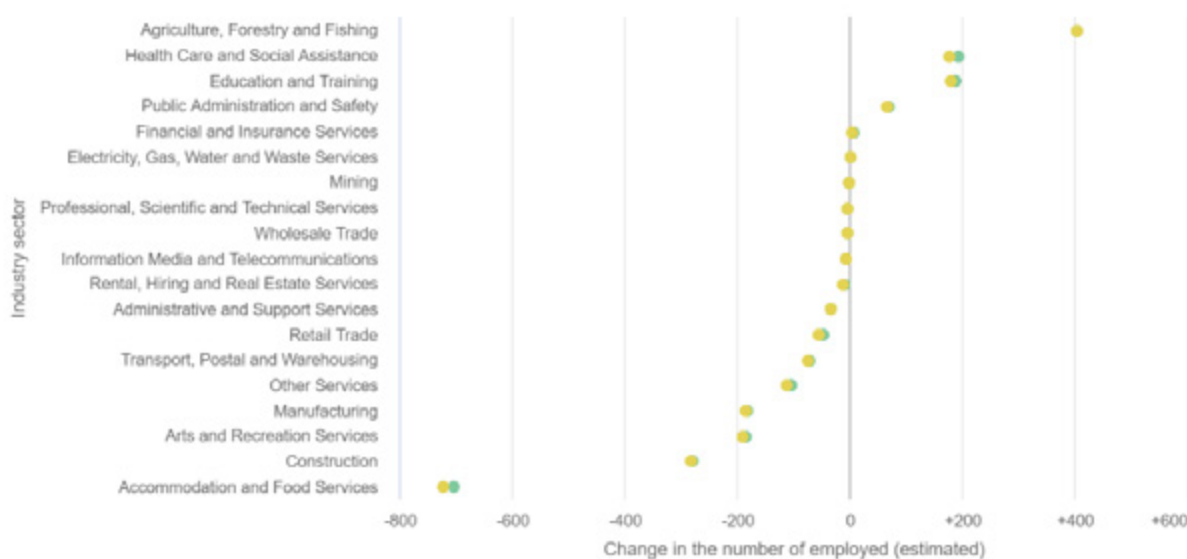
QUALITATIVE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ACROSS AUSTRALIA

COVID-19 has disrupted economic growth, business activity and the way we live. The degree of impact has varied across industries and locations. A summary of some of the major impacts include:

- **International tourism and education** – border restrictions into Australia has meant that the international tourism and education is on hold for the foreseeable future. These are two of Australia's most important export industries.
- **Domestic tourism** – the border restrictions has largely meant Australian's are forced to holidaying within the continent. Tourism operators in many regional towns in NSW have never been busier now catering solely for domestic markets.
- **Hospitality** – lockdowns and social distancing measures have a direct impact on the hospitality industry. Some businesses have quickly managed to adapt with home deliveries.

Local Jobs Impact in Sept quarter 2020 (compared to Sept quarter 2019)

Local Jobs change without JobKeeper | Local Jobs change



Source: National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) Version 2.1 (Sept 2020). ©2020 Compiled and presented in economy.id by .id the population experts.

.id the population experts

Image: Impact on Business

- **Arts and recreation** – performing arts and other recreational businesses that typically require people to physically gather have been severely impacted.
- **CBDs vs local centres** – major CBDs across Australia have been severely hit by COVID-19 with many people working from home and reluctant to return to the office. In Sydney and Melbourne this has meant suburban centres have on average seen an increase in their customer base.
- **Adoption of technology** – the disruption caused by COVID-19 has rapidly increased the adoption of new technology such as Zoom and Skype. This has in turn changed attitudes to tele-work and business models have adapted.
- **Tree Change** – Residents of Australia's capital cities are reconsidering their life choices. Many are investigating moving back to the country town they grew up in, or providing a better quality of life for their family. COVID-19 has opened opportunities to take their city job with them.

International trade – supply chains across the world have been interrupted. COVID-19 has coincided and possibly accelerated a global unrest and the emergence of trade wars.

REQUIRED RESPONSE BY HAWKESBURY COUNCIL

Council has an important leadership role to play in disaster recovery. No other entity is in a better position to understand and respond to the unique needs of a local community. Some of the critical functions of a local council include:

- **Manager/Leader** – Council manages, leads, delivers, and communicates commitment, progress, and outcomes.
- **Critical Partner** – Council is an informed critical partner in the delivery of a project with mutual benefits for the partners.
- **Advocate** – Council develops an informed position and influences others who have the responsibility to make the decision and act.



