



SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE UPPER HUNTER SHIRE COUNCIL

DRAFT DELIVERY PROGRAM 2022 - 2025 and OPERATIONAL PLAN 2023 - 2024

General

It is unfortunate that, once again, it appears the Draft Delivery Program 2022 - 2025 & Operational Plan 2023 - 2024 (DPOP 2023) has been presented to the residents of the Upper Hunter Shire (UHS) as a plan that has been decided for them. On two previous occasions the Merriwa District Progress Association Inc. (MDPA) has recommended that Council consult with residents earlier in the year to determine their problems, desires and priorities before preparing the Operational Plan. Typically, residents believe all the decisions have been made by the time the draft DPOP has been prepared. Many see the public sessions as *information delivery* instead of *consultation*. If it is the intention of Council that the plan is set and the Council is simply informing the public, we highly recommend this is made clear in communications prior to the meetings. Again, we implore Council to schedule public meetings in early 2024 to consult UHS ratepayers and residents on the projects they would like to see Council focus upon for the 2024/2025 year.

The MDPA held a public consultation forum on 5 November 2022 at which we asked for suggestions from the community on the capital projects, services and improvements they would like to see introduced to the Merriwa / Cassilis district. The results of this forum were widely published, and a copy forwarded to every Councillor and selected Council staff members. Despite the suggestions including several capital projects that could be designed, costed and funded in a single year, none of these projects has been included in the draft DPOP 2023. Those suggested projects include the following:

- ★ Distinctive overhead lights in the main street,
- ★ Paint or render the Civic Centre,
- ★ Paint a sepia mural on the Bow Street wall of the RSL Club,
- ★ Need a new unit (kiosk) for street stalls,
- ★ Solar powered lighting to illuminate the new mural in the Rotary playgrounds,
- ★ Beautify the Merriwa River frontage areas to make the river part of the town,
- ★ A few flower pots in the main street,
- ★ Exercise stopping points (with equipment) [on the shared pathway],
- ★ Fenced-in dog park within town,
- ★ Improve literacy by holding courses in: running committees; insurance literacy; etc,
- ★ Locate defibrillators around Merriwa with 24 hour access, and
- ★ More art murals and sculptures.

Reiterating the comments from the MDPA and other members of the public at the DPOP Delivery meeting at Merriwa on 9 May 2023, for several years the MDPA and ratepayers have provided feedback with absolutely no response to – and certainly no inclusion of – their suggestions or comments in the DPOP. It can be very defeating for the public and members of the MDPA to spend so much of their time reviewing the plan only to have suggestions overlooked year after year.

Many residents find the DPOP 2023 difficult to interpret, as it mainly contains budgetary figures and only high-level descriptions of services and activities, and not the type of information that is of particular interest to them (or at least that which can be applied to their town and situation). The 194 page document and appendices of 40 and 21 pages present as a mammoth document for the average citizen to digest. Many items listed in the DPOP are cryptic in their nature, only to be understood by the author and selected Council executive. The document is not user-friendly, and does not provide the type of useful information of most interest to residents. For example, local residents are interested to know details about local capital projects, staffing levels, assets and plant distribution across the Shire.

It is considered that too many employees are engaged in administrative tasks instead of providing hands-on services. In Merriwa, staffing numbers in roads crews and parks & gardens are below traditional levels. The use of contractors for works should be limited in favour of using local Council employees where appropriate. It should present information in a way that residents and ratepayers can relate to, not just a balance sheet.

Public Consultation

The MDPA appreciates the effort expended by Council staff and Councillors to present the draft DPOP at various centres across the Shire. We recognise the commitment and inconvenience imposed upon them to attend late meetings away from home. However, many residents are disillusioned that the sessions are for information only, and that Council is reluctant to make alterations to the final DPOP from comments received at these information sessions. They cannot be considered as consultation - only presentation.

