arts UPPER HUNTER



2025

ANNUAL REPORT



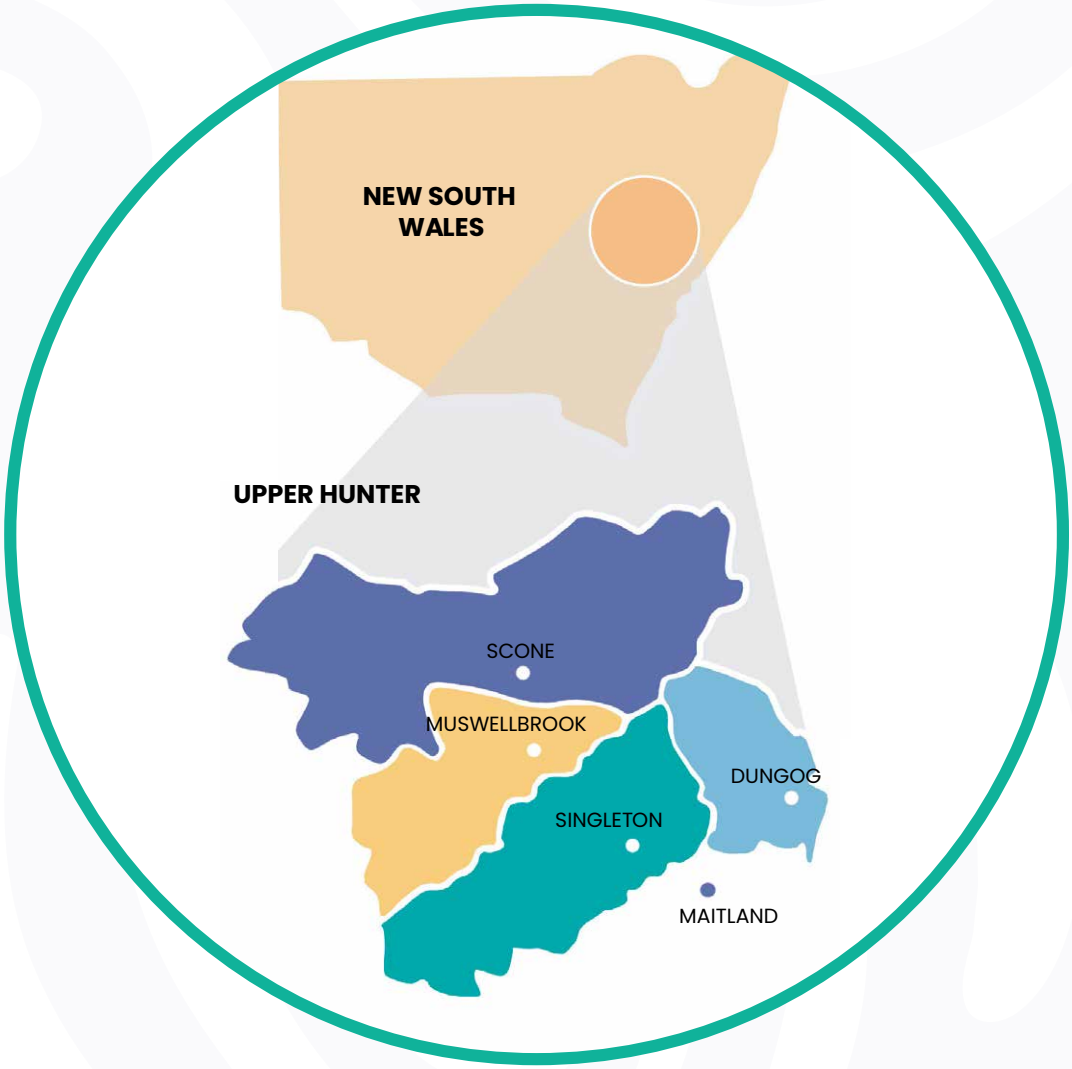
Acknowledgement of Country

Arts Upper Hunter acknowledges the Wonnarua/Wanaruah and Gringai/Worimi peoples, traditional keepers of this land, and we pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise the deep connection that First Nations people have with this Country and honour their continuing cultural and spiritual relationship with the land, waters, and community.

Cover image: Still from The Common, a First Stories film made by Pretty Amazing Productions, supported by an FRRR grant.

Arts Upper Hunter acknowledges the financial support of the NSW Government through Create NSW, and the support of Dungog Shire Council, Muswellbrook Shire Council, Singleton Council, and Upper Hunter Shire Council.



Us

Arts Upper Hunter (AUH) is a Regional Arts Development Organisation which supports and promotes opportunities for people and groups in the creative industries across the Council areas of Dungog, Muswellbrook, Singleton and Upper Hunter. We work with Create NSW, Local Councils, other government agencies, individuals, collectives and associations to provide connection, skills, opportunities, insights, promotions and strategic advocacy for the arts and creative industries across the region.

Our Vision

A region which embraces all arts and cultural practice as part of its social, economic and environmental development.

Our Mission

To embed art and cultural pursuits and appreciation into life in the Upper Hunter.

Our Value

Inclusive. Collaborative. Engaged. Social. Acknowledging. Creative. Resourceful. Sustainable. Local. Kind.



Jacqui Bakewell, courtesy herself.

From the Chair

2025 was a year of challenges, achievements and adjustments for Arts Upper Hunter. The organisation responded to a tighter funding scenario with focus, care and determination, continuing to support creative communities across Dungog, Muswellbrook, Singleton and Upper Hunter while also seeking to expand revenue from other sources.

