



Annual Report

2024 - 2025



The talented members of NRYO 2025

The Northern Rivers Conservatorium acknowledges the people of the Bundjalung Nation, traditional custodians and music makers of the land on which we work and come together in music.

The Northern Rivers Conservatorium Arts Centre Inc. (NRCAC) is a non-profit incorporated association, enriching the cultural life of our region through music.

A proud member of the Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums, our work is made possible through the support of NSW Treasury, with funding delivered via the Regional Conservatorium Grants Program administered by the NSW Department of Education.



Contents

Our People	2
Chair's Report	3
Treasurer's Report	4
Building Works Report	5
Executive Director's Report	9
Student Numbers	10
Music Programs	11
Scholarships	12
Community Music	13
Music in Schools	14
Early Childhood Music	16
First Nations Music Program	18
Events	20
Thank you	23
Financial Statements	

NRCAC Personnel

Anita Bellman	Executive Director
Janene Brooks	Finance & Administration
Ngryie Starkey	Early Childhood Music
Kellie Eden	Organisational Support Officer
Blake Rhodes	First Nations Music Program
Tilly Jones	Administration Assistant
Paul Archer	Schools Liaison

The Board

Chris Leach	Chair
Donna Kildea	Deputy Chair
Peter Hughes	Treasurer
Matt Sorenson	Secretary
Jenny Dowell	Director
Georgina Bruinsma	Director
Mykaela Baillie	Director

Our Teachers

Paul Archer	Justin Bannister
Dan Brown	Nic Campbell
Rex Carter	Jacob Donohue
Wendy Ford	Katrina Harris
Laura Hymers	Andy Jans-Brown
Fiona Kerr	Mat Lydon
Michael McCabe	Neil McCann
David O'Meara	Imogen Wolf
Luke Rosten	Ngryie Starkey
Christina Gobet-Freeman	Michael Alvey
Sonya Lopes	Nora Pieterse
Fionn Quinlan	Ben van Kleef
Diego Zaragoza	

Our People

Chair's Report

Those of you familiar with the 1902 Conservatorium building would have noticed significant changes to the exterior this year. We have an external goods lift that complements the heritage façade. We have a new carpark. The turret on the roof was recreated by the same Lismore firm that did the original 120 years ago. Signage for the NRC has been updated. There is also a new roof, replete with a solar array.

Inside the building, the concert room floor has been repaired and a new stage added that compliments it. New access doors, ramp and seating as well. An updated fire system for the building has been installed.



Jennifer Rowley, Christopher Leach, Anna Reid, Anita Bellman, Jenny Dowell

Left to complete is the underpinning of one of the external walls, some flood remediation to the ground floor level of the building ("The Arches") and sound and lighting in the concert room. Bennetts Constructions have been a pleasure to work with and none of this would be possible without the financial support of Create NSW.

The Northern Rivers Conservatorium has a new strategic plan, taking us into the next triennium of the Regional Conservatorium Grants Program. This is available on the revamped NRC website.

Cyclone Alfred was a test of our disaster preparedness. We managed well and this was before the goods lift was completed. We implemented the recommendations of a review of disaster and business continuity planning undertaken by Hawkridge, an external consultant funded by Create NSW.

In March 2025, the NRC launched a First Nations Music Program. This has been run by Blake Rhodes, a local First Nations musician. It is an innovative initiative of which I am particularly proud.

We have been graced by some remarkable visiting performers this year. Among them Zöj in September 2024 and Slava and Sharon Grigoryan in July this year. Slava and Sharon performed in the renovated concert room and commented on the sound quality and lovely ambience.

After many years and a number of those as the Chair of the NRC, Jenny Dowell is stepping down from the Board. The NRC would like to thank her for her kindness and her wisdom over the years.

As always, the dedicated staff and Executive Director keep the NRC running like clockwork. I would like to thank them and my fellow Board members for their support. The parents and students at NRC also deserve a huge vote of thanks.

Christopher Leach
Chair



“The management and staff should be congratulated for the result which has exceeded all expectations.”

Treasurer's Report

The association reported a surplus of \$1,745,427 which was after the net building grant of \$1,922,266. The net profit line pre the grant was a loss of \$176,838 which included non-cash charges of \$65,691 for depreciation, and a decrease in employee provisions \$18,608. The association received \$3.2m in grant funding in the year to fund the upgrade of the building and this is treated as income, but it was spent on the capital works on the building which appears as an asset in the balance sheet. Due to the valuation of the building, an audit book adjustment of \$1.3m was made to impair the building works back to market value.

