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TOWNSVILLE AND NORTH WEST QLD

BUSINESS PLAN 2025-26



An Australian Government Initiative



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Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland

2025-2026 ANNUAL BUSINESS PLAN AND BUDGET

Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland acknowledges First Nations peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Australia. We respect and celebrate the inherent strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their commitment to the land, waters and their communities. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Chair's Foreword

As Chair of Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland (RDA TNWQ), I am proud to present our Business Plan for 2025–26. This plan outlines our priorities for the year ahead, shaped by strong regional partnerships, stakeholder insights and regional data, and a shared commitment to long-term outcomes.

Our region spans more than 660,000 square kilometres across 14 local government areas. It brings together distinct but interconnected economies, from resource-rich areas in the North West to growing defence, agriculture and service hubs along the coast. With more than \$29 billion in major projects planned or underway, including the transformative CopperString 2032 transmission project and large-scale renewable energy investments, Townsville and North West Queensland is playing a central role in Australia's energy and industry transformation.

RDA TNWQ has an important role in this transition. We connect government, industry and communities to ensure that investment translates into practical outcomes: local jobs, improved services, stronger supply chains and greater regional resilience.

Over the past year, our organisation has undergone a period of leadership change. I acknowledge with deep respect the late Frank Beveridge, who served as Chair from March 2019 to late 2024. Frank's passing is felt deeply across our organisation and region. His strong advocacy and commitment to North and North West Queensland helped lay the foundations we continue to build on today. I also recognise Cr Mary Brown, who provided steady leadership as Acting Chair during the transition. As her term on the committee also concluded this year, I thank Cr Mary Brown along with Mr Chris Boshoff and Cr June Kuhl for their valuable service and contributions to our strategic direction.

We are pleased to welcome new committee members Mayor Peta MacRae, Mayor Pierina Dalle Cort and Mr Anthony Curro, who each bring local knowledge, sector expertise and a shared focus on regional development.

In July 2025, Dr Lisa McDonald commenced as our new Chief Executive Officer. Lisa brings nearly three decades of experience across agriculture, energy and economic development, including her leadership of the Jobs Townsville North Queensland initiative. I also extend sincere thanks to outgoing CEO Wayde Chiesa for his outstanding leadership over the past four years. Wayde has played a central role in building trusted partnerships and delivering impactful outcomes that have positioned our region for future success.

In 2024–25, RDA TNWQ delivered several high-impact initiatives that reflect our commitment to sustainable growth and practical solutions. This work was nationally recognised when RDA TNWQ received the Investing in People Award at the RDA National Awards in Busselton, Western Australia. The award recognised our coordinated approach to strategic workforce planning, which continues to drive regional outcomes in talent attraction, workforce participation, career pathways, and business engagement. It is a testament to the strength of our partnerships, our leadership in workforce development and our commitment to building a resilient regional economy.

We launched the Live North West Queensland and Jobs North West Queensland websites, helping to promote the region as a great place to live, invest and work while supporting local employers in attracting skilled workers. Councils, businesses and regional partners across the North West are now using these tools.

As host of the Regional Jobs Committee, Jobs Townsville North Queensland (JTNQ), RDA TNWQ continues to lead collaborative action on workforce priorities. We delivered two key research projects: *Strategic Implications of North West Queensland's Major Projects* and the *North Queensland Workforce Environmental Scan 2025–2029*. These reports provide insights into regional workforce and skills gaps, and are now helping governments, education and training providers, and industry align their planning, investment, and skills development.

In May 2025, we hosted the North Queensland Future Workforce Summit. The event brought together more than 150 leaders from across government, education, business and the community to develop a shared

approach to regional workforce challenges. The summit has helped set a foundation for longer-term collaboration on regional training, employment and workforce attraction.

These efforts have laid the foundation for our next major deliverable: advancing the development of a Regional Workforce Development Plan and Roadmap. Work is now underway to secure funding and sustain engagement throughout the year.

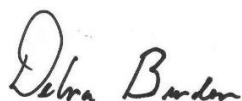
While federal and state election cycles created some uncertainty and delayed the finalisation of our Strategic Regional Plan, we are now well-positioned to complete this body of work. Housing availability remains a significant constraint across North and North West Queensland, particularly for attracting and retaining workers.

