

## Women Who Shape Cities: Alice Thompson

[00:00:00] **Sara Stace:** Hi everyone. I'm Sara Stace, Director of Cities and National Executive of Planning and Places at WSP. Today, I'm joining you from the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation in Sydney and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging. This podcast is the second in our mini-series on Women Who Shape Cities, where we are interviewing women in senior executive and government roles who have shaped, and continue to shape, our cities across Australia and New Zealand.

Today, we are interviewing Alice Thompson, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Committee for the Hunter. Alice, thank you for joining us today.

[00:00:45] **Alice Thompson:** Hi Sara, thank you for having me on here today.

[00:00:47] **Sara Stace:** Alice has a career spanning the public and private sectors, including as the national lead on cities and regions at KPMG. She's known as a leader in public policy, infrastructure, industry development and attraction, urban planning, and regional development. Throughout her career, Alice has championed new approaches to regional development. As senior advisor on cities and infrastructure for the former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, she brokered the Western Sydney City Deal involving eight councils in partnership with the Australian Government and New South Wales Government.

Alice, this is around your two-year anniversary as the CEO of the Committee for the Hunter, after you commenced as the inaugural CEO in 2020. Can you tell us about the committee and your role?

[00:01:34] **Alice Thompson:** Yes, I can. So, the Committee for the Hunter, Sara, you would be familiar with the committee's four model, when we're working in cities, there's the Committee for Sydney, there's Committee for Melbourne. So, the community and some of the regional leaders and businesses got together were looking at that and felt that there was a gap or a need in the Hunter that had that unified voice to be talking louder and more directly around regional priorities, and what we need from our partners, particularly talking to state and federal government. We have a really diverse group of leaders who have come together, really with a shared interest in the social and economic development of the region for future prosperity. So, it was really great to be hired and to come in as the first CEO, because I get to take all of that great ambition and that strong sense of purpose and values and run it out and show what that could look like.

So, we're two years into the model now, we've grown our membership, we've grown our impact. We've learnt who we are relative to others, and we're having some advocacy wins as well, which means that we can do what we do, bigger. So, a really key example of that would be around getting support for the extension of the runway.

So, when you're looking at regional development, clearly your key assets, the goal that you have there, are your international gateways. It's the port and it's the airport. We happen to

have both there. So, there's been lobbying essentially to have that runway extended and also for funding for the terminal. We were able to provide a platform where we could bring different players in to put a little bit more sophisticated advocacy around how we present that project and what it means to the region and why it's a priority and get it to the right places, and we succeeded. So the federal government had made around a 50 million dollar investment in that last year.

And that was a really key win. It was really symbolic, because it started to show what we can achieve when we all work together, and therein lies, I think the role and the function of the committee. We do that advocacy, we do that thought leadership, but increasingly we provide that platform for collective action, for collaborative action, and it was really good to have a win.

[00:03:50] **Sara Stace:** Oh, wow. That sounds amazing. And recently you released a strategic vision for the Hunter. Can you tell us what those key directions and targets are?

[00:04:00] **Alice Thompson:** Certainly, so Newcastle, as you would all know from the media, is our coal region. We have the world's largest coal export port. We also have got coal fire generators that have pretty much underwritten the national energy market for the last couple of decades so we've been an essential part of the nation's prosperity. But when we look to the future competitiveness of the Australian economy, we know that we need to be on a low carbon trajectory.

We know that our buyers, so for example, in Germany and Japan, that they've all got very ambitious objectives and goals for Net Zero, but also for clean energy as well. So look, there is change and this region is heading into quite a large, a gradual, but a large structural adjustment. We know that we've got Liddell shutting next year. Bayswater Power Station has been brought forward to 2030, and let's just see if that holds in the current climate and operating environment and the financials around that. So I think the message is, is change is coming. It looks low carbon and Net Zero. The communities and businesses of the Hunter are affected more than most, but we also have the most to gain.

