

# Train to Cessnock

## Response to the TfNSW Draft Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan

This submission is made by the Train to Cessnock group, in response to the TfNSW Draft Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan (SRITP), released for consultation in December 2024.

### 1. The need for the Train to Cessnock is fully recognised in the SRITP

The Draft SRITP correctly recognises and analyses many of the issues that our community faces with respect to transport, and the current lack of any meaningful public transport. For example, the following are extracts relating to the Cessnock LGA and the area serviced by the Train to Cessnock:

***P48** The Hunter region is home to some of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia, with over 50 per cent of the population of the Cessnock LGA ranking in the most disadvantaged fifth of the NSW population. Areas with the highest level of disadvantage typically have low public transport accessibility, while areas with the highest levels of public transport accessibility are typically areas with higher levels of advantage*

***P48/49** The future productivity, liveability, health and sustainability of the Hunter region depends upon a transport network that provides a range of travel choices to people, regardless of where they live or their circumstances. ... areas with poor PTAL (Public Transport Accessibility Level) include Weston, Kurri Kurri, Heddons Greta, Milfield, Paxton, Bellbird.*

***P50** Age dependency ratio is higher than state average. The aged dependency ratio, defined as the ratio of people over 65 to people aged between 15–64, is set to increase from 33 per cent in 2021 to 39 per cent by 2031 and 41 per cent by 2041. This is significantly higher than the statewide ratios of 27 per cent, 33 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively*

***P51** Cessnock LGA has 89% of its population in the bottom half in terms of advantage/disadvantage. The development and land use patterns of these areas has resulted in a high car dependency with limited alternatives to driving for many journeys.*

***P52** for most of the Hunter there is not a fast, frequent public transport service to be used by these new residents. The rapid demand for dispersed housing growth has increased reliance on existing road networks, resulting in congestion during peak times.*

***P54** The Kurri Kurri to Maitland corridor connects the suburbs of Heddons Greta, Cliffield and Gillieston Heights and is anticipated to accommodate a further 5,000 dwellings across the next 20 years. Combined with the traffic growth on the corridor as a result of the opening of the Hunter Expressway, there is a clear need to invest in infrastructure and services to manage increasing trips in the future.*

***P71** The Cessnock Road growth corridor from Kurri Kurri to Maitland demonstrates the need for transport to address growth whilst maintaining resilience for customers and the community. This corridor will see a significant increase in dwellings and employment across Maitland and Cessnock, resulting in increased traffic volumes. The corridor is also susceptible to flooding, resulting in significant disruption to traffic due to road closures and isolation of communities. For example, in 2022, Gillieston Heights was cut off by floods for more than a week, requiring supplies for the community to be brought in by boat.*

Train To Cessnock acknowledges that many of the above issues are wider than just the Cessnock LGA. However, what sets the Cessnock LGA apart is the ready availability of a low cost and effective integrated transport solution.

### 2. The Train to Cessnock should be a fundamental pillar of the SRITP

The solution to these needs that is offered in the draft SRITP, Initiative 6 to “review and implement bus service improvements” is clearly inadequate for the growing community in Cessnock, Kurri Kurri and surrounding areas. Existing busses are underused because of inconvenience, lack of connection, long journey times and poor

accessibility. More buses would address one existing problem – that of the poor existing service frequency – but would add to road congestion. This solution can only be adequate if it was undertaken in support of a public transport spine provided by rail services. On its own, this is not the solution our community needs.

Equally, the draft SRITP's Initiative 28 to "Preserve opportunities for re-use of mining infrastructure including the rail corridor between Maitland and Cessnock" does nothing to address these issues in the short or medium term.

Train to Cessnock has done a large amount of work to demonstrate that upgrading and repurposing the existing rail line to carry passenger train is viable, relatively cheap and will provide a vital service for many in the community. Our work shows that this project would be the best value rail project that any Australian government could pursue, and (by a long way) it is better value than any comparable rail project the NSW government is currently funding or considering.