In 2025–26, our efforts will focus on delivering the region's most important priorities, including the finalisation of our Strategic Regional Plan and the development of a Regional Workforce Development Plan and Roadmap. We will also advance housing, workforce and liveability initiatives, engage with key industry sectors, support First Nations economic opportunities, and provide trusted intelligence and advocacy to guide investment and policy.

Our work is underpinned by a skilled and experienced team with strengths in project management, communications, data analysis, stakeholder engagement and regional strategy. Our committee represents diverse industry sectors and local government areas, offering critical insight and regional connections that ensure our work reflects local needs and opportunities.

With a highly capable team, strong committee representation and deep regional networks, RDA TNWQ is ready to deliver the next stage of our strategy. Thank you to our staff, partners, committee and outgoing leaders for your continued support and shared commitment to the region.

Together, we are helping to build a stronger, more inclusive and future-focused North and North West Queensland.



Debra Burden BBus FIML FAICD

Chair

Regional Development Australia Townsville and North West Queensland

Our Committee



Ms Debra Burden
Chair
BBus FIML FAICD

Debra commenced as CEO of Selectability in February 2017 and has previously held CEO and executive management positions with Queensland Country Credit Union and Health Fund, 1300Smiles and Canegrowers Burdekin.

Her business management expertise has been recognised with the Qld Business Review Women in Business Award and the Queensland Telstra Business Women's Award.



Ms Maria James
Treasurer

Maria James is the CEO of MITEZ, a regional development organisation encompassing seven local government areas along the North West corridor, as well as members from mining, transport, logistics, and energy sectors.

A born and bred North Queenslander, with 14 years of prior experience at Port of Townsville, she is passionate about the Northern Australia region and being part of its development.



Mr Noel Gertz
Secretary

Noel joined RDA in 2021.

Noel co-established On Common Country Pty Ltd in 2017 to provide workforce planning and indigenous procurement services to major resource and infrastructure projects.

Noel is the current Chairperson of On Common Country and has extensive experience in community engagement.



Ashley Gallagher

Ashley joined RDA in 2021. Ashley has been a Councillor at Carpentaria Shire Council for 20 years, four of which were as Mayor.

Ashley has also held other committee and board roles including Southern Gulf Catchments, as well as being involved in many volunteer organisations.



Anthony Curro

Anthony Curro is Chief Executive Strategy and Engagement at the CRC for Developing Northern Australia.

Based in Townsville, Anthony leads strategic initiatives and research that supports agricultural development and climate resilience across the North. With a background in pharmacy and a family history in agriculture, he brings practical insight and deep regional knowledge.

He also serves as a Director on the North Queensland Dry Tropics Board.



Cr Peta MacRae

Peta MacRae is Mayor of Mount Isa and a long-time advocate for the North West.

With a background in education, business, and community leadership, she is passionate about regional development, liveability, and local opportunity.

Peta has served on the Council for eight years and chairs the Country Universities Centre Mount Isa. She holds an MBA and is a graduate of the AICD, committed to building a stronger, more vibrant Mount Isa for future generations.



Cr Pierina Dalle Cort

Pierina Dalle Cort is Mayor of Burdekin Shire and a long-time business owner with deep ties to the local community. A former Councillor for 12 years, Pierina is a strong advocate for economic development, housing, and youth engagement.

She is a Justice of the Peace, an AICD graduate, and has held leadership roles with the Burdekin Chamber of Commerce and Local Government Women's Association.

Strategic Context and Regional Priorities

Townsville and North West Queensland is a region of national significance, driving outcomes in critical minerals, clean energy, defence, agriculture and advanced manufacturing.

Spanning more than 660,000 km², the region includes 14 Local Government Areas across three subregions: North, Mid-West, and North West & Gulf. It is home to over 275,000 people, with a labour force exceeding 150,000, and generates a Gross Regional Product (GRP) of \$36.3 billion in FY2023.

