

Newsletter

February 2026

198



DISCOVER
JAPAN
Welcome to
Tomakomai
City

Commemorative Events for the 45th Anniversary of the Sister City Relationship between Tomakomai City and Napier City

On 20 November 2025, a cultural welcome ceremony and gala dinner party were held to mark the 45th anniversary of the sister-city relationship between Tomakomai City, Hokkaido, Japan, and Napier City, New Zealand.

The official visit program is conducted every five years; however, the 40th-anniversary program was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this visit marked the first occasion in ten years that a delegation from Tomakomai travelled to Napier.

The primary objectives of this visit were to promote cultural exchange between the Māori people of New Zealand and the Ainu people of Hokkaido, as well as encourage economic exchange amongst business stakeholders, with the aim of rebuilding connections that have weakened over time.

C O N T E N T

- ★ Discover Japan
- ★ CLAIR Sydney January Activity Report
- ★ March’s Event
- ★ 2026 CLAIR Forum
- ★ News from CLAIR Sydney
- ★ From Executive Director

Welcome to Tomakomai City



Cultural Welcome Ceremony

At 9:00 a.m. on 20 November, the Tomakomai delegation participated in a pōwhiri, a traditional Māori welcoming ceremony, at Waiohiki Marae.

Upon arrival at the venue, the delegation was welcomed by the Mayor of Napier, Richard McGrath, who exchanged greetings and handshakes with Mayor Kanazawa of Tomakomai and other members of the delegation. During the ceremony, Māori representatives from the marae and local children, performed a haka, followed by formal speeches known as whaikōrero, delivered in te reo Māori.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, participants exchanged hongi, a traditional greeting involving the gentle touching of noses, along with hugs, creating a warm and friendly atmosphere that reflected mutual respect and openness.

Following the ceremony, an introduction to Māori culture and history was provided by representatives of Napier, offering the Tomakomai delegation a valuable opportunity to deepen their understanding of local cultural traditions.

Gala Dinner Party



The commemorative ceremony was attended by the Tomakomai delegation, consisting mainly of local government representatives, Ainu-related organisations, and business leaders, alongside members of the Napier City Council. Representatives from Pan Pac Forest Products Ltd (a joint venture between Oji Paper and a local timber company in Napier, which marked the beginning of this exchange), Oji Holdings Corporation, the Embassy of Japan in New Zealand and the CLAIR Sydney office were also in attendance.

The program included speeches by representatives from both cities, an exchange of commemorative gifts, and cultural performances by members of the Ainu community, making the event both meaningful and diverse in content.

During the gift exchange, Napier City presented Tomakomai City with a wall hanging made from native New Zealand plants, while Tomakomai City presented Napier City with a tapestry featuring traditional Ainu motifs.

In his address, the Mayor of Tomakomai expressed a strong desire to further develop exchanges between the two cities in preparation for the 50th anniversary in five years' time. He also conveyed expectations were expressed for expanded cooperation across a range of fields, including cultural, economic, and educational exchanges.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, all participants from Japan performed the song Ue o Muite Arukō (internationally known as Sukiyaki). The performance fostered a strong sense of unity and mutual respect, leaving the venue filled with an atmosphere of cultural appreciation and shared goodwill.

Tomakomai City and Napier City plan to continue regular communication in order to further strengthen their relationship. In addition to online interactions, the resumption of youth-focused exchanges, such as student exchange programs, is currently under consideration. The continued development of exchange between the two cities is highly anticipated.



CLAIR Sydney January Activity Report

Supporting the Tokyo Metropolitan Government

On Tuesday, 20 January, staff members from the Local Administration Division, Bureau of General Affairs, Tokyo Metropolitan Government, visited the CLAIR Sydney office with an accompanying interpreter. The visit formed part of a study tour examining advanced case studies in regional branding. Their objectives included investigating tourism initiatives that make use of natural resources, as well as learning about the characteristics of local governments in New South Wales and examples of collaboration between the state and local governments.