Our small but mighty team continued to punch above its weight, delivering thoughtful, high-value work across the region. Executive Director John O'Brien led the organisation through a year of funding change and strategic recalibration, while Sandra Reichel continued to provide the steady operational, communications and financial support that underpins so much of what AUH does.

Among the year's highlights were the continued development of the Blak Arts Collective in partnership with Wanaruah LALC, the growth of Creative Valleys as a cultural tourism platform, the completion of key LiddellWORKS outcomes, and another strong round of community grants supporting grassroots creativity.

These achievements matter because they strengthen artists, communities and local places. They also show the value of sustained regional arts investment: relatively small contributions generate significant cultural, social and economic returns.

I thank our Board, staff, contractors, partners, funders, artists, volunteers and community members for their commitment through a demanding but productive year. To our Council partners in Dungog, Muswellbrook, Singleton, and Upper Hunter—your ongoing support and investment in the arts delivers extraordinary returns for your communities.

To everyone who has participated in our programs, attended our workshops, applied for our grants, or simply engaged with the creative life of this region—thank you. You are what makes this work worthwhile.

Jacqui Bakewell
Arts Upper Hunter Chair

From the Executive Director

Results and Recalibration
If 2024 was about facing change head-on, 2025 was about turning certainty, constraint and ambition into action — in true Arts Upper Hunter style.

The year opened with anticipation as we waited on the outcome of our four-year Create NSW funding application. When the result arrived in April, it gave us certainty through to 2028 — welcome news, even if it did not deliver the extra capacity we had hoped for. Our core work remains strong; some of the more ambitious parts of the Strategic Plan will now need additional project funding to fly.

Even so, 2025 was another lively, productive year across the Upper Hunter — employing people, engaging creatives, backing local ideas and reaching into the towns, villages and communities that make this region so distinctive.

Core Business, Regional Value
Advice, networking, advocacy, communications, professional development and small grants remained the bedrock of AUH's work. They are not always the flashiest parts of the arts ecosystem, but they are the practical infrastructure that helps artists, venues, councils and community groups turn ideas into action.

The value of this work shows up clearly in the strong return delivered to each Council partner. More importantly, it shows up in the people reached, projects nudged forward, doors opened and partnerships strengthened across the year.

Program Highlights
The **Blak Arts Collectiv**e became one of our most important and energising areas of work, strengthening our partnership with Wanaruah Local Aboriginal Land Council and supporting First Nations artists, young people and cultural workers. Two artists had the stellar opportunity to attend the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, while the Dare 2B Deadly talks and workshops — dreamt up, devised and delivered by Aboriginal creatives — were richly, proudly Deadly. This work has also deepened AUH's own understanding of First Nations culture as a vital thread running through the region's creative life.

Creative Valleys continued to grow as a cultural tourism platform, connecting local stories, venues, events and itineraries with wider visitor networks. A series of workshops across the region helped people get those stories and listings out into the world. The website is not only gorgeous — it is useful, practical and increasingly full of life.

We also wrapped up key outcomes within **LiddellWORKS** — a multiplying octopus of a project if ever there was one. It has set a high bar for how communities can respond to economic transition with respect, honesty and creativity. And with Bayswater Power Station beginning its own transition, the story may not be over yet…

Smaller projects added plenty of spark too, from the final This Here Then Now museum activation to First Stories video productions, and a new program with Health Infrastructure. AUH continued to back community-led creativity through **CASP and Micro Grants**, and linked artists and cultural workers with local, regional and statewide **development opportunities** — of which, happily, there are quite a few.

Networks, Governance and the Year Ahead
AUH's work runs on networks and partnerships: councils, government departments, regional arts centres and the conservatorium, schools, community organisations, Aboriginal groups, businesses, venues, volunteers and individual creatives. In 2025 those relationships helped us deliver far more than our size might suggest, while keeping us plugged into statewide conversations about regional arts, cultural tourism, music, First Nations development and even the NSW Regional Cultural Plan.

Our staff brought energy, humour and serious

commitment: Suzannah leading tourism workshops, Marina rejoining AUH to work on a health project, Uncle Richie offering sage advice, and Sandra somehow keeping communications, admin and finances moving at once. Contractors came and went through the year delivering terrific programs — some now old friends, others new and emerging artists adding fresh momentum.

The year ended with a move to a new home, in the Campbell's Corner building across the road, with the move assisted by Muswellbrook Shire Council. Our old home is due for demolition. The move completed a year that was full of new beginnings.

The year ahead will call for discipline and optimism in equal measure. We will keep delivering core services, chasing and delivering strategic project funding, managing staffing with care, and building the partnerships needed to bring the more ambitious parts of our plan to life.

Thank you to our Board, LGAs, project officers, contractors, artists, partners, readers and community supporters. Arts Upper Hunter works because people across this region keep turning up — for creativity, for place, and for one another.

John O'Brien
Executive Director



John O'Brien with sculpture, David Cianci's The Land Around Us magically appeared outside Singleton Arts + Cultural Centre in March.



Strategic Plan 2025-28 & Funding

Our Strategic Plan 2025–28 was completed in late 2024 to support a four-year Create NSW funding application. It set out five areas of work:

1. **Advice & Desires** – our core business of advice, networking, and support
2. **Blak Arts Collective** – our First Nations program
3. **Creative Valleys** – cultural tourism development including CV website
4. **The Bigger Picture** – advocacy and major projects
5. **Brilliant Places for All** – equity and inclusion

We are very grateful to Create NSW that our Strategic Plan was accepted and our core funding continue. Grant writing becomes even more essential – and demanding. Each application can take 20-40 hours to research, plan, cost, write, and submit. Outcomes are never guaranteed, so AUH must balance capacity, ambition and sustainability.