Despite historical volatility linked to commodity prices, the region has demonstrated strong and consistent economic performance over the past five years, including throughout the COVID and post-COVID periods. Economic fundamentals are strengthening. Our Strategic Implications of North Queensland's Major Projects 2025–2029 report finds:

- Around 90 major projects worth \$27.5 billion are planned or underway over the next 5 to 7 years.
- These are projected to boost real GRP by \$5.6 billion (NPV, 4% discount), with peak impacts of \$1.6 billion by FY2027, about 4% of total annual GRP.
- Over 41,000 FTE person-years of employment will be created, averaging 8,283 annually and peaking at 11,000 in FY2027.

This activity presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to drive national productivity, strengthen sovereign capability and deliver long-term regional prosperity. However, this will only occur if conditions are in place to see projects come to fruition, the most pressing of which is having an appropriately skilled workforce.

Strategic Shifts and Regional Leverage

The global economy is shifting toward clean energy, secure supply chains and sovereign production, and Townsville and North West Queensland is in motion with it. The region is no longer waiting for opportunity. Large-scale projects are underway, investment signals are clearer, and national priorities are aligning with regional strengths.

The commencement of construction of CopperString 2032 has moved the clean energy transformation from concept to delivery. More than just a transmission line, CopperString is opening new energy corridors, unlocking large-scale renewable generation and making regional industry more competitive. This shift is attracting developers, sparking new partnerships and laying the foundation for clean energy exports and critical minerals developments.

In the resources sector, the conversation has matured beyond extraction. Critical mineral projects across North and North West Queensland are now being matched with growing interest in downstream processing and advanced manufacturing. With the right infrastructure, policy settings and coordination, the region could host the next wave of value-adding industries, transforming copper, vanadium and rare earths into materials used in defence, energy storage and high-tech manufacturing. The Lansdown Eco-Industrial Precinct is a leading example, with the Queensland Government facilitating investment through common-use infrastructure that reduces risk for early-stage proponents. Committed tenants include Queensland Pacific Metals, which is developing a battery chemicals refinery; Edify Energy, progressing a large-scale hydrogen and renewable energy hub; and Aosun Energy, planning advanced battery manufacturing. Together, these projects position the precinct as a nationally significant hub for clean energy and critical minerals processing.

That sovereign capability agenda is increasingly urgent. The planned closure of Glencore's Mount Isa copper smelter in 2025 and the potential closure of the refinery in Townsville will leave a significant gap in Australia's refining capacity, with widespread impacts across North Queensland. The smelter is critical infrastructure that underpins activity along the Mount Isa to Townsville rail corridor, through the Port of Townsville, and across a network of regional manufacturers and suppliers. Its closure is expected to place additional pressure on freight networks, reduce throughput volumes, and impact supply chains that service downstream industries.

While operations in Townsville may continue, the long-term implications for the region's industrial ecosystem require close coordination and forward planning. Without a domestic processing solution, the reliance on offshore smelting will increase, potentially threatening the viability of existing mining operations costs and exposing Australia to global supply chain disruptions. Strengthening regional infrastructure and planning for future capability will be essential to maintaining economic resilience and supporting the industries that contribute to both regional and national prosperity

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the regional economy, but the landscape is shifting. The Queensland Government's emerging *Primary Industries Prosper 2050* blueprint will guide long-term investment, innovation and land-use planning, anchored by a \$6.5 billion target to grow the sector over the next five years. For our region, this momentum supports opportunities in biofuels, low-emissions farming, agtech commercialisation and sustainable water and land management. Regional producers are already exploring opportunities aligned with the *Queensland Low Emissions Agriculture Roadmap* and are set to benefit from the blueprint's focus on innovation, sustainability and localised delivery.

As the *Defence Strategic Review* is implemented, our region is stepping up as a key partner in strengthening Australia's northern defence operations. Local businesses are already delivering real outcomes, from building and upgrading base infrastructure to providing equipment, logistics and maintenance services. These projects are creating local jobs, supporting small and medium businesses, and ensuring the region's skills and capabilities are part of the nation's long-term defence strategy.

RDA TNWQ is working to ensure global trends translate into meaningful and lasting benefits for our region by supporting project development, fostering collaboration and ensuring regional planning reflects local priorities. To harness these opportunities and respond to the region's evolving needs, we must build on our strengths and tackle persistent barriers.