This project should proceed now, for the following reasons:

- **The demand already exists and is rapidly growing.** Around 50,000 people were recorded in the 2021 Census as living in the suburbs immediately surrounding the corridor – Gillieston Heights, Kurri Kurri, Weston, Abermain, Neath, Kearsley, Aberdare, Cessnock and Bellbird. This number is rapidly growing. Cessnock LGA is the second-fastest growing area in the state, with a forecast population increase by 60% in the period to 2041 – this will equate to over 90,000 people living in the suburbs immediately surrounding the corridor within 15 years.
- **The need is immense.** There are currently only very limited public transport options available to people who live in the communities along the corridor, and what is provided is infrequent and inaccessible. A train service would connect these communities to employment, education and health facilities, and would also provide a means to boost inbound tourism to the Hunter Valley vineyards area. This point is amply evidenced in the Draft SRITP.
- **The cost of establishing the corridor is relatively cheap, and will only increase.** Because the corridor remains an active railway it can be readily upgraded to passenger standard at a relatively low cost. Conversely, if the railway line is left inactive it will inevitably deteriorate – sections will be removed, equipment vandalised, trees grow, etc. Residents along the corridor will resist the re-introduction of trains after such a long time. The works required to upgrade and restore it to use in, say, 10 - 15 years, will be substantially greater than now, and hence the cost of establishing train services at that time will also be substantially higher. The time for action is now.

The Draft SRITP initiative to "commence implementation of strategy for increasing passenger rail services along the Hunter Rail Line" is welcome and should be progressed, as many these communities – particularly those west of Maitland – are also starved of effective public transport. However, the establishment of rail services between Maitland and Cessnock should exist alongside this initiative, or at a higher priority, for the following reasons:

1. The Maitland to Cessnock corridor would serve more people than any enhancement of services on the Hunter Line west of Maitland. There are over 50,000 people already living along the Maitland to Cessnock corridor (2021 census). This well exceeds the approximately 30,000 people living in the vicinity of the Hunter line between Maitland and Singleton. It is recognised that the communities of Lochinvar and Huntlee are rapidly growing and would be served by additional trains on the Hunter Line. However, the communities of Gillieston Heights, Loxford Waters, Cliftleigh, Abermain and Bellbird are also rapidly growing. By 2041, the estimated population along the Maitland to Cessnock corridor will be approximately 90,000 – equivalent to the current population that lives along the rail line between Sutherland and Cronulla today. The Maitland to Cessnock corridor is also better placed to serve the communities it passes, as much of the existing population and development is clustered directly alongside (i.e. in walking distance of) the corridor. In contrast, both Lochinvar and Huntlee are several kilometres away from the rail corridor, and Anambah is even further away.
2. Passenger rail services on the Maitland to Cessnock corridor would not conflict with existing coal and other rail traffic west of Maitland, as would be the case to services towards Singleton – the SRITP recognises this constraint and the challenges it presents: "West of Maitland, freight and passenger services share tracks reducing capacity and reliability of all services." (SRITP, p72). Services on the Cessnock corridor would be independent of coal and could be operated reliably and without impact on the economically-important coal and freight traffic. Trains operated to Cessnock would also serve the areas between Maitland and Newcastle, providing additional benefits to the populations in these areas.
3. As noted above, if no action is taken the Maitland to Cessnock corridor will degrade and the cost of upgrading it in future will be substantially higher than now. This will not happen with the Hunter line, which is an active and vital corridor right now.

Reiterating our point above - the initiative to “commence implementation of strategy for increasing passenger rail services along the Hunter Rail Line” is welcome and should be progressed. However, as set out above the reasons for investigating and pursuing the introduction of passenger rail services on the Maitland to Cessnock (Bellbird) corridor are greater, more straightforward and more urgent – and should be recognised as such in the SRITP and in Government planning and budgeting.

### **3. The Train to Cessnock is fully aligned with objectives set out in the SRITP**

The Train to Cessnock is directly aligned with each of the objectives set out in the SRITP. This is detailed in the table on the following pages.