The focus at the DPOP presentation meeting seemed to be on that of a “balanced budget”. There is no doubt the “bottom line” for any Council is important and no one wants to see their Council in financial distress. Understanding that the Council has a balanced budget does engender confidence, but it is not a plan. It would be more useful to see a breakdown of what works are being planned for the beautification, activation and development of each community within the UHSC. This breakdown could be based on the vision the UHSC has for each community focussed on its uniqueness rather than a “one size fits all” concept. It is very difficult to give feedback on figures alone.

The MDPA has made a significant effort to submit comments on the draft DPOP for years. However, few of the comments have resulted in any change. Some of the suggestions submitted by the MDPA that have been ignored include the following:

- ★ develop a strategic plan to enhance employment opportunities,
- ★ identifying potential infrastructure projects as part of a long-term strategic plan,
- ★ balance capital expenditure across the Shire instead of in and around Scone,
- ★ simplify the DPOP so it can be understood easily by the ratepayers,
- ★ adopt a program of resheeting and resealing rural roads,
- ★ extending the operating hours of the Merriwa VIC,
- ★ resume using tangible communication for residents who do not use social media,
- ★ plan and construct bridges over Bow River and Killoe Creek,
- ★ equitable upgrading of local and regional roads across the Shire, and
- ★ address the apparent failure to meet Strategic Objectives listed in the DPOP.

Positives

The MDPA acknowledges that Council has allocated funds to continue the operation of many services and to continually repair and maintain essential services, such as water and sewerage.

We also note with sincere appreciation that Council has budgeted for an increase in its annual contribution to the MDPA towards administrative costs.

In response to representations from residents and the MDPA, it is pleasing to note that Council has allocated \$450,000 towards the cost of rehabilitating Comialla Road.

We applaud the ongoing repairs to the Scone / Merriwa Road near Murdering Hut Gully with an allocation of \$500,000 per year for the next four years, following on from the \$400,000 expended this current year.

Roadworks within the township of Merriwa are noted, with \$250,000 budgeted for rebuilding Gummun Lane, \$260,000 for sealing Bow Street (on top of the \$160,000 expended this current financial year), and \$200,000 to modify the intersection of Bow Street and Sollys Lane.

We appreciate Council budgeting for rehabilitation works on regional roads in the Merriwa district for the 2024/2025 year, including: Idaville Road (\$400,000) and Cullingral Road (\$350,000). However, we note there is no budget for rehabilitation of regional roads in the Merriwa / Cassilis district for the 2023/2024 year, which is in stark contrast to allocations for regional roads in the Scone district, including: Moonan Brook Road (\$3,600,000), Hunter Road (\$5,400,000) and Moobi Road (\$1,400,000), totalling \$10,400,000.

The exception is the \$25,000,000 to make repairs to MR 358 due to its failure following previous upgrading by Council. We understand this money is held by Transport NSW, and therefore would not pass through Council's accounts. We also want to reiterate that funds towards this road should NOT be considered “a bonus for Merriwa”. This is a major route used by everyone (including those travelling from the New England region through to the Central West, for example). The \$50m grant funding is to repair the road which failed due to poor construction by Council. To continue to promote this as some type of contribution towards the Merriwa community (as though it was one of our local roads) is not acceptable (as witnessed by the public reaction at the DPOP Delivery meeting in Merriwa on 9 May 2023).

There is an allocation of \$60,000 for the installation of lighting over the pedestrian crossing over Vennacher Street between the Royal Hotel and the Regional Australia Bank. This figure appears to have been carried forward from the 2022/2023 year due to works not being carried out. We trust this project can be completed satisfactorily as soon as possible, as it was first brought to Council's attention in July 2018.

It is generally accepted that sources of gravel suitable for road base are very few, especially in the Merriwa / Cassilis district. We are pleased that \$60,000 is allocated in the 2023/2024 year for gravel exploration. Could you please advise how many gravel pits were activated from the \$100,000 expenditure in the 2022/2023 year.