Council contributions continued to deliver strong value in 2025 through their annual service fees. After all, *our program is their program.* That value includes grants we bring to the region, services we provide for residents, local programs, our considerable promotion including ArtSparks newsletter and Creative Valleys, and advocacy and representation on their behalf to state bodies and networks.

Blak Arts Collective

Funded through Creative Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support scheme, the Blak Arts Collective is AUH's most significant First Nations program to date. Delivered in close partnership with Wanaruah Local Aboriginal Land Council, this two-year program (2024-2026) is supporting Aboriginal artists, building skills, creating opportunities, and strengthening community-led cultural practice. Uncle Richie Lawton, our Aboriginal Arts Officer, provided an elder's inspiration and grounding to the program.

Dare 2B Deadly: Inspiring the Next Generation
Dare 2B Deadly brought talks and hands-on workshops to Singleton High School, Merriwa Central School and Muswellbrook High School. Professional artists helped students explore identity, culture and creative expression through practical art activities.

- **Singleton High School** (Term 1): Uncle Richie Lawton and Kerri-Ann Taggart explored Aboriginal woodwork and digital designs in an inspiring couple of sessions.
- **Merriwa Central School** (Term 2): Monique Rennie delivered four sessions, where students created their own designs that were printed on leather-covered notebooks to take home.
- **Muswellbrook High School** (Term 3): Monique delivered the same program to enthusiastic Muswellbrook students and more notebooks went home!

The workshops focus on identity, culture, and creative expression. Students learn traditional and contemporary art techniques while exploring what it means to be a young Aboriginal person today. The feedback from teachers and students has been overwhelmingly positive – as have the gorgeous artbooks.

Key to the program's success has been our partnership with Wanaruah Local Aboriginal Land Council. Kemer Edwards and Vanessa Kelman have been instrumental in delivering the program, coordinating with schools, organising events, and ensuring authentic community engagement. They've also benefited from mentoring sessions with Lorrayne Fishenden from Aboriginal Regional Arts Alliance, building their own capacity as cultural program coordinators.









Blak Arts project leaders Kemer Edwards and Vanessa Kelman from Wanaruah LALC at Singleton NAIDOC. Image AUH.

Youth Leadership Camp Planning

In August, we held a planning meeting at Minimbah Teaching Place for an On Country Youth Leadership Camp, scheduled for April 2026. The meeting brought together representatives of Wanaruah LALC, Ungooroo Aboriginal Corporation, Muswellbrook Shire Council, Hunter Local Land Services, youth workers and established and emerging artists.

The camp will bring up to 50 young Aboriginal people onto Country for cultural learning, leadership development, and creative expression. It represents exactly the kind of community-led, culturally grounded program we hoped to support.

Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development was another strong outcome. Kerri-Ann Taggart joined the Arise program and attended the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, later receiving a major hospital artwork commission. Roz Thomson also attended the Fair as an artworker, with funding from our IVAIS grant, and made new discoveries, brainwaves and connections.

Other Program Elements

- **Travelling Totems**: Stuart Berends completed the totem poles commissioned in 2024. Uncle Richie has now made them ready for handover in 2026 to Wanaruah LALC.
- **First Stories**: Two videos celebrating First Nations stories and places were shot. AUH's Suzannah Jones led this project assiduously. The first video, a cinematic documentary about a cultural burn at The Common (Muswellbrook), premiered at the Blue Heeler Festival and picked up a cinematography award for videographer Jonathan Burrows; the second, showcasing Finchleys Gap, should appear in the next year or so after extensive consultation is completed. Both will feature on the Creative Valleys website. That's The Common featured on our cover.
- **Two CASP grants** were for specifically First Nations projects.
- **Pop-Up Gallery**: we began work with a very responsive Muswellbrook Council to create a pop-up shop and showcase in 2026.

The Blak Arts Collective is more than a program—it's a commitment to supporting Aboriginal artists and cultural workers in leading their own creative futures. The goal is for the whole program to be handed over to an Indigenous collective representing interests across the region within 5 years.

Scan to watch The Common, a First Story in Muswellbrook Shire – and read a story about it.

WANARUAH
Australian Government
Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support
MACHEnergy
Mount Pleasant Operation

Creative Valleys

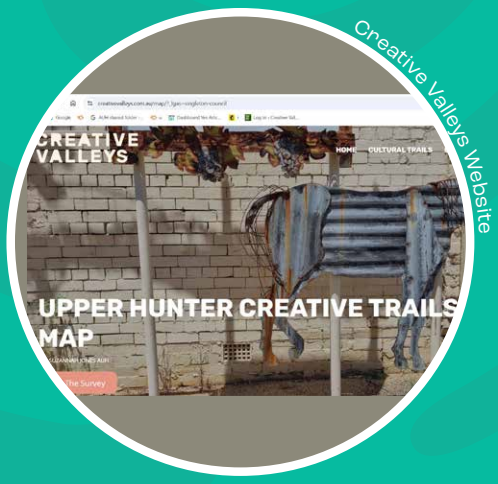
"Where to go and what to do?" It's lovely to look at, full of things to do, and adding to life round here. Creative Valleys is our cultural tourism website and initiative, designed to showcase the rich arts, cultural, and heritage experiences available across Dungog, Muswellbrook, Singleton, and Upper Hunter shires (and a little bit beyond). Launched in 2024, the site gained significant momentum in 2025 as we worked to build content, engage partners, and demonstrate its value.