### **4. Media about the SRITP and the Train to Cessnock**

It is not just the Train to Cessnock lobby group that recognises the potential value of this initiative, and the opportunity that the SRITP is squandering by ignoring this corridor. Below are links to some of the many media articles published on the SRITP by the Newcastle Herald in January and February 2025, relating to the opportunity presented by the Train to Cessnock in particular.

We would encourage Transport for NSW to read these articles, and to also consider the number of comments made by members of the general public in favour of the initiative.

- **Shame the Coalfields isn't in Sydney. Then it would get its trains.** February 14 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8891760/cessnock-rail-overhaul-nsw-governments-ignored-chance/>
- **What Minister Haylen's winery trip exposes about Hunter's public transport network,** February 4, 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8882399/>
- **Housing with rail: making the most of the Hunter Line,** January 30, 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8879631/>
- **It's past time for this Hunter 'public transport black hole' to change,** January 25 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8873517/letters-to-the-editor-january-25-2025/>
- **Transport draft leaves Cessnock train out of loop again,** January 22 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8871491/why-cessnock-rail-link-is-crucial-for-regional-growth/>
- **'Stunning failure': Cessnock rail plan goes backwards in Labor's new plan,** January 19 2025, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8867939/cessnock-to-maitland-rail-plan-goes-backwards-under-labor/>

SRITP Objective	TfNSW Commitment (taken from SRITP)	Train to Cessnock alignment
<b>Starting with Country</b>	<p>The Transport outcomes for achieving this objective will support Aboriginal economic independence.</p> <p>Transport will work to ensure that Aboriginal people are connected safely to the economy and socially, through transport solutions</p>	<p>The 2021 census shows that 10.2% of the population in the Cessnock LGA identifies as indigenous, exactly triple the NSW state average of 3.4%. Further, the SRITP notes that 5.5 per cent of households in the Hunter region do not own a motor vehicle, but that this is higher for households with at least one Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander person (6.4 per cent). (SRITP, p33).</p> <p>These differences mean that the Train to Cessnock would disproportionately benefit Aboriginal people, providing a transport solution that safely connects them to the economy and socially, and will support Aboriginal economic independence.</p>
<b>Access to transport for all</b>	<p>A transport network that provides a range of travel choices to all people living, working in or visiting the Hunter region.</p> <p>Transport will work to achieve this objective by ensuring transport disadvantage is reduced across the entire Hunter region and all people are able to seamlessly access all their regular destinations with a variety of transport choices for all trip purposes.</p> <p>By achieving this objective, a reduction in transport disadvantage will be achieved in the Hunter region and all people will be able to seamlessly access their regular destinations through a variety of transport choices.</p>	<p>The Train to Cessnock would provide a travel choice to communities that currently have only one viable option- the use of private car. Establishing rail services along the Maitland to Cessnock corridor would be the best possible remedy – to connect those communities seamlessly into the integrated transport network of the Hunter and connecting areas.</p> <p>The train would provide a direct and rapid connection between the main centres of Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Maitland and Newcastle, in the process connecting with the communities in Gillieston Heights, Weston, Abermain, Neath, Kearsley and Bellbird, as well as many other communities in surrounding areas. Many of these areas have been highlighted in the SRITP as areas with poor Public Transport Accessibility Level.</p> <p>The 2021 Census also shows that the Cessnock LGA has a much higher proportion of its population that is disabled or of low socio-economic status compared to national averages. Cessnock Council’s 2023 ‘Traffic and Transport Strategy’ showed that 44% of the LGA population is classified as vulnerable transport users.</p> <p>Providing equitable access to transport options, regardless of a person’s age, ability, personal circumstances or level of disadvantage, is an important objective of the SRITP. The Train to Cessnock is an easy, quick, cost effective and obvious way of addressing this transport disadvantage for these needy communities.</p> <p>The Train to Cessnock would provide vital connectivity for over 50,000 people along the corridor to important centres for jobs, health and education and visitor attractions. Cessnock Council’s 2018 ‘Traffic and Transport Strategy’ reported that 55% of those living in the Cessnock LGA travel beyond Cessnock for work, the vast majority travelling to either Maitland or Newcastle. The Train to Cessnock would provide enhanced transport options for these journeys and would alleviate the current dependence on car transport.</p> <p>Further, the train would provide additional options for those who travel to significant regional education facilities including the University of Newcastle, the various TAFE campuses in the region, the selective</p>