We gratefully acknowledge the \$200,000 grant Council received for the Merriwa town revitalisation. We are in touch with Sam Wooden to scope out the project of footpath engraving and tree uplighting with the advice and cooperation of the Merriwa Chamber of Commerce and the Merriwa District Community Advisory Committee.

Figures in the draft DPOP indicate that a deduction of \$60,000 has been made from the Merriwa Reserved Fund (Former Merriwa Assets) and added to the budget for the Merriwa Shared Pathway (Ftpth - Merriwa Extension), as the extracts from the draft (below) indicate. This will undoubtedly please all the land owners adjacent to the pathway that were previously expected to pay this contribution.

Restricted Assets Report Forecast 2024				
	2022 Revised Budget as at 31/3/24	Dpop Tfrs To	Dpop Tfrs From	Projected Balance 30/6/24
Internal Restrictions				
19016.8516.6403 Other Council Residences	17,887	0	0	17,887
19016.8516.6404 Former Yha Building, Segenhoe	32,597	0	0	32,597
Tourism & Area Promotion				
19016.8516.6406 Festival Of The Fleeces	25,968	0	0	25,968
Other				
19016.8516.6408 Saleyards	(2,485,974)	0	(461,620)	(2,947,594)
19016.8516.6557 Former Mwa Assets	334,869	0	(60,000)	274,869
Total Economic Affairs	(2,004,572)	569,000	(521,620)	(1,957,192)

Footpaths and Cycleways					
Budget Summary	Revised Budget 2022/23	2023/24 DPOP Budget	2024/25 Budget	2025/26 Budget	2026/27 Budget
Operating Revenue					
0135. Capital Grants Received	(872,674)	0	0	0	0
0140. Contributions	(32,000)	(60,000)	0	0	0
Operating Revenue	(904,674)	(60,000)	0	0	0
Non Operating Revenue					
0920. Depreciation	(27,944)	(27,873)	(27,873)	(27,873)	(27,873)
6060. F-19016.8523.6441 Footpaths, Mwa	(60,000)	0	0	0	0
6074. F-19015.8510.6305 s94A Contributions	(45,000)	0	0	0	0
Non Operating Revenue	(132,944)	(27,873)	(27,873)	(27,873)	(27,873)
Operating Expenditure					
0560. Footpath/Cycleway Maintenance	72,500	72,500	75,113	77,820	80,477
0680. Depreciation	27,944	27,873	27,873	27,873	27,873
Operating Expenditure	100,444	100,373	102,986	105,693	108,350
Capital Expenditure					
4080. Ftpth - Mwa Extension	932,674	0	0	0	0
4327. Kerb Ramp Upgrade	20,000	25,000	25,000	25,000	25,000
4352. Scn - Moobi Rd Cycleway	30,000	0	0	0	0
4929. Ftpth - Bedford St (Hwy - Segenhoe)	0	80,000	0	0	0
4930. Ftpth - Footpath/Cycleway Expansion	0	120,000	0	0	0
5558. Ftpth - Waverley St (Short to Liverpool)	50,000	0	0	0	0
5576. Cassilis Ftpth - Decommission Fuel	45,000	0	0	0	0
Capital Expenditure	1,077,674	225,000	25,000	25,000	25,000
Footpaths & Cycleways	140,500	237,500	100,113	102,820	105,477

Service Summaries and Activity Budgets

Administration Budget Summary

Item 0446, Page 26 - The draft DPOP shows expenditure in 2022/2023 of \$119,200 and a budget in 2023/2024 of \$123,108 for a Road Safety Officer, purportedly shared with Muswellbrook and Singleton Shire Councils. There is some doubt as to the function of this officer, as the MDPA has not received satisfactory results to at least three matters involving road safety lodged with Council, being:

- the safety of pedestrians using the zebra crossing over Bettington Street between the Royal Hotel and the Visitors Information Centre.
- reducing the speed limit on the eastern approach to Merriwa on the Golden Highway (King George V Ave) to slow vehicles down to 50 kph before they reach the driver reviver, toilets and skate park area.
- concerns for the safety of pedestrians using the zebra crossing over Vennacher Street between the Royal Hotel and the Regional Australia Bank due to poor visibility at night time.