The Website
https://creativevalleys.com.au/ connects visitors and locals to Galleries, museums, and cultural venues; public art and heritage sites; events, workshops, and performances; itineraries and trails; and stories about the region's creative people and places.

The website pulls data from the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW), which means listings appear not just on Creative Valleys but across multiple tourism platforms including Visit NSW and Australia.com. AUH adds commissioned and written stories that give the platform local depth.

Share Your Story Workshops
Project Officer Suzannah Jones developed and ran cultural tourism workshops in all four shires, helping 56 participants create compelling ATDW listings, write better descriptions, choose images and understand the tourism ecosystem. She included a hilarious session on Good, Bad and Ugly photographs of venues and events. The workshops were funded by a statewide Regional Futures grant.



Creatives, council workers and organisers attended. The workshops were rated highly. Many declared they'd been putting off developing listings because it seemed too complicated. Having expert guidance and hands-on support made all the difference.

Dungog Itineraries
For Sculpture On The Farm, AUH created four Dungog itineraries linking arts, heritage, food, wine, nature and adventure. Feedback was enthusiastic, with the Sculpture On The Farm team particularly appreciative. (We also brokered a grant from the NSW Government for Sculpture On The Farm that proved timely.) We're now exploring how to create similar itineraries for other shires.

Strategies and Challenges
Future growth depends on stronger event-listing habits, continued council tourism integration, regional partnerships and that ever-elusive search for funding for additional stories, videos and cultural tourism tie-ins. Suzannah's comprehensive marketing strategy should help us reach both content creators (venues, artists, event organisers) and content consumers (visitors, tourists, locals) to plan visits and discover experiences.

Scan to view the Creative Valleys Website



Todd Fuller presents an artist talk at Tocal Homestead. Image AUH.

Scan the QR codes to read the stories and watch Thomas Ryan's videos for THTN.

Todd Fuller - Tocal Homestead

Sophie Cox - Scone Museum

Helene Leane - Dungog Museum

This Here Then Now (THTN)

This Here Then Now paired contemporary artists with small museums to create new work inspired by local collections. Funded by the Regional Arts Fund, the project concluded in 2025 with final exhibitions and a suite of films.

The THTN program was designed to help museums reinterpret their collections in new ways, bring new audiences in, and provide "extra" stuff on the Creative Valleys site. The Scone project, Desks of Fabric, was nominated for an Imagine Award through Museums & Galleries NSW — sweet recognition of the quality and innovation involved. Suzannah Jones deserves enormous credit for her project management.

Todd Fuller at Tocal Homestead

Todd Fuller's They Call Me Blacket was unveiled at Tocal Field Days in May 2025. Todd created an atmospheric animation projected in the Stone Barn at Tocal Homestead, bringing to life the story of the Blacket Barn, designed by the famous convict architect.

The artist gave an engrossing talk on Saturday 3 May, discussing his research process, the technical challenges of creating the work, and how he translated historical records and architectural drawings into a moving animation, experienced by hundreds through the Field Days. Many commented on how it made them see the buildings around them differently—not just as historic structures but as the work of real people with real stories.

The Other Two and the Films

While completed in 2024, two other THTN projects, Helene Leane's Bing Bang Ring, Cash Is King! at Dungog Museum and Sophie Cox's Desks of Fabric at Scone Museum, stayed on exhibition throughout 2025.

Meanwhile, Muswellbrook filmmaker Thomas Ryan completed three short documentaries capturing the artworks, artists and museum partnerships. The films are available through Creative Valleys and YouTube. You can scan and view them on this page!

CASP & Microgrants

AUH's grant programs put small but meaningful amounts of money directly into the hands of community groups and artists. In 2025, CASP and Micro Grants supported projects across all four shires, from workshops and exhibitions to school, youth, heritage and community arts activities.

We saw applications from established groups and first-time applicants. The grants process was streamlined into one application and assessment process, reviewed by two Board members and an independent assessor. Recipients regularly report that even modest grants can determine whether a project proceeds.

Grants announced in late 2025 will support further projects in 2026. The 2026 grants are funded by: $17,000 from Create NSW devolved funding, $660 from our AusArts Day fundraiser, and $845 from our reserves.

Six CASP funded for 2025:
Singleton Council: **Seniors ARTernoon Tea.** In March, two 'Paint n Sip' style art workshops (with cups of tea and scones) were delivered as part of the Singleton Seniors Festival. Two local artists guided participants to paint an oil painting of a scone with jam before enjoying the real thing for morning tea. 21 attendees and two paid artists!

"It was great to showcase art as a valuable activity that contributes towards the wellbeing and positive social outcomes for our seniors community," said organiser Mathew Fox.



Singleton Quilters Inc: **Bringing Textile Landscapes with Rhythm to Singleton.** Landscape quilter Gloria Loughman led a class with local quilters and had a trunk show at the library in May. The class artworks went on show at "QuiltFest" in September and Singleton Library during November. The group gained 8 new members in 2025 after QuiltFest. 20 participants, one paid artist, 350 people attending QuiltFest.

"Amazing, beautiful very clever – glad we called in" – Entry in the visitor book by a visitor from the Gold Coast to QuiltFest.