Regional Strengths

- Critical Minerals and Processing - Supporting battery and rare earth supply chains
- Clean Energy - Exceptional solar, wind and hydrogen project potential
- Strategic Location - Export and defence logistics advantages
- Agriculture and Manufacturing - Strong industrial base and supply chains
- Skills Ecosystem - Strong local training providers including universities, TAFEs and RTOs

Barriers to Growth

- Labour and Skills Shortages - Affecting both established and emerging industries
- Housing Gaps - Affecting workforce attraction and retention, especially in remote areas
- Infrastructure Bottlenecks - Raising costs for freight, energy and access to market
- Water Security and Resource Management - Requiring long-term investment
- Unaligned Policies and Planning - Misalignment between land use, infrastructure and regulatory frameworks is slowing project delivery

RDA TNWQ's strategic direction is guided by these trends, strengths and barriers. Our key business activities and priorities for 2025-26 are shaped by both regional opportunities and the structural challenges we need to address. The Annual Work Plan outlines the major initiatives we will lead, support or enable in response to this evolving context. We remain focused on connecting opportunity with action, ensuring the region's strengths, partnerships and projects continue to deliver national impact and local benefit.

Annual Work Plan

Key Business Activities 2025-2026

The following are RDA Townsville and North West Queensland's top priorities for 2025/26:

- **Strategic Regional Plan:** RDA TNWQ will complete the SRP, outlining the economic, social, and environmental context of the region and relevant local and global economic and social drivers. The Plan will identify strategic priorities for RDA TNWQ within the broader context of key stakeholder activities. The SRP is a key foundation for RDA TNWQ's activities and for raising awareness on the region's investment needs.
- **Regional Workforce Development Plan and Roadmap:** North and North West Queensland face significant workforce challenges that are best addressed through a coordinated approach to regional workforce planning. RDA TNWQ will seek funding for and lead the development of a Regional Workforce Industry Development Plan and Roadmap. The Roadmap will set priorities for regional activities to address workforce issues, ensuring the region is prepared to meet future demand. The process will involve extensive stakeholder engagement and utilising co-design principles to ensure that actions can be effectively implemented across the region.
- **Jobs Townsville North Queensland (JTNQ):** The Queensland government recently announced that the Regional Jobs Committees will be funded for an additional 2 years. RDA TNWQ will tender to continue hosting JTNQ and contribute to its objectives of addressing workforce, education, and training needs.
- **Regional Housing Opportunities:** This project aims to identify and facilitate solutions to ease housing pressure in the region. RDA TNWQ will collaborate with local and state government partners to assess housing needs and develop a proposal for a coordinated approach to providing housing through modern construction methods.
- **TNWQ Regional liveability audit:** RDA TNWQ will engage with local councils and stakeholders across the region to compile a baseline report outlining the state of the region's main liveability factors, including connectivity, health and community services, education, housing, cost of living and lifestyle. The audit will identify areas for improvement and assist RDA TNWQ and other key stakeholders in focusing their efforts to address areas of need.
- **Trusted source of regional intelligence:** RDA TNWQ will maintain our high standard of data collection, analysis, and gathering of local intelligence to support our advice to the Australian and Queensland governments. These insights will be distilled into a 'State of the Region' snapshot and communicated to local governments and regional stakeholders through a regional roadshow, ensuring they are informed about economic and social indicators, as well as upcoming projects. RDA TNWQ will also provide a bi-annual regional briefing to the Commonwealth, updating them on the economy, projects, and any challenges and opportunities.
- **Key Industry Sector Engagement:** RDA TNWQ will maintain our engagement with leading industry sectors through one-on-one meetings with proponents and participation in industry taskforces and initiatives to understand their requirements (particularly concerning infrastructure and costs), regional challenges and opportunities, and to determine how we can support industry growth opportunities. Key regional industries include renewable energy, biofuels, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, water, defence, innovation, and tourism development.
- **Regional collaboration and strategic alignment:** Facilitate regional strategic alignment across councils and economic development bodies.
- **Regional advocacy:** Support local governments and other key regional stakeholders in their advocacy for key regional investments.
- **North Queensland and North West Queensland Liveability and Jobs Portals:** RDA TNWQ will maintain and promote the liveability and jobs portals jobsnorthqueensland.com.au, livenorthwestqueensland.com.au and jobsnorthwestqueensland.com.au. These portals showcase the region's lifestyle and job opportunities, serving as essential tools for attracting new residents and skilled workers to the area.
- **Indigenous business opportunities:** RDA TNWQ will engage with local First Nations councils and stakeholder groups to determine how RDA TNWQ can support the advancement of opportunities for First Nations people in our region.