Prior to their arrival in Australia, the CLAIR Sydney office conducted an online briefing to provide an overview of the local governments they planned to visit and relevant policies and initiatives. During their visit to our office, we outlined the differences in administrative structures between Japan and Australia, as well as the local context. We hope this information will be useful as they consider future approaches to collaboration between Tokyo and other local governments, as well as the development of related policies and initiatives.

CLAIR Sydney supports a wide range of activities by Japanese local governments in Australia and New Zealand, including policy research and case studies. If you require support for such activities, please feel free to contact us.



Mark Your Calendar: March's Event

Join us at the upcoming event!

We'd love to see you at the CLAIR booth—please drop by if you're around!

- **Perth Japan Festival 2026**

When: 14 March 2026, 11:00-20:00

Where: The Langley Park
(103 Birdiya Dr, Perth WA 6000)

Details: <https://www.perthjapanfestival.com/>

At this event, we'll showcase the unique appeal of various Japanese municipalities and provide brochures for attendees to take home with them.

For more details, visit our Facebook page!
(We'll post updates about a week before each event.)



← Follow us on our CLAIR Sydney [Facebook](#) page!



News from CLAIR Sydney

School Exchange Opportunities

To support cultural exchange between schools in Japan and Australia/New Zealand, CLAIR Sydney has a dedicated page on our website that lists schools in Japan that are interested in initiating cultural exchange with schools in Australia/New Zealand. Please click on the link or scan the QR code below for more information on the respective schools.

Should you be interested in a particular school, please get in touch with them!



[Schools interested in exchange opportunities - CLAIR Sydney \(jlgc.org.au\)](https://www.jlgc.org.au)



Announcement: 2026 CLAIR Forum

CLAIR Sydney and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Institute for Public Policy and Governance (IPPG) cordially invite you to the 2026 CLAIR Forum.

This year's theme is 'Sustainable & Thriving Communities'.

The 2026 CLAIR Forum will be held in person and livestreamed via Zoom.

Register from the link below: (Select 'Get Tickets' for both the in-person and online options)

<https://events.humanitix.com/clair-forum-2026-sustainable-and-thriving-communities>

Participation is free! More information below:

Upcoming Event

Free Event

2026 CLAIR Forum

Theme

Sustainable & Thriving Communities

The CLAIR Forum is an annual half-day seminar co-hosted by CLAIR Sydney and the Institute for Public Policy and Governance (IPPG) at UTS. Japan, Australia, and New Zealand face shared challenges, as population growth concentrates in major cities while regional and rural areas experience decline. This Forum will showcase practical initiatives by local governments in Japan and Australia and provide a platform for exchanging views on building sustainable and thriving communities.

- ✓ **Date and Time:**
Wednesday, 4 March 2026
2:00pm to 5:00pm (AEST)
- ✓ **Venue:**
Hybrid Format: On-site & Zoom
University of Technology Sydney, Building 1,
Level 22, Room 10
Address: 15 Broadway, Ultimo, NSW 2007
- ✓ **Speakers:** (This forum will be conducted entirely in English.)
3 Assistant Directors from CLAIR Sydney
2 speakers from local governments in Australia

Register via the link to see full details and secure your spot!
(Select 'Get Tickets' for both the in-person and online options)
<https://events.humanitix.com/clair-forum-2026-sustainable-and-thriving-communities>



 **UTS** Institute for Public Policy and Governance

 **CLAIR**
Japan & Local Government Centre
UTS Sydney

From the Executive Director

2026: Koshogatsu Events – Traditional Winter Events in Akita, Japan

Many people may be familiar with the Japanese word and tradition of *Shogatsu*, meaning New Year. However, fewer are likely to have heard of *Koshogatsu*, which is celebrated at the end of the new year. In Akita Prefecture, various traditional Koshogatsu events are held every February. In this article, I would like to introduce some of Akita's unique winter traditions.

Note: February is summer in Australia and New Zealand, but it is winter in Japan as it is in the Northern Hemisphere.

What is Shogatsu?