We know that our economy needs to be low carbon in order to be competitive. So we have said to project or position the Hunter, because this is all about investment attraction, right? How do we create the labour demand? And then how do you link affected workforce and affected businesses to those opportunities? It's really the fundamental task that we've got here, but we know that we need to do that low carbon as well. So we've said that we need to be positioning the Hunter as a global centre of investment in Net Zero and clean energy as well. When we talk about future prosperity, it's not just for a few, as we grow and develop that development should result in improving standards of living for people.

And so we've put perhaps a bit of controversial, but albeit a galvanising objective there to say that as we grow and develop, as we think that we should, you need to bring the socioeconomic outcomes experienced by Hunter communities on par with the Sydney Metropolitan region. Why that's important, it's a general tension in regional development, a central tenant indeed in regional development, but certainly that difference, and there are

differences across education and health and Indigenous and youth employment, you name it - housing accessibility, socioeconomic status. We think that, you know, we're only 90 kilometres north of Sydney, and it's not readily explained by us being either rural or remote or particularly lacking in resources.

So I think, you know, the most important thing in these sort of strategies is to get your thinking right, and then the structure and the absence flows. So yeah, that's a really exciting policy, it's really needed, and essentially that's the committee's go at what we think an effective structural adjustment package is and where we would like to position state and federal governments in terms of partnering with the communities and businesses of this region to get there.

[00:07:00] **Sara Stace:** Thanks Alice. That's a really comprehensive response, and I guess it shows that you are bringing together a whole lot of different experiences you've had working in different levels of government and the private sector and bringing some very strong strategic thinking to that and stakeholder engagement. So to switch it around a little bit, we're keen to hear about your professional history and how it has brought you to your current role, where you're bringing all these various threads together. We previously worked together in the major cities unit in Infrastructure Australia. Can you tell us about how you came into that role and what were the highlights for you?

[00:07:36] **Alice Thompson:** Absolutely, the major cities unit, so I'd been working before that. I'm from Canberra. So, you know, I've got the good public service lineage in me, but in that's also a sense of purpose on civil service, on public service and the important roles of government really in supporting communities and the economy and all of this, I want to be part of it.

So I started working in the Bureau of Statistics, which was very analytical, but it was also a really strong lesson in policy development that I think sometimes you actually don't get in the policy department when you're thrown in as a graduate. So I was a summer grad and essentially we were there end-to-end, so you're consulting with government, you're consulting with stakeholders saying 'what are your information needs?' and then you're developing surveys and collections, and then it's all the operations on how you gather that data, analyse it, publish it, and then communicate. So it was really fantastic, and I had a strong understanding of the policy development process of which the key lesson was; everyone jumps to the answer without actually understanding the question, and that was what you had to do in that client service role. Because everyone knew what data they wanted, but they couldn't actually say what the, you know, what the question was.

[00:08:45] **Sara Stace:** The question.

[00:08:46] **Alice Thompson:** Correct, and I think that was a pretty significant lesson and it's always a starting point in policy 101, I'd say. So I worked there for a few years, I came up to Sydney, chasing a boy as many do. That didn't work out and I'm still resentful about that situation, but it brought me to a great place in Sydney, and then I just applied to an advertisement for the major cities unit.

Clearly with hindsight, we know it was a new statutory entity. It was quite high profile, and it was quite controversial too, because essentially it was a bit of a vote of no confidence in the Department of Infrastructure and the need to pull out an independent statutory entity to start having that more long term strategic, independent view to Australia's infrastructure priorities that I don't need to remind you all are really, really expensive and prone to politics too.