Scone Neighbourhood Resource Centre: **Crafting Creativity: Art and Weaving Extravaganza**. Leading artist Michelle Napanangka Earl led two workshops on 26 February, one painting totem animals and the other weaving in raffia. Classes filled quickly and the results were some fine works in both mediums. 18 participants, 1 paid artist.

"The experience left everyone with a richer, more profound understanding of Aboriginal traditions and heritage," according to the organiser.



Murrurundi Arts & Crafts Council's **Murrurundi Community Arts Event Planning workshop.** Alex Wisser of Kandos's Cementa Festival led this two-day intensive free-ranging info and brainstorm session in March 2025, part of the complex journey to the Festival due to happen in March 2026.

"There were many ideas and directions, as we wrestled with the question of what would work best for a Murrurundi Festival" – participant.



Mr A Wisser at the podium. Photo John O'Brien.

Upper Hunter Shire Council: **Art Out The Back – Inspiring Individuals.** First Nations artist Suszanne Lang collaborated with youth to create a painting at the Merriwa Youth Centre on 12 March 2026. 7 participants, 1 paid artist.

"It was fantastic to see how engaged the youth were in the process, actively contributing ideas for colours, shapes, and design," said the organisers.



Young person getting their fingers involved in the Merriwa mural. Photo Kaylene Howman courtesy Upper Hunter Youth Services.

Glen William Public School P&C's **175 Year Commemoration mural** will be completed in 2026.

2 Micro Grants funded in 2024 but happening in 2025:
Lisa Melichar There Is Time children's book launch. In March Lisa launched her book co-authored with Lisa A Kennedy.

"The event catered for both young and old, with wonderful activities including a book reading and Q&A with the authors, a beautiful song performance, a colouring-in competition and face-painting," writes Lisa.

Dayarne Smith's Solo Exhibition ran through March 2025 at the Artisan Collective in Port Stephens: the grant funded paint, mediums and canvases to make the show possible.



Q&A at the book launch, courtesy Lisa Melichar.



Lisa and Lisa authors and illustrator, at the event, courtesy Lisa Melichar.



Abstract artist Dayarne Smith. Courtesy the artist.

LiddellWORKS: The Final Chapter

LiddellWORKS, AUH's major creative response to the closure of Liddell Power Station, reached its final stages in 2025. While the main exhibitions took place in 2024, several important outcomes were completed this year. The program was funded by AGL and the NSW Department of Regional Development (through a Stronger Country Communities grant) in partnership with organisations across the region.

Sculptural Bench

Will Maguire's sculptural bench was unveiled at Muswellbrook Library in April, with additional support from Muswellbrook Shire Council. Created from pipes and other items like a King Dick Spanner salvaged from Liddell Power Station itself, the bench is a functional, playful and thought-provoking piece of public furniture that kids love climbing on.

NEXT // Studios

NEXT//Studios returned in July, with Grace Barnes and Juniper Martin leading 30 young people through digital art, animation and music workshops at Singleton Arts + Cultural Centre, with additional support from Singleton Council. The visual work produced was excellent—charming short animations and digital drawings. The music workshop culminated in a delightful 90-second song created collaboratively by the students and Juniper.

Lessons & Legacy

The LiddellWORKS website will be updated and handed over to AGL as an archive of interviews, artworks, essays, films and documentation. The program sets a high standard for arts engagement with industrial transition. As Bayswater Power Station begins its own winding down, there's hope that a similar program might be developed.

The lessons from LiddellWORKS are clear:

- Take time to listen to workers and community
- Respect the complexity of people's relationships to place and work, climate change and the future
- Engage diverse artists with different perspectives
- Create permanent outcomes (artworks, publications, website)
- Be honest about the challenges as well as the opportunities
- Document everything for future learning

LiddellWORKS reached thousands of people through exhibitions, events, publications, and digital channels. More importantly, it created space for difficult conversations about transition, identity, and the future of energy-reliant communities.



Liddell workers and the new sculpture which lights up at night. Maguire is bottom right with his son. Image AUH.



NEXT // Studio videos can be viewed!

Scan here to visit the pulchritudinous LiddellWORKS website

Scan here to view Next//Studio animations in a big wallpaper

Scan to watch the whole Next//Studio show here

Scan here to hear song (written by Juniper Martin and youthies, and produced by Juni)



Local Member Dave Layzell, artists Ellie Hannon and David Clark, Deputy Mayor Sue George at a Singleton public artwork launch. Photo John O'Brien.



AUH left our Brook St Plaza premises in December and moved into the Campbell's Corner building, still in Muswellbrook.



Ces Miller, Glen Morris and Mal Walsh met to begin dealing with the secret and sacred objects from the dereliict Museum of Rural Life at Lake Glenbawn. Photo John O'Brien.



ALLY percussion workshop poster, selling the claave in Dungog Anglican Hall.



Dungog artist Lisa Wiseman's work in Muswellbrook – you can "munraliise" just about any piece of infrastructure. image by AUH.



Mysterious public artwork delivered, installed but not revealed yet. Photo John O'Brien



Fran Wachtel at the Bayswater 40th anniversary day with her earlier artwork Three Phases of Liddell. photo John O'Brien.



John and John in Murrurundi during the CASP-funded festival plan. Courtesy AUH.

Around The Region

Our work happens everywhere—in schools and libraries, galleries and community halls, cafés, council chambers and paddocks. We also provide numerous heavily considered Letters of Support to groups seeking grants across the region.