- **Supporter** – Where a project is initiated externally to Council, Council provides low level assistance to enable the project to be realised.
- **Facilitator** – Council makes it easier and builds the capacity of others to deliver.

There are however five key areas that council will need to address to ensure future economic prosperity:

1. **Small business owners** – COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll of small business owners. Some estimate that during the pandemic 10% of Australia's small businesses will fail.
2. **People looking for work** – with rising unemployment there will be many in the community who will need to either re-skill or up-skill to find employment or start a business.
3. **Activating town centres** – many town centres have not recovered to pre-COVID levels of trade. There will be a role for councils in welcoming people back to centres in a safe manner.
4. **Industry-specific impacts** – there are certain industries that will require more assistance in recovery than others. Businesses based in tourism, hospitality, and arts and recreational have experienced a significant decline.
5. **New Business Models** – Consumer spending habits and ways of working have all changed because of COVID-19. Businesses may need assistance in developing new ways of working.

PART 2

ECONOMIC PROFILE AND ROLE OF COUNCIL



The disruption caused by bushfires, flood and COVID-19 has required Hawkesbury City Council to provide new services to address emerging community needs. One advantage of the external shocks is that it has allowed Council to review programs and strategic direction from a fresh perspective.

Hawkesbury City Council has since applied for grant funding which has enabled business support initiatives to prepare for the bounce back. (E.g. grant funding to assist with operational bushfire logistics such as tree removal.)

Council will continue to apply for funding with the latest announcement including the \$1.2M Greening our City Grant (Successful in achieving \$1.2 million) and the State Government's new funding announcement of \$1.68 million in Local Economic Recovery Funding for the Hawkesbury to further support community projects for Bilpin, Colo Heights, and the Macdonald Valley (including St Albans) as part of their ongoing bushfire recovery.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

During October 2020, Council engaged NDP Economic Development to conduct a business survey to better understand the impact of the bushfires, floods, and COVID-19 on Hawkesbury businesses. The survey focused on three things: (1) the severity of the impact and levels of business confidence, (2) how best to support businesses recover, and (3) ideas on how to unlock further economic growth.

The results indicated the impact of COVID-19 was higher than anticipated with 74% of businesses surveyed reporting a reduction of sales by more than 30%. There was also a relatively low level of business confidence looking towards the next 6 – 12 months with only 28% of business owners believing things were likely to improve.

The top responses to how Council can best support their business were as follows:

1. Promotion of the area to attract tourists – 56%
2. Listening to the specific needs of business owners by industry type – 41%
3. Events and activations of town centres – 38%
4. Showcasing a wide variety of businesses and attractions – 38%
5. Business development webinars and mentoring – 21%

UNDERSTANDING THE HAWKESBURY ECONOMIC PROFILE

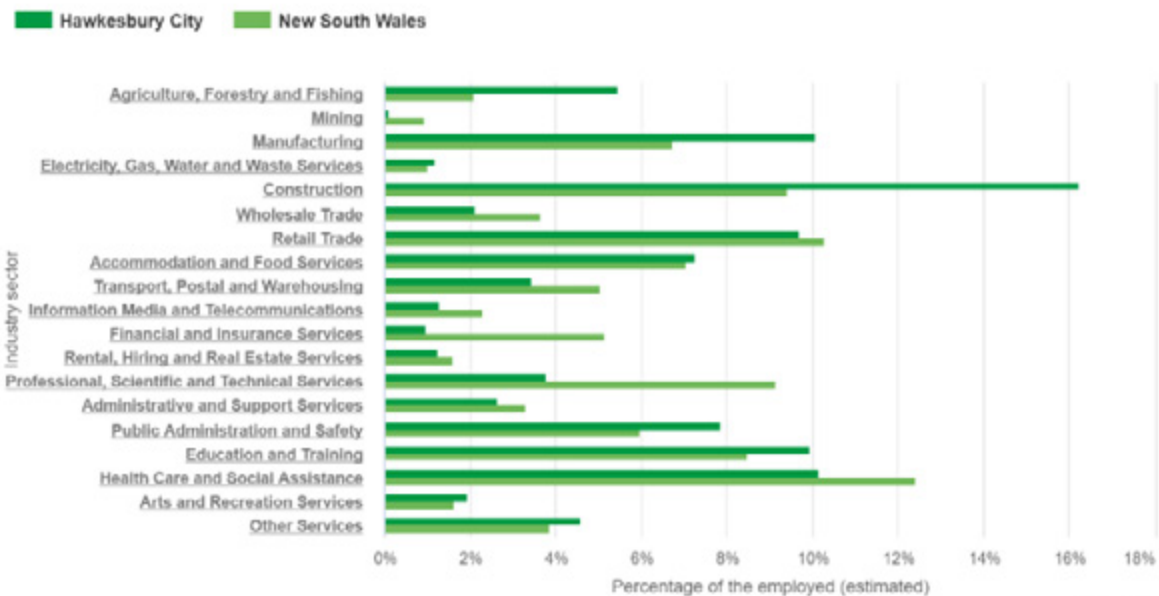
The Hawkesbury economy has experienced steady growth for the past 20 years. It has a diverse economic base and benefits from its natural environment. The main industry drivers of the local economy include (1) manufacturing, (2) construction, (3) agriculture and (4) education. These four industry sectors have continued to experience steady growth over the past five years and act to offset each other to provide a highly robust economy.