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		<p>Merewether High School, Hunter School of Performing Arts, and Hunter Sports High. This will support the many families that are moving into the area along the corridor.</p> <p>Aside from increasing access to the Hunter region residents, the train line would also allow for improved public transport access to job opportunities in Cessnock and Kurri Kurri, including in the Hunter Valley vineyards.</p> <p>Rail services would integrate seamlessly with existing public transport, such as the Newcastle Light Rail and buses, as well as rail links to Sydney and other destinations. Furthermore, as public transport options are enhanced across the Hunter generally, the communities between Maitland and Cessnock would already be connected. This includes such far-reaching initiatives as the High-Speed Rail connection to Sydney, any potential future transport connection to Newcastle Airport, as well as public transport enhancements in Newcastle.</p>
<b>Well-located housing and successful places</b>	<p>The key outcomes for achieving this objective will see growth in identified Transport Oriented Development locations and the delivery of sustainable low and mid-rise housing near train stations, commercial centres and local centres.</p> <p>Housing ... in established areas will be serviced by sustainable transport options including public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure with a resultant reduction in private vehicle use</p>	<p>The Train to Cessnock directly supports the development of well-located housing in new and established areas.</p> <p>Development areas such as Gillieston Heights, Loxford Waters, Cliftleigh, Abermain, and Bellbird (among others) are proceeding apace. In the absence of useful public transport options (as is the case now for all the communities along the Train to Cessnock corridor), options for movement and place planning are limited. However, once the Train to Cessnock is committed to and established then these developments can consider how to take advantage of the new connection.</p> <p>A key feature of the Maitland to Cessnock rail line is that it is surrounded by established communities along the length of the corridor - the rail line could scarcely be better placed to service these communities. The Train to Cessnock would support current developments and enable new development areas or higher density development at virtually every station along the corridor.</p> <p>The rail service would enable the housing in the established communities along the corridor (e.g. Weston, Abermain, Neath and Aberdare) to become a more viable option for many, as it would make it possible to live in these communities without the need for multiple cars. At present, all these communities are car-dependant and will continue to be unless the Train to Cessnock happens.</p>
<b>A thriving and diversifying economy</b>	<p>Provide an efficient transport network to support a diversifying and growing economy including tourism, freight movements and enabling renewable energy zones.</p>	<p>The Train to Cessnock passes near two potentially significant industrial and freight precincts: the Hunter Economic Zone and the site of the former Hydro Aluminium Smelter, both located near Kurri Kurri and the Hunter Expressway. Beyond passenger transport, the Train to Cessnock corridor could be used to provide a rail connection into both of these sites, expanding the range of industries and uses that may be developed in either.</p>