In Japan, the period beginning on 1 January is called Shogatsu, a time when families and relatives gather in their hometowns to celebrate the New Year and reconnect with one another. In particular, the first three days of January are designated holidays for government offices and most companies.

What are Koshogatsu and Koshogatsu events?

Today, Japan uses the Gregorian calendar like most countries, but until about 150 years ago (in 1872), the lunar calendar was in use. In that calendar, the first full moon of the year, which occurred after Shogatsu (late January to mid-February in today's calendar), was called Koshogatsu. Various Koshogatsu events were held to mark the conclusion of the New Year celebrations. These Koshogatsu events carry multiple meanings, including bidding farewell to the deities welcomed during Shogatsu, praying for a good harvest before spring farming begins, wishing for health and safety, and strengthening community ties by participating together. After Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar, many regions began holding Koshogatsu events around 15 January. However, in many parts of Akita, these events are still held in mid-February according to the old lunar calendar, preserving the traditional timing.

Koshogatsu Events in Akita

In snowy Akita in February, various Koshogatsu events take place.

◆Kamihinokinai Paper Balloon Festival

In Kamihinokinai, Semboku City, giant paper balloons decorated with warrior paintings and portraits of beautiful women are lit and released into the winter night sky on 10 February each year. Each balloon carries wishes for health, family safety, and a bountiful harvest. The sight of more than 50 balloons gently rising into the dark winter sky is breathtaking and truly beyond words.



A giant paper balloon decorated with a portrait of a beautiful woman



A giant paper balloon gently rising into the night sky

◆Kariwano Giant Tug-of-War

In Kariwano, Daisen City, one of the largest tug-of-war events in Japan is held every year on 10 February. A massive rope, about 80 cm in diameter, 200 meters long, and weighing roughly 20 tonnes, is pulled by thousands of participants divided into two teams: the Upper Town and Lower Town. With a history of over 500 years, the event is rooted in a tradition that predicts the year's fortunes: if the Upper Town wins, rice prices will rise, and if the Lower Town wins, the harvest will be abundant. Visitors are welcome to join in and experience the excitement firsthand.



◆Kamakura (Yokote Snow Festival)

In Yokote City, the Snow Festival called *kamakura* is held every mid-February (13-14 February in 2026). With a history of about 450 years, dome-shaped snow huts called *kamakura* are built, and inside, water deities are enshrined to pray for family safety, business prosperity, and a bountiful harvest. Local children welcome visitors inside the huts with a sweet rice drink (amazake) and rice cakes (mochi). The softly illuminated kamakura scattered across the snowy landscape at night create a truly enchanting scene.



Inside a kamakura



A Kamakura in front of Yokote Castle

◆Namahage Sedo Festival

In Oga City, the Namahage Sedo Festival is held on the second Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of February. Originating from a Shinto ritual said to date back over 900 years, the sight of *Namahage* demons charging down the snowy mountain with torches is both thrilling and powerful. The Oga's Namahage tradition involves young men dressing as deity-like ogres on New Year's Eve, visiting homes to ward off misfortune and admonish laziness. This folkloric event was designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2018.



Namahage demons



Namahage demons running down a snowy mountain

◆Yuzawa Inukko Dog Festival

In Yuzawa City, the Inukko Dog Festival is held on the second Saturday and Sunday of February and has a history of about 400 years. The festival began with the custom of placing small dog figurines made of rice flour at home entrances and windows as charms to ward off theft. Today, the venue is lined with adorable dog-shaped snow sculptures, and as dusk falls, the snow shrines glow softly with candle lights. In recent years, a blessing ceremony for pet dogs has also been added, making the festival especially popular among dog lovers.



Conclusion

Akita's Koshogatsu traditions have long been cherished as important events through which people living in snowy regions pray for a bountiful harvest and good health while strengthening community bonds. The flickering flames and glowing lights against the snowy landscape, along with beautiful snow structures such as kamakura, provide visitors with unforgettable experiences and the full charm of winter travel. Why not immerse yourself in the unique blend of culture and nature that Akita has to offer?