So all of this was important. I came in and had an interview and I got hired on account of that data and the analytics and the evidence, and also we had a bit of a talk on the sidelines about some politics that were going on and some things that were in the news. So I got pulled into this and then, yeah, we formed pretty rapidly, a small team, didn't we Sara? It was you and myself and Daute, and I think that job is similar to the one that I'm attracted to just like I was attracted in the committee. I love a start-up that's got this very strong role and sense of purpose, but that hasn't been sketched out. You get to come into a position and work out how you might deliver that and that was really about developing Australia's urban policy, which was the first one for, since the time of year and days I think, at that stage, and also to get more fully involved in the broader infrastructure prioritisation function, you know, we set up the framework, we got all of those first kind of projects, we helped enhance that, but I remember it was really exciting. We hadn't been in the seat that long, Sara, if you remember, when the GFC hit. So we're still trying to set up the fax machine, and then all of a sudden there was something like 23 billion dollars worth of stimulus, and they were seeking our advice on what to spend.

So that opportunity of that role to be able to step in and fix that gap, and I recall that resulted in the largest investment of a federal government in public transport, a re-entry of the federal government into urban policy and planning, and it was really exciting to lead and be part of that, be working with a small team of handpicked people like yourself, who were the, you know, the smartest of the smarts, but also the most dynamic, strategic and really good to work with and good at dealing with stakeholders as well, to navigate all those challenges as they were progressively thrown at us. So it was a thrill to work in the major cities unit.

[00:11:36] **Sara Stace:** It absolutely was. It was probably, just the funnest job in the world. It was a pretty awesome time.

In 2015, you became the senior advisor on cities and infrastructure to the former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, where amongst your achievements, you established City Deals including for Western Sydney, and you also had a young family during this time, which must have been incredibly hard to juggle. Can you tell us about some of that?

[00:12:00] **Alice Thompson:** You know, as young women, that's a stage of quite rapid career acceleration and all the demands that come with that and buying homes and renovating and what our partners are doing, all of these sort of things come together. However, to have an opportunity like that, to work with someone like Malcolm Turnbull, who, his passion is really around cities and transport and urban policy and planning, his whole family indeed, getting to work with Lucy Turnbull on this.

When you see that, coming back to that purpose of, I want to make a contribution, the biggest contribution as quickly as possible, because Australia we've got to get moving. When you're faced with that opportunity and to be able to work with someone like Malcolm Turnbull and inform that and support that. You're going to grab that with both hands and you're going to push it as far as possible.

So it was a time of great reform, probably some quite subtle reform that from an external view, wouldn't be recognised as being pretty critical. But what it did serve to do was essentially change the way that the federal government considered who they are in the infrastructure and urban policy and planning landscape relative to others.

It's not just about funding state infrastructure, priorities funding it and walking away. Malcolm would refer to that as the ATM, we're no longer an ATM. It essentially was around, this is about funding national infrastructure priorities that happen to be in a place. So how do you determine a national priority from something else?

We can no longer afford to build a train or a road or a hospital indeed, without thinking of broader objectives that we have as a society, as a government, and as an economy, we need to be doing both, and I think that plays really well into a city when we started, instead of thinking about transporters A to B, we started thinking about rail's role in shaping cities.

So we did some really cool reforms, probably what I'm most proud of in that period was getting Badgerys Creek over the line after 50 years, but also the particular way that government has engaged with that, and really the steps were similar to what I've just spoken about. The first steps were saying, why are we doing this? Are we just building additional aviation capacity in the Sydney Basin? Or, are we really using this to develop an entire economy where you've got one in eight kids in Australia growing up in Western Sydney, and yet again, there's socioeconomic outcomes, their access to training and even part-time jobs and all of these things and universities was much lower.

So it was of national interest. And once you changed, like why are we doing this airport from a really functional, let's say engineering aviation view, to broader regional development then the next question was, oh, so we need local governments and we need state governments because they've got jurisdiction of these particular elements, oh, we need to work with the private sector, and that's what created the City Deal, which is essentially a contract to pull all of this together in a shared plan for growth and investment, and the fundamental principle that sits behind that, that I still whip out at any opportunity is that surely coordinating the things that entities and governments would do anyway, we're going to get better outcomes for communities for business, for the economy. So again, to be able to work with a cohort of people that you can learn from, and it just moves the whole system much, much, much more quickly, and I learned a lot from that.