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		<p>The Train to Cessnock would enable a rapid and robust rail connection between these sites and the Port of Newcastle, Sydney and further afield.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Train to Cessnock would enhance visitor accessibility and amenity to one of NSW's top tourist destinations – the Hunter Valley vineyards area. The rail corridor would open up entirely new business and tourism options such as rail-based wine tourism, increase visitors (e.g. from cruise ships that stop at Newcastle Harbour) and encourage business and economic development in the communities along the corridor.</p>
<b>A safe transport network</b>	Reduce fatal and serious injuries on the transport network and address safety concerns for public transport passengers.	Cessnock Council's 2023 'Traffic and Transport Strategy' noted that Cessnock LGA has a 37% higher road fatality rate than the NSW State average. The increased use of public transport, made possible through the provision of a fast, convenient and accessible solution such as the Train to Cessnock, would have substantial safety benefits for this community.
<b>Resilient networks</b>	Reduce the impact of transport network shocks and stresses to service and network interruptions and proactively plan for future impacts.	<p>Provision for more transport options generally will improve transport resilience for the communities in the Cessnock and Kurri Kurri areas. As has been noted previously, these communities are currently dependent on private cars for virtually all transport needs.</p> <p>The July 2022 flood event isolated the entire township of Gillieston Heights (which became known as Gillieston Island) for a period of 2 weeks. A repeat of this event cannot be tolerated in a rapidly growing community where almost all residents will travel outside the area for work and school.</p> <p>Enhancements to Main Road to the south of Gillieston Heights have provided some enhanced resilience, but more is required. Introducing rail services on the corridor between Maitland and Cessnock would provide another option for this community.</p>
<b>Net zero emissions</b>	<p>Contribute to the net zero 2050 target. Transport will work to achieve this objective in the Hunter by aligning with key targets including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100% renewable energy for all operational electricity for the rail, light rail and metro train network by 2025</li> </ul>	<p>The 2021 Census shows that almost 25% of households in the Cessnock LGA have three or more cars, compared to a State average of 17.5%. The 2023 Cessnock LGA Traffic and Transport Strategy identifies that 97% of all trips in the LGA are via private vehicles. These numbers reflect the lack of viable public transport options available to residents within the Cessnock LGA.</p> <p>The increased use of public transport is an essential component of moving to a lower emission economy, particularly coupled with the SRITP's initiative to move to 100% renewable energy for the rail network. Provision of the Train to Cessnock will enable residents within a short distance of the corridor to reduce car dependency and to reduce the number of cars required in each household.</p>

## 5. The Train to Cessnock is an affordable option that provides incredible value for Government and the community

As noted above, Train to Cessnock has done a large amount of work to demonstrate that upgrading and repurposing the existing rail line to carry passenger train is viable, relatively cheap and will provide a vital service for many in the community.

Our estimate is that the project will cost between \$100M and \$200M and will take 3-4 years to complete. These estimates have been prepared by rail industry professionals and have been independently validated. We would be pleased to have the opportunity to take Transport for NSW through the work we have done in detail, to provide confidence in our estimates and analysis.

Coupled with a 50:50 financing split with the Commonwealth Government, our upper estimate of \$200M would mean a funding profile for the NSW Government broadly as follows:

Business Case / Design	Construction			
Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
\$10M	\$15M	\$25M	\$25M	\$25M

This project is very affordable and would provide incredible value to Government and the community. The cost of this initiative would equate to between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per person to provide a rail service. Other passenger rail projects in NSW and Australia typically cost upwards of \$20,000 (and often closer to \$50,000 or more) per person in the catchment area. The Train to Cessnock is clearly the best value rail project in Australia.

Transport for NSW's Infrastructure Pipeline (updated February 2025) show zero planned rail (or public transport) projects outside of Sydney. Furthermore, even the rail projects shown to be delivered in Sydney are \$ multi-billion projects taking many years or even decades. By contrast, the Train to Cessnock would be a project that would boost regional transport and amenity and could be delivered for a fraction of the cost and in a short timeframe. At minimum the project deserves to be considered and have its benefits weighed against these other intended projects, to demonstrate that the taxpayer's money is being spent in the most beneficial way for the entirety of this state.

## 6. Summary

As we have set out above, the Train to Cessnock would provide a vital link for the communities through which the rail corridor passes. The needs of these communities are well recognised in the SRITP. Equally, the alignment between the Train to Cessnock proposal and the SRITP objectives is clear and compelling. The project is affordable and would be timely – both for a rapidly growing community and to avoid the rapid increase in cost of the initiative that would result if no action were taken now.

This is the transport solution our community needs.

The SRITP must be revised to include the following action as a short-term initiative, in the 0-5 year timeframe:

***Acquire and upgrade the rail corridor from Maitland to Cessnock (Bellbird), and introduce passenger rail services between Bellbird and Newcastle.***

Bill Palazzi  
For Train to Cessnock  
26 February 2025