Community Services and Education

Page 57 - Aged Care - Gummun Place Hostel

Council's Operational Plan Action for Gummun Place is to "*Maintain Gummun Place Hostel as an accredited 16 bed care facility in Merriwa*". Council should consider applying for a grant to construct the additional six to eight additional 'beds' (rooms) to make the facility more self funding. If poor occupancy rate is deemed to be a limiting factor, Council could widen the catchment area for residents. It has also come to light that a delay exists in residents obtaining an ACAT Assessment to make them eligible to enter Gummun Place. We believe Council should make potential residents aware of the need to obtain an ACAT Assessment, and also to work with the relevant Government agency to expedite these assessments.

Economic Affairs

Page 71 - Camping Areas and Caravan Parks - The MDPA would like to see Council plan, design and budget for capital works to improve the safety of campers in the Merriwa Caravan Park. Some time ago it was proposed to relocate the entrance to the park into Dutton Street and to erect a high, aesthetically pleasing, sound-proof fence around the southern and eastern boundaries of the park to reduce traffic noise from the Golden Highway. This would improve the attraction of the park to tourists looking for an overnight stay.

Environment

Waste Management - Page 94 - Council should allocate a budget for carrying out ground preparation for the proposed Reverse Vending Machine in Merriwa, in accordance with any agreement with TOMRA.

Housing and Community Amenities

Page 114 -Town Planning - As Merriwa is becoming increasingly popular for tourism, business operators and retirees, accommodation in the form of rental or purchase is becoming less available. It is recommended that Council begin planning for a new subdivision in Merriwa, such as that in Collins Street.

Economic Affairs

Page 83 - Tourism and Area Promotion - The MDPA is delighted that Council has discontinued its Operational Plan Action to '*Review model of delivering Visitor Information services*'. The Visitor Information Centre in Merriwa is a most important service offered to tourists and the local community, and also the UHSC in general (it is not just information about Merriwa that is given out at the VIC). However, we would reaffirm our request to reinstate the opening hours of the Merriwa VIC to the pre-COVID hours of operation (being 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM seven days per week).

Transport and Communication

Page 149 - Repair of Flood Damaged Roads - The Newcastle NBN Television News on 3 May 2023 announced a Federal Government grant of \$1,940,000 to the Upper Hunter Shire Council to repair flood damaged roads. Could Council please identify where the repair works will be carried out?

Page 165 - Transport Ancillaries

The MDPA would like to ask Council to support and develop a proposal to offer a regular public transport service (in the form of a bus or coach) between Scone and Cassilis, via Merriwa.

The growing number of Shire owned facilities at Scone are difficult for many residents and ratepayers to access unless they own a car and have the funds to travel to Scone. So, to fully avail themselves of these facilities they need to access them by other means.

Many towns throughout Australia thrive due to the (international and local) tourist trade and backpacker workforce. These tourists and itinerant workers avoid townships without public transport. If Merriwa and Cassilis were more accessible the level of employment would increase and nightlife could improve. Current bus transport connections to Merriwa offered by Sid Fogg, Osbornes and TransCare do not provide satisfactory timetables to fulfil the needs as described, as they operate infrequently and at school hours (giving the impression of them simply being school buses).

Sewerage Services

Page 168 - The MDPA believes Council should apply for grant funding and allocate a budget for the installation of the Cassilis Sewer Scheme without delay. This is a most important project that has been poorly managed in the past, so we believe Council needs to make an extra effort to fulfil this project. We made this same request last year without effect.