Cash at the end of the year was \$756k versus the prior year's \$1.06m with the reduction in cash due to the grant works being completed.

The Community music program has recovered to pre Covid levels in turnover and individual tuition by far the dominant activity. The Conservatorium continues to receive substantial capital grants for the renovation and upgrading of its heritage building. On completion of the renovations, the greatly enhanced facilities should ensure the association's financial viability as a conservatorium of music

The association is committed to maintaining fiscal discipline with indepth costing of all activities and maintaining balanced budgets. Regular reporting and budget reviews ensure that control is maintained throughout the year.

The management and staff should be congratulated for the result which has exceeded all expectations.

Peter Hughes
Treasurer



Building Works Report

The past year has been a remarkable chapter in the Conservatorium's story of recovery and renewal. Following our swift return to refurbished and flood-resilient teaching spaces after the 2022 flood, we embarked on the largest program of capital works in our history.

This ambitious program has been proudly supported by the NSW Government, with 4.8 million dollars in Create NSW's Community Local Infrastructure Recovery Package and Creative Capital funding. These funds have enabled us to move beyond immediate recovery into long-term resilience, ensuring that the Conservatorium remains a cultural cornerstone for the Northern Rivers.

Works officially began in November 2024, led by Project Manager Richard Mason and delivered by a host of local building contractors including Bennett Constructions. From the earliest days of the Fire Upgrade, scaffolding and site establishment through to the major milestones of roof replacement, solar and battery storage installation, and concert room refurbishment, the project has been a careful balance of heritage restoration and modern resilience.

A key achievement has been the construction of a new service lift well. Already this year, it has improved accessibility and efficiency, giving our ensembles, including the Northern Rivers Youth Orchestra, better movement of equipment and instruments. Just as importantly, in any future flood events, the lift will allow quick response and safe removal of assets, reducing the risk of loss and helping ensure the continuity of our programs.

Upgrading the building's air conditioning system provided genuine improvements, including a more efficient system mounted in a far more serviceable and central location on top of the new goods lift shaft. This position, well out of flood height, allows the old condenser units to be removed from the face of the building and away from risk.



Approvals for the works took time, but throughout the process Lismore Council was constructive and supportive. The weather added its own challenges, with long stretches of rain and tricky ground conditions to work through. Yet one of the most rewarding aspects has been keeping the Conservatorium operational throughout. While working around rehearsals and lessons was sometimes a challenge, it has also been a highlight, showing the adaptability of staff, students, and contractors as the music never stopped.

Another highlight of the year was the re-creation of the Conservatorium's bell tower dome. First machined by local business Sidney and Hacking in 1903, the dome was remade by the very same business in 2025, more than 120 years later. Watching the new dome craned into place was both a moving tribute to our history and a proud symbol of continuity, resilience, and community skill.

As the project enters its final stages, attention is turning to completing structural works, including underpinning and wall anchors. Concert room upgrades will be finalised with new seating, joinery, and acoustic improvements. Landscaping and external works will restore the grounds and create welcoming outdoor spaces. Final refinements across all floors will ensure safe, resilient, and inspiring facilities for our community.

"The feedback from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. People deeply appreciate the care that has gone into restoring such a treasured building and are excited about what these renewed spaces will mean for music and culture in the Northern Rivers."

Anita Bellman
Executive Director



By the end of 2025, the Conservatorium will emerge from this once-in-a-generation project with facilities that honour our heritage and provide a renewed home for music. From students and teachers to our wider community, everyone will benefit from these transformed spaces.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the NSW Government, Create NSW, Project Manager Richard Mason, Designers Richard Stone and Peter Lucena, the team at Bennett Constructions, Sidney and Hacking, and the many contractors, consultants, staff, Board members, and community supporters whose collective skill and dedication have made this restoration and resilience project possible.



Executive Director's Report

Our grand old dame, our beautiful heritage building that sits proudly on Bundjalung Country in the heart of the Lismore CBD, has been the focus of the past year. With \$4.8 million worth of tender loving care made possible by funding obtained through Create NSW, she has received the attention and respect she deserves. A home of learning, creativity, and community since 1902, thousands of students and teachers have walked through her doors, discovering new talents and skills that have enriched their lives and the life of our vibrant region. The extensive reclamation and resilience works undertaken this year will ensure that the Conservatorium remains a creative hub for many years to come.