I'll return to the kids thing, I know it's really hard in a national role and that's real pound of flesh, but again, the view to public service tends to outweigh it and I couldn't have done it without flexibility in my family, particularly my husband taking a step back, and doing his PhD at the same time, in looking after those kids to enable me to provide that public service

to the nation. And my parents of course were incredibly proud and I used to live in Canberra and I got to stay with my mum, which was really cute, you know, little post-it notes and dinner plates put out on the table with notes on how to take stuff out of the microwave, and, you know, it was a really great opportunity to just be there as an individual without the little kids, who do take a lot of attention. To be there as an adult and to relate to my parents in that way, and they of course, were incredibly proud and just wanted to support me.

[00:16:22] **Sara Stace:** And you were also able to take your kids sometimes and they'd look after those kids during that period as well, which I'm sure that's a valuable time with grandparents, too.

[00:16:32] **Alice Thompson:** Yeah, definitely, and even the kids were all engaged in politics. They know who Barnaby is, they knew who Malcolm and Sco-Mo, and they're all, they're asking questions. It's quite funny, you know what they pick up, but it's a whole of family effort supporting one person to be able to make a difference in a role like that.

[00:16:49] **Sara Stace:** Yeah, absolutely. So our next question is that you've worked in federal and state government, including at Department of Premier and Cabinet, the private sector at KPMG, as an independent political candidate, and now as a lead for an industry body, and I have to say, Alice, you have a better understanding of how all these bodies work together than anyone else I know. So, how do you think these bodies can work together to develop better regional and city outcomes?

[00:17:21] **Alice Thompson:** So I suppose the first one is they need to. So when we look at the modern issues that we face today, look, domestically, I know there's a lot going on in the world right now, too, that has significant implications for Australia. But we look at climate change, we look at how that impacts a place like the Hunter, and driving a structural, a deep structural adjustment of an entire 63 billion dollar economy, you know, this is really large in scale. Housing affordability, youth unemployment, these are really complex issues. We know the solutions will cross portfolios in any level of government.

It will cross levels of government, it will cross sectors, and of course, all of this working with communities because who do we do this for? You know, it comes down to people at the end of the day. So I've sought these positions, not with like a master plan, but essentially understanding the feel of what moving forward looks like, and for me, it was really curiosity, understanding that we need to gear that system. We also talk about infrastructure and precincts and particular services, for example, to help workers and businesses transition and to connect them to those opportunities. We talk about the need for skills and workforce development.

So that kind of shows the complexity and the plan, having worked at all those levels of government and indeed in government, I could come into the region and say, it's in our interest to move on this more forthrightly and quickly, we shouldn't stand around waiting for government to take the lead, and it's in our interest, so we need to be doing something together, and of course we're not passive in this as well. We can bring a lot to the table, but in order to get there quicker, I firmly believe we need to be much more distinct about what

it is that we need, who needs to be doing it and to be pushing that out rather than again, waiting for that, for that lead.

And I think it's a much more constructive conversation with government when you can sit down and say, this is important, and we know you think it's important because you've got those same shared priorities for jobs growth, for prosperity, for your climate, you know, your Net Zero targets and climate change, which totally depend on what happens in the Hunter. So we recognise that too, we're aligned and we're not sitting around. Here's what we're doing. Here's our skin in the game and our projects and our resources. Here's how you can partner with us to get there quicker and to scale it up because we certainly need to, and then saying, councils, we need you to do A and B; Feds, you're on F and T and, you know, maybe D and E, that's what we need you to do, state government.

I think the responsibility on coordination is vested in at the regional level, whether we like it or not. So to do so, we need to be far more specific around the things that we need, who needs to be doing what, and to be really pushing our advocacy and getting all of those entities to play those particular roles in that integrated plan for growth of which we know will get better outcomes.

[00:20:21] **Sara Stace:** Absolutely. And so this shows that you are very much a changemaker and have a strong vision of where you are able to influence others. How do you influence that change? What are your special Alice ingredients?