In the DPOP 2021, Council presented a Statement of Commitment *'To provide an efficient sewerage system for Cassilis'*. That commitment was for the *'Construction of a sewerage reticulation and treatment scheme to serve the village of Cassilis. Cassilis does not currently have a sewerage scheme. The proposed sewerage scheme will resolve environmental problems with septic tanks in the village due to ground conditions and small lots'*. Therefore, it should remain as a priority project until complete.

At Council's draft DPOP presentation in Merriwa on 9 May 2023, it was mentioned that the State Government would only fund new sewerage systems on a 1:1 basis. Therefore, Council should make allowances in its recurrent budget to match grant money for this project. In the draft DPOP, Council has budgeted \$1,315,000 for works on sewerage systems elsewhere in the Shire, and \$4,337,500 to be spent on the Scone water supply, so accessing these funds to match grant funding appears to be possible.

Distribution of Capital Projects

The proposed expenditure on capital projects over the 2023/2024 year once again appears to be heavily biased towards Scone. An analysis of budget items based on sub-categories in the draft DPOP has been separated into groups of towns, regional areas around those towns and non-specific locations. The table generated by this analysis is included at the end of this submission, and shows that planned expenditure is disproportional across the Shire. The green highlighted cells indicate where expenditure exceeds \$1m.

The pie chart below (Figure 1) provides a more graphic representation of budget allocation across the Shire. This year, the budget is skewed by an allocation of \$25,000,000 for repairs to MR 358. If this budget item is removed, it can be clearly seen (Figure 2) that Scone gets the biggest piece of pie of any town in the Shire.