About to start hitting things in the very well attended ALLY percussion workshop. Dungog. Image AUH.



NEXT // Studio poster courtesy Singleton Council.

Professional Development

Professional development remained central to AUH's work in 2025, supported through partnerships, statewide programs and promotion. With core funding tight, we are super strategic about what we can deliver directly versus what we facilitate through partnerships or external providers. We do both, of course.

Our Own Workshops
Freelance Five and **Social Media for Artists** with Emmie from Creative Plus Business happened at the Muswellbrook Regional Arts Centre for two sessions attended by 20 participants.

CASP Information Session ran online in October, with practical tips and Q&A from ED John O'Brien.

ALLY Percussion Workshop ran in June with 26 participants and 5 musicians learning serious Latin percussion skills. A joyful, energetic session that left everyone buzzing, in collaboration with Performing Artists of Dungog.

Share Your Story – ATDW Training ran in every LGA, led by Suzannah Jones. See Creative Valleys.

NEXT//Studios reached 30 participants in Singleton, led by Grace Barnes and Juniper Martin, building skills in animation, digital art, and music creation. See LiddellWORKS.

Statewide Programs

Horizons: Pathways for Creative Youth celebrated its completion in February at Singleton Arts + Cultural Centre. The event connected established Upper Hunter creatives with the young people, who were thrilled to have their creative dreams treated so seriously and enthusiastically. Horizons was a program of the Regional Arts Network, funded by the NSW Office for Regional Youth.

Other statewide opportunities also benefitted the region. Kerri-Ann Taggart joined Arise and attended the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, and local musicians connected with Music NSW programs, with one artist taking part in the Songbirds tour. Muswellbrook creative Roz Thomson also attended the Art Fair, as part of a PD for artworkers. RALLY, an initiative of RANSW and Alex Wisser, supported five rural NSW towns with workshops, design support, and networking – and creatives from across the state, including the Upper Hunter, took part.

Other People's Programs

AUH promoted more than 30 external opportunities through ArtSparks and direct contact—everything from online grant writing workshops to in-person arts law sessions, from music industry webinars to First Nations cultural workshops.

Summit and Symposium Participation

Executive Director John O'Brien attended the NSW Regional Music Roundtable and Australian Regional and Remote Music Summit in Byron Bay in July, and bringing insights back home. It was a thrill to witness and give voice to the threnody of concerns and opportunities, to sing of and hear the lessons musicians and others in the industry continue to face. Music, festivals, performers and venues are struggling. They are also full of hope, and the government for one did seem to be listening.

After attending the Arts On Tour Salon, AUH has created an epic theatre program to roll out in 2026. Keep an eye out...



Juniper Martin, Thomas Ryan, Kasey Tudor, three of our Horizons artists at the celebration. Juni's work in the background. Image Suzannah Jones.



At the Byron Bay Music Summit – that's Magpie from Dasyhille on the right. In this talkfest. Photo John O'Brien.



Logo: RALLY program

The NSW Regional Arts Network, & NSW State Plan

AUH is one of 15 Regional Arts Development Organisations across NSW — and that network matters. Through the Regional Arts Network and our peak body, Regional Arts NSW, we swap knowledge, build collective muscle, advocate together and help shape statewide programs that reach well beyond any one region.

Network meetings, monthly check-ins and shared programs give us practical peer support, fresh ideas and coordinated advocacy for regional arts across NSW. This is where statewide programs are dreamed up, sharpened, funded and delivered — often with results that are far bigger than the modest machinery behind them might suggest.

In 2025, John O'Brien served on the Working Party for the NSW Regional Cultural Plan, which sets priorities around First Nations development, investment, training, creative spaces, touring and cultural tourism. The 10-year plan is significant not only for recognising the RADO network, but for focusing on achievable three-year goals. There is no small coincidence in the strong alignment between our own Strategic Plan and the state's Regional Cultural Plan — watch this space.

Regional Arts NSW also brings very practical support: HR advice through NFP Success, a group insurance policy that delivers significant savings, professional development throughout the year, advocacy across the many echelons of government, an Employee Assistance Program through Hey Mate, direct advice and check-ins that help guard against burn-out, and some fearsomely good networking moments.

For a small organisation like ours, those supports are not just useful — they are invaluable.

Hey Mate is our Employee Assistance program, which we access through our RANSW membership.

hey mate.

The State's 10-year Heartland plan would finally appear in early 2026. Image courtesy NSW Government.



Regional Arts Network Logo

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REGIONAL ARTS NETWORK

Regional Arts NSW Logo

REGIONAL
ARTS
NSW

Support Act's mental health services are available to practising artists and musicians across Australia.



How's your mental health? Any artist or musician struggling with mental health, career, and other concerns can access Support Act, a great service available across Australia. Google it or just contact AUH for details. It's funded by the Australian Government.