[00:20:33] **Alice Thompson:** Mm-hmm. I think, so look, it's actually really, it's really difficult. I would say the Hunter is one of the, having always worked in the centre so I was always across stakeholders and various kind of interests. You're always kind of grinding a little bit through that. I'd say the stakeholder landscape is even more complex in a place like the Hunter, but it's also the most important place to actually, to actually get it right. I suppose, when you come in with a bit of a reformist attitude, your view is looking at what's happening, and I suppose in this role, I bring a level of expertise and experience that kind of, I'm already there. I didn't come into this job saying, oh, I've got to find out what the priorities are and work out what we do, I knew exactly what we needed to bloody do. It was just about finding out who did what and how we could get moving forward on all of that. But when you come into a place, be it a government organisation or a region, and you say, things need to be different. What is read, and it actually is true, is what you're saying is it's not good enough. And people have ownership, you know, of these things. So I think you're automatically setting yourself up for a bit of a, you know, it almost causes a bit of offence and a bit of worry in saying we can do things better.

I, what I've found really important in that is intent. There's always conflict because you're dealing with a whole range of stakeholders and they've all got their own distinct interests. Where I've found it worked is intent and trust. If you can communicate that directly with people that, we all want the right things, it's not about ego. It's really, my heart's in the right place. I really want to get there. I think it's really important to the region, it's in the region's interest. How can we, how can we get that together? So I find that that kind of intent, understanding of that intent both ways and that trust and that sense of purpose gives you a

bit of fat to get through the inevitable conflict that you do confront sitting in the centre, trying to pull all of these entities and views together in something much more coherently.

I suppose the other part is just a base sense of indignity and urgency. So we do need to get moving, you know, you talk about Australia being the lucky country. I sit at home with a German and I just, you know, that there's no too hard basket for the Germans. They just don't understand why we're not moving on these things. So I think there's just that indignity of thinking things can be better. Also, isn't it more fun and more exciting if we talk about a future for the Hunter region, where you say, yeah, not only are we, you know, not going to lose any jobs, but we're going to be the global centre for Net Zero and clean energy, and that if you want to be part of the clean energy economy as we know many, many young people do, and they want to work with purpose on something to say; 'you come here'. It means something in the Hunter, if you want to study climate change and Net Zero and clean energy technology, you come to the Hunter and you do it.

If you want to catch a hydrogen bus, if you want to live your life with purpose in either a six-star building as an employer, or, you know, in the kind of home. If you want to be a researcher in it, you come to a place like the Hunter. So that's the starting point in all of this, is raising ambitions, which does have that sting. It says it's not enough, but also trying to generate that shared sense of purpose and that personal excitement and attachment to that goal and wanting to be part of it and wanting to be part of a really dynamic, creative group of similar minded people to overcome all the challenges that inevitably arise in this landscape and the conflict that comes between what people want.

[00:24:20] **Sara Stace:** Wow. That's some pretty, pretty amazing threads that you're pulling together into all of that, and so we've got a final question for you, which is that our listeners on this podcast include a wide range of professionals interested in cities and places, they include land use and urban planners, transport planners, engineers, architects, and policy makers. Do you have any advice, particularly for women or men who might be early or mid-career who want a more influential role in shaping our cities and regions?

[00:24:54] **Alice Thompson:** So I feel like I've had a bit of an accidental career. Like, you know, every foot's moving in the same direction, but there wasn't sort of a grand plan put into the whole thing. Quite early in university doing urban ecology and then starting to think about cities as systems and then realising, oh my goodness, the whole world is urbanising. That's what we need to crack in order to be sustainable and prosperous, and then that started a line of inquiry. Those line of inquiries were multiple because in order to answer that question, so I studied a whole range of, there wasn't a sustainability degree back then. So I studied earth science and atmospheric science.