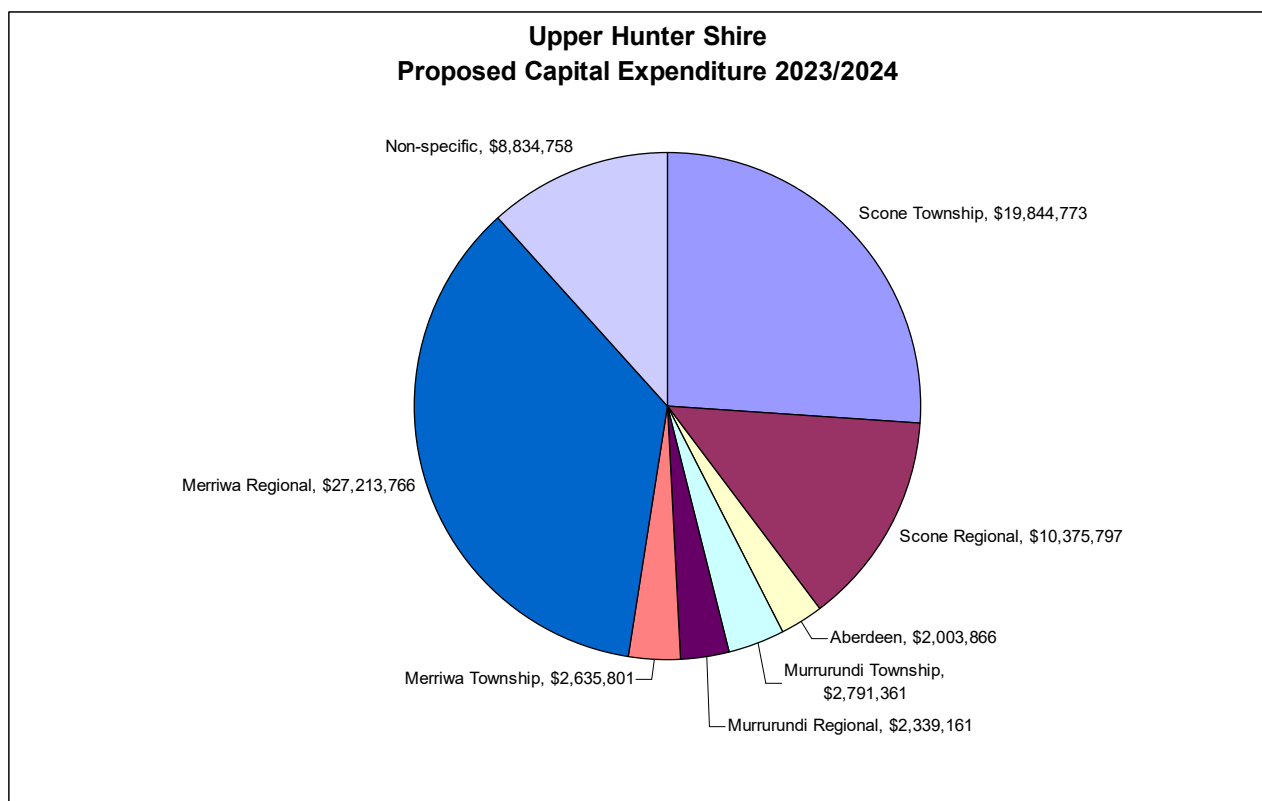


Figure 1 - Capital expenditure across the Upper Hunter Shire (including MR358)

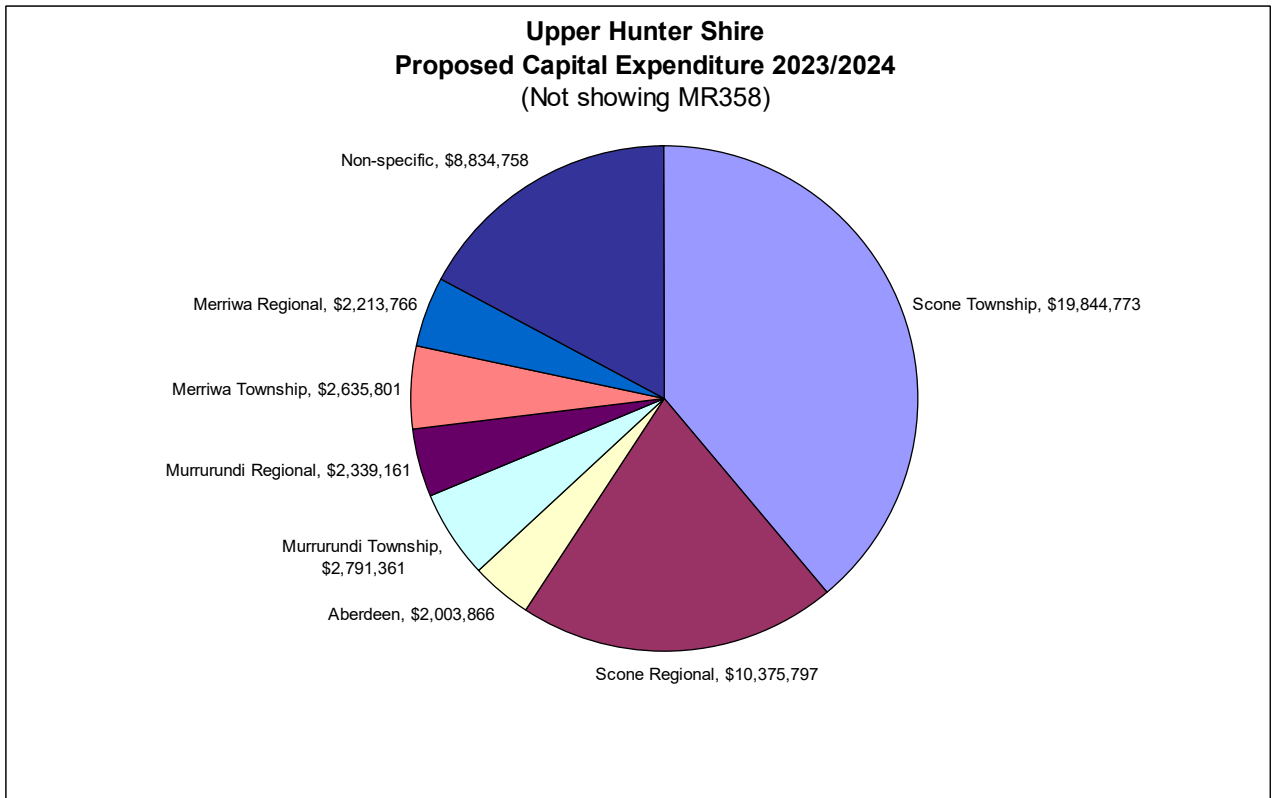


Figure 2 - Capital expenditure across the Upper Hunter Shire (excluding MR358)