In the midst of this busyness, the music has never stopped. Our dedicated teachers and passionate students have kept the spirit of the Conservatorium alive, with generosity, creativity, and drive. Programs and performances have continued to flourish, a reminder that while our building is central, it is people who breathe life into it.

This year also marked the proud launch of our First Nations Music Program under the leadership of acclaimed Bundjalung artist Blake Rhodes. This important initiative brings distinctive voices to the fore and strengthens our place as a cultural leader in the Northern Rivers.

Professional growth has also been a theme. A group of our teachers attended the Association of NSW Pedagogy Conference at the Clarence Valley Conservatorium of Music in Grafton, joining colleagues from across the state's 17 Regional Conservatoriums.

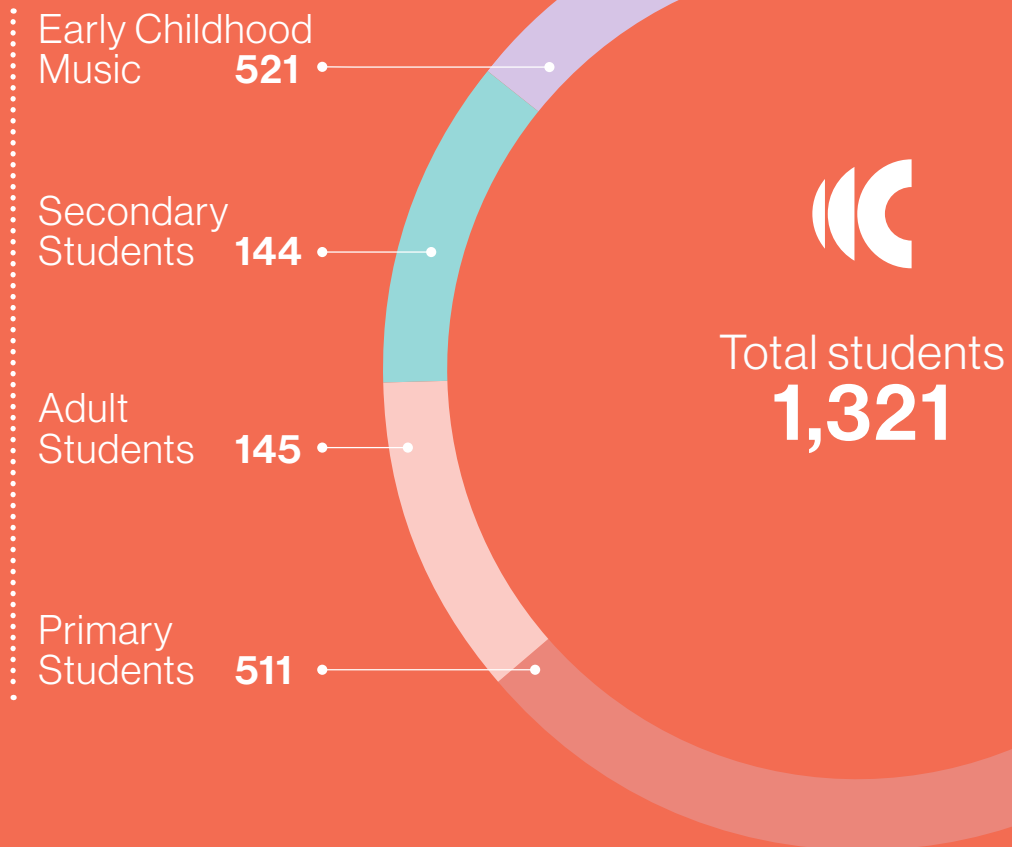
While each Conservatorium serves its own community, we are part of a much larger movement in regional music education.

Of course, challenges remain. The ongoing high cost of insurance since the 2022 flood continues to place pressure on our operations. The Board and Management will be prioritising a sustainable solution, while also focusing on the expansion of our sponsorship and philanthropy program to secure long-term stability.

As always, my deepest thanks go to our wonderful Conservatorium community. To our teachers, staff, students, and families - thank you for the passion and commitment you bring. To our team at the Department of Education Conservatoriums Program, and to the NSW Government through the Regional Conservatoriums Grant Program, we are grateful for your steadfast support. And to our wise and dedicated Board of Directors, your guidance ensures the Conservatorium continues to thrive.

Together, we look ahead with confidence in the Conservatorium's resilience and optimism for the opportunities yet to come.