I studied the environmental policy, I did anthropology, I did archaeology, did human biology and evolution, because that's all about understanding and gearing the system better. So I think given that what happens in cities, is it is that confluence of complexity, everything relates to everything. That's what made it so difficult, I think, in our early days in the major cities unit, you might remember some of those lectures from John Austin, but what city about it? Rather than whole of economy.



[00:25:59] **Sara Stace:** Why is this not a regional Australia problem or a whole of economy problem?

[00:26:03] **Alice Thompson:** Correct. That's right. And yet we know that place, again, like I talked about the larger geography versus small, it takes a different look at it, different solutions arise, and it's complimentary to that whole of economy. You know, we need to be doing both. So I would say probably a couple of things. When you're working in cities, you kind of need to be, what is it a Jack of all trades and a master of none? So I think an understanding, because you are an integrator in these roles as a planner, you're working across social environment, economic, so the more that you understand, the more that you can bring into that picture. It's those broader networks as well, because sort of sitting in the centre, you need to be able to gear the whole thing, but you still need to tap into that expert advice, but you don't have the ability to, all the time to be able to do that.

So it's really about building those relationships and making sure that you've got that network that you can tap down to ask those questions, because you do want to get it right. You want to be an expert in what you're doing as well. So having that network, definitely. So you are able to do that integration and you have to bring that depth. You got to have the breadth, but you got to have the depth. So build your network. There's a big community out there. You know, you've got landscape architects and the engineers, we're all part of the same problem. There is expertise in there, but it's your ability to build that and harness it. I would say personally, I made some relationships with, who really shared that sense of purpose and saw something in me as when they're reaching the end of their careers and wanting to keep that flame alive and really wanting to pass that on to the younger generation. I was privy to being one of those people that I had the arms wrapped around me, quite significant and esteemed experts and individuals, who did nothing but support me, and it's really weird for me to be sitting here today with the other people that you are talking to in this, because I've always felt myself as little, like, you know, as a learner, now I'm hitting middle age. Yeah, maybe I am an expert, you know, it sort of seems funny to say, but it's also flipping to the other side and then saying, alright, now it's my role at this stage in my career to be supporting the generation of younger people to carry on this work, to take it into increasing levels of technicality and complexity, which is what it involves. So we formed a youth committee in the Committee for the Hunter. One to make sure that we are talking about the issues important to them.

When we're building a future, who are we doing this for? It's young people, but it also recognises the important role of my leadership at this stage in my career and all the CEOs that sit around that table, and I think if it's not our job to support these young kids, then whose is it and surely with all of our capacity, capability, expertise, resources, surely we can make a dent in it and understanding that young people are probably our most, well, they are our most important resource. When you look at things like that jobs target, and the ambitious vision that we've got a place, for a place like the Hunter, if not Australia. We need to support them. We need to get them there quicker, and I certainly don't believe in this kind of pyramid scheme and hard yards that I did it that you need to be able, you need to be demonstrating that, too. No, we've got to get there much quicker.

[00:29:25] **Sara Stace:** Yeah, absolutely. In fact, this morning I was on a call with staff in WSP across Australia and New Zealand, we were talking about exactly that, what's the role of mentorship in helping young professionals build up their career capacity and also getting guidance from those more experienced people, whether they're in the organisation or beyond.

[00:29:43] **Alice Thompson:** That's right.

[00:29:44] **Sara Stace:** I think we'll wrap up from there. Thank you so much for joining me and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to hear from Alice Thompson, one of our women who shapes cities. If you are interested in the work that we are doing, please get in touch. Our links are in the podcast show notes and keep an eye out for more of these Women Who Shape Cities podcasts in the future.

Thank you, Alice.

[00:30:08] **Alice Thompson:** Thank you for the platform, Sara, to talk about something I'm most passionate about.

[00:30:12] **Outro:** We hope you enjoyed this episode of People And Place. To hear more, find us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. You can also find us on LinkedIn and Facebook at WSP in Australia and on Instagram and Twitter at WSP\_Australia.