To further illustrate the disparity of capital expenditure across the Shire, a map has been included that shows the spatial distribution of proposed capital projects valued at greater than \$1m. It is blatantly obvious that by comparison very little expenditure is planned to the west of the Shire (with the exception of repair works to MR358).

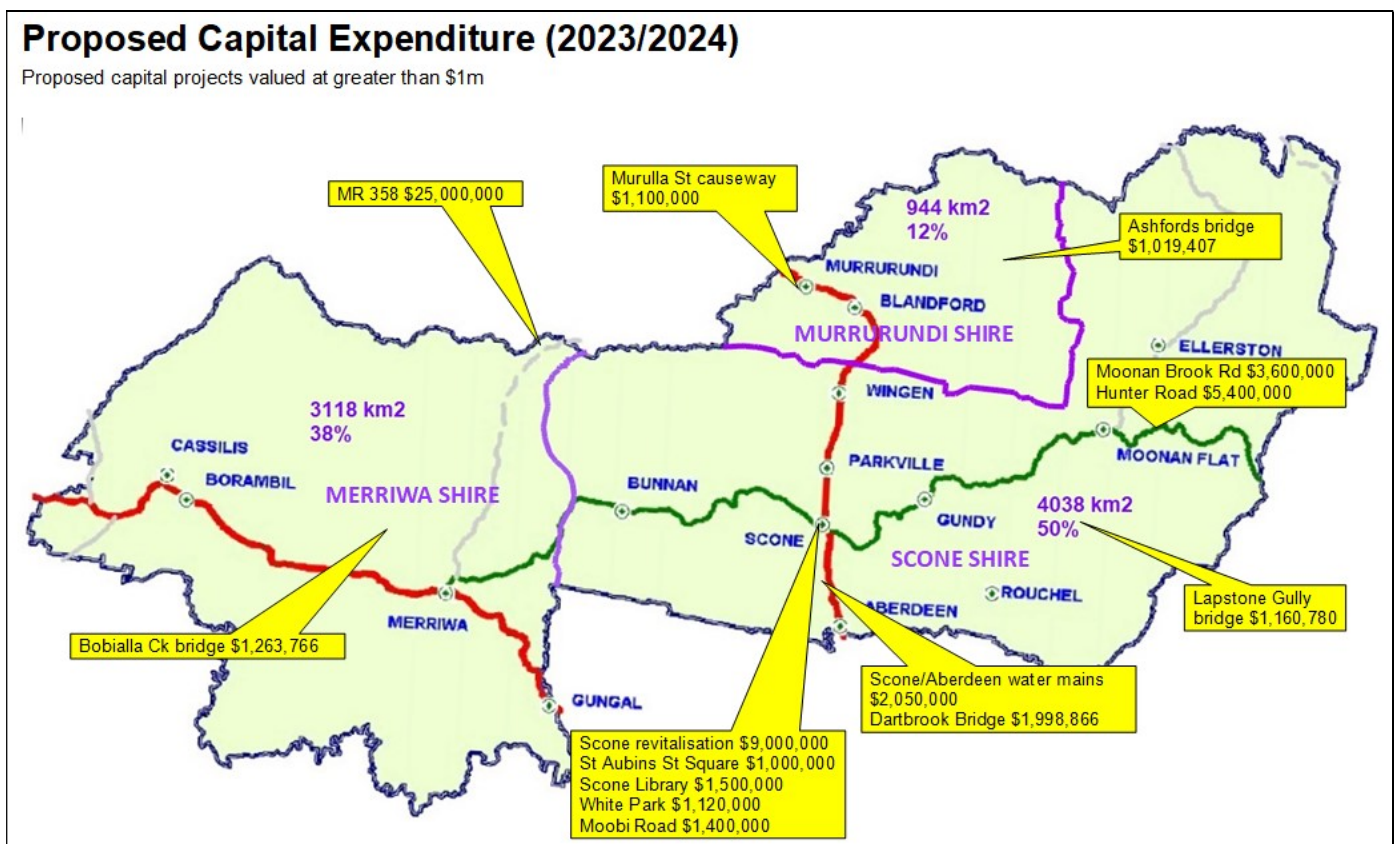


Figure 3 - Location of capital projects budgeted at greater than \$1m across the Upper Hunter Shire

In closing, the MDPA would like to say that we have put a significant amount of time, effort and thought into our response and would welcome an opportunity to discuss these items in person if required.

Capital Expenditure 2023/2024

ITEM	Scone Township	Scone Regional	Aberdeen	Murrurundi Township	Murrurundi Regional	Merriwa Township	Merriwa Regional	Non-specific	TOTAL
Administration									
Depot Operations	\$20,000					\$15,000			\$35,000
Financial Services	\$10,000								\$10,000
Fleet Management								\$250,000	\$250,000
Information Services								\$50,000	\$50,000
Stores & Purchasing								\$5,000	\$5,000
Sustainability									\$0
Community Services and Education									
Gummun Place Hostel	\$15,000								\$15,000
Independent Living				\$17,500		\$5,000			\$22,500
Early Learning Centre	\$40,000								\$40,000
Youth Services				\$400,000					
Economic Affairs									
Saleyards	\$15,000								\$15,000
Tourism & Area Promotion	\$700,000								\$700,000
Environment									
Stormwater Management								\$200,000	\$200,000