Anita Bellman
Executive Director



Events & audiences

Performances

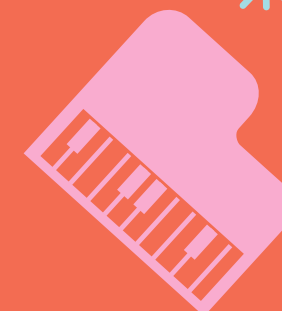
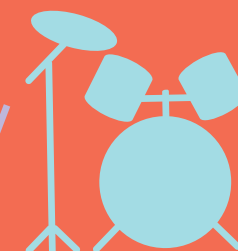
49

Audience numbers

20,492

Workshops & Masterclasses

7



Partner Schools

Preschools

12

Schools

14



Our People

Teachers

25

Admin

7

Board

8

Our Music Programs



Each term, the Northern Rivers Conservatorium delivers music education and performance opportunities to people of all ages and abilities. From preschoolers just beginning their journey to older adults in their 80s who continue to find joy in learning. Participation numbers have continued to grow, reflecting the community's strong appetite for music and the value of accessible programs that welcome everyone.



Scholarship Program

This year the Conservatorium held its second annual Scholarship Program, designed to recognise and support exceptional musical talent among our students. With the generous backing of The Harmony Fund and The Maria Hogan Fund, recipients were awarded complimentary tuition across a range of instruments. The program provides not only financial support but also encouragement for students to strive for excellence.

The Scholarship Concert was a special evening. The hall was filled with proud parents, friends, and guests including long-time supporter Vicki Brooke from The Harmony Fund and members of Maria Hogan's family. For many students it was their first time performing to a large audience, and the atmosphere was one of both celebration and inspiration.



“The Conservatorium’s Community Music program continues to provide rich opportunities for learning, growth, and celebration.”

Community Music

The Conservatorium’s Community Music program continues to thrive, offering weekly one-on-one lessons alongside opportunities to join ensembles. Demand remains consistently high, with available spots filling quickly each term. The start of 2025 brought a wave of new enrolments, adding to the program’s rich mix of ages, skill levels, and musical interests.

Students worked towards a range of milestones throughout the year; from AMEB exams and Scholarship auditions to Twilight Concerts and personal goals, supported every step of the way by our dedicated tutors.

Our ensembles also had a strong year. The Youth Jazz Orchestra (YJO) performed regularly, gaining momentum with each concert. Their end-of-year rooftop performance in Lismore drew a large and diverse audience, sending music drifting through the streets and marking a joyful close to the year. The concert also symbolised transition, as graduating members passed the baton to younger players stepping up into the senior ensemble.

With strong community support and growing participation, the program remains a cornerstone of cultural life in the Northern Rivers.

Kellie Eden
Organisational Support Officer



Music in Schools

Big Play Day

The 2024 Big Play Day was a highlight of the Conservatorium calendar and a resounding success. Hosted by NRC, the event brought together 57 students from six partner schools, supported by four school teachers, 11 YJO Buddies, and six NRC tutors as band leaders. Families and friends enjoyed a free concert at the close of the day.

Students experienced the thrill of rehearsing and performing in a large ensemble, many for the first time. For schools, the event showcased the benefits of MIS participation, and for families it was a source of pride and delight. Feedback confirmed that Big Play Day is much more than a workshop. It is a joyful celebration of music, collaboration, and community.

IT Updates

Upgrades to NRC's IT systems, while initially challenging, have delivered lasting benefits. The MIS enrolment process is now more user-friendly, with simplified forms and clearer information. The launch of online timetables for tutors, teachers, students, and parents has improved communication and scheduling. This digital shift has contributed to stronger attendance and a smoother overall program.



“The MIS program continues to thrive, with strong engagement, expanding partnerships, and innovative solutions for delivery.”

Program Growth and Partnerships

This year saw the addition of four new tutors: Michael Alvey, Sonya Lopes, Fionn Quinlan, and Diego Zaragoza, bringing fresh expertise and energy. Two new schools joined: Nimbin Central and Mullumbimby High, expanding MIS into senior years and strengthening pathways from primary to secondary.

Smaller schools often face challenges in sustaining music programs. An innovative model, trialled this year, combines whole-class music with individual lessons, delivered by a registered teacher who is also an MIS tutor. Funded through CAPA or RFF budgets, this approach makes quality music education available to all students regardless of family finances and is proving an effective solution.