Summary - of the top 5 strategic priorities for the upcoming year

1. Regional workforce development
2. Housing availability and affordability
3. Key industry sector engagement and support
4. Regional liveability
5. First Nations economic development

Summary - of the top 5 business activities for the upcoming year

1. RDATNWQ Strategic Regional Plan.
2. Regional Workforce Development Plan and Roadmap for North and North West Queensland.
3. Regional liveability audit.
4. North West Queensland Local Government Housing.
5. Regional intelligence – State of the Region report and roadshow.

Communications Strategy

Strategic Communications, Marketing and Stakeholder Engagement

Overview

Effective communication is central to RDA TNWQ's role as a regional connector, advocate and facilitator. This strategic function supports the organisation's mission to drive sustainable economic development and long-term regional prosperity.

Our Communications, Marketing and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy strengthens RDA TNWQ's contribution to regional outcomes by building visibility, trust and alignment. Through consistent messaging, inclusive engagement and place-based storytelling, we help drive support for priority initiatives in workforce development, investment attraction, liveability, and regional resilience.

Strategic Focus Areas

The Strategy is built on three pillars that guide all activity:

- **Engage and Communicate:** Raise awareness and understanding of RDA TNWQ's impact, while supporting stakeholder participation across the region.
- **Collaborate:** Foster open, respectful relationships with local councils, industry, government and communities to co-design solutions.
- **Drive Best Practice Communications:** Uphold high standards across all messaging, platforms and tools to ensure credibility, consistency and effectiveness.

Key Messaging Framework

RDA TNWQ communications position the organisation as:

- A trusted advocate for regional economic development and sustainability
- A connector across government, industry and community
- A driver of workforce, liveability and investment outcomes for the region

Messaging is tailored to suit each audience but consistently reflects RDA TNWQ's vision for a prosperous, sustainable and liveable North and North West Queensland.

Measurement and Impact

Success is measured through influence with decision-makers, stakeholder trust, engagement reach, digital and media performance, the uptake of RDA insights in policy and planning, and alignment with national RDA messaging and standards.

The full Communications, Marketing and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy is available on request.

Priority Matrix

INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT	
Infrastructure development incl. land, water, energy, renewables	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Transport – roads, bridges, airports, rail links, ports, intermodal centres, public transport, integrated transport connections	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Land, water, energy infrastructure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Telecommunications (incl. digital economy initiatives)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Affordable housing	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Identification of priorities	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	
Leadership	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Supporting local government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Facilitate funding proposals.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Population attraction and liveability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Regional snapshot and economic modelling	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Economic diversity (through new industries/ underdeveloped industries)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Smart Cities and City Deal Collective	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agribusiness growth and diversification (including export)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Food produce and innovation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cross-regional economic development opportunities.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Decentralisation of businesses (into region)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supply chain integration	<input type="checkbox"/>
Entrepreneurship incl. incubator and accelerator programs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Smart Specialisation Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative arts and dance activities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Defence industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Indigenous business development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Industry diversification and clustering	<input type="checkbox"/>
New technologies incl. drones	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identification and promotion of state-wide economic development opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Development of capital city stakeholder relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>
SKILLED AND READY WORKFORCE	
Innovation skills and capability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Education, learning and jobs pathways	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Workforce development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Increase employment and job diversity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Aged care, disability and community sectors workforce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
STEM – Science Technology Engineering and Maths	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting Indigenous leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>
ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURAL ASSETS	
Building future resilience	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Environment and natural resource management (includes water and land use planning)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Community support incl. children, families and youth	<input type="checkbox"/>
Building community capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sustainable food production	<input type="checkbox"/>