The Hawkesbury economy is predominately comprised of small businesses with over 88% of locally based businesses having fewer than 5 staff, and 55% of all businesses being sole traders.

The natural landscapes and historical assets are also a defining characteristic of the LGA. This is a key draw card for tourism-related businesses with a total estimated output of \$193 million in 2019 (Source: NIEIR).

Hawkesbury is within the North West Growth Area as designated by the NSW Government. It is designated for large scale land release due to it being located within a short distance to Richmond and Windsor. Furthermore, the Western Sydney City Deal will deliver jobs, transport, and services over the next two decades with Hawkesbury City Council receiving funding to revitalise Richmond, Windsor, and South Windsor.

Employment (total) by industry 2018/19



Source: National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) ©2019 Compiled and presented in economy.id by .id the population experts.

.id the population experts

Image: Industry Profiles

Value of tourism and hospitality

Hawkesbury City



Source: National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) ©2020 Compiled and presented in economy.id by .id the population experts.

.id the population experts

Image: Industry Profiles

STRENGTHS

Sustained Economic Growth: Hawkesbury's economy has benefited from 20 years of uninterrupted economic growth. This solid track record is due in part to having a diverse industry base. Businesses in Hawkesbury report a high degree of satisfaction with their existing client base.

Liveability and Recreational Experiences: a quality lifestyle ranks as one of the top attributes in surveys of business owners. Hawkesbury's country town feel, and rural character will serve the economy well in a bid to lure Sydneysiders to enjoy the range of experiences on offer as they seek a weekend retreat.

History and Heritage: Our past is shared through local stories, traditions, historic buildings, and important sites. The "Deerubbin" (Hawkesbury River) is central to the Darug and Darkinjung people and their traditions. The Hawkesbury also has a strong colonial history and heritage with 4 of 5 towns established by Governor Macquarie. There are opportunities to package and promote Hawkesbury's heritage trails to support a thriving visitor economy.

Connected to Nature: Hawkesbury is blessed with an abundance of natural assets such as the National Parks, bushland, Hawkesbury River, and its proximity of Sydney. The significant amounts of rural land contribute to a scenic character distinct from most of Greater Sydney and improves the wellbeing and quality of life for residents. Nature-based recreational experiences will be of heightened interest for Greater Sydney particularly when overseas travel is not an option.

Pride in Place: Residents and business owners are proud to call the Hawkesbury their home. There is a strong connection to the Hawkesbury – its towns and villages, history and local stories and its future. This has helped the community to draw together in mutual support and strengthen individual's resilience to help in the recovery effort.

Food and Agriculture: The Hawkesbury has a long tradition in agriculture and a strong equine industry. The proximity to Sydney is a major attribute to attract more food visitors. Since the onset of the pandemic the agriculture sector in Hawkesbury has experienced solid growth which has helped to offset job losses in other industries such as hospitality.



Educational Institutions: Western Sydney University's Richmond campus is a major education institution researching new agri-business and food innovations and sustainable regional development. TAFE has long been a trusted entity providing vocational training and professional development opportunities for the local population.

CHALLENGES

Perception as a Distinct Destination:

Hawkesbury has struggled to carve out a reputation among Sydneyiders as a destination in its own right. It is often considered part of the broader Blue Mountains or worse still, somewhere you drive through to get to Central Coast.

Association with Hawkesbury River: Whilst Hawkesbury River is a tremendous asset for the local economy, surveys of target audiences indicate they readily identify the Hawkesbury region with the waterway and not much else. There are many other attractions that struggle to get noticed.