Waste Management				\$270,861		\$275,801			\$546,662
Housing & Community Amenities									
Low Income Housing									\$0
Public Cemeteries				\$20,000				\$12,500	\$32,500
Street Lighting						\$60,000			\$60,000
Mining, Manufacturing & Construction									
Gravel Exploration								\$60,000	\$60,000
Recreation & Culture									
Community Centres & Halls								\$30,000	\$30,000
Museums	\$27,273								\$27,273
Parks and Gardens	\$5,000		\$5,000	\$5,000		\$5,000		\$87,500	\$107,500
Public Libraries	\$1,500,000								\$1,500,000
Sporting Grounds & Venues						\$150,000			\$150,000
Swimming Pools	\$100,000					\$130,000			\$230,000
White Park Complex	\$1,120,000								\$1,120,000

ITEM	Scone Township	Scone Regional	Aberdeen	Murrurundi Township	Murrurundi Regional	Merriwa Township	Merriwa Regional	Non-specific	TOTAL
	Transport & Communication								
Bridges		\$1,075,797	\$1,998,866	\$1,100,000	\$2,339,161		\$1,263,766	\$1,829,758	\$9,607,348
Footpaths & Cycleways	\$80,000							\$145,000	\$225,000
Regional Roads & Bridges							\$25,500,000	\$1,630,000	\$27,130,000
Local Roads	\$1,400,000	\$9,300,000				\$710,000	\$450,000	\$4,440,000	\$16,300,000
Transport Ancillaries	\$10,000,000					\$200,000		\$95,000	\$10,295,000
	Water Fund								
Water Supplies	\$4,337,500			\$933,000		\$290,000			\$5,560,500
	Sewer Fund								
Sewerage Services	\$475,000			\$45,000		\$795,000			\$1,315,000
TOTAL	\$19,844,773	\$10,375,797	\$2,003,866	\$2,791,361	\$2,339,161	\$2,635,801	\$27,213,766	\$8,834,758	\$76,039,283