Pending Students and Capacity Challenges

At present, 81 students are pending, largely due to space, enrolment numbers, and tutor availability. Recruitment continues to be a challenge: while several interviews were conducted, many applicants did not meet NRC's standards. Multi-instrumentalists remain especially valuable for smaller schools. Secondary schools present strong opportunities for growth, though this is dependent on tutor capacity.

While tutor availability limits growth, the program's momentum and positive community impact are clear, ensuring it remains a cornerstone of music education in the Northern Rivers.

Paul Archer
School Liaison



Early Childhood Music

In January 2025, we welcomed Nora Pieterse as our new Early Childhood Music teacher. Nora brings many years of experience as both a Preschool and Primary School teacher, as well as an Orff Level 1 music qualification. She is a strong advocate for music education and has already proven to be a dedicated and enthusiastic member of the team. Her presence has allowed us to expand the reach of ECM across the region.

Little Sprouts and Seedlings

Our Tuesday Little Sprouts and Seedlings classes, run by Ngyrie, have continued to run strongly throughout the year. It is heartening to see younger siblings of past students joining the classes, showing families' commitment to keeping music in their children's lives. Currently, there are 10 students in Little Sprouts and 5 in Seedlings. The small group sizes provide opportunities for individual attention and have created nurturing environments where children can grow musically at their own pace.

Music in Preschools

With Nora joining the program in Term 1, classes at Dunoon and The Channon Preschools were able to resume. She has also been teaching at Lismore, Coraki, Alstonville, and Me and My House Day Care Centre. Ngyrie has continued teaching at Bangalow, Bright Horizons (Term 1), Rainbow Day Care Centre (Term 2), as well as Lillypilly and Ocean Shores Preschools. Demand continues to grow, with a request from First Step Early Learning Centre for classes in Term 4.



In Semester 2, 2024 the Music in Preschools program reached 450 children, and in Semester 1, 2025 that number rose to 488.

“This steady increase shows the strong appetite for music education in the early years across the Northern Rivers.”

Saplings Music Classes

The Saplings course for children aged 5–7, focusing on singing, hand percussion, xylophones and an introduction to notation, ran successfully over six weeks in Term 2. Although class numbers were small, every student chose to return for Term 3, which speaks to the quality and enjoyment of the program.

Professional Development

From August 2024, professional development courses for teachers no longer need to be NESA accredited. Instead, our Early Childhood Music workshops are now “NESA recognised.” A three-hour ECM workshop will be held in September, facilitated by Emma Hart with Ngyrie assisting. This workshop reflects our ongoing commitment to supporting early childhood educators and spreading quality music practices throughout the community.

Ngyrie Starkey
Early Childhood Music Coordinator



First Nations Music Program

Since beginning in March, the First Nations Music Program has already started to develop as a key initiative of the Conservatorium, aligned with our commitment to cultural engagement and creative development in the Northern Rivers.

Achievements

The Studio Sessions initiative has been a central success, running weekly and providing a professional, culturally safe space for artists to record and receive mentorship. These sessions have supported numerous emerging musicians, including Bundjalung artist Zac Paden, with whom multiple high-quality tracks have been recorded as part of the Blak Moon Society project. His work reflects the program's ability to empower artists to share their stories and inspire others in the community.

Community Engagement

A key focus over the past six months has been building stronger engagement with the broader Northern Rivers community. The program has delivered workshops and mentorship opportunities while developing partnerships with local schools, cultural organisations, and networks. This outreach has increased visibility, encouraged inclusive participation, and positioned the Conservatorium as a hub for First Nations creativity and collaboration.



Future Direction

Looking ahead, the program aims to expand its reach through public showcases, bootcamps, and masterclasses, offering participants greater opportunities to present their work and build professional portfolios. With ongoing support, the program will continue to grow its impact, contributing to cultural resilience, community pride, and creative excellence across the region.

Summary

In summary, the First Nations Music Program has made significant progress since its launch in March, laying a strong foundation through Studio Sessions, mentorship, and community engagement. The program is building momentum, demonstrating tangible outcomes for artists, and positioning itself as a vital cultural initiative for both the Conservatorium and the broader Northern Rivers community.

Blake Rhodes

First Nations Music Program



Events

Stepping into this role at the start of 2025 has been an exciting and rewarding new adventure. From large-scale events to intimate workshops, our programs have continued to thrive; fostering creativity, collaboration, and musical excellence across all age groups and experience levels.