Limited Resources for Infrastructure: It should come as no surprise that Council has limited funds to invest in infrastructure and services. Damage to business-enabling infrastructure caused by the bushfires and floods on has stretched already thin budgets further. The situation is made more difficult due to the sheer size of the LGA and the list of planned infrastructure upgrades.

Communication Channels with Business:

Due to the diversity of industries and the concentration of small business owners it is challenging to communicate directly with business owners. Effective and reciprocal communication is fundamental to a successful recovery effort.

OPPORTUNITIES

Visitor Economy: Hawkesbury has potential to significantly grow the visitor economy. Research indicates Hawkesbury has enough tourism-related assets, e.g. bush walking, water sports, horse riding,

arts, markets, festivals etc. to be a 'first choice' location for visitors craving new and authentic experiences. This needs to be done through coordinated packaging and promotion of existing offerings, as well as the development of new events and experiences. More work needs to be done to jointly communicate the message that 'the River is just the beginning' to target audiences.

Heritage Assets: With some of the oldest towns in NSW, Hawkesbury has the potential to attract audiences interested in heritage trail walks. There is an opportunity to combine this with history museum which has archived many local artefacts. The majority of Sydney is completely unaware of the history and many fascinating stories Hawkesbury can share.

Revitalise Centres: Feedback from businesses indicates some town centres need a refresh. There are reports of vacant premises, dormant construction sites and shop fronts in need of a renovation. The town centres in Hawkesbury have an opportunity to be revitalised through the new centre Masterplans, growing the visitor economy offering, and activating tired spaces through public domain improvements.

Agriculture and Manufacturing: The agriculture and manufacturing sectors have been growing strongly in Hawkesbury for the past five years. There is further potential to attract new audiences through, for example, a 'Grown in the Hawkesbury' type initiative (e.g. large-scale farmers markets). Likewise, an industry backed 'Made in the Hawkesbury' type initiative could attract new audiences interested in bespoke manufacturing.

Pandemic Inspired Tree Change: COVID-19 has prompted many people located in Sydney to reconsider their work-life balance and where they choose to live. Regional towns across NSW are experiencing record levels of inquiries. Hawkesbury can position itself as having a country feel and rural character whilst being located on Sydney's door step.





PART 3

THE BUSINESS RECOVERY PLAN

The Business Recovery Plan has been prepared with a particular focus in mind, that is, helping businesses recover from the recent series of external shocks.

It is intentionally practical, and outcomes focused. The short timeframe of only two years means that a reduced number of actions could be chosen and had to be relatively 'shovel ready'.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

Rather than a vision, three desired outcomes have been chosen to give the BRP a clear focus in terms of what it is aiming to achieve. They include:

1. Improve the resilience, skills, and networking among business owners
2. Increase levels of visitation and spending by Sydneysiders
3. Attract new investment in the form of new businesses, new residents and construction.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

A strategic framework of three themes has been prepared to organise the actions into logical groupings each with identified delivery partners and measures.

REGROUP

This strategic theme is concerned with taking stock of the situation, understanding the areas of most need, and getting procedures in place to facilitate a quick recovery. It will require Council to monitor the performance of the local economy, set the strategic direction and effectively communicate with key stakeholders and delivery partners.

REACTIVATE

This strategic theme is concerned with helping businesses and town centres to get moving again. This could be in the form of practical support for existing business owners, encouraging new business owners, connecting people to local training and employment opportunities, and refreshing tired or vacant local shopping centres.

REDISCOVER

This strategic theme is concerned with external marketing and promotion to targeted audiences. It is primarily aimed at attracting visitors to come and experience what Hawkesbury has to offer. It is also concerned with creating and trialling new visitor experiences.

An aerial photograph of a river winding through a rural landscape. The river is dark blue and flows from the top right towards the bottom left. On the left bank, there are green fields, some trees, and a small pond. On the right bank, there are large, rectangular agricultural fields, some of which are brown (plowed) and others green (crops). There are some buildings and trees scattered along the banks. The background shows more fields and a distant horizon under a clear sky.