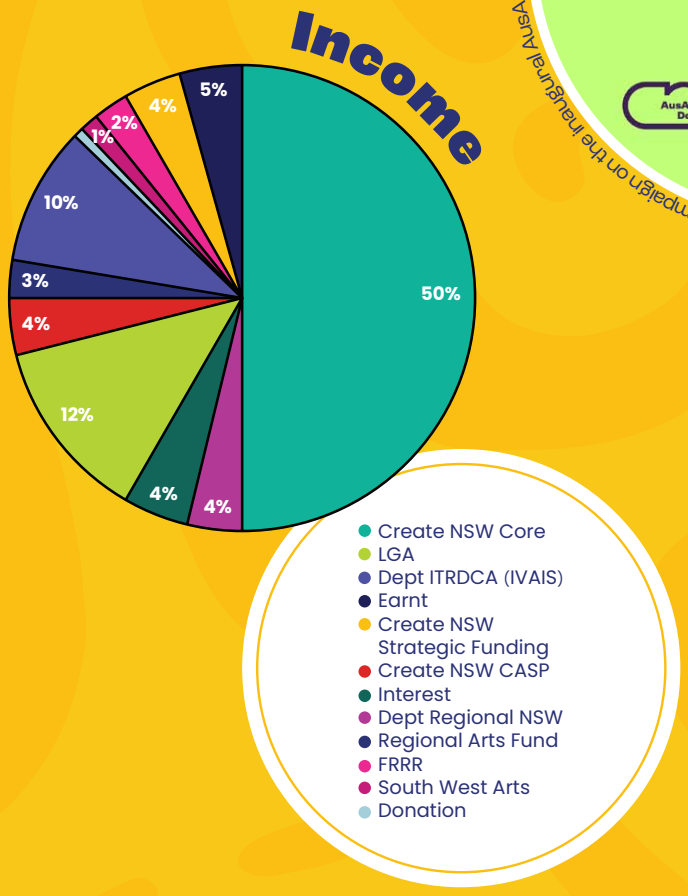


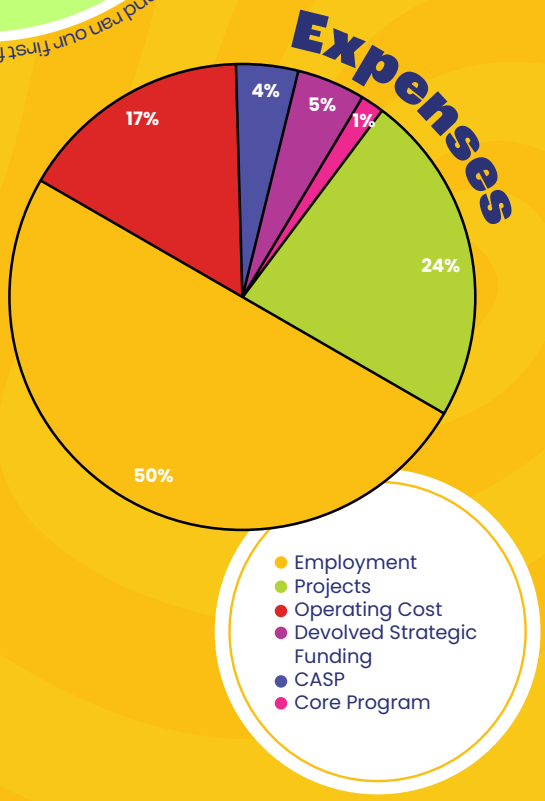
The Breath Of The Mountains. Kerri-Ann "Kez" Taggart's working drawings for the Muswellbrook Hospital Redevelopment, commissioned by Health Infrastructure and the Hunter New England Local Health District. Image courtesy the artist.

Muswellbrook Hospital Art Program

In November, NSW Health Infrastructure invited AUH to support arts projects for the Muswellbrook Hospital, with up to 15 new artworks potentially part of the renovated rooms, to open in 2026. In November and December we worked with local Aboriginal artists to develop their pitches for a community consultative work, and advised Kerri-Ann Taggart on design creation and presentation for the glass walls adorning the new spaces.







Financials

AUH's core funding tightened in real terms in 2025, so winter brought a serious stretch of grant writing: developing shovel-ready programs, chasing project funding and keeping one eye firmly on the next opportunity. Contracts, acquittals, documentation, compliance and risk management all added to the workload. A surplus was reported, mainly due to website and project delays and lower-than-expected employment expenses, and will be transferred into reserves. Income was slightly lower than in 2024, largely because major programs such as LiddellWORKS were winding down.

Council contributions continued to deliver strong, direct program value, with a significant return on investment for each of our four LGAs. ROI is only one measure, of course; it cannot fully capture the wider cultural lift, connections, confidence and creative momentum generated across the region. Financial management was overseen closely by staff and the Board, led by Treasurer Martha Moderitz. Grant programs were tracked separately, and the annual independent audit was completed by Kelly+Partners.

In August, we finally achieved Deductible Gift Recipient status (huzzah!), allowing donors to claim tax-deductible contributions. For the first national AusArt Day in October, Arts Upper Hunter ran a short successful campaign to grow our 2026 grants pool. Our need for fundraising will only grow, but this was a very welcome start.

Comms & Promotions

"You want a snapshot of the region's arts ecosystem? Check out our Comms," according to John O'Brien. "Arts Upper Hunter's ability to promote what the creative communities are up to—is central to our existence." In 2025 we maintained newsletters, social media, websites and local media relationships while telling the region's creative stories and adapting to changing audience habits.

The **ArtSparks e-newsletter** went out 14 times, including 3 Stop Press editions, with subscribers steady at around 500.

Across Facebook, Instagram and other **social media platforms,** AUH reached more than 50,000 people and maintained about 4,500 followers. Posts featuring people, artworks, events, video and local opportunities performed best.

AUH managed **three websites**: the main Arts Upper Hunter site, Creative Valleys and the LiddellWORKS archive. A crisper AUH logo was added in October by our web guru Mark Carpenter.

Radio and newspapers remain valuable, even as local papers move online or disappear. The Hunter River Times, local newsletters and regional radio continue to keep arts visible across the region.