Our Twilight Concerts remain a key part of student development, giving performers of all skill levels a regular chance to share their progress with friends and family in a supportive setting. The 2024 AMEB exams, once again held on-site, provided students with vital opportunities to set goals, perform under pressure, and receive valuable feedback.

In July 2024, the Northern Rivers Youth Orchestra (NRYO) hosted its annual three-day workshop, ending with a powerful concert at SCU's Whitebrook Theatre. Under the skilled direction of David O'Meara, the 60+ piece orchestra delivered a memorable performance that celebrated both musical achievement and David's final year as Musical Director. We were excited to welcome back the collaboration with the Sydney Conservatorium through our 'Buddy' program, where selected students travel up to assist with the orchestra.

The 2024 Big Play Day was another standout success. This special event brought together a diverse group of young musicians from our Music in Schools Program, where they were joined by members of the Youth Jazz Orchestra. It's always a powerful reminder of how impactful early exposure to ensemble playing can be.



“We remain committed to nurturing the next generation of musicians, celebrating artistic excellence, and creating spaces where music can connect, uplift, and inspire.”

Masterclasses and visits from guest artists added something really special to our calendar. One highlight was a workshop with acclaimed pianist Alex Raineri, who worked closely with four of our top piano students - a rare and valuable experience for these young musicians. The Women in Harmony Workshop, led by long-time vocal teacher Imogen Wolf, also saw strong growth this year, welcoming more participants than ever and continuing to inspire and uplift female singers from across our community.

Audiences were captivated by the electrifying performance from renowned jazz vocalist Emma Pask, who graced our newly refurbished concert room stage. She was joined by NRC alumnus Charlie Kennedy-Beaumont, demonstrating the powerful connections between past and present students and showing younger performers what's possible through dedication and passion.

None of this would be possible without the collective effort of our incredible community. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the students, staff, arts partners, families, and sponsors who continue to contribute to our shared success. Your support has a profound impact, not just on individual musicians, but on the cultural life of our entire region.

Kellie Eden
Organisational Support Officer



Vision

For the love of music.



Role

Providing quality music education and performance experiences for all.



Values

INCLUSIVE	A spirit of inclusion for all our community
INTEGRITY	In all that we do and say
COLLABORATION	We serve our community and collaborate with the local, wider national and global community of musicians
QUALITY	We provide quality music education and performance opportunities
OPTIMISM	We seek out the best in our students & staff and embrace possibilities and opportunities

Thank you to our funders, partners, sponsors and friends

Create NSW
 NSW Department of Education
 Sydney Conservatorium
 Southern Cross University
 Arts Northern Rivers
 NORPA
 Lightn Up Lismore Lantern Parade
 Lismore Regional Gallery
 Lismore Regional Library
 Lismore City Council
 North Coast National
 Lismore Jazz Club
 Association of NSW Regional
 Conservatoriums
 Harmony Fund
 Family of Maria Hogan
 Family of Mollie McDermott
 Musica Viva
 Fred Cole Piano tuner
 AMEB
 Biggsounds Productions
 Supercurious
 Studio Troppo
 Photography by Natsky
 Complete IT Management and Support

Music Monitor
 Rest Media
 Dollars Making Sense
 Evergreen Accounting & Advisory
 Y People
 Bennett Constructions and associated
 contractors
 Richard Mason Construction Projects
 Lucena Engineers P/L
 Richard Stone Design
 Kate Gahan
 CAV
 Northern Rivers Locksmiths
 O'Grady's Transport & Removals
 Primal Systems
 Mick Sawtell Electrical
 Cleaning Neways
 Northern Rivers Plant Hire
 Lismore Produce Market
 Phillip Channels
 Allied Pest Management
 Catering by Sharon
 The Garden Plate
 WCA Chartered Accountants

Preschools

Bangalow Community Children's Centre
 Coraki Preschool
 Lillypilly Brunswick Heads
 Lismore Preschool
 Alstonville Community Preschool
 Me and My House Childcare Centre Lismore
 Ocean Shores Preschool
 The Channon Children's Centre
 Bright Horizons, Tintenbar
 Dunoon Preschool
 Rainbow Children's Centre

Schools

Bangalow Public School
 Brunswick Heads Primary School
 Byron Community Primary School
 Clunes Public School
 Dunoon Public School
 Eureka Public School
 Kyogle Public School
 Modanville Public School
 Mullumbimby Public School
 Mullumbimby High School
 Nimbin Central School
 Upper Coopers Creek Public School
 Wyrallah Rd Public School
 Corndale Public School



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