PART 4

BUSINESS RECOVERY ACTION PLAN

Themes	#	Actions	Time frame	Council Branches	Delivery Partners	Measures
REGROUP	1.1	Monitor the performance of the local economy, the needs of businesses, and level of new business registrations.	Ongoing	Economic Development	Economic profiling providers Australian Business Register Local business and industry representative groups Business survey specialists NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment	1. Gross Regional Product 2. Job numbers 3. ABN registrations 4. Communication with business owners
	1.2	Gather information on available business support services and programs and review existing programs delivered to local businesses by Council to determine their appropriateness of fit.	Short	Economic Development		
	1.3	Engage with local businesses and business associations (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism etc.) to support business needs and priorities.	Medium	Economic Development		
	1.4	Conduct a mapping exercise of non-internet-based community communication channels (e.g. informal community networks).	Ongoing	Recovery Officer		
	1.5	Establish a Community Resilience Network to act as a conduit to engage with Council and recovery service providers (e.g. Red Cross).	Short	Recovery Officer		
	1.6	Hold a series of community engagement meetings with areas affected by natural disasters.	Short	Recovery Officer		
	1.7	Hold two business forums annually to build networks, share knowledge and inspire new ideas.	Ongoing	Economic Development		
	1.8	Continue the delivery of Council's business communication channels such as the monthly business e-newsletter and updating the new Council website with relevant business information.	Ongoing	Economic Development		

Themes	#	Actions	Time frame	Council Branches	Delivery Partners	Measures
REACTIVATE	2.1	Design and deliver a program of workshops, Business 101 seminars and skills development opportunities to increase knowledge and capacity to help local business adapt, grow, and increase their resilience.	Short	Economic Development	Vocation Training Providers TAFE NSW Western Sydney University Chamber of Commerce NSW Department of Customer Service	5. Business sentiment surveys 6. No. of business workshops and events and feedback surveys 7. No. of outdoor dining applications 8. No. of contracts awarded to local businesses
	2.2	Investigate what up-skilling and retraining opportunities exist locally via vocational training organisations and higher education providers.	Short	Economic Development		
	2.3	Review Council's own procurement policies and procedures to support local business owners.	Medium	Procurement		
	2.4	Develop an Activation Action Plan and trial new ideas that contribute to the revitalisation of our towns, villages, and public spaces (i.e., Parklets) and create places that people want to be.	Medium	Economic Development		
	2.5	Continue to support and deliver the Shopfront Facade Improvement Program.	Ongoing	Economic Development		
	2.6	Investigate the establishment of co-working or start up spaces within the LGA. Consider the use of a council owned building to enable flexible leasing of workspaces and wider community use.	Medium	Economic Development / Property		
	2.7	Deliver the Liveability Program by implementing the Master Plan to revitalise the key town centres in Hawkesbury LGA (e.g. Windsor, South Windsor, and Richmond).	Long	Economic Development		
	2.8	Review Council's outdoor dining policies and fees to make it easier restaurants to operate.	Medium	Property		
	2.9	Support increased networking among existing business owners and support business events and awards programs.	Medium	Economic Development		

Themes	#	Actions	Time frame	Council Branches	Delivery Partners	Measures
REDISCOVER	3.1	Partner with Destination NSW on campaign and tourism promotion activities	Short	Communications / Visitor Information	Destination NSW Tourism Operators Tourism Agencies Land Owners Local Artists and Creative Enterprises NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services NSW Roads and Maritime Services Western Sydney Investment Attraction Office	9. No. of visitors to Hawkesbury LGA 10. Visitor experience surveys 11. No. of events and festivals and feedback surveys 12. No. of investment enquiries
	3.2	Provide up to date information on the wide range of visitor attractions in Hawkesbury on the discoverthehawkesbury.com.au website (e.g. horse riding, farmers markets, kayaking, bush walking trails etc.).	Short	Visitor Information		
	3.3	Develop and implement an LGA Wayfinding and Signage guideline.	Medium	Economic Development		
	3.4	Prepare a digital calendar of varied events and attractions for different markets (e.g. music events, heritage tours, food festivals, art gallery displays etc.) to be promoted on online, social media and radio.	Ongoing	Communications		
	3.5	Develop an Arts and Cultural strategy to increase offer to visitors, especially day trippers as well as supporting our local creatives.	Medium	Cultural Services		
	3.6	Continue to conduct visitor surveys via Visitor Information Centres, at events, and incorporate market research to better inform promotional strategies and to enhance or develop new visitor experiences.	Ongoing	Visitor Information		
	3.7	Provide positive economic development media statements (together with partners) associated with key targeted industries and recent success stories	Ongoing	Communications		
	3.8	Develop a Hawkesbury investment prospectus and promote associated opportunities in partnership with the Western Sydney Investment Attraction Office.	Medium	Economic Development		

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