ArtSparks Subscribers
503

Number of ArtSparks and ArtSparks Stop Press
14

Number of newsletters opened
1,665

Facebook
Arts Upper Hunter
Followers: 1,690
Reach: 137,982

LiddellWORKS
Followers: 97
Reach: 31

Blak Arts Collective Facebook Group (members)
Followers: 110

You Tube
Arts Upper Hunter (AUH Channel)
Followers: 9
Reach: 376

LiddellWORKS Creative Program
Followers: 13
Reach: 0

X
Arts Upper Hunter
Followers: 460

Website
Arts Upper Hunter
Sessions: 13,687
Page Views: 22,558

LiddellWORKS
Sessions: 1,250
Page Views: 2,326

Creative Valleys
Sessions: 4,927
Page Views: 15,057

Instagram
Arts Upper Hunter
Followers: 1,601
Reach: 4,053

LiddellWORKS
Followers: 249
Reach: 110

Creative Valleys
Followers: 46
Reach: 300

Promoted on website
Grants/Prizes
119

Events
134

New Items
59

Our Projects
23

Staff, Board & Partners

Staff

- **John O'Brien –** Executive Director (full-time through 2025, moving to 4 days/week from January 2026). John oversees all programs, manages grants and budgets, provides strategic leadership, and represents AUH regionally and statewide. Four years in the role in September 2025.
- **Sandra Reichel –** Office Manager (part-time). Sandra manages communications (ArtSparks, social media, website), financial administration, and general office operations. Twenty years with AUH in 2025.

Project Officers (casual)

- **Suzannah Jones –** Creative Valleys, This Here Then Now, First Stories, Share Your Story workshops (to mid-2025)
- **Marina Lee Warner –** re-commenced work for AUH, on Muswellbrook Hospital art project in November
- **Uncle Richie Lawton –** Aboriginal Arts Officer (casual, ongoing), Dare 2B Deadly presenter
- **Thomas Ryan –** This Here Then Now videographer (to May 2025)

Artists and Facilitators (contracted)

- **Kerri-Ann Taggart –** Dare 2B Deadly, graphic design, First Stories
- **Monique Rennie –** Dare 2B Deadly (Merriwa, Muswellbrook)
- **Jonathan Burrows** of Pretty Amazing Productions – First Stories videographer
- **Lorrayne Fishenden** (2 Rivers) – Mentoring for LALC staff
- **Grace Barnes –** NEXT//Studios facilitator in July
- **Juniper Martin –** NEXT//Studios music workshops in July
- **Stuart Berends –** Travelling Totems completion
- Plus numerous workshop facilitators, artists, and specialists throughout the year





















Board Members 2025

A highly engaged Board — led by Chair Jacqui Bakewell and Treasurer Martha Moderitz — helped AUH steer a steady course through a demanding year. Strong policies, sound financial processes and a healthy appetite for compliance kept the organisation well governed and future-focused. The Board's work is substantial and deeply valued: all members are volunteers, four are Council delegates, and the co-opted members bring a rich mix of skills from within and beyond the arts. Above all, they bring passion, practicality and a clear commitment to ethical, no-nonsense governance.

Cyber security also moved higher up the agenda. As more systems, safeguards and digital responsibilities came our way, the Board and staff began regular cyber-security training through A Corp Computers— a practical habit that will continue into 2026.

Our Principal Partners

NSW Government through Create NSW, Dungog Shire Council, Muswellbrook Shire Council, Singleton Council and Upper Hunter Shire Council.

Project Partners & Funding Bodies 2025

AUH runs on relationships. Some partnerships are formal, many are wonderfully informal, and together they make the region's creative life possible. Regional arts centres, the conservatorium, creative groups, First Nations and youth organisations, CWAs, community groups, individuals, venues and plenty of people in between help weave the rich, practical, ever-shifting cultural ecosystem of the Upper Hunter.

- Wanaruah Local Aboriginal Land Council
- Creative Australia (Regional Arts Fund), Office For The Arts (IVAIS)
- Singleton Arts + Cultural Centre
- Muswellbrook Regional Arts Centre
- Hunter Regional Conservatorium (formerly UHCM)
- Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal
- Music NSW
- Regional Arts NSW
- NSW Aboriginal Regional Arts Alliance (ARAA)
- Department of Regional NSW (Stronger Country Communities Fund)
- AGL
- Mach Energy
- Dungog Museum, Scone Museum, Tocal Homestead
- Sculpture On The Farm Dungog
- Plus numerous schools, libraries, community groups, and venues

Services

- **A Corp Computers –** IT support and cyber security training
- **Thirty Point Four (Mark Carpenter) –** website development and management
- **Kelly+Partners –** annual audit
- **NFP Success –** HR services (through RANSW)
- **Hey Mate! –** Employee Assistance Program (through RANSW)
- **Hunter Valley Printing –** Annual Report design and printing



arts UPPER HUNTER

Arts Upper Hunter
Shop 7 Campbell's Corner
60-82 Bridge Street
Muswellbrook NSW 2333

PO Box 114
Muswellbrook NSW 2333

Phone: 0409 382 509
Email: rado@artsupperhunter.com.au
ABN 70 9875 616 44

Websites
artsupperhunter.com
creativevalleys.com.au
liddell.works

Social Media
Facebook: @artsupperhunter
Instagram: @artsupperhunter
Creative Valleys Instagram: @creativevalleys
YouTube: @artsupperhunterinc2388

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